



SALAFISM *in* **AMERICA**

History, Evolution, Radicalization

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Glossary of Terms

Aqida/manhaj:

Aqida literally means “creed” whereas *manhaj* means “method.” *Aqida* is a crucial concept for Salafis, as they attach great value to following the right religious path. *Manhaj* refers to the specific method of applying the creed that Salafis follow regarding subjects such as worship. While Salafis broadly follow the same creed, their interpretation of methods is how their various strands differentiate.

al-wala’ wa-l-bara’ :

al-wala’ wa-l-bara’ literally means “loyalty and disavowal.” According to the Salafi interpretation of this concept, Muslims should live their lives completely under the rules of Islam and reject anything that has any basis outside the confines of Islam.

Bid’a/tabdi:

Bid’a, or “innovation” refers to unnecessary innovation in Islam. Salafis believe that any practice that developed in Islam that is not directly based on the ways that the first believers practiced Islam is *bid’a* and therefore not authentic. *Tabdi*, a term rooted in the word *bid’a*, refers to the declaration of a Muslim as an innovator (*mubtadi*).

Dar al-Islam/Dar al-Harb:

The terms *Dar al-Islam*, or “territory of Islam” and *Dar al-Harb*, or “territory of war” refer to the main geographical distinctions in Islam. Although their exact limits and borders vary across time and interpretation, *Dar al-Islam* is the territory where Muslims rule according to Islam and *Dar al-Harb* is the territory where non-Muslims rule and Islamic law is not enforced.

Da’wa:

Da’wa literally means “making an invitation.” *Da’wa* refers to proselytization and public outreach and represents the act of convincing others to accept Islam.

Fard al-ayn/ fard al-kifaya:

Fard al-ayn, translated as “individual duty,” and *fard al-kifaya*, literally “sufficient duty,” represent the two forms of duty recognized as religious obligations by Muslims. Duties which every individual Muslim are required to complete, are considered *fard al-ayn*; duties which only a certain number of community members are required to complete are *fard al-kifaya*.

Fitna:

Fitna refers to a dispute between Muslims within a branch of Islam.

Hijra:

Hijra, meaning “flight or departure,” refers to migration. In its original context, it refers to the journey taken by the original followers of the prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina from 615-620 AD. In the Salafi interpretation, *hijra* refers to the act of Muslims departing from Muslim-minority countries to Muslim-majority countries or areas being governed under Islamic law.

Jihad:

Jihad means “struggle.” The method by which this struggle should take place is disputed across Islam. In the context of the Salafi movement, *jihad* can refer to an internal, personal struggle, a political struggle, or a violent, armed resistance. Those who engage in jihad (usually, in the context of violent resistance) are called *mujahidin*.

Khilafa:

Khilafa is the Arabic word for the Caliphate. The reemergence of a Caliphate led by a rightful Caliph and guided by Islamic law is a general, theoretical goal for most iterations of the Salafi movement. However, a specific focus on its re-establishment is more closely associated with Islamist, rather than Salafi, thought.

Kafir/takfir:

Kafir, meaning “unbeliever” or “disbeliever,” refers to a non-believer or someone who is not a Muslim (plural: *kuffar*.)

Takfir is derived from the root “*kafir*,” and is best translated as “the act of declaring someone to be a non-believer.”

Murtad:

Murtad, or “one who turns away” refers to an individual who is an apostate. The term is derived from *irtidad*, literally meaning “relapse or regress,” and refers specifically to a Muslim who has rejected Islam. (plural: *murtadin*).

Munafiq:

Munafiq, literally defined as a hypocrite, is someone who outwardly expresses to be a Muslim but secretly acts against the interests of Muslims and Islam. (plural: *munafiqin*).

Rafida:

Rafida translates as “rejectionist.” It has been commonly used by Salafi Muslims as a derogatory term to refer to Shi’a Muslims, dating back to the schism within Islam after the death of Muhammad and the refusal of the Shi’a to recognize Abu Bakr, Umar, and Uthman as the legitimate successors of Muhammad.

Taghut:

Taghut is best translated as “one who exceeds their limits.” It refers to those who actively rebel against God (plural: *tawaghit*). *Taghut* is used by certain strains of Salafis to refer either to secular leaders of Muslim majority countries or to conquering empires that wage war against Muslims. It is frequently used to refer to America, Western European countries, and Russia.

Tawhid:

Tawhid translates to “oneness of God.” For Salafi Muslims, *tawhid* is more than the concept that “there is only one God—Allah,” but also that nothing external to Allah should be associated with Allah. Salafis incorporate three interrelated forms of *tawhid*: *tawhid*

al-rububiyya (the affirmation of the oneness of God), *tawhid al-asma' wa-al-sifat* (God as one in his names and attributes), and *tawhid al-uluhiyya* (God as the sole deity worthy of worship).

Tawhid al-hakimiyya:

Tawhid al-hakimiyya derives its name from the verbal noun *hakimiyya*, which in turn is translated as “Governorship; rule; command; dominion, or authority.” It is a concept developed by Sayyid Qutb, a leader of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in the 1960s, and has since been adopted by certain groups of Salafis. According to this concept, the only legitimate sovereign and law-maker is Allah. Democracy, where the population lives under man-made laws and decides who should govern, associates individual humans with powers that only Allah should have, and is therefore seen as a form of idol worship, or *shirk*. Based on this concept, many Salafis encourage their followers to refrain from participating in democratic elections and rejecting the legitimacy of democratically elected governments. In the most extreme interpretation, Muslims are called upon to fight against and remove governments that implement democracy and man-made law.

Shirk:

Shirk is translated as “polytheism” or “idolatry.” There are major and minor forms, with major *shirk* being an unforgivable sin. Association of mortal figures to Allah is considered major *shirk*. Those who practice *shirk* are referred to as *mushrikin* and are considered enemies of Islam.

Executive Summary

Salafism, a complex and multifaceted conservative global Islamic movement, has become a topic of increased interest among a range of scholars over the last decade. Although worthy of study in its own right, the Salafi movement often attracts attention because certain components of it provide much of the ideological inspiration for jihadist groups including al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS).

This study is one of the first to focus solely on Salafism in the United States. Drawing on multiple primary sources, including interviews with leading American Salafis, it provides an overview of the history, evolution, and contours of the movement in America. In doing so, it also offers insights on the genesis of jihadism in the U.S.

Salafis base their beliefs and practices on the *salaf al-salih* (the first three generations of Muslims) who they believe represent the most authentic form of Islam. In an effort to recreate that era, they follow a literalist interpretation of the two primary Islamic texts, the Quran and the sayings of Muhammad (*hadith*). The primary mission of the movement is to purify Islam of sinful innovations which they believe many Muslims have adopted over the centuries.

Today, scholars broadly divide Salafism into three strands: quietist, activist, and jihadist. These categories offer a useful starting point for analysis, but it is important to note that the boundaries between the subdivisions are fluid and overlapping. **Quietists** stress the importance of Islamic study and peaceful propagation and eschew involvement in politics. **Activists**, however, believe that the creation of political organizations is the most effective way to achieve the goals of the movement. They are influenced by Islamist ideology and groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood. **Jihadists** represent the most extreme form of Salafism and believe that the only effective and legitimate form of activism is violence, either in the form of terrorism or insurgency.

This study finds that these three strands of the Salafi movement exist in America today:

- **Quietists:** The quietist strand was the first to be established in America. It was originally represented by an organization called the Quran and Sunnah Society (QSS), members of which began preaching in the 1980s. The dominant Salafi group for over a decade, by the mid-1990s the influence of QSS began to wane, and it eventually shut down. However, quietists continue to preach in America, and their main hubs are found in Islamic centers based in New Jersey and Philadelphia. They draw almost all their inspiration directly from the senior scholars of the Saudi Arabian religious establishment.
- **Activists:** As the quietists began to lose influence in the 1990s, partly due to their refusal to engage in or discuss politics, activist Salafi groups filled the vacuum. The most prominent of these groups was the Islamic Assembly of North America (IANA), which drew much of its ideological influence from activist scholars based in the Middle East. Due to its willingness to discuss contemporary geopolitical issues related to Muslims, it attracted a wide range of American Muslims and soon overtook QSS. After the September 11, 2001 attacks, IANA became subject to intense scrutiny from the FBI due to some of its members' support for jihad, and by 2003 it effectively ceased to exist. Its influence, however, lives on today as the wellspring of many of America's most influential politically active Salafis. One group that emerged out of IANA is the al-Maghrib Institute, an Islamic education hub founded in 2002. Its leading members, including the popular imam Yasir Qadhi, represent a unique form of American "post-Salafism."
- **Jihadists:** Foreign-born jihadists have been active in America since the 1980s, but American jihadist ideologues emerged in the late 1990s mostly as products of the activist Salafi strand. Among the first of these was Ali al-Timimi, who began his career as a one of the first American-born Salafi preachers and an influential figure within IANA. He went on to become the spiritual leader of the so-called Virginia Jihad Network in 2001 before being jailed in 2005. This milieu of

American activists also included Anwar al-Awlaki, who eventually left the U.S. and became the most influential American jihadist ideologue to date. America's jihadists helped to facilitate the emergence of an indigenous "homegrown" jihadism by making the ideology more accessible and relevant for American Muslim audiences.

Today, the most vocal and active Salafi jihadist in America is Michigan-based Ahmad Musa Jibril. He rose to prominence during the early stages of the Syrian civil war due to his influence over Westerners who traveled to fight against the Assad regime. However, this study reveals that he had a following in the United States since the late 1990s when he preached in support of jihad against Saudi Arabia and America. Today, he continues to promote a form of Salafi jihadism which supports the use of violence to establish Islamic law in Muslim majority countries, with a focus on Syria and Iraq. Jibril is not, however, known to be directly involved in violence, and has not been charged with any terrorism offenses.

Although Salafism is thought to transcend local culture and politics, this study argues that, since its establishment in America, strands of the movement have adopted traits unique to the national context. Some American Salafis have developed their own set of terms to describe themselves and their opponents. Others are influenced by national politics and social issues and have shed some of the more divisive and obstinate elements of Salafi belief. These developments led to the creation of an indigenous Salafi-influenced Islam which will continue to evolve and change in response to local and global events.

Various Western European nations have grappled with the question of how, if at all, to deal with Salafis operating inside their borders. Most take a negative view and regard the movement as both a threat to social cohesion and a contributing factor to the radicalization of their citizens. Some states have gone as far as enacting laws which restrict Salafi activism, and others have banned specific Salafi groups. In some cases, however, authorities have worked with quietist Salafis to help prevent the radicalization of Muslims. This approach is based on a belief that they possess the credibility and religious credentials to dissuade Muslims from adopting jihadist beliefs.

In the United States, where the government is constitutionally restricted from interfering in religious matters, there is little discussion of the role of Salafis in either causing or preventing radicalization. However, as policymakers continue to consider their options for how to approach homegrown radicalization, it is important that they are informed of the history and status of the various forms of Salafi activism in America.

Introduction

Salafism, a rapidly growing puritanical and revivalist movement within Islam, garners noticeable interest in discussions about how and why Muslims in the West become involved in jihadist terrorism. While the jihadist branch of Salafism (often referred to as Salafi jihadism) is an important ideological component of the global jihad movement, encompassing groups like the Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda, the wider Salafi movement contains many different strands. The vast majority of Salafis reject jihadist groups, perceiving them as deviants, and often are among the most vehement critics of global jihadism. As a result, there is much debate about the role Salafi beliefs play in both motivating and dissuading Westerners to become involved in terrorism.¹

In Europe, this debate led to an increased focus on Salafism after the September 11, 2001 attacks in the U.S. and subsequent jihadist activity on the European continent. Several studies conducted on the movement over the last two decades analyze whether Salafism is linked with terrorism and radicalization. European politicians also openly discuss or develop policies on Salafism, with most taking a largely negative view. This has not, however, been the case in America. While there are numerous studies and political statements on the general question of jihadism, a specific focus on Salafism in America has been almost completely ignored.² This study attempts to fill the void of knowledge about Salafism in America.³ It is among the first in-depth treatments of the movement in the country based on extensive interviews of key figures within the movement. While much of the criticism of Salafism stems from its ultra-conservative social stances, this study will focus on American Salafi beliefs as they relate to political participation, citizenship, and jihadist violence.

The study begins with a review of the literature on Salafism. This background chapter provides the context of the report and an understanding of how Western scholars have categorized the movement. The chapter will also assess how Western governments regard the movement, engage with Salafis, and create policies to either support or curtail their activities, followed by a similar assessment of scholarly views on Salafism.

Following this, the study will turn its attention to the Salafi terrain in the United States. In doing so, it will provide a historical overview of the movement and its establishment in the country; an assessment of how it evolved and adapted over the years; and how elements of it came to support and engage in jihadist violence. To begin this discussion, the first section of the second chapter is based on an in-depth interview with Muhammad Syed Adly, who is considered a foundational figure in the American Salafi scene but rejects what he regards as the toxic label of Salafi. Here, Adly helps explain how the movement came to America and established itself, while also providing insight into his own beliefs on a variety of issues related to American Muslim political participation and involvement in jihad. The following sections will each be devoted to one of the three macro-categories of Salafism—quietists, activists and jihadis—and how each manifested in the American context.

Throughout these chapters, analysis will show the influence a variety of sheikhs, mainly based in Saudi Arabia, have had on different American Salafis. In many cases, we shall see how events in Saudi Arabia, including political upheaval relating to the role of Salafis in politics and jihad, trickled down and impacted American Salafism. The analysis also attempts to determine how, if at all, American Salafi jihadis represent either a deviation from Salafi belief or an amalgam of all three currents of Salafism.

I. Understanding Salafism

Over the last decade, the Salafi movement attracted the attention of a variety of academic disciplines, including political science, history and, most recently, the study of terrorism. It is the subject of a variety of books and collected volumes which demonstrate its evolution into an amorphous and complex movement. This chapter begins with a brief review of the literature on Salafism which offers definitions and a breakdown of the main Salafi currents operating today. Following this, it outlines current perceptions of Salafism in the West, with a focus on their role in either inspiring or preventing violence. The chapter will be split into three subsections, with the first analyzing how Western governments approach the Salafi movement, the second assessing a variety of scholarly views on the subject, and the third analyzing the role of Salafism in extremism and radicalization.

I.I What is Salafism?

The term Salafi derives from the *salaf al-salih* who were the first three generations of Muslims.⁴ It is used to describe those who believe that the *salaf* represented the purest form of Islam and should be emulated by Muslims today in their beliefs, practices, and outward appearance. In some cases, Muslims who follow this approach directly refer to themselves as Salafis, while others avoid the term.

Salafi theology is, according to Haykel, based on five key claims. The first consists of the belief that the *salaf al-salih* practiced the purest form of Islam. Secondly, Salafis base their creed around *tawhid* or the belief in the unity of God as the sole deity to be worshipped. The preservation of monotheism by fighting against unbelief and idol worship (*shirk*), and by removing innovative beliefs and practices (*bid'a*) among Muslims make up the third and fourth key aspects of Salafism. Finally, the Salafi system is based on the belief that the Quran, *hadith*, and the consensus of the *sahaba* (the companions of the prophet) are the only authentic sources of Islamic knowledge, regardless of time or context.⁵

This approach is rooted in the works of Ibn Taymiyya and his student Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, both 14th century scholars from the Hanbali school of Islamic jurisprudence.⁶ According to Ibn Taymiyya, Salafi beliefs are based on a literal interpretation of the primary Islamic texts, which extends to understanding the physical aspects of God himself: “the way of the Salaf is to interpret literally the Quranic verses and *hadiths* that relate to the Divine attributes, and without indicating modality and without attributing to him anthropomorphic qualities.” Thus, he rejected the metaphorical approaches to reading the texts that emerged over the centuries and believed that any description of God was to be taken literally: “one is not to state that the meaning of ‘hand’ is power or that of ‘hearing’ is knowledge.”⁷

While Ibn Taymiyya’s teachings formed the basis for future Salafi thought, a theologian from the Najd region of the Arabian Peninsula revived and refined them in a way that created the impetus for the Salafi movement to emerge.⁸ In the early 1740s, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab concluded that most Muslims strayed away from the original path of *tawhid*. Al-Wahhab regarded contemporary Muslims in Arabia as having reverted to a time of religious ignorance (*jahiliyya*) before the arrival of Muhammad, who rid the Arabian Peninsula of idol-worshipping tribes. In both their practices and beliefs, they adopted elements of pre-Islamic idolatry and classical influences of reason and critical thinking. In his opinion, innovations such as these threatened the integrity of the faith, and Muslims were committing idolatry by worshipping spirits (*jinn*), praying at gravesites, and making sacrifices to deities other than God.

The answer for al-Wahhab was the doctrine of *tawhid*, which sought to reinstate and purify Islamic monotheism corrupted by new practices and interpretations. Muslims needed to profess their belief in Allah, and him alone, and pray to him as the sole deity. Al-Wahhab is credited with developing three interrelated forms of *tawhid*: *tawhid al-rububiyya* (the affirmation of the oneness of God), *tawhid al-asma’ wa-al-sifat* (God is one in his names and attributes), and *tawhid al-uluhiyya* (God as the sole deity worthy of worship).⁹

Jihad, al-Wahhab concluded, was the primary method to fight back against the growing tide of innovation. He therefore led a revivalist campaign to cleanse Islam, sweeping through the Arabian Peninsula with a ferocity that by 1744 had caught the attention of a powerful tribal chief, Muhammad ibn al-Saud, the Emir of Diriyah. He saw al-Wahhab's teaching and activities as an opportunity to lend religious legitimacy to his family's political ambitions to rule the region. The pact between al-Wahhab and al-Saud led to the creation of the first Saudi state, and eventually to the creation of Saudi Arabia in 1932. The descendants of al-Wahhab, known as the Al ash-Shaykh family, formed the religious establishment of the country, while the al-Saud family made up the political elite of the Saudi royal family.¹⁰ From this time on, the relationship between the two has been based on an understanding that neither power base will interfere with one another's respective responsibilities.

Followers of al-Wahhab's teachings are commonly referred to as "Wahhabis," a term that is often erroneously used interchangeably with Salafi.¹¹ While there is no doubting al-Wahhab's contribution to the Salafi movement (in particular his tripartite formulation of *tawhid*), there are also key differences.¹² Most significant is the differing jurisprudential approach. Wahhabis rely on the Hanbali school of *fiqh* (jurisprudence), while the appeal of Salafism lies in its refusal to be beholden to any of the four Sunni schools and its rejection of *taqlid* (conforming to one school of thought) in favor of individual interpretation (*ijtihad*).¹³

This approach to understanding Islam possesses several obvious attractions for certain Muslims. Salafism seeks to remove cultural influences from Islamic belief and practice, making it appear purified and removed from any influences other than what God intended. It also offers a sense of empowerment to followers, who can feel that they are taking their understanding of Islam straight from the original and most respected texts. Salafis present a belief that is, in theory, rooted in finding and presenting all the evidence on Islamic rulings and teachings from the original texts rather than being influenced by the views of others. This liberates followers from the constraints of the interpretations of specific clerics or schools of thought that have the potential to cloud the true meaning of the religion.

While this study focuses on Salafism, it will also look at the relationship between Salafis and Islamist groups and ideas. It is therefore also instructive to briefly define Islamism as a movement and belief system which is distinct from Salafism. The term can be used to broadly define Islamic political movements which present the religion as a revolutionary political ideology. This ideology is based on the premise that the primary Islamic texts (the Quran and *hadith*) provide the blueprint for the creation of a state governed by Islamic law and the restoration of the Caliphate. Islamism is most closely associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, an Egyptian political movement founded in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna and has since inspired the creation of numerous other groups and movements. Unlike Salafis, who are defined by theology and their focus on maintaining the purity of their creed (*aqida*), Islamists are defined by politics and pragmatism. In addition, Islamists come from a range of Islamic traditions and are not focused on identifying and attacking Islamic beliefs and practices deemed by Salafis as deviant. However, overlap between the two is possible. As shall be discussed in more detail below, both violent and non-violent political Salafis are influenced by the revolutionary ideology of Islamism.

I.II Categorizing Salafism

While all Salafis (Wahhabis included) share the same basic creed that revolves around the centrality of *tawhid*, they differ in their methodology for implementation (*manhaj*) and proselytizing (*da'wa*).¹⁴ Western academic literature traditionally categorizes Salafism into three strands: purists (also often referred to as quietists), activists (also known as *haraki* Salafis), and jihadis.¹⁵ Although imperfect, this framing is generally useful in explaining the similarities and differences among Salafis.¹⁶

Quietists

Quietist Salafis are those who usually align with Saudi Arabia's Wahhabi religious establishment (and, as a result are often also referred to as "Wahhabis"). They also call for believers to show absolute obedience to the ruler of any Muslim country in which they

are based. The most influential scholars with whom this strand is most closely associated are Muhammad Nasir-ud-Din al-Albani, Abd al-Aziz bin Baz, Muhammad ibn al-Uthaymeen, Muhammad Aman al-Jami, and Rabee' al-Madkhali. Quietists reject political involvement or political frames within their discourse, at least until Islam is “purified” of *bid'a* (innovation) and other evils.¹⁷

As part of this belief, quietists often oppose the creation of formal groups, political activism, or fighting. Instead, they support grassroots initiatives through education (*tarbiya*) and proselytizing in their pursuit to purify Islam. While quietists do not reject the concept of creating of an Islamic state under *shari'a* law, it remains a secondary concern after maintaining the correct *aqida*. As such, the quietists' rejection of Islamist and activist Salafi groups is based primarily on the means through which they try to achieve their goals, rather than the goals themselves. For example, in Muhammad Nasir-ud-Din al-Albani's often-quoted attack on the Muslim Brotherhood, he stressed that “the ends do not justify the means.”¹⁸ If an Islamic group adopts methods—such as forming political parties—that fall outside of actions taken by Muhammad and the *salaf* when facing a similar situation, they are seen as veering from the correct path, despite the purity of their end goal.¹⁹

Wagemakers offers three subcategories of quietists based in Saudi Arabia which he argues typically see each other as allies but differ in how they choose to support the Saudi rulers.²⁰ “Aloofists,” inspired by al-Albani, have no interest in politics and make no pronouncements on anything related to the status of the Saudi government. The “loyalists” are influenced by Sheikh Abd al-Aziz bin Baz, the former Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia and Sheikh Muhammad ibn al-Uthaymeen, another giant of Salafi thought. They refrain from active politics but support the policies of the Saudi rulers when called upon. Finally, the “propagandists” follow Sheikh Rabee' al-Madkhali (as a result they are also often referred to as “Madkhalis”) and present supporting the Saudi regime as an article of faith.

Due to their influence over American Salafism, it is worth taking a closer look at the Madkhali category. Unlike the other sub-categories, they actively propagate loyalty to the

rulers and just as vigorously attack and criticize any Salafis or other Muslims who question the Islamic legitimacy of the rulers. Madkhalis are especially critical of the Muslim Brotherhood ideologue Sayyid Qutb, whom Sheikh al-Madkhali describes as a “supermarket of heresies.”²¹ The anti-Qutb sentiment amongst the Madkhalis is so strong that they criticize Salafis that are not openly opposed to Qutb, questioning the personal integrity and reputation of opponents. Madkhalis also fiercely condemn modern Salafi jihadi groups, viewing them as heretics for opposing and fighting against Muslim rulers. They believe that society must first be purified and that Muslim nations have the means to fight before jihad is permissible.²² The same zealous critiques are also reserved for other Muslim sects regarded by Madkhalis as deviants, be they Shi’a or other Sunni Muslims who do not follow Salafi beliefs or practices.

Activists

Unlike the quietists, the political activist Salafis represent a convergence between Salafism and Islamism, which are two distinct movements.²³ This category of Salafi is influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood and is more acquainted with the political process, elections, international relations, and geopolitics.²⁴ Activists believe that they are best placed to contextualize and frame Salafi *aqida* so that it offers effective responses to contemporary political issues. They do not usually engage in, or call for, revolutionary violence in support of their cause. However, in some cases, they call for the unseating or reform of “un-Islamic” regimes in the Middle East. This approach tends to appeal to a younger generation of Muslims put off by dry doctrinal issues discussed by quietist Saudi scholars.²⁵

Activist Salafi currents differ from country to country, although in most cases they are associated with Salafi political parties or prominent movements. A key early figure associated with this current, an Egyptian named Abdul Rahman Abdul Khaliq, broke new ground in 1981 when he encouraged Salafis in Kuwait to run for office.²⁶ Activist Salafis are often either involved in party politics, such as Egypt’s Hizb al-Nour, or engaged in contentious political debate and activism, such as the *Sahwa* in Saudi Arabia during the 1990s.

While it is beyond the scope of this study to provide an in-depth analysis of the *Sahwa*, it remains an important movement to understand, especially because its activists influenced the American Salafi movement. As demonstrated throughout this study, the clash between the quietists and activists in Saudi Arabia trickled down to the United States, shaping the American Salafi movement and influencing the ideology of America's first Salafi jihadist ideologues.

Described by Lacroix as a “hybrid of Wahhabism and the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood,” the *Sahwa* is arguably the single most influential activist Salafi movement.²⁷ Founded in the 1960s, it came to prominence in the early 1990s when its members began an aggressive campaign to protest the Saudi state's invitation of American troops into the country during the first Gulf War. The *Sahwa* clerics argued that seeking the protection of a non-Muslim army was prohibited, and thus in the process opposed their rulers on a political matter. Their activism centered around petitions, letters, and the establishment of various organizations. By way of contrast with other Salafi currents, in response to the *Sahwa*, the Madkhalis not only passionately defended the Saudi state's position but went on the offensive against critics. They went as far as labeling opponents as Kharijites, a reference to a despised, seditious early Muslim sect.²⁸ While during the *Sahwa*'s early phases the Saudi government sought to co-opt the activist power of the movement, the agitation it caused during the Gulf War led to a widespread crackdown in 1994, during which most of the *Sahwa* leadership were arrested.²⁹

For their movement to gain support in Saudi Arabia, *Sahwa* ideologues sought to find common ground between the country's rigid Wahhabism and Islamism's revolutionary political ideas. They argued that Islamist ideology shared similarities with Wahhabi teachings and could be legitimated using the works of Ibn Taymiyya and al-Wahhab. The key figures behind the movement, including Salman al-Awda, Safar al-Hawali, Muhammad Surur bin Nayif Zayn al-Abidin and Muhammad Qutb (the brother of Muslim Brotherhood ideologue and leader Sayyid Qutb), oversaw this ideological cross-pollination between Salafist theology and Islamist/Muslim Brotherhood ideology and activism.³⁰ As a result of their ideological affinity to Islamist thinkers, activist Salafis are

often referred to by quietists (especially Madkhalis) using derogatory terms such as “Sururi” or “Qutbi” based on the names of some of the *Sahwa*’s key figures.

Muhammad Qutb, for example, devoted himself to reconciling his brother’s ideas with Saudi Wahhabism. He is credited with devising *tawhid al-hakimiyya*, which added a fourth element to al-Wahhab’s three forms of *tawhid*. Derived from Sayyid Qutb’s formulation of the doctrine of *hakimiyya*, it is a concept that is central to both activist and Salafi jihadist belief and activity today. Sayyid Qutb’s analysis of the ills of the Muslim world led him to conclude that the root cause was its embrace of secularism. He argued that God must be considered the sole sovereign (*hakim*) over the affairs of man. As such, Muslim societies had to be ruled by the laws set out in the Quran. Otherwise, they were in a state of disbelief (*jahiliyya*), and the ruling government could be excommunicated and overthrown.³¹

However, Sayyid Qutb’s revolutionary approach was feared by the Saudis, and his brother needed to convince them that it was in line with Wahhabi thought. He argued that *hakimiyya* represented a form of al-Wahhab’s *tawhid al-uluhiyya* (God as the sole deity worthy of worship) and that if God is the sole deity to be worshipped, he should also be the sole creator of law. Accepting laws other than those laid out by God in the Quran should, he argued, be considered a sinful form of worship (*shirk*) that places man-made law above that of the *shari’a*. Thus, Muhammad Qutb concluded that the Saudis should not view *tawhid al-hakimiyya* as a dangerous innovation but rather one that made al-Wahhab’s teachings more explicit through emphasizing the sovereignty of God.³²

During the 1980s, the efforts of the *Sahwa* scholars succeeded in securing support from the Saudi government.³³ Despite remaining concerned by the revolutionary message of activist Salafism, it aimed to co-opt the movement for a variety of reasons. While Saudi-inspired Salafism was, and in some ways still is, an isolationist movement seeking to purify Islam by insulating Muslims from the rest of the world, it shared commonalities with the modern revivalist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood. These “doctrinal cousins,” as Commins describes them, “were dedicated to resisting Western cultural influences”. They also both viewed Islam as polluted by modern philosophical influences

and in need of a renewal based almost solely on original texts.³⁴ The Saudi state also hoped that, if given enough influence and money, the *Sahwa* movement's focus would turn away from the Kingdom. Related to this, they partnered with activist Salafis as part of a wider effort to bolster the state's Islamic credentials following high-profile challenges to its religious authority during the 1970s and 1980s.³⁵ Finally, the government believed that it could use the activists' organizational skills against secular Arab nationalism practiced by Nasser in Egypt, which was perceived as a threat to Saudi monarchy.

As part of this understanding between the Saudi state and the activists, the royal family allowed Muslim Brotherhood-influenced scholars to run the Islamic University of Medina, which was set up in 1961 as a direct rival to the Nasser-influenced al-Azhar University in Egypt.³⁶ In addition, the state allowed or directly funded the creation of international Islamist proselytizing organizations such as the Muslim World League (MWL) and the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY), both run by Islamists.³⁷ These groups are often erroneously referred to as Saudi Wahhabi groups that spread the Saudi vision of Islam. While they were funded and set-up with the help of the Saudi state, they do not follow the quietist or Wahhabi approach. Instead, these organizations were represented by Muslim Brotherhood activists and members of the Jamaat-e-Islami, the Pakistani Islamist movement founded by Indian activist and writer Abul A'la Maududi.³⁸ By supporting this international outreach, they hoped that the attention of these political agitators would be diverted away from the Saudi state.

Few of the *Sahwa* leaders or thinkers supported militancy to further their domestic goals.³⁹ However, this fusion of Islamist political doctrine with Salafi theology did, perhaps inadvertently, contribute to the creation of the final macro-category of Salafism, Salafi jihadism, which represents the most violent and extreme version of activist Salafism.

Jihadis

Unlike activists, Salafi jihadis believe that violent jihad is the only effective and legitimate way to achieve their goals. Activist and jihadi Salafis also differ in the form of jihad they

support and who can be targeted. The former may in certain circumstances advocate for classical jihad, while jihadis practice a more radical version often referred to as global jihad. Both of these strands support fighting against non-Muslims who are seen as occupying Muslim lands. However, the classical approach, which is most commonly associated with Abdullah Azzam and the jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan, is rooted in guerrilla warfare waged against occupying militaries. Global jihad, influenced by Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, emphasizes mass-casualty terrorism against non-combatants within nations seen as spearheading the oppression of Muslims.⁴⁰ The global jihadist approach is also more open to the practice of *takfir*, or violent excommunication of Muslims who do not implement or follow *shari'a* law.⁴¹

Despite their differing views on when and where to fight jihad, jihadis and activists both see politics as integral to the faith, are committed to *tawhid al-hakimiyya*, and have shared ideological influences from important Islamist thinkers.⁴² While activists do not believe that excommunication should be an automatic precursor to violence, their affinity with Islamist ideology means that both strands also share the belief that a Muslim leader who rules by man-made laws is an unbeliever. It has also been argued that some of the original Salafi jihadis are radicalized activist Salafis who initially supported non-violent activism but later adopted violence as a more effective means to achieve their goals.⁴³

The emergence of the activist strand likely played an important role in the creation of Salafi jihadism. It injected political activism into traditionalist Salafism, opening the possibility of a variety of different reactions to local and global events. Once Salafis embraced activism as a legitimate method, the shape that it assumed became more open to debate. While much of the activism centered on vocal opposition, such as protests and open letters criticizing the establishment, others decided that violence was the only effective method to achieve real change.⁴⁴

One of the most recent contributions to the discussion of Salafi jihadism comes from Maher, who defines it through its five key pillars: jihad, *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* (loyalty and enmity), *takfir*, *tawhid*, and *hakimiyya*. Some of these are long-standing doctrines within Salafism, with manifold interpretations, and Salafi jihadists have re-interpreted,

radicalized, and operationalized them as part of their effort to mobilize Muslims. These five “defining characteristics” allow the movement to protect its belief system and followers, while promoting itself as the only true interpretation of Islam.⁴⁵

Although Salafism takes different forms from country to country, followers of its various currents are either spread throughout the world or influence Muslims abroad through their sermons and writings. In the case of the U.S., Salafi trends emerged through sheikhs who imported their ideas after emigrating from their own countries or the Muslim-majority country they were trained in.

It is important to note that these categories describe general currents, and that even the sub-currents themselves may be broken down further. None of these represent a distinct group or an organization, let alone a single hierarchy. Salafis themselves usually reject such labels, with each believing that they are the purest and only correct representation of Salafism. In the U.S. context, some Salafis even shy away from the term “Salafi” itself. They fear it may bring unwanted attention, particularly because of the existence in America of a current that came to be known as “the Salafis,” which they do not wish to be confused with. For instance, Madkhalis in the U.S. are usually the most associated with this label, using it to distinguish themselves from what they see as deviant Islamic movements.

While the tripartite categorization of Salafism between the quietist, activist and jihadi strands is an important contribution to the understanding of the movement, the boundaries between them remain fluid and open to significant overlap. According to Wagemakers, Salafis occasionally “cross the boundaries of the boxes in which they have been placed.” Olidort, for example, informs us that while al-Albani is one of the most revered scholars among quietist Salafis, he too “took vocal...stances on a number of political issues,” including condemning armed resistance in Palestine and supporting the mujahidin fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan.⁴⁶ Meijer also tells us that the division “should not be regarded as rigid but as a sliding scale.” Finally, Hegghammer, who argues for a more in-depth categorization of this wide-ranging movement, acknowledges that attempting to apply any sort of typology to political Salafist thought “falls into the trap of

excessive categorization of an inherently fluid and dynamic phenomenon.”⁴⁷ In his study on jihadism in Saudi Arabia, he also notes that militant Islamists in the region are “usually linked, sociologically, discursively, or both, to the non-violent actors sharing the same dominant rationale.”⁴⁸ Thus, not only are Salafis very diverse, but they also occasionally cross these boundaries depending on situations and developments they are faced with.⁴⁹ This is significant in the American context. As the second part of this study shows, some of the first influential Salafi jihadi sheikhs in the U.S. started as activist Salafis whose support for jihad was subject to a shift from theory to practice depending on the geopolitical context.

I.III Salafism and Extremism

Much debate and diverging opinion exists among governments, scholars, analysts and commentators surrounding the impact of Salafism on the current jihadist terrorist threat to the West. For some, Salafi Islam presents an antidote to jihadism. It is an orthodox theological approach which inoculates Muslims against terrorism by offering strong religious arguments condemning groups like al-Qaeda and IS. Critics, however, see Salafism as an intolerant and sectarian ideology that turns Western Muslims against their societies and pushes them towards the jihadist worldview. Others regard discussion of Salafism as irrelevant to radicalization and terrorism. For them, Salafi beliefs, while conservative, are benign. They believe the focus must be on other, often external, motivations for terrorist involvement that extend beyond ideology and religious belief. The following sections provide an overview of how governments and scholars understand the link between Salafi beliefs and terrorism.

Government and Official Views of Salafism in the West

Western European states have mostly taken a negative view of the Salafi movement, albeit to varying degrees. Senior politicians, security officials, and analysts often express two interrelated concerns. The first is that Salafism’s anti-secular and illiberal social views have the potential to damage the social fabric of a Western nation, dividing Muslims and turning them against their host societies. Secondly, this societal division is seen as a

contributing factor to the radicalization of Western Muslims. Thus, in Europe, Salafism is often used interchangeably with “terrorism” or “extremism,” and references are made to “radical Salafist networks” which provide recruits for jihadist groups. In 2013, the European Parliament also weighed in on the topic, identifying “Wahhabism” as one of the main sources of terrorism in the world.⁵⁰

In Germany, where hundreds of Muslim citizens—many with connections to Salafis—have joined IS in Syria and Iraq, officials have found it difficult to distinguish between quietist Salafis and jihadis. For example, in September 2016, Hans Georg-Maassen, the former President of Germany’s Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV), noted that there were 9,200 Salafis in Germany and that “the unchecked growth in the number of Salafis is expanding the pool of recruits for jihadists.”⁵¹ In the BfV’s annual reports, which focus on recent trends in extremist activity in Germany, Salafism is regularly referred to as a factor in encouraging extremism and violence. The term is often used interchangeably with “Islamism,” and in one report Salafism is described as “a particularly radical form of Islamism.”⁵² The same report also noted that the continued spread of violent Islamism in Germany was “due to the continuous increase in the number of followers of the Salafist movement.”⁵³ A follow-up report even more explicitly outlined Germany’s view on the role of Salafism in contributing to jihadist activity in the country:

The Salafist scene represents a very important recruitment ground for jihad. The Salafist movement rests upon an ideology which claims to be exclusively based on the principles of the Koran, the example of the Prophet Muhammad and of the first three generations of Muslims. It also rests upon an affinity for violence. Almost all individuals with links to Germany who have joined jihad had before been in contact with Salafist structures.⁵⁴

Partly as a result of the BfV’s findings, Germany’s counter-terrorism efforts have at times focused on Salafi groups. In 2013, then-Federal Minister of the Interior Hans Pieter Friedrich oversaw the banning of three Salafi groups, arguing that “Salafism is incompatible with our free democratic order.” The movement is perceived as a threat

because it aims “to change our society in an aggressive, belligerent way so that democracy would be replaced by a Salafist system, and the rule of law replaced by Sharia law.”⁵⁵

While the Germans have pursued an aggressive, values-based approach to restricting Salafi activities in the country, it is arguably the French government that has the most fraught relationship with Salafism than any other Western nation. This is perhaps best exemplified by the 2010 ban in France on the full concealment of the face in public.⁵⁶ Known colloquially as the *niqab* ban, the order prohibits the use of the face veil (or *niqab*). While not an explicitly anti-Salafi move, this clothing is most closely associated with Salafi women and the ban is seen as an attempt by the state to curb the movement’s influence. Discussions of Salafism also feature prominently in the report of the commission tasked by the French Parliament to study the wearing of the veil which preceded the 2010 law. While there was little effort to directly link Salafism to terrorist violence, the primary concern was instead the negative impact the movement had on social cohesion in France. For example, the authors warn that:

support for the full veil—and in some cases the public call to wear it—reveals two key characteristics of the nature and the actions undertaken by this [Salafist] nexus: firstly, it is a movement whose apparent reformism consists in reality of the promotion of a literalist reading [of the Quran] and which may be considered backward with respect to Islam; secondly, a missionary movement putting in doubt the freedom of Muslim women and pushing for the enshrinement of the existence of a separate Muslim community from the rest of society.⁵⁷

The recent case of a 19-year-old French woman whose Salafi beliefs led to the Interior Ministry to impose a travel ban on her demonstrates how the state currently views the movement. The ban was imposed on counter-terrorism grounds because it was believed that her Salafi beliefs would encourage her to attempt to travel and join IS in Syria. During her October 2016 court hearing, she told the judge, “I am a Salafist, but I am not Daesh [IS]. There is a big difference.” The French court eventually overturned the ban, arguing that while she was a strict Muslim who was in contact with a network of Salafis, this was not evidence that she supported violence. Thus, according to the court, “the

Interior Ministry's decision is flawed because of an error of judgment.”⁵⁸ Nonetheless, former French Prime Minister Manuel Valls has maintained a highly critical view of Salafism. He argues that it has “destroyed and perverted a part of the Muslim world, is a threat for Muslims, and also a danger for France.”⁵⁹ Salafis, according to him, are also a threat to French values and are “winning the ideological and cultural war” in France, despite only representing a small minority of Muslims.⁶⁰

In the Netherlands, officials are also wary of Salafism, and in some cases regard it as an entryway into jihadist violence. The country's internal intelligence service, the AIVD, identifies it as one of the main roots of radicalization among Dutch Muslims. In a report on the topic, it acknowledges that there exists “an important distinction to be drawn between jihadi Salafism, with its approval of violence, and the essentially non-violent apolitical and political strands,” but also believes that Salafism as a whole represents a threat to the “democratic legal order.”⁶¹ The main tenets of Salafism, even among non-jihadi Salafis, “can give rise to antidemocratic and undemocratic activities of various kinds... and make use of undemocratic means.”⁶²

The three widely accepted categories of Salafism discussed above, while considered helpful by the AIVD, are also deemed limited when put into practice. Thus, the agency warns against overreliance on this “conceptual model” as “in practice, the dividing lines between the various forms of Salafism are far from straightforward.” While the quietist and non-violent strands reject jihadism, the report warns that it promotes “rejection of the democratic legal order; the active promotion of intolerance, discrimination and hatred of other groups... and intolerant isolationism.” These beliefs, while not linked to calls for violence, are nonetheless seen to be creating “a breeding ground for radicalisation and extremism.”

Despite this, the report is careful in its conclusions, warning that, “it would not be right to brand the entire [Salafi] spectrum as a problem” because this could lead to a perception among the wider population that Muslims in general are “problematic.”⁶³ Nonetheless, as in Germany, the unprecedented mobilization of Dutch foreign fighters forced the authorities to take a closer look at the Salafi movement: “recent developments...in the

form of the conflict in Syria (including participation by Dutch jihadist fighters)...do call for renewed and intensified state interest in Salafism as a phenomenon.”⁶⁴

While the Dutch offer the most vigorously researched and nuanced publicly available assessment of Salafism of any Western government to date, it is clear that Salafism is viewed as a potential threat. Though carefully worded, the AIVD approach regards Salafism, even in its non-violent form, as a danger to Dutch values and, as a result, a possible gateway into more extreme activism, and even terrorism.

More recently, Salafism has come under increased scrutiny in Belgium. In 2015, Prime Minister Charles Michel placed the blame for the January 2015 Paris attacks on “a fanatical ideology that wants to impose its obscurantist vision through extreme violence.”⁶⁵ Soon after this, Belgium also fell victim to IS’ international terrorist campaign when five IS militants bombed the Brussels airport and Maalbeek metro station in March 2016, killing 32 and injuring a further 340.⁶⁶ In response, the Belgian government set up a Parliamentary Investigation Committee which aggressively investigated the presence of Salafism in the country. The Committee’s president, Patrick Dewael, singled out one particular institute for criticism: the Grand Mosque in Brussels. Built in the late 1800s, then bought by Saudi Arabia in 1967, it is the country’s premier institution of Saudi Salafism. Speaking in October 2017, Dewael stated that:

The fact that, at present, a Saudi Arabian satellite is spreading a form of Wahhabi Islam submitting our laws to a type of religion from one of our properties, is unacceptable for all committee members. Its interpretation of religion disregards the fundamental principles upon which our rule of law is based.⁶⁷

Around the same time, the Belgian state also made one of the most aggressive moves against Salafism seen in recent years. In late 2017, the country’s Asylum and Migration Secretary, Theo Francken, withdrew the residence permit of the Grand Mosque’s imam. Speaking about his decision, Francken justified the move on the basis that “there is a problem with the Grand Mosque” and that the unnamed imam “was very radicalized, Salafist and conservative. He was dangerous for our society and national security.”⁶⁸

Increased scrutiny on the Grand Mosque, combined with Saudi Arabia's new Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's stated desire to shed his country's associations with mosques deemed extreme, eventually led to the Kingdom officially giving up control of the mosque in January 2018.⁶⁹

Unlike other European nations, in the United Kingdom the official view of Salafism over recent years has been subject to significant shifts depending on the government in power and minister overseeing the Prevent counter-extremism strategy. In one of its original forms under the Labour government in 2007, Prevent offered funds to Muslim organizations that the state believed were able to assist in grassroots efforts to counter radicalization. Among the groups the government initially supported were the Strategy to Reach, Empower, and Educate Teenagers (STREET). Based in a Salafi mosque in Brixton, South London, STREET was led by an influential Salafi imam named Abdul Haqq Baker. The backing of this group was part of a belief held by some early Prevent practitioners that quietist Salafis, especially those based in economically disadvantaged areas, held the "street cred" and religious knowledge to reach vulnerable Muslim youth. The most prominent supporter of this position was the former head of a police unit called the Muslim Contact Unit (MCU), Robert Lambert, who, speaking about STREET, argued: "I think it's their street skills; I would put that at number one on the list of importance. They might say it's their religious understanding, but from seeing them at close quarters, it's a combination [of the two] that matters."⁷⁰ While this view prevailed for some years, it was contested by various Labour ministers. Most prominent among them was Hazel Blears who, as Secretary for Communities and Local Government (the government department that oversaw Prevent at the time) in 2009, argued that Prevent needed to be "values based" and engage only with Muslim groups that shared the liberal democratic values of British society.⁷¹

A sweeping change to how the British State dealt with Salafis and other groups it categorized as "non-violent extremists" came in 2010, when David Cameron became the Conservative Prime Minister. The revamped 2011 version of Prevent clarified that "we will not work with extremist organisations that oppose our values of universal human rights, equality before the law, democracy and full participation in our society. If organisations

do not accept these fundamental values, we will not work with them and we will not fund them.”⁷² Under the new approach, “preventing terrorism will mean challenging extremist (and non-violent) ideas that are also part of a terrorist ideology.” While not explicit, the intended targets here were groups and individuals holding Salafi and Islamist viewpoints that, while non-violent, were now perceived as problematic.⁷³

In his landmark speech on the topic, Cameron set out an agenda based on “muscular liberalism,” which made it clear that the Government viewed terrorism and radicalization as intertwined with the question of social cohesion and shared liberal values. As a result, groups and individuals who “may reject violence, but who accept various parts of the extremist worldview, including real hostility towards Western democracy and liberal values” were now regarded as part of the problem.⁷⁴ The government explicitly rejected “non-violent extremists” that Cameron believed influenced many radicalized Britons, and ties with Salafi and Islamist groups previously working with Prevent were cut. Included in this was the STREET project, which saw its funding withdrawn in 2011 after it came to be seen by the government as spreading divisive and extreme beliefs.⁷⁵

In the years since Cameron’s speech, the Conservative government continued to implement his vision and in early 2018, it set up an independent body called the Commission for Countering Extremism (CCE). The body is tasked with better understanding various forms of extremism and providing policy recommendations. Among its primary concerns are groups which are seen as promoting ideas that run counter to what it describes as “core, shared values.”⁷⁶ While Salafis are not directly mentioned, the current commissioner of the CCE, Sarah Khan, is a long-time critic of the discourse of both Salafi and Islamist groups, and it is likely that she will continue to support this approach.⁷⁷ In October 2018, for example, Khan and the commission released a statement condemning the popular UK-based Salafi preacher Haitham al-Haddad. After it was revealed in the *Times* newspaper that al-Haddad’s charity, the Muslim Research and Development Fund, received funding from a charitable scheme run by Amazon, Khan warned that al-Haddad represented a non-violent form of “Islamist extremism”:

Islamist extremism is not just manifested as terrorism or violence. Haitham al-Haddad's views are misogynistic, racist and homophobic. They promote a supremacist 'us versus them' worldview that wrongly makes Muslims feel that they can't be fully British; that permits bullying and intimidation of those who choose not to conform and that has the damaging effect of tarring many Muslims by association.⁷⁸

Thus, in Khan's and the commission's view, terrorism and violence are merely the tip of the iceberg of a much wider threat to British society posed by Salafi and Islamist views. While, along with the French, the British approach to Salafism may be among the most aggressive in Western Europe, it is also in line with a wider trend among governments in viewing Salafis with suspicion, often binding them together with Islamists and the threat posed by jihadist terrorism.

Scholarly Views of Salafism in the West

While many Western governments have concluded that illiberal and conservative religious beliefs are problematic and linked to terrorist activity, there is far less agreement among commentators, scholars, and analysts. For some, any focus on Salafism is a red herring based on a misunderstanding of radicalization and factors behind jihadism. Conservative Salafism, they argue, is not a sign of radicalization nor a pathway to violence and must be seen as separate from violent extremism. This is an important point to consider. It is worth noting that there are several groups that can be described as militant Islamists, such as the Taliban, Hamas, and Hezbollah, that, while highly socially conservative, do not adhere to the Salafi movement.⁷⁹

In her critique of the British government's focus on conservative religious ideology, for example, American academic Z. Fareen Parvez draws on her research among Salafi women in France to argue that a focus on religious beliefs and practice can lead to "the false assumption that Islamic practices and ways of life directly correlate with violence." This, she fears, leads to an atmosphere where "all religious Muslims...become suspect."⁸⁰ A focus on belief also risks taking attention away from what she identifies as the main

drivers of radicalization such as the socioeconomic exclusion of Muslims throughout Europe.⁸¹

In order to back up her assertion that religion has little or nothing to do with violent radicalization, Parvez notes that many recent cases of jihadist radicalization in Europe have involved young socioeconomically disadvantaged Muslim men with petty criminal pasts and a distinct lack of religious knowledge or piety. She also draws on recent work by Olivier Roy where he blames jihadist terrorism in the West on the “Islamization of radicalism” rather than “the radicalization of Islam.” For Roy, young French Muslims with limited life opportunities as well as criminal pasts are drawn to the movement due to a sense of nihilistic rebellion, not religious conviction. This explanation also downplays the role of failed integration, and Roy argues that France’s jihadists are “Westernised; they speak French better than their parents do. They have all adopted the youth culture of their generation; they drink alcohol, smoke hash and pick up girls in nightclubs.”⁸²

Similar findings are reported by other European scholars on the topic. In his research on the most recent wave of Belgians to join jihadist groups in Syria, for example, Rik Coolsaet concludes that “religion is not of the essence...[and] has systematically decreased as a driver of terrorism as the waves of foreign fighters succeed one another.”⁸³ More important, according to him, was involvement in social networks and the creation of a youth subculture based around the idea that the recruits feel they have no prospects, or “no future”:

The explanation for their decision is found not in how they think, but in how they feel. Going to Syria is an escape from an everyday life seemingly without prospects. Vulnerability, frustration, perceptions of inequity, and a feeling that by traveling to Syria they have nothing to lose and everything to gain, are common traits among both groups.⁸⁴

Nonetheless, Coolsaet also notes that recruitment takes place quickly along with a rapid and superficial adoption of religion, itself a possible admission that it plays a role, albeit a small one. He quotes a Belgian senior police officer who found that, while previous

waves of Belgian jihadists were motivated by an “extremist interpretation of Islam,” the latest group are “Islamized radicals” who have quickly adopted Salafi jihadism as a vehicle for pre-existing radical thought and behavior related to rejecting and feeling rejected by their own societies. Salafism for them is therefore more of an afterthought than a central motivating factor.⁸⁵

The dismissal of the importance of religious belief and its role in violent radicalization has been met with a variety of criticisms. Olivier Roy’s ongoing and much publicized dispute over this issue with another European giant of Islamic studies, Gilles Kepel, is something of a microcosm of the wider debate. Responding to Roy, Kepel argued that the rise of Salafism in France contributed to the creation of cut-off French-Muslim communities. Such “virtual and mental enclaves” help contribute to a rejection of liberal democratic values and should be seen as factors in the radicalization process of French Muslims.⁸⁶ Kepel thus presents the problem as the result of a French society that failed to properly integrate its Muslim youth, many of whom live in the ghettos surrounding Paris and Marseilles. As a result of this, Salafism, which he regards as providing the theological underpinnings of global jihadism, has taken root.

Several other prominent European scholars hold a similar view to Kepel, viewing Salafism writ large as one of the core causes of violent radicalization in the West. In a recent study of European jihadists, Spanish academic Fernando Reinares argued that “undemocratic Salafism” is a “very serious middle to long-term challenge” facing those trying to combat extremism and terrorism in Europe.⁸⁷ His claim centers on the promotion of illiberal values as something that can motivate European Muslims to turn against their societies, sometimes violently.

This approach places emphasis on the importance of social cohesion as a mechanism to prevent radicalization. Referring to it as a “fundamentalist and politicised...ideology,” Reinares writes that Salafism is an obstacle to Muslim integration due to its teachings that liberal democracy is un-Islamic and forbidden. Integration into wider Western society is not only rejected but actively prevented by Salafis who “drastically restrict...any interaction with the...surrounding society.”⁸⁸ Reinares thus presents quietist Salafism as

a possible gateway for radicalization, whereby some European Salafis will seek to transition to organizations that espouse similar religious tenets but pursue violent means to impose them.

Karen Armstrong, a leading scholar of comparative religion, has also for some time expressed concerns about the general illiberal intolerance of Salafi thought. Writing in 2014, she argued that the roots of IS “are in Wahhabism” which she described as an “idiosyncratic form of Islam” which was undertaking a “cultural offensive” in the West through aggressive Saudi proselytizing efforts.⁸⁹ This had a deleterious effect on values of tolerance and pluralism in the West as Saudi-funded institutes “demanded religious conformity” which ensured that harsh Wahhabi sectarianism “would reach as deeply into Bradford, England, and Buffalo, New York, as into Pakistan, Jordan or Syria: everywhere gravely undermining Islam’s traditional pluralism.”⁹⁰

While it does not endorse violent jihadism *per se*, this Wahhabi influence, she wrote, ensured that a “whole generation of Muslims...has grown up with a maverick form of Islam that has given them a negative view of other faiths and an intolerantly sectarian understanding of their own.” This, in Armstrong’s view, makes Western Muslims more vulnerable to jihadist recruitment efforts that exploit these beliefs, presenting themselves as the only Islamic group capable of implementing them in the modern world.

Writing in the run-up to U.S. President Donald Trump’s May 2017 visit to Saudi Arabia, Brookings scholar Will McCants expressed a similar belief that Saudi-sponsored Salafi proselytizing was one of the roots of extremism in the West. While advising the President to urge the Saudis to curb their exporting of Salafism, he argued that “the creed teaches that infidels and misguided Muslims should be shunned or even fought if they refuse to embrace its message.”⁹¹ McCants is particularly concerned with the views of Wahhabi clerics and cites statements from an official Saudi government website such as: “Hating infidels is obligatory because they are the enemies of God and His messenger and the enemies of Muslims,” and a fatwa that claims that Muslims who call for religious unity are apostates, which is a crime punishable by death in Saudi Arabia.⁹² While he concedes it is unfair to lay the blame of extremism in the West entirely at the feet of Saudi Salafism,

he also concludes that “it’s hard for the Saudi government to argue that it is helping matters when its own textbooks have been taught in IS-run schools and most of the groups designated as foreign terrorist organizations by the United States espouse some version of Wahhabism.”⁹³

The basis for much of this type of criticism of Salafis, whether they are violent or political, is that their teachings contribute to an overall erosion of a Western Muslim’s value system, transplanting a new set of values based on a rejection of liberal democracy and an intolerance for other beliefs, lifestyles and cultures. This, it is argued, makes them more susceptible to the message of militant Salafist groups, which can offer a more immediate and, for some, satisfying response and solution to their desire to live by and implement these values.

Some, however, argue the opposite—far from being the root of the problem, Salafi scholarship is in fact the antidote to jihadism. Writing from the Dutch perspective, Bitter and Frazer argue that forms of political Salafism “can play a role in the prevention of violent jihadism” because their adherence to the same religious norms as Salafi jihadists potentially gives them more legitimacy in the eyes of potential militants.⁹⁴ While it is a seemingly counter-intuitive line of argument to suggest that promoting the same approach to understanding Islam as jihadists can prevent violence, the authors claim that politically active Salafis can offer potential jihadists an alternative to violence.

As noted in the previous section, in the United Kingdom a similar argument was put forward by former policeman Robert Lambert, who headed the Muslim Contact Unit (MCU). During his time at the MCU, which was charged with leading outreach to British Muslim communities in order to prevent radicalization, he concluded that “a handful of Salafi and Islamist groups have been at the forefront of ground-breaking community work that successfully counters the adverse influence of al-Qaeda propaganda among susceptible youth.”⁹⁵ He also pointed out that, throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, Salafis refuted the teachings of popular Salafi jihadist sheikhs based in London, such as Abdullah al-Faisal, Abu Qatada, and Abu Hamza al-Masri. Unlike other Muslim groups,

he concluded, Salafis have the “street credibility” to confront and stop jihadist ideology and activity.⁹⁶

Defenders of Salafism often highlight that certain members of the movement are well-equipped theologically to argue against jihadist claims that terrorist violence is a legitimate form of activism in the pursuit of Salafi goals. They note that Wahhabis and Salafis have done more than any other Islamic movement to develop detailed religious condemnations of jihadist violence. Writing for the *New York Times*, the Atlantic Council’s Mohamed Alyahya highlighted Saudi Arabia’s former Grand Mufti (one of the most important figures in Saudi Salafism) Abd al-Aziz bin Baz’s fatwa against suicide bombing and Abdullah al-Sheikh’s criticism of Saudis joining jihadist groups overseas while calling for Muslims to obey the laws of their governments and avoid political activism.⁹⁷ The founder of Washington D.C.’s Arabia Foundation, Ali Shihabi, echoed similar sentiments when he wrote in 2017 that “Scapegoating Saudi Arabia won’t help us fight terrorism.”⁹⁸ While conceding that Wahhabism is “intolerant and reactionary,” he argued that while many Arab nations (such as Syria, Iraq and Tunisia) are historically resistant to Salafi Islam, they have nonetheless now become major producers of jihadists.

In the United States, this debate was briefly re-ignited in 2015 after the journalist Graeme Wood published an influential article in the *Atlantic* in which he argued that quietist Salafis “offer an Islamic antidote to [IS leader Abu Bakr al-] Baghdadi-style jihadism.”⁹⁹ This prompted the Brookings Institute to publish a series of responses which offered a range of views on quietist Salafism. In the first contribution to the series, Jacob Olidort warned against Wood’s suggestion, arguing that “this proposal, while tempting, can lead down a dangerously slippery slope.” The apolitical position of quietist Salafism is, in his view, a question of timing and circumstance and is therefore “merely a placeholder rather than a principle for most Salafi groups today.” Because of a shared “theological DNA” between the two, Olidort concludes that the move from quietist to jihadist does not require a significant change in ideology.¹⁰⁰ Olidort’s view is shared in a follow-up contribution to the series by Rashad Ali, who similarly argued that “the premise that quietist Salafism is an antidote needs to be questioned.” He reminded readers that Sheikh al-Uthaymeen, despite being a key influence on quietist Salafis, recommended the

building of armies to fight secular Muslim rulers and provided the religious justification for killing Jewish women and children in Israel.¹⁰¹

While European politicians, commentators, and scholars have long considered how, if at all, Salafism contributes to jihadist radicalization in their countries, few have broached the specific topic of the role of Salafism in jihadist radicalization in the United States. This is partly due to the codified division between politics and religion, which ensures that the government largely avoids discussion of theological issues. Another likely reason is the controversy with which the very few studies that have discussed Salafism (or conservative Islamic belief more widely) and violent radicalization has been met with in the United States. This problem is perhaps best exemplified by the reaction to an attempt by the New York Police Department to inject a discussion of Salafism into the official discourse on radicalization in America. In their 2007 report on jihadist radicalization in the West, authors Mitch Silber and Arvind Bhatt (who were intelligence analysts for the New York Police Department at the time) argued that a common initial phase in the homegrown radicalization process included an exploration and eventual acceptance of Salafi Islam and that “contemporary Saudi (Wahhabi) scholars have provided the religious legitimacy for many of the arguments promoted by the jihadists.”¹⁰²

These findings were met with a furious reaction from certain American Muslim lobby groups and civil rights organizations. The Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR), for example, argued that the report “casts suspicion on all US Muslims.”¹⁰³ The work was held in such contempt by the American Civil Liberties Union that it successfully sued the NYPD, obtaining a court order banning the department from including the report on its website. The basis of the ACLU argument was that such a focus on Salafi belief helped feed suspicion and persecution of America Muslim communities, claiming that the “report provided the analytic underpinnings of discriminatory surveillance against Muslims.”¹⁰⁴ Since this controversy, American government bodies and scholars are loath to approach this topic, thus leaving the United States considerably behind other Western nations in how it understands and approaches the issue.

One of the only other studies on the link between Salafism and jihadism in America is found in Heffelfinger's *Radical Islam in America*. While it is primarily a study of Islamist and Islamist-inspired activism in the United States, it also looks at Salafi activism, in particular that which was undertaken by the Virginia-based Salafi preacher Ali al-Timimi. Similar to the NYPD's conclusions, the author argues that "immersion in Salafi thinking and mind-set" is an early stage in the radicalization process.¹⁰⁵ In his study of al-Timimi, Heffelfinger posits that his initially non-violent and apolitical "da'wa centered activism" eventually morphed and "turned into a call to militancy." Al-Timimi came to see engagement in violent jihad for American Muslims overseas as a "necessary part of their faith" in the post-9/11 War on Terror era. This was influenced by both his Salafist theology and his adoption of a form of Islamist ideology inspired by *Sahwa* thinkers in Saudi Arabia.¹⁰⁶

Thus, while in Europe officials have for years couched their discussions of extremism and jihadism in language often framing the problem as emanating from a Salafi interpretation of Islam, this is not the case in the United States. American officials, by contrast, have rarely touched upon this subject and have certainly avoided speaking about it in the same terms as their European counterparts. Nonetheless, the United States has for decades been home to a large and diverse Salafi population, from non-violent quietists to jihadists. Indeed, any discussion of the roots of jihadism in America is incomplete without an understanding of how Salafism grew and evolved in the country. Like the wider global movement, however, the vast majority of Salafis in America are not violent and reject all of the jihadist groups that operate today in their current form. This study will provide an overview of the history and current status of various strands of Salafism in America, helping to better understand its link to militancy and its wider evolution.

II. Salafism in America

In the United States, each of the macro categories of Salafism manifested themselves either through large umbrella organizations or influential and charismatic individuals. In some cases, members of the quietist community traversed the spectrum, first becoming activists and then eventually, jihadists. The following section will map the history and evolution of the Salafi movement in America through identifying and analyzing key organizations and individuals who have shaped it. It begins with a profile of one of the pioneers of purist Islam in America, Muhammad Syed Adly, which is based largely on the author's in-person interview with Adly at his mosque in South Carolina. Following this, analysis will turn to two of the first Salafi umbrella groups in the United States, the quietist Quran and Sunnah Society (QSS) and the activist Salafi influenced Islamic Assembly of North America (IANA). The traditions of both organizations shaped the future of Salafism in America, and remnants of their influence can be found in many Salafi currents in existence today. As such, the section will conclude with analysis of some of the more influential Salafis operating in America today, from modern, Americanized Salafi groups like the al-Maghrib institute, to Salafi jihadis such as the Michigan-based Ahmad Musa Jibril.

II.I The Pioneer: Muhammad Syed Adly

One of the first imams in America to preach a purist interpretation of Islam is Muhammad Syed Adly, who is the founder and head of the Islamic Center of Columbia in South Carolina. While impossible to say with complete certainty, he is likely to be among the first classically trained imams to ever operate in the country. However, it is important to note from the outset that Adly himself fiercely rejects the Salafi label. In an email correspondence with the author he wrote that, "I strongly object to the labelling of myself as a salafi...I am not a salafi imam and do not teach salafiyah."¹⁰⁷ Nonetheless, Adly is worthy of study in the context of researching American Salafism due to the proximity of his teachings to what is widely accepted as constituting Salafi theology. In addition, he is described as influential in the American Salafi scene in at least two published accounts of Salafism in America.¹⁰⁸ Finally, Adly was closely associated with recognized Salafi

organizations, taught and mentored many American Salafi leaders who preach today, and many within the Salafi community consider him to be one of the pioneers of the movement in America. In a series of interviews with the author, he recounted how he came to live in America, the early experiences he had with other Islamic movements of the time, and his own beliefs. While many of his beliefs about politics, or lack thereof, fit the quietist model, Adly is somewhat of an outlier. In addition to his rejection of the “Salafi” label, he prides himself on his independence from any specific scholars or movements, referring to himself as a “free *da'i*” (caller to Islam) with “nobody to tie my hands.”¹⁰⁹

Born in Egypt, Adly began his Islamic education in the late 1950s with a conservative Islamic organization called Jamaah al-Sharia. In 1970, he moved to Mecca where he trained for five years, swiftly making a name for himself for his level of knowledge and ability to teach. Recalling how this experience opened his eyes to a “purer” form of Islam, he noted how “they taught me to take everything in the Islamic texts as it is, without adding any logic or philosophy.” Adly learned to be more critical of other Islamic groups and teachings, including those found in his own country at al-Azhar, Egypt’s pre-eminent center of Islamic learning. Al-Azhar’s associations with Sufi groups meant that, for Adly, “it was not the proper place—its *aqida* has a lot of philosophy and things like this.”

While Adly had planned to live out his years learning and teaching in Saudi Arabia, this all changed unexpectedly for him when, in 1973, he was approached by a woman he identified as Hasina Umm Khalil.¹¹⁰ An American convert from New York, she had traveled to Mecca in order to make pilgrimage and find a classically trained scholar who she could persuade to come back with her and help spread the “correct” understanding of Islam. Adly recalls how during their meeting “she was so emotional, she even started crying that there was no one at her mosque who could teach the proper Sunnah of Muhammad.” Moved by her passion (“even I started crying!”), he eventually agreed to move to America for a brief time because “I had always wanted to help spread Islam in a non-Arab country.”

In 1975, he joined Hasina Umm Khalil at her mosque, the American Muslim Mission on State Street in Brooklyn, New York, also known as the State Street Mosque. Run by a Caribbean-Moroccan immigrant named Babar Sheikh Dawud, who founded the mosque in 1928, its congregation was largely made up of African-Americans. Many of them were introduced to Islam through the Nation of Islam (NoI) but, due to Dawud's teachings, had moved closer toward Sunni orthodoxy. Adly recalls that, while this was a time that Islam was beginning to be spread in parts of America, "their *aqida* was totally corrupted." Salafis view the NoI as heretical due to its belief that its founder, Wallace Fard Muhammad, is God incarnate.

In addition to heavy NoI influence in the contemporary American Muslim scene in New York, Adly noted the existence of another group called Dar ul-Islam. Dar ul-Islam was founded by a former imam of the State Street mosque, named Yahya Abdul-Karim, in the late 1960s. Like the NoI, Dar ul-Islam was a predominantly African-American movement, but it maintained closer links to orthodox Sunni belief and a much more overtly militant character. They sought to distinguish themselves from the NoI by expressly referring to themselves as "Sunni Muslims." The group emerged in an era of black power activism, tapping into the emotions it elicited among sections of African-American communities. Members included both former NoI members and Black Panthers. According to Adly, "they came from a mentality of oppression from society and Islam offered them a new way to rebel."

The movement grew rapidly in New York, New Jersey, and Atlanta, among other major cities. It created a network of mosques and organizations which dealt with issues such as education, outreach, and communal defense. Members wore military uniforms, complete with fatigues and boots, and armed themselves. "They wanted to make a Muslim land in America," Adly claimed, while describing how "they had a semi-army [militia] who would search congregants before they entered the mosque and acted as bodyguards for their imams." Among its most notorious members was Jamal al-Amin (also known as H. Rap Brown), the former chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and minister of justice for the Black Panther Party. In March 2000, al-Amin murdered a police officer in Georgia and is currently serving a life sentence.¹¹¹

Adly recalls clashing with Dar ul-Islam members soon after arriving in New York. After teaching for some time at the State Street mosque, his “big mouth” and rebellious character led to him leaving and establishing his own mosque on the same street, which he named the Masjid al-Muslimeen. He was one of the only classically trained imams in the region at the time, and his level of knowledge and oratory skills allowed him to quickly build his own congregation. His new congregants included former Dar ul-Islam members, whom he persuaded to leave the group after convincing them of what he believed were its heretical beliefs.

The traditions of Dar ul-Islam and other similar groups of the time required that people pledge allegiance (*bay'a*) to a specific imam. Communities would be created and closely controlled by the leadership figures and Adly recalls that most Muslims of the area were “either under Imam Yahya [Abdul Karim] or Imam Tawfiq.” He saw this approach and the demands made for *bay'a* as a divisive innovation that had nothing to do with Islamic teachings. In his mind, *bay'a* was only to be made to the recognized Caliph and no one else. Angered by his activities, Yahya’s men soon began to threaten Adly and one night in 1977 “they came to the mosque with guns and a van full of people.” Their intent was to take back the former Dar ul-Islam members who had joined Adly, but after some hours of negotiation he persuaded them to leave. Following this, Adly claims that he attempted to reach out to Dar ul-Islam leadership with a plan to make peace and work together for the sake of the religion. He took his students—including future American Salafi preacher Khalid Yasin—to meet various figures including Jamal al-Amin, but it was to no avail. “I was naïve,” he laments.

By the early 1980s, Adly had his fill of New York and grew weary of the infighting while also wanting to move his family away from the vices of the city. His intention was “to find land and build a community,” and he eventually came upon South Carolina: “I like the South in general—even non-Muslims are much friendlier here and there is a much more relaxed life style. People were more soft-hearted here and had what they call the southern hospitality.” Soon, as in New York, the desire among the local Muslim community for a formally trained scholar rapidly gained him a sizeable following of the area’s Muslims.

As well as giving lectures for Muslim students at the University of South Carolina, Adly soon managed to set up the Islamic Center of Columbia and, largely thanks to donations from congregants, in 1989 he built the mosque which currently stands there. He also claims that he was approached by the MWL on occasion with offers of financial assistance. In the 1970s, when he was still in New York, he notes that he met with the then MWL secretary general Muhammad Saleh al-Qazzaz,¹¹² but turned down his initial offer for fear of becoming beholden to the group. For a man who prided himself on his scholarly independence, association with the MWL was not an attractive proposition: “we are not here to support any regime.” Nonetheless, they sent him a check, which he promptly sent back. Eventually however, he gave in, accepting \$500 a month from them for three years while in New York.

From his base in Columbia, Adly continues to preach today while also publishing books under the imprint of *Adly Publications*. His views, while conservative and outmoded, are difficult to place into any specific category. His refusal to give allegiance to any specific scholar separates him from the purists and American Madkhalis. While he displays affinity for elements of Islamist thought, including support for *tawhid al-hakimiyya*, he cannot be classified as an activist due to his belief in education over revolution and political activism. Finally, he is a firm believer in the centrality of jihad in Islam, but he sees no place for violent jihad today and rejects the action of Salafi jihadists as a matter of practicality rather than *aqida*.

Adly’s views on American Muslim political participation, citizenship, and some areas of civic engagement are perhaps closest to those of the quietist Salafis. He sees little value in politics for Muslims today. They are not, he believes, in a position to worry about anything other than studying and improving their knowledge:

The most important thing is to straighten your relationship with Allah first—when you educate yourself and do the right thing then [involvement in politics] is OK but it is not the time for this now. Politics is a waste of time, it is not gonna get you any

place. What can you change? Allah will bring about the change—worry about yourself first. Do the proper *aqida*.

Positive change for the *ummah*, in his view, will come organically “through *tarbiya*” and a process of purifying Islam from innovations. “This is the way the prophet built a society, one by one, brick by brick.” Muslims who vote in America are “ignorant of their *deen*” as “democracy is not from Islam.” By taking part in the political process, Muslims are risking diverting their trust in God to another authority. Depending on the circumstances, Adly believes that this is a form of *shirk* and *kufr*. If a Muslim votes out of ignorance, they can be forgiven, but if they do so due to a belief that “democracy is better than the Islamic system, this would take them out of Islam.” This form of excommunication is common among Salafis, though this is not the jihadi form of *takfir*, as Adly makes no claim that these Muslims should be killed.

Less common, however, is the preaching of *tawhid al-hakimiyya*, a concept reviled by purist Salafis but supported by Adly, who argues that “*tawhid al-hakimiyya* is connected to *tawhid* because it says the one who has the right to be obeyed in totality and to legislate is Allah.” This belief differentiates Adly from most other American Salafis. While Madkhalis and other purists consider any individual or group who holds these views as deviants, Adly does not. He was confident in pronouncing *takfir* on other Muslim sects, such as the Shi’a and Ahmadis, but would not do the same with Islamists such as the Muslim Brotherhood, whom he viewed to be mistaken in their revolutionary methodology, but not deviant or heretical.

While supportive of the concept of *tawhid al-hakimiyya* and its eventual application, Adly stressed that he did not focus on it in his teachings, which were more about the fundamentals of Islam. Muslims in America were not yet prepared or educated enough to concern themselves with establishing the law of God and had to first work on purifying their *aqida*. In his eyes, this was akin to telling someone with no money to give to charity: “why teach a poor person about *zakat* [charitable giving]—there is no point as they cannot do it.”

Adly also diverges from most purists when it comes to respecting the ruler of the country in which a Muslim resides. “Where is this in Koran, where is this in *hadith*?” he asks, “I do not teach this. In fact, in the Islamic texts Muslims “are discouraged to even live in a *kufir* land.” Today, however, Muslims have little choice as in his view there is no legitimate Islamic state in which they can live. In fact, in America Muslims are freer than many other countries and, speaking from experience, he notes that “in America Muslims are free to build their mosques and practice Islam.” They should, in his view, abide by the laws of the land and he points out that “I have been in America for 40 years and have had no problems here with the law—I don’t even have a traffic ticket!”

However, when asked about an American Muslim’s allegiance to the U.S. Constitution as the highest form of law in the country, Adly’s position is uncompromising: “if a Muslim believes the constitution is better than the Koran and will bring the solution to the people better than Islam, then he is out [of the fold of Islam].” As an extension to this, he is also of the belief that American Muslims should not seek political office in the United States. Nor should they join law enforcement or the military as this would make it impossible for them to enjoin the good and forbid the evil, a duty seen by Salafis as central to all Muslims: “this is totally wrong. We have a red line in Islam—enjoin the good and forbid the evil—help one another towards righteousness and do not help one another towards transgression and evil doing.” If a Muslim police officer would, for example, be asked to guard a nightclub, they could not refuse, despite meaning that they would be involvement in protecting an establishment that serves alcohol. In the military “you might be told to go and shoot people” around the world without needing religious sanction to do so. Through joining either the police or the military an American Muslim would become corrupted by opening themselves to actions that are against Islam.

Adly believes that the only type of military involvement that is legitimate for a Muslim is jihad. However, Adly approaches this doctrine in a theoretical fashion, arguing that today there is no legitimate avenue through which a Muslim can participate in jihad. Jihad, according to Adly, cannot be carried out by an individual or a group but only by an “Islamic country run by an Islamic system.” In his view, this does not exist today. Saudi Arabia, for example, does not have the authority to declare jihad as it is just one of many

Islamic countries that must first be united under one leader, the Caliph. Using the example of the United States, he asks “can Texas declare war on its own? No, it cannot.” In fact, by uniting all the states under one leader, “America is practicing Islam more than us [the Muslims]! It has fifty states but one leader. The Muslim nations are divided with many different leaders.”

The task of turning radicalized American Muslims away from jihad was, he accepted, a difficult one. Given his support of the concept of jihad and the establishment of *tawhid al-hakimiyya*, it is possible to argue that members of his congregation may conclude that groups like IS are on the correct path. Asked what he would advise a young American Muslim considering joining IS, which claims to have established the necessary conditions for jihad, Adly replied, “I would say you better go get a job and take care of your family—this person does not know what Islam is.” Not only did he regard IS as illegitimate due to its lack of authority, but he also viewed jihad today as impractical—it achieved little and, if anything, made the situation of the *ummah* much worse. Muslims were not in a position to fight and achieve any success and should therefore avoid it given the current situation: “you cannot destroy a whole building with a shotgun—you are making more harm on yourself by fighting a whole system.”

As an example, he turns to the issue of Palestine, providing a view on the conflict that is common among quietist Salafis which casts doubt over the utility of fighting Israel in the way groups like Hamas have done for decades. “How long has there been a problem there? Before I was born! All these revolutions, all this jihad did what? Losing people and making things worse!” Muslims instead should focus on “working to teach the people and educate the people.” God, in his view, abandoned the *ummah* “because they have abandoned him, Muslims are not doing the right thing.” Modern jihadists are “jumping the gun” through their methodology which places fighting above all other Islamic requirements which must first be fulfilled. They are not equipped with the “proper tools” and have not fully developed the relationship with God required to succeed in their aims.

Adly believes that it is the duty of Salafis to find means to convince people that are as effective as those employed by jihadists. If they are unable to do this, “it is our failure.”

One of the ways Adly tries to do this is to use the example of how the prophet Muhammad reacted in the 7th century. While he eventually fought jihad after fleeing Mecca for Medina, he spent 12 years facing oppression and violence along with his followers. During that time, rather than fight back, he focused on *da'wa* and education. If it took the prophet Muhammad 12 years to choose jihad then, according to Adly's reasoning, a normal Muslim must take far longer to educate themselves and study. The belief that the practice of jihad is not an issue of *aqida* but of circumstance and practicality is prevalent among most, if not all, non-jihadi Salafis. In this way, Adly is more in line with standard quietist Salafi thought.

Thus, Adly defies attempts to convincingly categorize him using the accepted typology of Salafism discussed earlier in this study. He, like the declining American quietist movement discussed below, continues to preach separateness over integration. He also rejects political participation in the same way that quietists do, while endorsing the activist Salafi concept of *tawhid al-hakimiyya*. Adly's views on jihad are also closest to those of other quietists. However, the fact that he decides to discuss the topic and its relevance during his sermons again places him somewhat on the fringe of quietist Salafism, whose members generally avoid giving it any prominence lest it be misunderstood by their audience.

While Adly is undoubtedly one of the most influential early figures to the current American Salafi movement, today his clout has waned considerably. Among the younger generation, he is regarded with respect but also seen as something of a relic with old-fashioned views about how Muslims should live in America. His legacy is nonetheless considerable, beginning with his role in the growth of the first major Salafi organization in America, the Quran and Sunnah Society (QSS).

II.II America's Purist Salafis: From Madkhalis to New American Quietists

The quietists were the first Salafis to establish themselves in America. During the 1980s and throughout the 1990s, they made up a significant portion of conservative Muslims in

America and closely followed the teachings of the two most influential quietist scholars, Muhammad Nasiruddin al-Albani and his student Rabee al-Madkhali. Since the late 1990s, American quietist Salafism experienced a significant drop in followers and a loss of influence. This is due to a variety of reasons, including what many perceived as the movement's inward-looking and isolationist approach that alienated many members. The movement has, however, spawned a variety of related Salafi groups which represent the evolution of a unique American iteration of Salafism that continues to influence Islam in America to this day. Unlike their predecessors, they are more open to engagement with the public as well as government organizations to address a variety of social issues, including radicalization and terrorism. The following chapter lays out the history of America's quietists, their evolution over the years, and how some of their offshoots operate today.

The Quran and Sunnah Society (QSS)

While Muhammad Adly helped to bring Salafi teachings to America and influenced future Salafi leaders in the country, the first major Salafi organization in the United States was the al-Qur'an was-Sunnah Society (or Quran and Sunnah Society-QSS). Officially incorporated in Ohio in 1995, QSS also had a presence in California, Pennsylvania, and Kentucky. It operated mainly by hosting major conferences and other smaller gatherings of like-minded Salafis from across the United States. These events would bring adherents together to listen to Salafi scholars, including leading Saudi clerics, and distribute audio tapes of new lectures.¹¹³ According to American Salafi Umar Lee, who was heavily involved in the organization during its peak, the QSS conferences were “the most important part of spreading the Salafi da'wa to other parts of the country,” helping build networks and communities of Salafis.¹¹⁴

The organization appears to have operated long before it was officially established, however, and according to two of its senior members, Abu Usamah al-Dahabi and Jamaal Zarabozo, QSS was organizing events and lectures as early as the early 1980s.¹¹⁵ From the 1980s until the late 1990s, the group experienced its heyday as one of the most influential Islamic umbrella organizations in America. This was partly due to the fact that QSS was

among the first groups in the United States to harness the power of the emerging Internet. As well as setting up its own website in 1996, *QSS.org*, by the late 1990s, Salafis were among the most visible American Islamic movements on the Internet. Lee recalls in his memoir that “there was a vast worldwide network of articles and audio lectures that interlinked to one another and were sent to numerous email lists.” In later years, the Internet would also play a central role in the decline of QSS and the wider quietist Salafi American scene, which was decimated by furious infighting among members based on personality clashes, power struggles, and disagreements over (often minor) issues of *aqida* and *manhaj*.¹¹⁶

The founder of QSS, a Lebanese Salafi and former student of al-Albani named Muhammad al-Jibaly, initially founded QSS to cater to the needs of a growing population of Arab students from the Persian Gulf living on the West coast.¹¹⁷ Soon, however, he also sought to use QSS as a vehicle for *da’wa* in the United States. He also found a willing audience among a significant population of African-American converts based mainly in New York and New Jersey. These new Salafi practitioners originally converted to Islam due to the influence of the Nation of Islam but became disillusioned with the movement due to its obsession with race at the expense of creedal purity.

According to Jamaal Zarabozo, who was among its first American-born members, QSS’ main activities included publishing the work of al-Jibaly and other Salafis, organizing Salafi-oriented lectures in mosques around America, and holding major annual conferences that brought together American Salafis from around the country.¹¹⁸ Zarabozo was brought on by Jibaly to help communicate the message in English. While largely unknown outside of American Salafi circles, he is one of the most influential early quietist Salafis in America, serving as an inspiration for a generation of some of the first American Salafi converts.

QSS and its members barely engaged with the outside world and its output was dry, scholarly, and primarily focused on issues of *aqida* and *fiqh*. “We spoke only about issues of belief,” says Zarabozo, “there was no politics at all.” Its leadership had little to say about the modern world and avoided any discussion of politics or current events. Jihad and the

issue of its relevance to American Muslims was also largely ignored. Zarabozo recalls a QSS conference in the early 1990s in which al-Albani gave a speech via video-link: “during the question and answer, one Salafi asked Albani what his view was on participating in jihad in Chechnya...Albani’s reaction was forceful. ‘Sit!’” he reportedly told the audience, “you are not the people of jihad!” Al-Albani’s reaction, Zarabozo says, displeased a portion of the audience who were eager for a more activist approach to issues affecting Muslims across the globe.

Zarabozo argues that modern, global jihadist ideology has no relation to Salafist thought. While accepting that “no Muslim can deny that jihad is part of their religion,” he believes that jihadist groups like IS are a product of people who are ignorant of Salafi thought and the principles of jihad, rather than a legitimate implementation of them. He also recognizes, however, that Salafis face significant challenges in convincing radicalized Muslims that modern jihadist thought is based on incorrect understandings of the religion. Individuals who do not have the required level of Salafi religious training, and who adopt some of the basic tenets of the movement, can move towards jihadism if they do not receive the appropriate guidance. The knowledge required to fully understand this takes years of study, and “there is no simple way to dissuade someone who thinks IS are the true Muslim group, this requires deep theological discussion about the true *shari’a* and how to implement the goals of the *shari’a*.” He also acknowledges that while it is the only way, this academic approach, which is common among many Salafis, will fail to reach a wide audience: “the masses like something else, they don’t like to hear it, they are not interested. But if this is the case they should realize they are not capable of making big decisions like fighting jihad.”¹¹⁹

The ideological problem, in his view, comes not from Salafism but from politicized Islam, and in particular groups like the Muslim Brotherhood. The term Salafi jihadism is, he believes, a misuse of the term because “Muslim Brotherhood activism has as much more to do with causing the jihad, so why is it fair to call them Salafi jihadists?” Aside from the ideology, he also sees jihadist radicalization as more of a reaction to external events, such as the oppression of Muslims around the world. Salafi or not, Muslims feel a duty to fight back because, after all, “Islam not a religion that is silent in the face of injustice.”

A similar argument was put forward by Hamza Abdur Razzaq, imam of the Masjid Quran Wal-Hadith in Washington, D.C., also known as the 18th Street Mosque. Like Zarabozo, he is a product of the QSS movement and has a specific focus on following the works of a select number of Saudi sheikhs, especially Sheikh al-Madkhali. He, too, balks at the use of the term Salafi jihadism, describing it as an oxymoron and exclaiming that “it’s like saying Buddhist-Christian, they have nothing to do with each other!” Jihad is, in his view, the result of Islam being polluted by the pernicious influence of Islamist (or what he refers to as “Qutbi” or “Sururi”) thought. Jihadis “rely on emotion over logic and have introduced innovations such as *tawhid al-hakimiyya*.”¹²⁰

While the ideological influence of what remains of the movement is still based around the works of the Saudi scholars, much of it is filtered through a British-based organization called Salafi Publications which provides the direction and inspiration for American quietists. Based at the Masjid as-Salafi mosque in Birmingham and under the stewardship of its imam Abu Khadeejah, Salafi Publications produces countless English-language books on Salafi issues as well as translations of the works of Ibn Taymiyya and the establishment Saudi sheikhs, in particular al-Fawzan and al-Madkhali. Many quietist mosques in America stock works produced by Salafi Publications, including the 18th Street Mosque.

During a visit to the mosque, Hamza Abdur Razzaq provided the author with various booklets, including *The Fundamentals of Tawheed* and *A Brief Guide to Islam and its Position Towards al-Qaeda & ISIS: An Analysis of the Historical Roots of the Extremist, Terrorist Ideology of al-Qaeda, ISIS and other Insurgent Groups*. The latter is written by Abu Khadeejah and published by Islam Against Extremism, a project of Salafi Publications headed by the preacher which purports to expose “deviant ideologies, extremism, terrorism, and their proponents.”¹²¹ The arguments found in the lengthy near 100-page document characterize the wider purist Salafi views and critiques of global jihadist groups. It presents the jihad of al-Qaeda and IS as the product of a modern “revolutionary ideology” created and spread by Muslim Brotherhood figures such as Hassan al-Banna and Qutb, who are characterized as *khawarij*. This is a reference to the

Kharijites, which many Salafis believe are represented today by al-Qaeda, IS, and other like-minded groups. The pamphlet and its critiques represent the standard Wahhabi position on the matter, to which groups such as Salafi Publications and its partners and affiliates in America adhere. Interestingly, considering ongoing debates about the causes of jihadist terrorism in the West, the pamphlet also notes that:

Western foreign policy in the Middle East...is not the cause of the existence of these extremists or their ideology. It is an evil ideology diametrically opposed to everything Islam stands for and it appeared at the very dawn of Islam in a people motivated by other than Islam but acting upon the pretense of Islam.¹²²

Due to the strong influence of Sheikh al-Madkhali, and the reproduction of their work by groups like Salafi Publications, American Salafis in the QSS mold are also fiercely supportive of the Saudi Kingdom and critical of any attempts to question the Salafi hierarchy in the country. Yasir Qadhi, who was involved with QSS during the early 1990s, points out that members adopted what he describes as a form of “Saudi nationalism.”¹²³ As part of this, the movement also sought to set itself against other existing Islamic currents in the United States which were critical of the Saudi royal family and religious establishment, in particular those associated with Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaat-e-Islami.

Zarabozo recalls that, during his time as a student at the University of California, Davis during the late 1980s, among the main rivals to QSS was the Muslim Students’ Association (MSA) based at the university. At the time, he regarded the MSA as heavily influenced by both the Islamist ideologies of the Muslim Brotherhood and, due to its high concentration of South Asian members, the Jamaat e-Islami. Indeed, the MSA was founded in 1963 by members of the Iraqi Muslim Brotherhood who were fleeing persecution in their home country and saw it as their mission to serve the political and ideological causes of the Muslim Brotherhood in the West.¹²⁴

As is common with quietist Salafis, QSS fiercely rejected Islamism, or the presentation of Islam as a revolutionary political ideology. QSS teachings regarded Islamist ideology, or

any direct engagement with politics or current affairs for that matter, as the root of extremism. Jihadist terrorism was, in their view, inspired by groups and individuals they often referred to as “Qutbis” or “Sururis”—named after Muslim Brotherhood ideologue Sayyid Qutb and *Sahwa* sheikh Muhammad Surur bin Nayif Zayn al-Abidin—against whom both al-Albani and al-Madkhali wrote lengthy refutations.

The story of this strand of American Salafism has only been told by a small group of scholars and people directly involved in the movement. Among the most comprehensive academic studies comes from Shadee Elmasry, who focuses almost exclusively on what he identified as the main African-American Madkhali communities.¹²⁵ Elmasry’s work is heavily influenced by the input of Umar Lee, who wrote a series of blog posts in 2007 that were eventually published as a memoir entitled *The Rise and Fall of the Salafi Da’wah in America* in 2014. Together, Lee and Elmasry’s work are a helpful starting point for understanding the history of the quietist Salafi scene in America.

They argue that the quietist Salafi movement in America resulted from two distinct social phenomena: re-emergence of black consciousness in the early 1990s, which coincided with the re-birth of the Nation of Islam, and the influx of money from Saudi Arabia, in particular its provision of full scholarships to young students to study at the University of Medina.¹²⁶ A key development was in 1988, when Saudi Arabia established the Institute of Islamic and Arabic Sciences in America (IIASA) in Fairfax, Virginia. Run by the Saudi Religious Affairs Department, it operated as a satellite school for the Imam ibn Saud University in Riyadh. Saudi teachers, including the prominent quietist Saudi cleric Abd Al-Aziz Fawzan al-Fawzan, taught classes and awarded certificates recognized by its parent institute in the Kingdom. These certificates made students eligible to continue their studies in Saudi Arabia, where they would often go on fully paid scholarships.

According to Elmasry and Lee, a group of the key foundational figures of the movement included the first Westerner to enroll at the University of Medina, Bilal Philips, along with others such as Dawud Adib, Abu Muslimah, and Abu Usama al-Thahabi (all converts to Islam), and Ali al-Timimi, the American-born son of Iraqi immigrants. As Lee points out, while the Salafi movement had already gained traction among Arabs living in America, it

was these men who “really took the [Salafi] *da’wa*” to audiences of black American converts.¹²⁷

By the mid-1990s many of those who received training either in Saudi Arabia—where they were often taught by the country’s leading Wahhabi sheikhs, including bin Baz, al-Madkhali and al-Uthaymeen—or by the IIASA, started to return and influence mosques in their local areas. At this time, the Salafi movement was one of the best funded and most organized Islamic movements in America. According to Elmasry, it “established a strong presence, if not a domination, over the religious discourse.”¹²⁸ The main job of those who were trained by Saudi Arabia was *da’wa*, and converts on the east coast were growing in number, including many from the prison system, where Salafism offered an Islamic version of the type of born-again Christianity that had long appealed to prisoners looking to turn a new page. To this day, there is an unmistakable Salafi influence on the varieties of Islam practiced by American prisoners, and this can partly be seen in the types of Islamic educational materials made available in some institutions. In a document obtained by the author, the U.S. Federal Bureau of Prisons lists many of the books on Islam and other Islamic educational materials it provides to prisoners based on request.¹²⁹ A significant proportion can be described as Salafi, including works by historical figures like Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and contemporary English-speaking Salafis such as Muhammad Adly, Jamaal Zarabozo, and Bilal Philips.

For a variety of reasons, al-Jibaly and QSS found a willing audience among a significant population of African-American converts based mainly in New York, New Jersey, and Philadelphia, some of whom were former NoI members. While little research has thus far been conducted on the reasons behind the popularity of Salafism among pockets of African-American communities on the east coast, members of the group and the few scholars who have pursued this suggest a variety of causes.

The Salafi *da’wa* in America conducted by QSS was able to offer opportunities that were uniquely attractive to African-Americans from poorer areas. For the most ambitious and sharpest members of the community, the offer of scholarships to the University of Medina represented a chance to receive higher education that was beyond their economic grasp

in America. Salafism, according to Elmasry, also offered black Americans a “source of reform,” a new direction and an identity that was not associated with white, Christian America in which they did not feel welcome. Salafism taught that the color of their skin was irrelevant—all that mattered was that they were part of the *ummah*.¹³⁰ Not only did this newfound community offer a clear sense of belonging, but religious study funded by Saudi Arabia was also a way to receive both intellectual enlightenment and empowerment. It became a symbol of achievement for low-income and disenfranchised minorities who saw little of the American Dream, and in whom Saudi Arabia saw rich pickings for *da’wa* located in the heart of the secular West. Through the free education and scholarships offered by the Saudi state, the distant and unattainable dream of higher education became a reality for a significant number of African-Americans. In many cases, they would live in Saudi Arabia for up to seven years while studying in Medina, with all expenses paid by the Saudi state.

Going to the “land of belief” was a badge of honor, and those who returned after study often attained a celebrity status—it was the highest goal and achievement for an American Salafi. As students of Saudi establishment sheikhs, their religious training was almost entirely free of modern political discourse - they avoided contemporary social and political debates and even the daily news, living in a cult-like Salafi religious bubble. According to Lee, the movement engendered such enthusiasm among its followers that “many dropped nearly completely out of the world and immersed themselves and their families into this bubble.” They gave all their free time, and much of their money, to helping spread Salafi teachings within their communities, believing that they “discovered the roadmap to utopia.”¹³¹

Tawhid, as the focus of study, also had a distinctly escapist appeal. The physical realm, or *dunya*, according to this doctrine, was mostly derided and any undue attention given to it was regarded as folly. This form of Salafism asked its followers to focus on the metaphysical world; the primary goal for adherents was to ensure that they were on the best path to reach the afterlife. The *dunya* was little more than a test, a brief blip in a life that was to live on in eternity after death. For many poverty-stricken African-American followers, an opportunity to see beyond the difficulties of their day-to-day lives was one

that many understandably were drawn to. *Tawhid* “relieved and explained” their difficult lives. In many ways, this form of Salafism can be understood in terms of the salvation offered to many by fundamentalist American Christianity, with its conservative, traditional family values, strong focus on bible study, and avoidance of sin.

Tariq Nelson, who was formerly closely associated with this form of Salafism in America before adopting a more activist approach, offered another reason for the appeal of quietist Salafism among African-Americans: “you can’t talk about Salafism in America without talking about black nationalism and use of Islam as a vehicle for black protest.”¹³² Indeed, this use of Islam preceded the advent of Salafism in America, and began with the establishment of the Nation of Islam (NoI) and its evolution under its most influential leader, Elijah Muhammad, who was a key influence on Malcolm X’s own conversion to Islam. Muhammad helped to establish Islam and the act of becoming Muslim as a means through which black Americans could both embrace their African heritage while also breaking away from a white American culture and society that had exploited and abandoned them.¹³³

Nelson went on to explain how and why the Salafi movement in particular appealed to him as an African-American. It was, according to him, something which initially felt liberating and helped define his identity as standing against a country in which he felt alienated. Salafi teachings, which are opposed to the values and history of American democracy, offered disaffected and angry young black Americans a new way to rebel against a society which they felt rejected and persecuted by. Salafism, as Nelson saw it at the time, was unlike the ideology of the NoI in that it treated all people the same as long as they were Muslims, regardless of their race or background. Whereas the NoI was steeped in, and inseparable from, American history and shaped by race, Salafism offered something purer, casting aside the baggage of indigenous American Islamic movements. When he was initially approached by a Salafi who appealed to him to convert, Nelson described how “I was told of how the Muslim world did not have the social problems we see in America and that Islam was the ultimate solution to all of it. The picture was painted to many of us [black American converts] was that Muslim majority countries were colorblind and free of racial and class distinctions.”¹³⁴

Islam and Salafism also offered a new religious identity distinct from Christianity which was too closely associated with the roots of an intolerant America that used faith to oppress African-Americans. Another African-American pioneer of Salafism, Abu Muslimah, expressed a similar view to Nelson's in an interview with Saudi television Channel 2. He explained his belief that Islam was the original religion of indigenous African people. His introduction to Islam, as with many African-Americans, was through the NoI, where he says that he learned that "if you're African-American, then your true religion was Islam."¹³⁵

It has also been suggested that Saudi Arabia targeted much of its *da'wa* activities in America towards Black communities as part of its rivalry with the Shi'a Khomeinist regime in Iran, which in the 1980s began efforts to reach out to the same community.¹³⁶ In 1982, for example, Iran commissioned a study aimed at determining how open to Shiism America's Black Muslim communities were, concluding that they "feel that nobody cares about them. Everyone only wants to use them for their own personal reasons as they languish." While the report concluded that there was a desire for "pure Islam" [i.e. Khomeinism], there would be no change "unless someone is willing, qualified and able to effectively oppose Saudi oil money."¹³⁷ While Iran ultimately saw very limited success in its outreach, the case of David Belfield (also known as Dawud Salahuddin) stands out. A convert to Islam, he was attracted to the faith because he saw it as "color blind" after having witnessed the backlash against the Civil Rights Movement in the southern United States. Eventually, Belfield was recruited by Iranian agents to kill an anti-Khomeini Iranian dissident.¹³⁸ On July 22, 1980, he arrived at the suburban Washington, D.C. house of Ali Akbar Tabatabaei, disguised as a mailman. Belfield shot Tabatabaei three times, leaving him to die on his doorstep. Belfield then fled to Iran where he resides to this day under the protection of the Iranian state.

East Orange, New Jersey

Two of the most influential early Salafis involved with QSS, Dawud Adib and Abu Muslimah, were also instrumental in the growth of the Islamic Center of America, one of

the country's largest and most well-established Salafi communities, based in East Orange, New Jersey. Originally founded in 1981 by an American convert named Ahmed Burhani, the center's congregation soon began to expand beyond the capacity of its modest rented storefront headquarters on Central Avenue in East Orange. After relocations to a number of other temporary sites and changes in leadership, the center eventually purchased a large 66,000 square foot plot of land in 1997 which is the site of its mosque, the Masjidu Ahlis Sunnah.¹³⁹

This growth coincided with the leadership of Abu Muslimah, who took over in 1995 from Dawud Adib. Abu Muslimah, who still runs the center today, was widely respected and admired by American Salafis due to the seven years he spent as a student in Saudi Arabia's Islamic University of Medina.¹⁴⁰ During the mid-1990s, entire families began relocating to East Orange in order to take part in this burgeoning Salafi project.¹⁴¹ Today, the center boasts a day care, summer school, and full-time school from kindergarten to 12th grade.¹⁴² It is also recognized as a school by the State of New Jersey and the East Orange Board of Education, allowing it to receive various official support grants. As well as teaching the state curriculum, the center also runs classes in Arabic along with Islamic studies. Its link with Saudi Arabia, more specifically the establishment sheikhs, is strong. Religious instructors take the majority of their direction from these scholars, and the school often holds conferences attended by senior members of the University of Medina.¹⁴³

In a 2006 documentary about the East Orange Salafi community, produced by Saudi Arabia's Channel 2, among the interviewees was the former mayor of East Orange, Robert Bowser, who provided details relating to the civic view of the local Salafi population. He numbered them at around 3,000 (or 4% of the population of the area) and, while praising their contributions, also expressed his frustrations related to their withdrawal from the political process and wider community. Bowser noted a general desire among them to separate themselves, stating that he "would like to see [them] participate more, and at various levels."¹⁴⁴ Both forms of withdrawal—from the political process and from the wider non-Muslim community—are traits one might expect from a Salafi community in America. Quietist *aqida*, including the interpretation of key tenets like *tawhid* and *al-wala' wa-l-bara'*, stresses an avoidance of politics and democratic participation along

with a separation from non-Muslim influence which may pollute and otherwise negatively impact their faith.

East Orange is likely to be the largest of a collection of quietist Salafi satellite communities in the United States. Other centers of Salafi activity include Germantown, Philadelphia, home of the Masjid as-Sunnah an-Nabawiyah, also known as the Germantown Mosque, where the influential imam Hassan Somali is based. While these communities still exist today, they have declined significantly due to various factors discussed below.

Implosion of Early American Quietism

Like the East Orange community, American Salafis under the wider QSS umbrella were encouraged to separate from other Muslim groups and from Western society. This community, in essence, became a subculture within America. Tightly knit Salafi communities formed around urban centers, with most of their inhabitants sharing a homogenous belief system. However, the QSS model was always vulnerable to collapse due to its obsession with excommunicating deviant Muslims and its refusal to adapt and evolve. It reduced any space for discussion or debate on key doctrinal issues, and began turning on those who advocated different interpretations, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant. The practice of *tabdi* became the order of the day, whereby any dissenters who were believed to not to be following the teachings of the Saudi sheikhs were declared as innovators who, while heretical, had not met the criteria for excommunication from the faith.

By the late 1990s, the Internet began offering the movement an unprecedented opportunity to spread its teachings and outreach. As numbers swelled, so did the desire to ensure that new members stayed on the correct path. The community expended great effort to expose so-called “deviant beliefs” among Salafis who had apparently strayed, and warnings were issued about their attempts to trick followers into changing their *aqida*. The term Salafi (or *Salafiyya*), and declaring oneself as such, became of paramount importance. This approach was influenced by al-Albani, who believed that there was so much deviation in Islam that the term “Muslim” was no longer sufficient, and that “true”

Muslims required a description which distinguished them from others and declared their devotion only primary Islamic texts and the ways of the *salaf*. Thus, he recommended the use of the term “Salafi,” and QSS preachers began to insist followers to accept this title, or face derision.¹⁴⁵ This was, in essence, a call going beyond the testament of faith required in Islam, now requiring a “declaration of Salafiyya,” and a *bay’a* [declaration of support] to the movement itself. New and existing members of Salafi communities were forced to accept the title of Salafi while also affirming their rejection of those seen to have strayed from the correct path.¹⁴⁶

It is worth also noting here that many who follow Salafi theology are split on labelling themselves as such.¹⁴⁷ For some, it is an approach which can lead to dangerous divisions and *fitna* among Muslims because it encourages the division of the faith into specific groups. Instead, they view themselves solely as Muslims who are on the correct path, often using the term “students of knowledge” to refer to one another.¹⁴⁸ For others, however, the term “Salafi” is an important way to distinguish themselves from the numerous deviant sects they identify.

In the United States, a set of unique circumstances led to the term “Salafi” carrying some very specific connotations. Among American Muslims, the term almost exclusively refers to quietists who closely follow the teachings of Sheikh al-Madkhali and a handful of other Saudi quietist sheikhs. According to Stephane Lacroix, Sheikh al-Madkhali was “given by his disciples the prestigious title of “bearer of the flag of critique and fair evaluation in our time” (*hamil liwa’ al-jarh wa-l-ta’dil fi hadha al-‘asr*).”¹⁴⁹ This approach demands a strict and unwavering following of the teachings of the Saudi sheikhs and is quick to openly denounce and reject those whom they view as deviating from that path, in particular Muslims whom they deemed to have taken on elements of Islamist ideology. In many cases, they target individuals in their refutations, naming and shaming those whom they believe deviated from the correct path. Many American Madkhalis therefore adopted a similar outlook, and this is an important factor behind the eventual implosion of QSS and the general reduction in influence of the Salafi quietist movement in America over the last 20 years.

By the mid to late 1990s, the QSS-led Salafi movement suffered from intense internal strife based both on the demands for a declaration of *Salafiyya*, and that American Salafis closely adhered to (if not parroted), the teachings of the Saudi religious establishment. There was simply no room for independent thought or debate and any slight deviation from these teachings was heavily condemned. As a result of the influence of the Madkhali approach that came to define early American Salafism, a cult-like atmosphere began to form whereby those who refused to give *bay'a* or were deemed to have disrespected the Saudis were put on “off lists” and, along with their family members, were shunned by the community.¹⁵⁰ This effort was driven largely by an organization which emerged from within QSS called The Reign of Islamic Da’awah (TROID), whose members began to use the term “off the manhaj” to describe those they had effectively excommunicated from Salafism.¹⁵¹ The movement sought to reduce any space for discussion or debate on key doctrinal issues, and began turning on those who advocated different interpretations.¹⁵² TROID’s sole mission was to carry out these attacks, undertaking what can only be described as a Salafi inquisition; identifying, exposing and publicly criticizing Salafis who were seen to be going against the teachings of the Saudi scholars. This was done mainly through their website, which issued lengthy refutations against both QSS preachers and other Islamic preachers in America believed to have adopted Islamist ideology, or refused to bow down to the authority of the Saudi sheikhs.¹⁵³ As Tariq Nelson aptly put it to the author, in the eyes of these Salafis, “either it’s all good, or it’s no good.”¹⁵⁴

Jamaal Zarabozo is one of many preachers who follow the Salafi methodology to express their frustration at the obsession with these definitions among American Salafis: “for the early guys, Islam was Islam, no club or group—I refused to label other people or other organizations.” Zarabozo’s view, along with one of his lectures which offered a minor critique of an interpretation of a hadith by al-Albani, meant that Zarabozo also soon found himself “off the manhaj.” Another prominent quietist Salafi and pioneer of the movement in America, the Canadian-born Bilal Philips, alludes to this problem in a 2014 lecture discussing the Salafi movement, defining this approach as “neo-Salafism”:

Salafiyyah is not a group. Some mistakenly think this. The Salafiyyah is not a group. Though you may find groups that say, ‘We are the Salafis’ and they have a

group and its an exclusive group and if you don't toe their line, as they see it, then you know, as one brother calls it Offtheminhaj.com. This is the approach and if you don't toe *their* line... so, yeah, so you become kind of an exclusive, and they are attacking everybody else but that is not Salafiyya.¹⁵⁵

Muhammad Adly, who was involved with QSS as a frequent speaker at its events, noted to the author how the QSS obsession with the Salafi label and its aggressive approach led to its eventual demise as an effective Salafi body. Over the decades he saw the term take on specific meaning in America:

The word Salafi has been utilized in a different way here—they started to misuse it. In America it became associated with being nasty, you don't have respect, you misbehave—you start to use it to control people—the term has a cursed meaning here. It is a way to pull people aside and create your own mosque and control them.¹⁵⁶

Adly, like many Salafis, rejects the use of the term to describe either himself or any other Muslim. According to him, “I am simply a Muslim who practices his religion according to the prophet and pious predecessors—the word Muslim and Islam is good enough for me.” Like many who prefer not to use the term, he notes that it does not exist in the primary Islamic texts and there is no mention of a group of “Salafis”: “I have always been against this term Salafi—if I go to Albani he will curse me! But my evidence does not show that the prophet recommended this term for us. It has created too much division—we are all at each other's throat. This is not Islam.”¹⁵⁷

Salafis who eschew the label also warn that its use risks creating divisions and eventual *fitna* [strife] among Muslims. As alluded to above by Bilal Philips, this is precisely what happened among the Salafis from the QSS current in America. The term has, in Adly's view, “become to Americans like a cursed word, and is a problem for us now.” The way in which the movement degenerated frustrates him, and is now defined by “backbiting, slandering and cursing.”¹⁵⁸

During the 1990s, Adly was asked repeatedly by members of the *Salafiyya* movement to give *bay'a* and declare himself as a Salafi, he refused and was appalled at their gall and lack of respect: “I was here before them. Some of them weren’t even Muslims when I first came here!” Adly marks the start of these problems with the deaths of the “true scholars” bin Baz, al-Uthaymeen, and al-Albani, who died in quick succession between 1999 and 2001. He claims that after this “everyone tried to become a big shot, like Madkhali.”

While the quietist Salafi movement and the communities it spawned still exist today, it never recovered from the acrimony and splits that came to define QSS and its leaders. Among observers and the few scholars who have studied this topic, many consider it to be largely irrelevant. Former leading figures like Zarabozo and Adly today shun the spotlight and live relatively quiet lives, limiting their teaching to local mosques. There is also no longer a large Salafi conference circuit like that run by QSS throughout the 1990s, having been replaced by more activist and modernist currents which will be discussed in more detail below.

The New American Quietists: The TAM Group

One American quietist Salafi who recently found himself in the cross-hairs of the American Madkhalis is Tahir Wyatt, an increasingly popular American convert. In 2017, he released a video online containing a veiled critique of the Madkhali approach, telling American Muslims that they can and should seek advice from domestic scholars. Rather than relying solely on “those four or five who they [American Madkhalis] have determined to be the scholars” Muslims should instead recognize and consult domestic scholars who have more relevant advice to give than those based in Saudi Arabia. The past approach, he lamented, led to a situation where “we have denied our own scholarship in the name of propping up these [Saudi Arabian] scholars.”¹⁵⁹

This is a position that, for Madkhalis, is tantamount to heresy. As is their standard practice, the online network of Western Madkhalis swiftly formulated a response.¹⁶⁰ Taking the form of a YouTube video, it begins by reaffirming that the only worthy scholars are bin Baz, al-Albani, al-Fawzan, al-Uthaymeen and al-Madkhali. The refutation then

moves on to audio clips of both al-Madkhali and al-Fawzan, who respond to questions from their American followers about their views on the Wyatt position. Muhammad bin Hadi al-Madkhali (a relative of Rabee's) scoffs at the claim that America has any worthy scholars: "I don't know of any scholars in America. The scholars are in the lands of Islam...the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia...My advice is that you do not listen to the one who said this statement whatsoever." Sheikh al-Fawzan goes further in his criticism, accusing anyone who makes the arguments laid out by Wyatt of *takhdil*, or forsaking the scholars.¹⁶¹

Wyatt was targeted because he is a popular figure among a new generation of American quietists who are seeking to shed the acrimony of the past and therefore reject the Madkhali approach. Among the organizations he represents is Tashih ul-Afkar al-Mutatarrifah (TAM), which translates to "rectifying extremist ideologies." It is a new American quietist Salafi initiative directly inspired by the work of Abdul Haqq Baker and his UK-based STREET project. During a conference organized by the group in 2017, Baker noted that, while "the situation in American is not as acute as the UK," TAM developed its model for confronting extremism "on the back of" his work at STREET.¹⁶²

On its website, TAM is described as "dedicated to addressing the corrupt ideology that is currently propagated in live media, online, social media and in private meetings."¹⁶³ Additionally, TAM's goal is to become "the central location where these thoughts and ideas can be discussed and corrected without fear or threat of punishment."¹⁶⁴ TAM, like STREET, sees itself as the link between Salafi communities and the state, in particular law enforcement. Before STREET's funding was cut by the UK government in 2011 after being deemed too extreme to receive official support, the project relied heavily on partnerships with official bodies. This included the above-mentioned Muslim Contact Unit within the London Metropolitan Police.

Since losing the support of the British state, Abdul Haqq Baker has sought to replicate the work of his organization and appears to have found an opportunity in the United States. It is not yet clear, however, how TAM pursues its work and whether it is involved in any official partnerships with law enforcement or other state groups. Nonetheless, the value

Baker continues to place on the support of law enforcement was evident at an August 2017 panel discussion organized by TAM in Washington, D.C. which included Baker, Wyatt, and Jeffery Carrol, the Assistant Chief of the Washington D.C. Police Department's Homeland Security Bureau.¹⁶⁵ This desire to engage with the state is another factor which separates new American quietists like those represented by TAM from other American quietist trends of the past who sought isolation from wider society and the state.

While TAM avoids the divisive and isolationist rhetoric of its American quietist predecessors, its members' views on the roots of the modern global jihad movement are largely the same. As an example of how TAM and STREET believe Muslims in the West become radicalized, Baker cites his direct experiences with 9/11 plotter Zacarias Moussaoui who, while in the UK, attended his mosque in South London during the 1990s. According to him, Moussaoui's viewpoints were the product of a mix of a basic grasp of Salafi theology and Islamist ideology. After Moussaoui's involvement in Islamist activism in France, Baker claims that when he moved to the UK in the early 1990s, he joined the Salafis of Baker's Brixton Mosque. He grew frustrated, however, at their lack of political engagement: "I remember him [Moussaoui] engaging with me and saying "you don't talk about jihad...you're passive, you're weak. It was unsurprising therefore, that he gravitated towards a community that said it provided both politics, the Islamist community, and ideology, the Salafi community."¹⁶⁶

In Baker's view, the conservative Salafi approach is the only effective way to counter jihadist ideology and recruitment. He also argues that any counter efforts which focus on promoting a "liberal set of Muslims" are mistaken because "they do not have any effectiveness in countering violent extremism" and therefore "those youth on the ground will reject them." The solution, according to him, is "those in the middle," referring to Salafis, who are "most effective in countering it."

Part of this confidence among Salafis like Baker about their ability to dissuade Western Muslims from fighting jihad is their belief that they can teach the "proper" understanding of this concept and its applicability in modern times. In their view, like that of any Salafi, jihad is an important concept in Islam and refers primarily to a physical, militant

endeavor as opposed to any sort of spiritual inner struggle. However, it has a variety of restrictions which they believe jihadists do not abide by and are therefore committing sinful acts.

During a lecture on jihad, TAM's Tahir Wyatt offered his take of one of the most popular *hadith* used by jihadists to justify terrorism, *Sahih Bukhari* 2:24:

I have been ordered (by Allah) to fight against the people until they testify that none has the right to be worshipped but Allah and that Muhammad is Allah's Apostle, and offer the prayers perfectly and give the obligatory charity, so if they perform that, then they save their lives and property from me except for Islamic laws and then their reckoning (accounts) will be done by Allah.

In his analysis of its meaning, Wyatt proclaimed that Muhammad specifically used the Arabic term for “fight” rather than “kill” in this *hadith*. Wyatt argued that this is an important distinction because the former refers to a legitimate struggle between two warring parties, while the latter refers to murder, which is unlawful in Islam. Wyatt also believes that jihadists have distorted the meaning here by claiming that this is an injunction to kill, or murder, and not necessarily only those who present a direct threat.¹⁶⁷

Nonetheless, Wyatt went on to concede that this *hadith* also explains that Muslims may face “situations that...necessitate that there be some type of fighting and that there be combat.” Any system or belief has developed a framework for “defending their ideology” which may even include “pre-emptive strikes” to protect themselves, and there is no reason why Islam should not follow suit. He cited what he referred to as the Christian concept of Just War Theory which, according to him, means that “though we view war as something that is terrible and something we prefer not be involved in, there may be situations, atrocities that can be avoided, circumstances that need to be dealt with where war is not the worst option... therefore it becomes a just war to prevent a greater evil.”¹⁶⁸ This presentation of jihad as the Islamic version of Just War Theory is popular among Salafis in the West when responding to questions related to jihad and terrorism.

Muslims, in Wyatt's view, are too often finding themselves "on defense," when it comes to explaining the Islamic view of the use of violence—a situation he would like to see changed. As part of this response, he cites the violence of secular, democratic and Christian nations over the last century:

If you look at the last century—how many people have been killed in the name of Islam as compared to how many people have been killed in the name of Christianity, in the name of democracy? In the last 20 years how many people have been killed in the name of freedom? Tens of thousands of thousands of people as compared to those who have been supposedly killed in the name of Islam. ¹⁶⁹

According to the TAM approach, then, Muslims must fight back against jihadism through proper Salafi interpretation of the Quran and authentic *hadith*, which they believe jihadists have distorted for their own ends. While this is not dissimilar from other quietist methods, it is their desire for a more direct and official level of engagement, partnership and endorsement which distinguishes TAM from other Salafi trends in the United States.

TAM and the case of Jalil ibn Ameer Aziz

In December 2017, Pennsylvania resident Jalil Ibn Ameer Aziz was sentenced to over 13 years in prison for conspiracy to provide material support and resources to IS and communicating threats to injure. Between 2014 and 2015, Aziz used Twitter to communicate with IS members and sympathizers both in the United States and abroad. He assisted three separate Americans seeking to join IS and, according to the Department of Justice, "Aziz acted as an intermediary between a person in Turkey and several well-known members of ISIS."¹⁷⁰ His activities included passing information between aspiring IS recruits in Turkey and IS members across the border in Syria. He also used his Twitter account to disseminate a list created by an IS member which contained the personal details of around 100 members of the U.S. military along with an encouragement for his followers to target and kill them.

The Aziz case is particularly pertinent, both because of his initial involvement in the American Madkhali movement and the fact that he is the brother of TAM executive board member Ibrahim Aziz. In a candid public statement and subsequent article about his brother's fate, Ibrahim alluded to the confluence of factors that he believed led to his brother's radicalization. According to him, Jalil's eventual support for IS was borne of mental health issues caused by a difficult childhood. Jalil was controlled and isolated by his parents, with a mother who was physically and verbally abusive.¹⁷¹ He was forbidden from communicating or interacting with his family members and the outside world. Jalil's mother, Sameera, would later tell the FBI that she did not let her son have friends because she did not want his mind "poisoned" by outside influences. In Ibrahim's assessment, his brother was "socially behind" as a result and always "searching for acceptance." Jalil's mental health challenges, isolation, and desire to be loved and accepted were the "precursor" to his embrace of "violent ideology."¹⁷² These factors made Jalil vulnerable to recruiters who targeted individuals like him, offering them acceptance and status despite their imperfections.

While Ibrahim acknowledges an ideological component to his brother's radicalization, there are elements of Jalil's path to IS that he omits which also help contribute to understanding the decisions he eventually made. In a series of posts on his Twitter feed, he offered a small yet revealing glimpse into his motivations for joining.

Jalil Aziz dates his interest in Salafi jihadism to 2011 when he was still a self-described Madkhali, writing that "though I was a Madkhali, I loved jihad (weird huh?)," his rhetorical question alluding to the fact that Madkhalis are usually known for their rejection of modern jihadist groups. Despite the efforts of his family, Aziz traced his interest in IS to when he began viewing propaganda videos online depicting Syrians being killed and tortured by the Assad forces:

when I was a Madkhali I was watching an old famous video of the martyred man being buried alive by Assad regime, at that point I had intentions to make hijrah [migrate] to shaam [Syria] to protect my Syrian Brothers n Sisters from Assad thugs.

Aziz also expressed a more general disdain, likely influenced by his Salafist conservatism, for the spread of liberal social values in the United States. In particular, the 2015 Supreme Court ruling that same-sex marriage was legal across the country drew his ire: “Kuffar are celebrating about Same sex marriage law, white house is in literal rainbows, DC in high celebration.” He was confident, however, that “Allah's punishment coming.” While it would be folly to solely attribute his support to IS to his pre-existing conservative Salafi outlook, such statements suggest that his religious views should be considered when forming a judgement on why he chose to support IS.

In his public comments about his brother’s conviction, Ibrahim Aziz acknowledged the difficult situation the FBI finds itself in, but also criticized its heavy-handed approach. In his view, federal law enforcement lacks the nuance required to prevent radicalization and focuses too much on arrest and imprisonment to the detriment of prevention. In his brother’s case, he believes that instead of monitoring his extremist activity online, there should instead have been a system in place to intervene in Jalil’s life before he crossed the line into criminal activity. TAM, according to Ibrahim, provides this “alternative solution,” which involves engaging with American Muslims and steering them away from extremism before they break the law. TAM is presented as the “bridge where confused, misinformed, vulnerable Muslims can be engaged, challenged, and educated before they reach the point of committing a criminal act.” Its aim is to offer an alternative to law enforcement for family and community members who notice “the first signs of radicalized behavior.”¹⁷³ Aziz expressed the wider belief among TAM and its supporters that Salafis such as themselves are uniquely placed to confront extremism because, unlike the state, they have credibility as voices on Islam among American Muslims: “as practicing orthodox Muslims we hold a level of respect and authority on the subject [of Islam] that a non-Muslim, governmental official will never hold.”¹⁷⁴

Aziz, like Baker, also wishes to see TAM as the gatekeeper of American Muslim communities for U.S. law enforcement, highlighting the need for it to establish partnerships with “local, state and federal law enforcement institutions.” In the past, Aziz was involved with police partnerships as Executive Director of a non-profit called Helping

Others Prosper Through Education (H.O.P.E.), a non-profit organization which shares its offices in Washington, D.C. with TAM. H.O.P.E. provides a variety of social services to the local Salafi community. In August 2017, the organization announced that it “was proud to act as a fiduciary agent and partner with 6th District Metropolitan Police Department and its Community Outreach Coordinator” as part of an event which provided a variety of school supplies to local students.¹⁷⁵ As part of Jalil ibn Ameer Aziz’s defense strategy during his terrorism trial, his brother Ibrahim Aziz submitted official letters of support for H.O.P.E. to the judge, which set out the important work Ibrahim did for the local community. One letter of support came from the then Council member for Washington D.C.’s Ward 7 while the other was written by the outreach coordinator of the 6th District of the Metropolitan Police Department.

Cases like Jalil Aziz’s strengthen the belief among quietists that it is their duty to fight back against Salafi jihadism. At the same time, however, the radicalization of Salafis and the role of Salafi *aqida* in introducing Muslims to doctrines that, at the very least, are mimicked by Salafi jihadis will continue to raise questions about the effectiveness of the TAM approach.

While TAM is attempted to re-shape the American quietist movement, it still is experiencing a decline in size and influence. QSS and the preachers it spawned were unable to fully recover from the years of in-fighting and were overtaken by more modern, publicly engaged, and political Salafi-influenced currents which will be discussed in later sections of the study. However, groups like TAM demonstrate that there is an evolution taking place. Quietist imams like Tahir Wyatt are attempting to change the “off the manhaj” mentality of certain communities of American Salafis, encouraging them to become more open to the works of American-based scholars and lessen their devotion to a small coterie of Saudi sheikhs. Simultaneously, due to the encouragement of individuals like Abdul Haqq Baker, they are seeking validation for their beliefs and methods from the state in a similar fashion to that which was enjoyed for a time by the STREET project in the UK. Thus far, these efforts have seen some success at a local government and police level, but it remains to be seen how, if at all, the federal government will engage with American Salafis in its efforts to counter extremism.

II.III Activist Salafis in America

The Islamic Assembly of North America (IANA)

As the American quietist community represented by QSS atrophied, activist-influenced Salafi groups began to take its place. The first of these organizations was the Islamic Assembly of North America (IANA). Founded in Michigan in 1993, partly in response to the QSS approach, it drew much of its ideological succor from Muslim Brotherhood ideologues, the emerging activist Salafi movement, and the *Sahwa*.¹⁷⁶ While it is now defunct, IANA represents a key development in the evolution of American Salafism. Unlike QSS' leader al-Jibaly, IANA's founder Bassem Khafagi was not a Salafi, and was more closely aligned with Islamist activism as a member of the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR).¹⁷⁷ Yasir Qadhi, who was heavily involved with American Salafism during the early 1990s before moving to Saudi Arabia to pursue further religious study, notes how important IANA's emergence was for the development and spread of Salafism in America. Unlike QSS, it engaged with the outside world and addressed global political issues related to Muslims: "how can you expect Muslims to ignore what is going on around them and still succeed as an organization?"¹⁷⁸

Through a wider engagement with politics and current affairs, IANA and America's activist Salafis were able to find a more widespread appeal for Salafism. Nonetheless, despite the apparent differences in approach between IANA and QSS, there was also some overlap. Like QSS, IANA hosted regular conferences and Islamic education camps. Many IANA members began their Salafi education with QSS, and, according to Umar Lee's account of his experience in American Salafism, "many of the rank and file attended both conferences and there was a lot of overlap of speakers at both."¹⁷⁹

Given its activist Salafi approach, it is also perhaps not surprising that, unlike QSS, IANA's output was more closely aligned with contemporary jihadist movements. In May 2001, for example, IANA's official magazine *Al Asr* ("The Era") published several fatwas in support of suicide bombing, including a ruling by Salman al-Awda in which he stated that the tactic could be used to "gain supremacy for the work of God."¹⁸⁰ IANA

conferences during the mid- to late 1990s not only included quietist preachers like Bilal Philips, Muhammad Adly, and Jamaal Zarabozo, but also featured individuals on the other side of the spectrum like the Saudi Arabian Abdel Rahman al-Dosari. Also known as Abu Abdel Aziz Barbaros, al-Dosari fought for jihadist groups in the Bosnian Civil War and is described as the most “visible spokesperson” for the contingent of Arab jihadists fighting in the country.¹⁸¹ In a 1994 interview he gave to a magazine called *Al-Sirat Al-Mustaqeem*, the interviewer stated that “the last visit of Abu Abdel Aziz to the U.S. was to attend the third annual gathering of IANA (Islamic Assembly of North America), which was held from 21-25 December 1995, in Dearborn, Michigan.”¹⁸² While there are no details on the content of his contributions at the IANA conferences he attended, al-Dosari’s talk at the 1993 gathering was ominously entitled “Jihad and Revival.”¹⁸³

After 9/11, IANA drew scrutiny from American law enforcement, who viewed the organization as a platform for the spread of Salafi jihadist ideology in the United States. During the 2003 trial of IANA member Sami Omar al-Hussayen, who maintained a collection of IANA-linked websites, it was revealed that the FBI investigated IANA for suspected ties to international terrorism.¹⁸⁴ The FBI assessed that the group’s mission was to “spread Islamic fundamentalism and Salafist doctrine throughout the United States...[and] solicits funds from wealthy Saudi benefactors, extremist Islamic Shaykhs, and suspect non-governmental organizations.”¹⁸⁵ As a result of this federal scrutiny in the post 9/11 period, IANA’s members eventually disbanded; some were deported, and others, like Ali al-Timimi, were jailed.

Al-Manar al-Jadid

One of the strongest indications of IANA’s ideological leanings, which helped to further set it apart from QSS, was another of its regular publications, *Al-Manar al-Jadid* (“the New Lighthouse”). The magazine’s name was no accident, according to its editor-in-chief, the Egyptian Islamist Jamal Sultan.¹⁸⁶ In his editorial for the inaugural Winter 1998 issue, Sultan explained to readers that the new magazine drew its inspiration directly from one of the ideological forefathers of the modern Islamist movement, Muhammad Rashid Rida and his influential magazine, *Al-Manar*, which ran from 1895 until his death in 1935.¹⁸⁷

To illustrate how, in the editors' view, little had changed in the Muslim condition and how Muslims continue to face "the same tribulations," the magazine's prologue was copied verbatim from Rida's original 19th century text.¹⁸⁸

The founding of the magazine itself reflected the condition and ambitions of Islamist Salafis in the Arab-American diaspora in the 1990s and early 2000s to both transplant their Islamism to their new host communities and use the U.S. as a base of operations. In his first editorial, Sultan frames the magazine's purpose in exclusively regional terms (Egypt in particular) as an "authentic work of enlightenment... [to confront] the waves of westernization, banality, and opportunism that appear as if it were successful in desecrating the identity of the Ummah." ¹⁸⁹

The magazine's roster of contributors wrote exclusively in Arabic for an Arab audience, both in the Middle East and the United States, and sought to gain popularity in both regions. Its Advisory Body, which reflected this mission, represented a "who's who" of Arab Islamist figures.¹⁹⁰ It included Muslim Brotherhood-aligned scholars such as the Brotherhood's spiritual leader Yusuf al-Qaradawi and the Sudanese Surur-influenced Salafi scholar Jafaar Sheikh Idris, as well as other Islamists and Salafists like the Saudi Muhammad bin Hamid al-Ahmari and the Yemeni Abdul-Majid al-Raymi.¹⁹¹

The magazine published on a variety of topics, usually with an Islamist angle. Article discussions ranged from the "problem of the modern women in Arab and Muslim societies," and "our battle with the Jews,"¹⁹² to critiques of the Egyptian left.¹⁹³ After 9/11, *Al Manar al-Jadid* also focused on the early years of the War on Terror, attacking "American war crimes," and "the religious dimension in the American campaign against Afghanistan."¹⁹⁴ Many articles also focused on issues related to Islamism and discussed "idiomatic awareness in the thought of the Martyr Imam," in reference to Muslim Brotherhood founder Hassan al-Banna.¹⁹⁵

Perhaps the most explicit hint of the publication's conservative Islamist identity, other than publishing well-known contemporary Islamists such as Muhammad bin Mukhtar al-Shinqiti, Issam al-Arian, Salah al-Sawy, and Rachid Ghannouchi, is its re-publishing of

articles by Sayyid Qutb and Abul A'la Maududi.¹⁹⁶ In its five years of activity, *Al-Manar al-Jadid* published over a dozen issues with the majority of its articles either explicitly supportive or sympathetic of Islamist ideals or views.

Ali al-Timimi

The most influential figure within IANA, Ali al-Timimi, was arguably the first American-born activist Salafi preacher, and his case is the best representation of the IANA strand of Salafism that emerged in the late 1990s. He was also one of the first people to bring the ideas of the Islamist thinkers which were influencing IANA to an American, English-speaking audience. Born in Washington, D.C., he briefly trained at the University of Medina in the late 1980s where he became an acolyte of Abd al-Aziz bin Baz, the future Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, before returning to America to work in information technology and start his career as a Salafi preacher.¹⁹⁷ Best known as the spiritual leader of the so-called Virginia Jihad Network, al-Timimi is currently serving a life sentence after being convicted in 2005 on charges including enlisting people to wage war against the United States and providing services to the Taliban.

During his years as a prominent Salafi preacher in America during the 1990s and early 2000s, he first emerged on the QSS circuit before becoming one of the main figures behind IANA.¹⁹⁸ Similar to the activist Salafi umbrella organization he represented, al-Timimi's Salafist theology was heavily influenced by the works of al-Hawali, Qutb, and Surur. Indeed, al-Timimi is a useful example of how, in the context of the American activist Salafi scene, the position of activist Salafis on the legitimacy and permissibility of jihad is subject to change and is not based on an explicit theological rejection of jihadist groups. Unlike most American quietists, who did not turn to global jihadism in response to 9/11, al-Timimi's own path from Islamist-infused activist Salafism to jihadism helps to provide a better understanding of cases where political Salafis can in some cases move towards supporting jihad when the geopolitical reality shifts, forcing theory to move to action. In Ali al-Timimi's case, the 9/11 attacks and the American response seemed to have provided the very geopolitical shift that led to him taking on more extreme and violent views. These events fundamentally tested his theoretical commitment to the use

of violence in the form of jihad, as well as his own identity as a law-abiding citizen of the United States.

It should be noted, however, that while this study categorizes al-Timimi as a Salafi jihadi, some nuance is also required. Based on his pronouncements after 9/11, including his advice to his followers and their subsequent actions, he should be regarded as a supporter of what is defined above as “classical jihad.” While he showed sympathy for the attacks on America, his main subsequent goal was to encourage followers to travel and fight jihad in Muslim majority countries that were invaded by foreign troops.

Al-Timimi drew influences from a range of Salafis from across the spectrum of the movement. His early work indicates that he retained lessons from the traditional quietist approach that he came across while in Saudi Arabia. Due to the influence of bin Baz, who was a vehement critic of the activists, his lectures upon his return to the United States, often given at QSS events, did not stray far from the standard quietist approach. This began to change, however, when al-Timimi started to work with the Sudanese activist Salafi Jaafar Sheikh Idris, who also held Saudi citizenship. Idris held influential religious positions in America, including founding chairman of the American Open University in Alexandria, Virginia, one of the first American schools of Salafi learning which drew a large part of its curriculum from the work of Muhammad Surur.¹⁹⁹ Idris also worked at the Institute of Islamic and Arabic Sciences in America (IIASA) in Fairfax, Virginia, which was founded in 1989 as an affiliate of the Imam Ibn Saud University in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Federal agents raided the IIASA in 2004, and authorities subsequently revoked the visas of many of its staff, including Idris. Similarly concerned about the direction of the IIASA’s teaching, the Saudi Ministry of Religious Affairs also ceased its previous sponsorship of the institute. Reporting at the time suggested both the raid and the Saudi withdrawal of support were based on concerns that the IIASA was promoting an intolerant interpretation of Islam. However, the move was also criticized at the time by Ibrahim Hooper, the spokesman for the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR), as a “fishing expedition by the government,” after his organization helped advise members of IIASA during and after the investigation.²⁰⁰

In addition to his involvement in American Salafi institutions, Idris also occasionally preached at the Dar al-Hijrah Islamic Center in northern Virginia. For those members of the mosque who sought more in-depth knowledge, he led a small study circle in his home in northern Virginia. Initially Idris would give the lectures, but soon his acolyte Ali al-Timimi took over—al-Timimi’s scholarly credentials, American upbringing, and general charisma made him a very popular preacher, especially among the young American-born Muslims in attendance.

In the mid-1990s, al-Timimi and Idris sought to formalize their endeavors and created a small Salafi organization called the Center for Islamic Information and Education (CIIE), also known as Dar al-Arqam.²⁰¹ Several years later, Dar al-Arqam became the meeting place for one of America’s first post-9/11 terrorist conspiracies: the Virginia Jihad Network. Ismail Royer, an early member of Dar al-Arqam who later became a senior figure in the network and was close with al-Timimi, recalls in an interview how the Islamic center was Salafi-oriented but also “open to more political engagement and activism,” thus distinguishing it from many other Salafi organizations of the time.²⁰²

Soon, al-Timimi began attracting large followings among Muslim Americans in the Northern Virginia area. He also sought to expand his reach and influence nationally by recording his lectures at Dar al-Arqam on CDs which were then published in-house and sold online and at Islamic conferences across the country. Their rapid spread helped al-Timimi become one of the most popular Salafi sheikhs in the English-speaking world, and his work was disseminated within Muslim communities in the U.S., Canada, and the UK. Born and raised in America, he was among the first to give Salafism an American voice and have an appeal outside of the audiences which had already flocked to QSS Salafi figures, making it more applicable to the lives of his congregants. Crucially, while his work covered standard Salafi themes such as *fiqh* and *tawhid*, unlike most American Salafis of the time, al-Timimi’s work would also often fuse Salafi theology with current affairs and politics.

Despite his involvement with QSS, there were signs early on in al-Timimi’s work that suggested he was not a strictly quietist Salafi. In 1995, he attended the United Nations 4th

World Conference on Women in China as a representative of IANA. While IANA decried the conference as an attack on Islam that was part of a conspiracy to undermine conservative Islamic teachings on women's place in society, al-Timimi resolved to attend to give the conservative Islamic viewpoint. This type of activism was largely unheard of among Salafis in America at the time. As part of al-Timimi's involvement in the conference, he partnered with the activist Salafi sheikh Abdur-Rahman Abdul-Khaliq, thus further distinguishing both him and IANA from QSS. In preparation for his appearance at the UN conference, al-Timimi translated Abdul-Khaliq's book *The Wisdom behind The Islamic Laws Regarding Women* into English, and distributed copies at the event.²⁰³

Given Khaliq's own well-known ideological influences, this decision by al-Timimi was significant. Khaliq is an activist Salafi figure whom quietist Salafis often deride, placing him alongside al-Awda, al-Hawali, and Surur in the ranks of "politicized deviants."²⁰⁴ Quietists often quote al-Albani's critique of Khaliq as a Salafi whose "*manhaj* is *Ikhwani* [of the Muslim Brotherhood]."²⁰⁵ Al-Timimi's partnership with Khaliq is among the main sources of American quietist attacks on the preacher. An article on an American Madkhali website which frequently issues refutations of "Ikhwanis," "Sururis," and "Qutbis," argues that al-Timimi's "Qutubiyah affectation,"

could be seen in the early 90s but it wasn't till after the mid-90s that his affair became manifest, and unfortunately it deteriorated from that point onwards after he turned his back upon many of the *usool* [teachings] he was previously "*spoon-feeding*" to others before the mid-90s, and took a portion of the youth towards the Ikhwani methodologies of Abdur-Rahman Abdul-Khaliq and his likes.²⁰⁶

After 9/11, al-Timimi continued his direct involvement with activist Salafi scholars. In 2002, he partnered with Safar al-Hawali (who by this time became a key influence on his thinking) in writing a joint letter to the U.S. Congress opposing the future invasion of Iraq.²⁰⁷ According to Heffelfinger, al-Timimi's relationships with and admiration for al-Hawali and al-Awda "was one of the clearest indications of his ideological and political affiliations."²⁰⁸ Additionally, al-Timimi also cited Sayyid Qutb as an inspiration, placing

him well outside the fold of American quietists. Shortly before his imprisonment, al-Timimi gave a farewell sermon in which he referred to Qutb as an example of other Muslims who, like him, bravely stood up for their beliefs: “I remember that, the person as a young man and young boy I grew up reading his books and loving his teachings, Sayyid Qutb saying as he was facing the executioner ‘by Allah the finger which bears witness that there is none worthy of worship than Allah, how could it side with something which is false?’”²⁰⁹ While this alone does not suggest a deep influence of Qutb’s works on al-Timimi, very few, if any, quietist Salafis ever favorably cite Qutb, even as a passing influence on their work.

Al-Hawali, Khaliq, and Qutb’s influences on al-Timimi help to explain how Salafism, and individual Salafi figures, can transform in the right circumstances. Royer, who regarded al-Timimi as his spiritual leader during the late 1990s and early 2000s, sees the preacher’s fusion of Salafist theology with Islamist politics and activism as a major reason for al-Timimi’s support for jihad after 9/11:

There's no question that al-Timimi's *Sahwa* orientation influenced his response to 9/11. One way that was so was al-Hawali's previous writings on the events leading up to the end of time, and how the events unfolding in the world today were those described in the Qur'an and *hadith*. When 9/11 happened, I think al-Timimi interpreted things in light of that. This is related to the general focus of *Sahwa* sheikhs on *fiqh al waaqi'ah* [the knowledge of current events], which is not really just current events per se in a civics sense but in a religiously-charged, millenarian sense. Basically it all boils down to the ikhwan influence on the Wahhabist and Salafist movements.²¹⁰

One of al-Timimi’s most influential works, a 1996 lecture called *New World Order*, is itself an oral commentary on al-Hawali’s work *Jerusalem between the True Promise and the Bogus Promise*.²¹¹ This treatise would later be used as a key piece of evidence by the federal prosecution in his 2005 trial. Al-Timimi’s adversarial view of the United States and his penchant for activist Salafism is demonstrated throughout the lecture. The West, he argued, was involved in an “unrelenting attack to annihilate Islam from the face of the

earth.”²¹² It was now crucial that Muslims respond, “by any means necessary, including physical attack.” Al-Timimi’s focus, however, was not on terrorist attacks in the West, but conflicts in so-called “Muslim lands,” which he urged his followers to join: “we should fight jihad in the Middle East for our own salvation because if we don’t, Allah will bring some other Muslims who will.”²¹³ Unlike many Salafi jihadists, however, al-Timimi still stressed the importance of receiving advice from recognized Islamic scholars before acting.

While he advised Muslims against directly confronting America due to its overwhelming military power, al-Timimi believed that conflict between Islam and the West, while a prospect for the distant future, was inevitable. This view was, however, subject to the convulsions of the geopolitical arena. After 9/11, an act which he saw as the opening salvo from Islam in this conflict, his view on fighting America quickly shifted, with events unfolding more rapidly than he expected in previous years.

Al-Timimi’s eventual turn towards more open and immediate support for jihad was also informed by his longstanding belief in the principles of *al-wala’ wa-l-bara*. In *New World Order*, he reminds Western Muslims that they must avoid adopting Western customs lest they “forget the principles of *walā’* and *barā’* [and] forget who are those to whom they should show allegiance and who they should disavow, show hatred, and warfare to.”²¹⁴ The West “duped” Muslims into misunderstanding the true principles of jihad and used concepts such as inter-faith dialogue to “strip them of their beliefs.”

In another point of departure from American quietist Salafi thinking, al-Timimi emphasized the importance of American Muslims assisting the Palestinian cause against the Israeli state, specifically by supporting Hamas. While most Salafis avoid the topic, and regard Hamas as a Muslim Brotherhood-influenced, deviant group whose actions have brought more harm than good to Palestinian Muslims, activists like al-Timimi believed it was a key issue. Even if peace was to be achieved, al-Timimi urged that “the issue must remain alive” and “we must stand with our brothers in Palestine and give them money.”²¹⁵

After 9/11, al-Timimi's political, activist Salafism turned to the active promotion of violent jihad overseas. The attacks and America's subsequent military response brought about a rapid shift in his thinking from viewing jihad as an important yet largely theoretical concept for American Muslims, to an immediate and mandatory duty.²¹⁶ In this shift, the influence from al-Hawali is unmistakable. Al-Timimi adopted the belief that 9/11 was justified and the subsequent War on Terror represented the first stages of a Quranic prophecy of a war between Muslims and unbelievers which was to precede the coming apocalypse and judgement day. However, al-Timimi's post-9/11 work can still be distinguished from the more gung-ho global jihadists, many of whom began to instruct their followers that they did not require the permission of recognized Islamic scholars to pursue jihad. One of al-Timimi's only major objections to the 9/11 attacks was that the perpetrators did not consult any scholars prior to the event.

In sum, the influences on al-Timimi's work during the years leading up to his 2004 arrest help explain how the scholar shifted across the Salafi spectrum, from a quietist to an activist, and then from an activist to a supporter of classical jihad. Eventually, he became a key leadership figure within the Salafi jihadist movement in America, who urged Americans to join the fight against their country overseas waged by al-Qaeda. In this endeavor, al-Timimi did not only speak in general, theoretical terms about fighting jihad, but began encouraging a small group of his followers to seek out opportunities to fight jihad against American military forces and their allies abroad.

The Virginia Jihad Network

Al-Timimi's first fateful meeting with the group of young men from his mosque that would later be termed the "Virginia Jihad Network" reportedly took place just five days after 9/11. On the night of the attacks, al-Timimi gave a public sermon condemning the perpetrators, but according to trial documents and an account given to the author by one of the attendees, al-Timimi's tone changed in a private meeting with his congregants on September 16.²¹⁷ The group of young men in attendance at the meeting were originally drawn to al-Timimi and his teachings while attending the Dar al-Arqam Islamic center. Many of them also met together every weekend to play paintball, and some eventually

formed a major part of what would later be called the “Virginia jihad network,” or more colloquially, the “paintball jihadists.”²¹⁸ Of the 12 who were arrested as part of the network,²¹⁹ six pled guilty to an assortment of charges related to material support for terrorism and were given a range of sentences from three to 20 years in federal prison.²²⁰ Four more were eventually convicted in court and were initially given much harsher sentences, including a life sentence for Masoud Khan. Two co-defendants, Caliph Basha Ibn Abdur-Raheem and Sabri Benkahala, were acquitted.²²¹ Additionally, Ali al-Timimi was listed as an unindicted co-conspirator in the case against the Virginia jihad network.²²²

The arrests and indictments of the men from Dar al-Arqam led directly to al-Timimi’s indictment in 2004 on four separate conspiracy charges, including 10 individual counts: conspiracy to levy war against the United States, conspiracy to supply services to the Taliban, conspiracy to take part in military expeditions against the United States and conspiracy to use, carry, possess, and discharge firearms.²²³ Al-Timimi was arrested and promptly offered a plea deal by the Justice Department: plead out on a smaller conspiracy charge with a term of 14 years or face a potential, mandatory life sentence. Al-Timimi refused, and the full indictment was filed.²²⁴

By the time of his arrest, the FBI already attempted to build a substantial case file on al-Timimi, which opened in 2001, continued until his arrest, and hinged on several meetings and contacts that al-Timimi had during that period. The first meeting of interest to law enforcement was the September 16, 2001 secret gathering, during which al-Timimi met seven of the 12 “paintball jihadists” at the house of network member Yong Ki Kwon. According to the indictment, al-Timimi discussed travel to Afghanistan via Pakistan to combat the American troops who would likely be deployed there, and claimed it was their duty as Muslims to wage jihad against American soldiers.²²⁵

Al-Timimi informed the attendees of the meeting that, of the various jihadist groups operating in the region, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), a Pakistani militant organization that provided training in combat for jihadists in several locations worldwide, was the “correct path.”²²⁶ Royer, a veteran of the Bosnian jihad who was also a member of LeT in Pakistan

for a year between 2000 and 2001, was present at the meeting and recalls how al-Timimi held court and urged his most loyal followers to travel, telling them that they “had to be with the *mujahideen*.”²²⁷ The world, he warned, was now going to be divided between Muslim and non-Muslim, and they had to choose the former if they were to be treated favorably on the Day of Judgement. Prior to this speech, Royer recalls how he was comfortable living in America while supporting classical jihadist causes abroad. However, al-Timimi “changed my mind-set completely.” He now viewed his fellow citizens with suspicion, beginning to question his own identity and where, if at all, he belonged in America.²²⁸

Royer also notes that, during the meeting, al-Timimi cited a recent fatwa by Saudi jihadist sheikh Hamud bin Uqla al-Shuaibi that justified the 9/11 attacks and called on Muslims to fight for the Taliban in Afghanistan. This claim is also made in court records related to al-Timimi’s case. In the indictment of a member of the network, Ali Asad Chandia, and a senior member of LeT, Mohammed Ajmal Khan, it is stated that “on or about September 16, 2001, at a meeting...Ali al-Timimi read from a document in Arabic entitled ‘Sheikh Humood Bin Uqla Ash-Shu'aibi' s Fatwa on the Recent Events,’ which stated in part that it was compulsory to assist Afghanistan in jihad against the expected U.S. military invasion.”²²⁹

Hamud bin Uqla al-Shuaibi is known as the founder of the al-Shuaibi school of thought in Saudi Arabia, regarded as among the most radical and violent strains of Islamism in the country.²³⁰ After the 9/11 attacks, al-Shuaibi became notorious for declaring that all Americans, including civilians, were complicit in the actions of the United States due to their involvement in the democratic system and therefore should be treated “like a fighter” and targeted. Basing his position around *al-wala’ wa-l-bara’*— “the obligation and necessity of opposing unbelievers and hating them, as well as rejecting them”—al-Shuaibi said that America, “has reached the peak of that arrogance in the form of open attacks on several Muslim Nations” and as a result was being justly punished by God.²³¹

The day after al-Timimi’s references to the al-Shuaibi fatwa, he told two of the network members how they should go about joining a LeT training camp in Pakistan while

avoiding suspicion.²³² In the following week after their private meeting, Yong Kwon, Khwaja Hasan, Muhammed Aatique, and Masoud Khan all traveled to Pakistan, and by October 2001 had all arrived at a LeT camp in Muzafabad in the disputed region of Kashmir. They received weapons training at the camp, but never reached Afghanistan.²³³ Meanwhile, back in Northern Virginia, al-Timimi held another meeting with Donald Surratt, Hammad Abdur-Raheem, Caliph Abdur-Raheem and an unindicted conspirator, where he told the group that Afghanistan was an appropriate location to conduct violent jihad, that *mujahidin* who died fighting Americans in Afghanistan would be accepted as martyrs, gave several examples from the history of Islam justifying violent actions against civilians from different faiths, and again recommended joining LeT.²³⁴

The time gap between the events mentioned in the indictments and the eventual arrest of the 11 “paintball jihadists” and al-Timimi himself was substantial—al-Timimi’s trial did not begin until 2005. By that time, al-Timimi had been a “known entity” to the FBI for at least four years: agents contacted him at his house in Virginia a week after 9/11, and surveilled several of his conversations with other “known entities.”²³⁵ There were several raids of al-Timimi’s house, and FBI agents seized books, other informational material, and al-Timimi’s passport.²³⁶ Authorities also recorded a series of 2002 conversations between al-Timimi and Safar al-Hawali, regarding the impending U.S. decision to militarily intervene in Iraq.²³⁷

To strengthen their case, federal prosecutors used al-Timimi’s interactions with al-Hawali to prove guilt by association. However, the links between al-Hawali and the terrorist networks that al-Timimi was accused of supporting were weak. During al-Timimi’s 2005 trial, federal prosecutors built their case on the dinner meeting between al-Timimi and the “Virginia jihad network” on September 16, and a few of the attendees testified against al-Timimi in exchange for reduced prison time.

The jury found al-Tamimi’s actions sufficient to convict him on all 10 counts of the indictment on April 26, 2005.²³⁸ Three months later, he was sentenced to life in prison. Since his arrest, al-Timimi has been incarcerated in at least five federal correctional facilities, and in 2006 he began the process of appealing the verdict.²³⁹ The information

uncovered by the author about al-Timimi during the appeals process is nearly as illuminating as the material during his initial trial: it highlighted not only the nature and scope of the federal counterterrorism investigations process at the time, but also his connections with other notorious members of jihadist networks in the United States.

During the initial trial, al-Timimi filed a motion to order the government to release recordings of several conversations that he had with individuals relevant to the case. In November 2004, he tried unsuccessfully to get the government to release notes of a conversation that he had with another imam, Anwar al-Awlaki, around 2002.²⁴⁰ At the time, al-Awlaki was the imam at the Dar-al-Hijrah mosque, also in Falls Church, VA. He is now well-known as one of the most influential Salafi jihadi ideologues among Western Muslims. Soon after meeting al-Timimi, al-Awlaki moved to the UK, and then Yemen, where he became a major figure in al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), influencing attacks on U.S. soil (al-Awlaki was in contact with Nidal Malik Hasan, the Fort Hood Shooter, as well as the 2009 “underwear bomber” Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab).²⁴¹ He was killed by a United States drone strike in Yemen in 2011.²⁴²

According to al-Timimi’s recollections to the FBI in June 2004, he first heard of al-Awlaki through one of his congregants, and also learned that he moved into the area.²⁴³ After 9/11, al-Awlaki visited al-Timimi at his house in Virginia, reportedly alongside a man who later would become a government witness in the trials against the Virginia jihad network.²⁴⁴ In his original June 2004 statement, al-Timimi claimed that al-Awlaki arrived uninvited and bearing gifts. Al-Awlaki allegedly discussed his relocation from Yemen to the United States and said that federal agents were trying to plant drugs on him and threaten him, but did not say anything about jihad, recruitment, or any violent act whatsoever.²⁴⁵

This interview became relevant later during al-Timimi’s appeal against his original conviction, after al-Awlaki gained more notoriety as the first United States citizen to be targeted overseas and killed by a drone strike. During his appeal, al-Timimi offered a new and rather different account of how the meeting played out.²⁴⁶ According to al-Timimi, al-Awlaki unexpectedly appeared at al-Timimi’s house and began talking about recruiting

young men from the area to join al-Qaeda affiliated organizations. al-Timimi said he ended the conversation immediately, and then asked al-Awlaki to leave, fearful of an attempt at entrapment.²⁴⁷ Al-Timimi believed al-Awlaki was an informant sent by law enforcement to ensnare him in a conspiracy charge, something he omitted from his 2004 discussion with the FBI about the meeting.²⁴⁸

During the appeals process, al-Timimi's new legal team used this updated account of the meeting, alongside other evidence, to prove three interrelated arguments: 1) that the federal government did not disclose necessary records related to al-Timimi's case during trial, 2) that federal surveillance against al-Timimi violated his constitutional rights to free speech and 3) that al-Timimi's actions toward al-Awlaki proved that he was not interested in recruiting for jihadist groups.²⁴⁹ In doing so, his defense attorneys attempted to link al-Awlaki's case to other cases where federal surveillance was used to convict Muslim defendants on material support to terrorism charges.²⁵⁰ Al-Timimi's appeals process began in 2006 and continues today. He remains incarcerated in the maximum-security facility at the United States Penitentiary in Florence, Colorado.²⁵¹

Al-Timimi's eventual downfall coincided with the end of IANA, which faced overwhelming pressure and attention from law enforcement after 9/11. It did, however, leave behind a legacy of political Salafism which continues to be active in America today. Few, if any, of the members of the current crop of influential American Salafis have followed al-Timimi's path and endorsed Salafi jihadism. However, there are Arab preachers who continue to espouse an Islamist-infused form of Salafism based on the foundation created by IANA and other similar organizations.

The Assembly of Muslim Jurists of America (AMJA)

Although Salafis may be a numerical minority within the American Muslim community, Salafi scholars are among the most prolific among Islamic leaders in issuing religious opinions through their own scholarly bodies. These opinions, which come in the form of the common fatwa or more detailed research papers, seek to mainstream Salafism and make their authors the go-to scholars on issues confronting Muslims in the U.S.

The Assembly of Muslim Jurists of America (AMJA) is perhaps the most robust of such Salafi-dominated bodies. AMJA's stated goal is to issue fatwas and produce research that specifically pertains to "the circumstances of Muslims in the American society."²⁵² The group boasts an impressive collection of America's leading Salafi scholars and imams. Over 50 individuals comprise its leadership council, fatwa committee, and list of experts. Another 41 scholars and imams are listed as members. The group's most basic service is the issuing of fatwas, to which it dedicates a telephone hotline and online submission form. It also hosts academic seminars and publishes declarations, articles, and research on its website. Most of AMJA's research is in the form of papers from its annual imams' conferences and conventions. These are not only held in the U.S., but also take place in Canada, Denmark, Nigeria, Bahrain, Egypt, and Kuwait.²⁵³

A great deal of AMJA's scholarly output focuses on non-controversial issues such as food and medicine in "non-Muslim lands," guidelines for new Muslims, the carrying out of Islamic rituals, as well as technical issues that pertain to Islamic arbitration and finances.²⁵⁴ The group's output also touches on more sensitive matters such as Muslim political participation in the West, citizenship, terrorism and extremism, and the role of women. The broad scope and focus on political matters are functions of the ideological makeup of the body and where it fits in the Salafi landscape. AMJA is decidedly non-quietist, and instead falls into a broad category of where scholarly and political/activist Salafism intersects.

Sheikh Salah al-Sawy

Perhaps the best indication of AMJA's ideological leanings are the rulings and background of its secretary general, Sheikh Salah al-Sawy, whose work draws influence from Muhammad Surur.²⁵⁵ The 63-year old al-Azhar educated Egyptian first came to the United States in 1992. In his early years, he briefly participated in the Egyptian *takfiri* group *al-Takfir wal-Hijrah*, before splitting with them and criticizing their doctrine.²⁵⁶ His professional career began with teaching posts at al-Azhar and in Mecca, as well as working for the Muslim World League in Pakistan.²⁵⁷ From 1992 to 1995, al-Sawy also

lectured at the now-defunct activist Salafi-influenced IIASA in Fairfax, Virginia. Then, from 1995 to 2004, he was the president and co-founder of the Surur-influenced American Open University in Virginia, where al-Timimi's mentor Jafaar Sheikh Idris was also based.²⁵⁸ In 2004, al-Sawy and AMJA founded the Sharia Academy of America, which later changed its name to the Islamic University of North America, and is also known as Mishkah University.²⁵⁹

During his time at AMJA, al-Sawy has written on a diverse array of topics ranging from technical matters related to Islamic finances to women's roles in Islam, as well as on more sensitive issues such as citizenship and terrorism. In a 2009 study titled, "The Debate on Loyalty to Islam & National Citizenship: Muslim Americans?!", al-Sawy discusses the Salafi doctrine of loyalty and disavowal (*al-wala' wa-l-bara'*) as it relates to living with non-Muslims, and citizenship in non-Muslim countries. The significance of the subject matter goes to the core of the controversy over the Salafi emphasis on loyalty and disavowal and the consequences this may have for someone living in a non-Muslim society. Specifically, the issue of to what extent some of these teachings may engender a degree of otherness among Salafis that make it arguably impossible for some to assimilate and accept the legitimacy of states of which they are citizens. Al-Sawy defines loyalty to religion as "loving those affiliating with this religion [Islam] regardless of whom they are...and disavowal from those who fight [Muslims] and show enmity towards them due to their religion."²⁶⁰ To al-Sawy, this is only natural and logical, while making clear that there is no prohibition against having relations with non-Muslims so long as they are not fighting Muslims. However, in situations where a group fights Muslims, even from inside the fold of Islam, then "fighting them is obligatory" if reconciliation is not possible.²⁶¹ He went on to explain that,

The issue then is not particularly about hostility to the West, or a specific region within in it, or loyalty to those the East, for in both the East and West there are the good and the wicked...the issue is not about a Muslim taking a stand against the West in general, or the United States in particular, but rather it is a general teaching.²⁶²

According to al-Sawy, a Muslim willingly gaining citizenship in a Western country is permissible and does not contradict the teachings of *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* as citizenship is, in effect, a contract between that state and the new citizen. At the same time, the issue is not entirely straightforward for al-Sawy since “on its face [gaining citizenship] includes approval of the rule of *jahiliyya*, renouncing arbitration by God’s *sharia*, and includes taking on non-Muslims as allies...it is not farfetched to say that this is a type of apostasy in Islam.”²⁶³ This use by al-Sawy of the term *jahiliyya* to refer to societies living in sin due to their rejection of Islamic law is an indicator of his Islamist ideological influences, setting him apart from quietists who avoid this formulation. Yet, al-Sawy argued, there are many naturalized Muslim American citizens who are still loyal to Islam and have benefited from it to proselytize for Islam and establish organizations that serve the religion. Furthermore, to him, there is not much of a difference between most Muslim countries and Western ones because both currently rule by man-made laws. Al-Sawy also stated that in absolute terms, willfully electing to gain citizenship in a Western country is prohibited: “Accepting in absolute terms the legislation of infidels, and abiding by absolute loyalty to them without an excuse, without being forced, or ignorant, is a nullifier of *tawhid*, and [takes one] outside the religion...”²⁶⁴

In practical terms, however, as it relates to the modern condition of Muslim diaspora communities, al-Sawy instructed that so long as Muslims detach themselves from the aforementioned “nullifiers of *tawhid*” and maintain their loyalty and disavowal, then it can be permissible. In any case, these new Muslim citizens must, however, maintain their Islamic identity and can only do so by living close to each other and around mosques, bringing in preachers from Muslim countries, and sending their children to Muslim countries so that they may return as preachers and scholars.²⁶⁵ Assimilation is allowed so long as it serves the purpose of proselytization. However, if it means a Muslim “dissolving in the [West’s] moral and civilizational system,” then it is forbidden because even “[the West’s] constitutions did not oblige it, neither its leaders or founding fathers.”²⁶⁶

As for political participation, al-Sawy argued that it is permissible so long as, again, its purpose is to advance Islam and its values by doing good, and the activity adheres to the principle of assessing payoffs. On the issue of Muslim citizens defending their adopted

country, al-Sawy wrote that defending the land itself from an assault is permissible as the Muslims did so while they were under the protection of Abyssinia while Muhammad and his followers fled persecution in Mecca during the *hijra*. However, “Muslims should not fight polytheists with other polytheists, because both factions are the party of Satan.”²⁶⁷ Al-Sawy justified this on the basis that citizens of these Western countries do not necessarily agree with all their government policies and yet no one accuses them of treason. Thus, being a citizen of these Western countries does not have to entail accepting the legitimacy of its policies if they contravene *shari’a* law.

On the issue of terrorism, al-Sawy, like most other activist Salafis, does not approve of the violence undertaken by modern Salafi jihadist groups. The position is, however, more nuanced than simply rejecting terrorism or jihadi violence in absolute terms. In a 2011 paper, “The Ideological Roots of Terrorist Operations,” al-Sawy focused on how secularism, and its “enmity towards *shari’a*,” is the “pivotal issue” stirring extremism, blaming it for the rise of takfirism.²⁶⁸ Al-Sawy emphasized that the legitimacy of jihad itself is a matter on which there is consensus and that disagreements always arise when it comes to execution.²⁶⁹ These include: possessing the religious legitimacy and authority to engage in jihad, having a clear benefit or gain to be made from it, and the level of preparedness, precision, and timing.²⁷⁰

Al-Sawy also put forward arguments on why jihadi activity in its current form is objectionable and offers his own “fundamentals that represent rationality in this thorny case.”²⁷¹ First, al-Sawy argues that apostasy is not sufficient justification for killing despite the use of this concept by some modern Salafi jihadi groups.²⁷² In addition, he writes that jihadi operations are only legitimate so long as there is a clear benefit and that the enemy is expected to suffer.²⁷³ Finally, al-Sawy argued that the permissibility of collateral damage and killing of innocents used as human shields by the enemy is conditional on there being a state of confrontation and there being an absolute need for it.²⁷⁴

On the latter point of collateral damage, al-Sawy elaborated that intentionally targeting the women and children of polytheists is prohibited. However, if there is no way to target

the enemy without using human shields or killing infidel women and children, then it is only permissible during times of war. Al-Sawy argued, per his interpretation of Islamic theology, that this only happens during a state of confrontation when the two warring factions are opposing each other and, most importantly, only when attacking the enemy in their land. He argued that, based on *hadith*, Muhammad granted license for this collateral damage only against “infidel combatants whom live in the abode of war, and there is not between them and the Muslims a treaty.”²⁷⁵ He cautioned, however, that jihadis cannot use this as pretext to kill Muslims or conduct attacks which result in collateral damage on Muslim lands, and that this issue represents the core of his objection to these jihadi operations. Al-Sawy clarified that when it comes to acts of violence outside Muslim lands, then new Muslim immigrants, who by obtaining a visa have signed onto a treaty with their host country, would be contravening Islamic principles. If, however, the attacker is native to the non-Muslim land then it is not permissible due to the evils that it will bring about as it will cause blowback against Muslims in general and Muslim diaspora communities specifically.²⁷⁶

Al-Sawy’s rulings and opinions are frequently subject to criticism from quietist Salafis. One major Madkhali figure, the Egyptian Sheikh Mohamed Raslan, has railed against al-Sawy on several occasions. In one sermon Raslan said:

Among the [Muslim Brotherhood] Qutbists, whom trick the Muslims, and plant hypocrisy and Taqiyyah...what Salah al-Sawy said... [who is] a [Muslim] Brotherhood Qutbist who theorizes for the Brotherhood on the way of the Qutbists and is one of their major preachers... [in his book] that ‘It is not farfetched that the interest of Islamist work may require that one group of its men would conduct some Jihadi operations.’ [Raslan comments] Meaning bombings and suicide operations! ²⁷⁷

The passage that Raslan refers to is from one al-Sawy’s most prominent books: *Constants and Variables on the Path of Islamic Work*, a version of which was included in the Sharia Academy of America (Mishkah Center) curriculum until at least 2009.²⁷⁸ The full passage reads:

It can be said that the interest of Islamist work may require that one group of its men would conduct some Jihadi operations. It is not far from achieving this operationally if Islamist work reached a stage of maturity that allows it to be able to grant license in this. Preferably to the interest of continuing the Islamist mission in these bodies without disturbance and provocation.²⁷⁹

The broader context of the passage sheds some light on what al-Sawy meant. In the book, as Surur-influenced Salafis are wont to do, he emphasized the absolute need to bridge gaps between different Islamist currents as he believes all can work together to ultimately bring about an Islamic state. In a clear indication of his Qutbist influence, al-Sawy wrote: “*Jahiliyya* [meaning the secular enemies of Islam] is keen on infiltrating Islamist work. To divide it into an extremist current, that it can begin to repress and punish, and a moderate one that it postpones doing the same to.”²⁸⁰ Islamist activists are encouraged to “strengthen the link with all the factions working for Islam. They are warned from delegitimizing their proselytization or jihadi work, even if with a passing reference. Unless this is part of a complete system of coordination and integration.”²⁸¹ Al-Sawy went on to emphasize the need for Islamists to avoid publicly denouncing others, specifically jihadi currents, even if their actions appear extreme. If an Islamist must comment, then he should “begin by denouncing the governmental terrorism in repressing Islam and punishing its preachers.”²⁸² This is important because, “absolute denunciation of these jihadi acts will naturally engender enmity with these factions. It will fill the field of Islamist work with discord and bloodshed.”²⁸³

In the same passage, al-Sawy warned again that “*jahiliyya*” will try to force Islamists, especially those in political bodies, to condemn jihadi acts under the pretext of countering extremism and may even accuse these Islamists of collusion. However, al-Sawy warns, doing so will only allow the “*jahiliyya*” to achieve its objective of fragmenting the Islamist current.”²⁸⁴ In later editions of the book, al-Sawy appears to have edited out the concession that some jihadi actions may be necessary, clarifying that it must follow the aforementioned conditions. The reference to Islamists denouncing such hypothetical jihadi actions is understood in the context of what al-Sawy outlined as the need for

division of roles between various Islamist currents. He likened the Islamist condition with that of soldiers garrisoning a gap on a battlefield, one may hold a position, yet needs the others to protect its flank.²⁸⁵

Al-Sawy's views, despite appearing to be problematic, fall comfortably within the general discourse of activist Salafis in general and Sururi Salafis in particular. Their critics, specifically the Madkhalis, charge that this preoccupation with political issues, coupled with the influence of the Brotherhood and Qutb, is what sows the seed of terrorism. Their argument is predicated on the assumption that when Salafi sheikhs discuss such issues they end up riling up Muslim youth who then resolve to change their condition by violent action. When they find that mainstream activist Salafis lack an effective methodology to deliver immediate results, and that they do not "walk the walk" when it comes to violence, established Salafi jihadi groups become a more attractive option. Radicalization is, of course, not as simple and clear cut as the Madkhalis believe. However, there is substance to their overall critique of the activist Salafi current in general and the logical consequence of the ideas they promote.

Walid Idris al-Menesi

Another influential member of AMJA's Fatwa Committee is the 50-year-old Egyptian Walid Idris al-Menesi. Originally an Arabic school teacher in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, al-Menesi gradually became involved in studying religion and informally learned Islam from prominent Saudi clerics such as bin Baz and al-Uthaymeen.²⁸⁶ Al-Menesi first came to the United States as a proselytizer for the Saudi Embassy's Da'wa office. He is now the head of the Islamic University of Minnesota, a Salafi seminary, and a trustee and regional head of the North American Imam's Federation, a Salafi dominated network of imams.²⁸⁷ He is also a member of the Educational Committee of the American Open University, where he received his first formal degree in Islamic studies.²⁸⁸

Al-Menesi's background is indicative of the influence that Saudi religious training still has among influential U.S.-based Salafi preachers. The Saudi influence does not, however, translate into a simple "Wahhabi" label. In fact, al-Menesi's positions intersect across

both scholarly and activist Salafism in a break from traditional Saudi orthodoxy. Although some American-born Salafi imams may claim to have “Americanized” their Salafism and demand a large fan base, immigrant imams like al-Menesi and al-Sawy still play a role in training new imams and influencing Salafism in America. Al-Menesi preaches exclusively in Arabic, which limits his reach among non-Arabic speaking American Muslims, but his position as the head of the seminary in Minnesota allows him to influence an important constituency: young American Muslims hoping to become Salafi leaders in their community. The Islamic University of Minnesota appears to draw a diverse crop of students, including many Somali Americans due to the large diaspora community in the state.

Al-Menesi’s views on general matters of creed like *al-wala’ wa-l-bara’* generally fall in line with many non-jihadi Salafis and are not, by Salafi standards, extreme. In a lecture entitled “To Whom is Our Loyalty?”²⁸⁹ al-Menesi repeatedly stressed that Muslims’ loyalty should only be to Islam and Muslims. This by default means that loyalty, in all things, excludes infidels and non-Muslims. However, he also elaborated that *bara’*, or disavowal, towards infidels did not automatically grant Muslims a license to be hostile or aggressive to unbelievers even outside the lands of Islam (i.e. the West). This interpretation ensures that Muslims are still able to successfully proselytize in non-Muslim lands. Unlike the Madkhalis, al-Menesi recommends a more pragmatic approach on the issue of Muslims taking civil and political associations, including with Islamist political groups. The scholar does include the caveat that these associations are only legitimate “if loyalty was to Allah, His prophet, and the believers comes before loyalty to [the group].”

Al-Menesi also spends much of his time focusing on Salafi scholarly issues of jurisprudence and discussions of Salafi texts. His forays into contemporary politics, however, are what set him apart from other scholarly Salafis, and provide insight into the strand of activist Salafis with whom he arguably shares some ideological ground. For instance, in a December 2016 sermon titled “The aggression on Aleppo,” the soft-spoken al-Menesi decried the bombings by “criminal infidels, between the atheist Russians and the *nusayirin* and the *rawafid* from Iran and Hezbollah,” the latter two terms being

derogatory sectarian references to Alawi and Shi'a Muslims, respectively.²⁹⁰ He then went on to frame the ongoing war in Syria in historical sectarian terms of Sunnis vs. “wicked” Shi'a. More specifically, towards the end of the lecture, al-Menesi advised, “If a Muslim is unable to aide them [Muslims in need, specifically Syria], meaning with weapons and [carrying out] jihad with one's life [i.e., physical jihad], he has to aid them through jihad of money by helping relief organizations.”²⁹¹

This was not the only time that al-Menesi spoke on record of the necessity to “aid Muslims” in conflict zones, specifically with “weapons” if one is able. In a sermon uploaded to his website titled “The Palestine Events,” al-Menesi decried “the Jews, the descendants of apes and pigs.”²⁹² Speaking of the situation in Palestine, al-Menesi advised,

our Muslim brothers in Palestine are calling on their Muslim brothers all over the earth and are asking them to extend their hand of support. Yet we abstain from supporting them when anyone of us can. Whomever has an army or weapons, they must support them with what they have, be it an armies or weapons. Whomever has money, must support them with money. And whomever can only pray, should pray for them.²⁹³

The problematic aspects of these diatribes aside, al-Menesi's lectures betray a certain worldview that considers issues related to jihad and confronting Muslims' enemies as part and parcel of the religion itself. For instance, reflecting on the condition of Muslims in Palestine, he lamented, “The Muslim Ummah is that of a billion Muslims. It does not lack anything in terms of its large numbers or its large size ...or money, or weapons, but what it lacks is relying on God Almighty and returning to the religion of God...If Muslims truly wanted to fight in the way of God and aid the religion of God, then they would have prepared and the signs of that would have been apparent.”²⁹⁴ Al-Menesi considers Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation, Chechnya, and Bosnia as prime examples of legitimate arenas for jihad. This means that the fundamental issue at hand is not simply the current situation in either Syria or Palestine, but a deeper preoccupation that is shared with other Islamists relating to changing the perceived weak condition of Muslims as a

power. This also means politicizing the term for a global Muslim community, or *ummah*, and changing its meaning as a spiritual community into a physical one of Muslim empire, or in other words, the Caliphate.

At the same time, unlike Madkhalis and Salafi jihadis, al-Menesi endorses, to an extent, Muslim political participation in the U.S. Although this may seem to be at odds with his other positions (and indeed, in some regards, it is), al-Menesi makes clear that any political participation is legitimate only when it aids or makes Islam victorious. The specifics of what that entails are, however, unclear. For instance, in a sermon titled “How To Serve This Religion,” he advocated for Muslims voting and becoming members of representative bodies as long as it is done to serve Islam.²⁹⁵ He praised activist Muslim groups like CAIR as a good example of this effort. Most interestingly, the sermon appeared to have endorsed Minnesota Congressman Keith Ellison, who al-Menesi intimated was in attendance, asking worshippers at the end to listen to him and support him in his campaign. This example further shows the complexity and nuance needed to understand different Salafi schools of thought. This is especially the case in the U.S., where clerics like al-Menesi ultimately must contend with the American political reality and figure out ways to reconcile their orthodox views.

Analysis of the works of American-based Salafi scholars like al-Menesi and al-Sawy demonstrates that, while categorizing Salafi belief is beneficial to understanding the movement, this approach is also limited. Each figure has their own ideological idiosyncrasies and diverging, if sometimes seemingly contradictory, beliefs. Nonetheless, it is also clear that forms of activist Salafism which still carry heavy Islamist influences continue to thrive in the U.S. While they do not match the more aggressive approach of past groups and individuals like IANA and Ali al-Timimi, the ideological currents still exist in various forms in the United States.

The focus seen here on politics or worldly political issues is often a cause for some debate among Salafis. The Madkhali critique of political involvement or commentary is, of course, incendiary, and their critics lob the accusation back at them, saying that their apolitical approach makes them irrelevant to naturally curious youth and frustrates them

further as they have no space to debate such issues. Regardless, the issue of the impact of Salafi imams providing commentary on political or otherwise charged topics, or in other words “Salafi Islamism,” is something worth exploring to better understand not just issues related to possible extremism, but also their political philosophy.

“Americanized” Salafism: The Al-Maghrib Institute and America’s Post-Salafis

Along with individuals such as al-Menesi and al-Sawy, who carry with them the ideological influences of their home countries, American-born Salafi activist imams also founded their own institutions. Like TAM, they have sought to shed the controversies surrounding Salafi infighting in America, but also constantly seek innovative approaches to the application of conservative Islam in American society. While they still rely on traditional sources and are trained by recognized Salafis, the new generation of American Salafi thinkers have moved away from them in several ways. Most obviously, they do not present an outwardly Salafi appearance. Rather than the long beards and flowing robes preferred by other Salafis, they often prefer more understated and Westernized styles of dressing and appearance. However, their differences go much deeper. Modern American Salafis espouse a form of politically engaged conservative Islam that calls on American Muslims to involve themselves in controversial political discussions and critique government actions, specifically those related to Muslims and Islam. Topics of most interest include American foreign policy in the Middle East, domestic counter-terrorism policies, and a variety of domestic social issues. Arguably, this approach represents a form of “post-Salafism” which retains Salafi theology but, in its quest for influence and relevancy, became more flexible and adaptive in both its *aqida* and *manhaj*.

The organization which most clearly serves as a symbol of this “post-Salafi” approach, the al-Maghrib Institute, is arguably one of the most influential Muslim organizations operating in the United States today. Two of its leading figures, its Dean of Academic Affairs Yasir Qadhi, and one of its instructors Omar Suleiman, are both Salafi-trained imams who emerged from the aftermath of the QSS and IANA eras, carrying with them ideological influences from both movements. Omar Suleiman, who also founded a Salafi-

influenced Islamic education center called the Yaqeen Institute, was until early 2018 also listed as a faculty member on Salah al-Sawy's Mishkah University website.²⁹⁶ Indeed, Suleiman studied under al-Sawy's tutelage, and describes al-Sawy as a "*faqih* [scholar] of our times" and at the "top of the list" of the sheikhs who inspired him.²⁹⁷ Qadhi, meanwhile, identifies a few U.S.-based Salafis from differing strands who influenced him alongside the Saudis he trained with during his time in Saudi Arabia. These include Muhammad Adly, Jamaal Zarabozo and Ali al-Timimi. Al-Timimi, according to Qadhi, was one of his "main teachers" before Qadhi traveled to study in Saudi Arabia in mid-1990s. He also believes al-Timimi was treated unfairly by authorities, describing the case against him as "false" and arguing that "he is not and was not supportive of violence."²⁹⁸

The work of al-Maghrib largely centers around Islamic education, and the organization runs hundreds of classes and seminars around the country and online each year. On its website, it claims to have attracted 80,000 students since its inception in Maryland in 2002.²⁹⁹ During one class attended by the author which focused on understanding and interpreting *hadith*, over two hundred students were in attendance. The theological influence of the classes has a clear Salafi bent—Qadhi did, after all, train with Saudi Salafi scholars while in Saudi Arabia and regularly references the works of figures such as Sheikhs bin Baz and al-Uthaymeen. However, there is no sign of the unquestioning devotion to the Saudi establishment sheikhs of the sort exhibited by the Madkhalis of the QSS strand.

Outside of the classroom, al-Maghrib leadership involve themselves in various forms of political engagement and discussion. In an interview with the author, Qadhi described himself as vocally critical of American foreign policy, likening his views on the topic to Noam Chomsky: "everything I heard him say about foreign policy and our role in South America and the Middle East, I am very sympathetic to."³⁰⁰ His regular critiques of Western policies and social issues related to both Muslims and other minorities are also evident in his social media activity, where he has a large following on both Facebook and Twitter. His targets include official counter-radicalization policies, such as those pursued by the British government under the umbrella of the Prevent program. Commenting on an open letter he co-signed which criticized Prevent, Qadhi wrote on Facebook that the

focus of the program is mistaken as it ignores the central role of Western foreign policy as a radicalizer of Muslims:

Under this tactic, innocent expressions of religious identity (such as the headscarf or a beard), or political speech (such as criticizing the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan) can and are used as 'signs' of radicalization....Rather than monitor 'signs of radicalization' to prevent attacks, it would behoove governments to look at their own foreign policies and understand that bombing and invading other lands will inevitably result in some sort of backlash. The main way to 'Prevent' terrorism at home is to prevent exporting it to other lands.³⁰¹

Qadhi also expresses support for popular protest and activist movements in America which focus on social justice issues. In 2016, for example, he applauded the Black Lives Matter movement after the police killings of Philando Castile and Alton Sterling. In his view, American Muslims were also experiencing a “small dosage” of the “type of racism that is endemic against African Americans,” and as such had a key role to play in “highlighting the racist underbelly of America.”³⁰²

His colleague, Omar Suleiman, is even more engaged in the American political activist arena with a similar focus on social justice. As part of his effort to fuse traditional Islamic teachings with recent American political discourse surrounding social justice, he created a 40-part lecture series entitled “40 Hadiths on Social Justice.” In the lectures, Suleiman attempts to demonstrate how the sayings of the prophet are in line with some key themes of the American social justice movement. During a lecture entitled “Elitist Privilege,” for example, he explained that, similar to the beliefs of the modern social justice movement, the *hadith* teach that those who are in a position of privilege due to their race or gender must “recognize your privilege and then use your privilege to alleviate those that are not in the same situation as you.”³⁰³

The policy issues which most interest Suleiman fall into three broad categories: national security, international relations, and hot-button domestic issues. On national security, he posts regularly on his social media accounts about terrorism, domestic radicalization, and

the controversial 2017 “travel ban” (known colloquially as the “Muslim ban”, particularly amongst its critics). Related to this, Suleiman also believes that the use of the term “terrorist” in popular and political discourse is biased against people of color.³⁰⁴ Following right-wing-inspired attacks, for example, he often takes to social media and suggests that the perpetrators should be classified as terrorists.³⁰⁵

On international relations, his posts address issues such as the persecution of the Rohingya, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and refugee policy. During the height of the Rohingya crisis, Suleiman was outspoken on the topic on social media, criticizing the world’s inaction and asking followers to support charities advocating for or providing aid to the Rohingya people.³⁰⁶ Similarly, he frequently discusses his support for the Palestinians, posting on Facebook in May 2015, “Last year Ramadan was marked by Israel’s massacre of innocent Palestinians. I sincerely hope this isn’t going to be the case again...”³⁰⁷ When discussing refugees and their desire to come to the United States, Suleiman expresses his annoyance with U.S. policy tweeting, “One of the most frustrating things about dealing with the refugee crisis is our government’s inability to take responsibility for creating it. We bomb them, then turn them away.”³⁰⁸

It is in the final category, hot-button domestic issues, where Omar Suleiman is arguably the most vocal and active. Topics of recurring interest include gun violence, police shootings of African Americans, and the controversy surrounding the repeal of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals policy (DACA, better known as the “Dreamers act”). In March 2018, he was among a group of people arrested during a protest against plans by the Trump administration to overturn the policy.³⁰⁹ He tweeted afterwards that “hundreds of thousands of families are being ripped apart and we need to come to a permanent solution for them. Until we do, we must keep the pressure up on this racist regime. [Speaker of the House] Paul Ryan's staff didn't have the decency to even open the door yesterday. The dreamers live in fear daily for no wrongdoing of their own while these politicians treat them like a chess piece.”³¹⁰

This type of commentary and political engagement helps to distinguish Qadhi, Suleiman, and the wider al-Maghrib strain of Salafism from other forms of the movement in

America.³¹¹ While al-Maghrib and its leading figures engage in politics, they do not, teach or seek to apply activist Salafi doctrines such as *tawhid al-hakimiyya*. Jihad, while not a central concern, is something which is accepted as a doctrine and discussed as something which has many restrictions and rules which they believe Salafi jihadis are not abiding by. Like all Salafis, they reject a popular *hadith* which describes the jihad against the self and the ego (*jihad an-nafs*) as the “greater jihad” over the physical, military jihad which is described as the “lesser jihad.” This, in their view, is a *da’if* (weak) *hadith*, which is the second to last category of authenticity, ahead only of the fabricated *hadith*.³¹²

Omar Suleiman’s Yaqeen Institute published its views on jihad in April 2018, in which the author Surkheel Sharif accepts the “sound meaning” of the *hadith* for its claim that “in that the inner and outer jihad are both great and of tremendous merit” but still rejects its authenticity. The report is notable for its reliance on Ibn Taymiyya when discussing this:

Ibn Taymiyyah said about this *hadith*: “It has no basis, and none of those who are an authority (*ahl al-ma’rifah*) in the words and deeds of the Prophet (*sal’ allahu alyhi wa’salaam*) have reported it. Jihad against the disbelievers is one of the greatest of deeds; in fact, it is the best of the optional deeds a person could perform. God, exalted is He, says: ‘Not equal are those of the believers who sit [at home], other than those who have a disabling hurt, with those who strive in the cause of God with their wealth and their lives. God has conferred on those who strive with their wealth and their lives a rank above the ones who sit [at home]. To both has God promised goodness, but God has preferred those who strive over those who do not with an immense reward’” [Qur’an 4:95].³¹³

Yasir Qadhi adds another component to Suleiman’s argument by explaining jihad as the Islamic version of Western Just War Theory, mirroring similar arguments made by Tahir Wyatt. While he rejects the way that current Salafi jihadist groups employ the doctrine, he argues that it is an inescapable component of Islam and provides Muslims with a framework for legitimate, defensive violence: “What do you expect people to do when their sisters have been raped and children killed? They are going to fight back and as they gonna fight back under the term jihad. They will use this term to justify their fighting.”³¹⁴

Indisputably, Qadhi is a product of the Salafi movement in America in its previous iterations; as a teenager, he was an active participant in the QSS. Today, however, he is a vehement critic of Wahhabism, Madkhalism, and the QSS. First, unlike many of his contemporaries in the quietist strand, he disputes the link between Salafi *haraki* scholars and modern jihadism. He sees Islamist ideology, in particular the works of Qutb and Maududi, as largely irrelevant to global jihadism. Indeed, Qadhi regards the argument that Qutb's work influenced modern jihadist groups as a "right-wing," anti-Muslim view, popularized by "Islamophobes" who do not understand the complexities of Islamist thought. In a more direct line of departure from quietism, Qadhi not only views *haraki* scholarship as unrelated to the jihadist movement, but also suggests that the ideology of modern jihadism is largely drawn from the quietists themselves. He blames Wahhabism for directly encouraging the jihadist violence perpetrated by IS, and in an interview with the author, offered a blunt opinion on the links between various strands of Salafi thought and the modern jihadist movement:

I have become very anti-Wahhabi—I don't view [Muhammad] ibn Abd al-Wahhab as being a reputable scholar anymore. He caused a lot of bloodshed and damage. He killed a lot of Muslims in the name of jihad and the name of takfir. Frankly, ISIS does take a lot of its views from him—I view certain strands of ISIS as being very similar to certain strands of pure Wahhabism.³¹⁵

Discussing QSS, Qadhi says that he left the movement because he came to believe that its approach to Islam and its framework for study greatly damaged adherents. According to him, these factors turned many members into "fanatical cultists" who focused obsessively on seemingly irrelevant minutiae related to religious practice: "really technical legal issues are big deals for them—how to pray, how to dress, the length of the beard." He considers this problematic because it contributes to the creation of a small and isolated subculture in which a "focus on abstract theology at the expense of personal spirituality" can lead to a dangerous lack of personal character development. This, in his view, encouraged a sense of arrogance among some of the Salafis he knew during his early

years, many of whom mistreated fellow Muslims they deemed to be either lacking in knowledge or deviant in their beliefs.³¹⁶

Qadhi's views are further detailed in a lengthy critique of Salafism he wrote in 2014. He begins the essay, however, by praising what he sees as its positive contributions. These include its methodology based on focusing only on the primary Islamic texts and its offering of an "unadulterated universal Islam that transcends time and place."³¹⁷ However, Qadhi is critical of the movement's "extremist" positions, including its obsession with attacking other non-Salafi Muslims as deviants and heretics. Here, he singles out the Madkhalis, noting that "any recent convert from amongst them will be able to recite a list of names of scholars 'on' or 'off' the Salafi manhaj, but will be hard pressed to mention as many names of the Companions [of Muhammad]." Among his list of other criticisms includes Salafism's "severely handicapped understanding of the modern political arena." The quietist Salafi position relating to absolute and uncritical support for the rulers of states in the Middle East, specifically Saudi Arabia, is seen by Qadhi as a grave error. In his view, it is the role of the Islamic scholar to keep the state in check, and Salafis are failing to do this due to their apolitical approach. He specifically points out how Salafis have not criticized the Saudi royal family's recent policies against the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, which he describes as a "blatant injustice."³¹⁸

Qadhi's attack on the movement sent shockwaves through the most conservative cross-sections of the American Muslim community, with many Salafis surprised at his turn away from the movement. Nonetheless, it should be understood as part of an effort by modern American Salafis represented by groups like al-Maghrib to separate themselves from Salafi activities of the past. One may suggest that the al-Maghrib approach, which retains ongoing reliance on Saudi-based scholars and engagement in politics, can be aptly characterized as utilizing a *haraki* Salafi methodology. Notably, their teachings continue to exhibit clear Salafi theological influences, and they are in many ways a product of both the QSS and IANA Salafi currents in America, influenced by a range of scholars, including Salah al-Sawy and Ali al-Timimi. Nevertheless, classifying al-Maghrib as a *haraki* Salafi institute may be reductive, as it represents a uniquely American form of politically engaged Salafism which is heavily influenced by American culture and politics.

II.IV American Salafi Jihadis

While Ali al-Timimi represented one of the first American Salafi jihadist ideologues, the movement had a presence in America long before he rose to prominence. However, it was mostly the product of external influences, and lacked the indigenous, homegrown element which al-Timimi helped to create. Some of the earliest Salafi jihadi activity in America, for example, was undertaken by Abdullah Azzam. During the 1980s, Azzam toured America and gave lectures on the importance of fighting jihad against the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan and raised funds to support Afghan *mujahidin*.³¹⁹ A small number of Americans also joined Azzam and fought in Afghanistan.³²⁰ Other conflicts have also attracted Americans, including the civil war in Bosnia during the early 1990s in which at least a dozen Americans are thought to have participated.³²¹ However, these mobilizations were mostly isolated incidents rather than the result of a large radicalization and recruitment network based in the United States.

During the time of the investigation of al-Timimi, his arrest, and his trial, other American jihadi ideologues began to emerge. By far the most influential and important was the American-born Anwar al-Awlaki, who was of Yemeni origin. Like al-Timimi, al-Awlaki also emerged from the milieu of activist Salafis in America but was not as prominent in the Salafi scene. As the imam of the Muslim Brotherhood influenced Dar al-Hijrah mosque in Virginia between 2001 and 2002, al-Awlaki is regarded (particularly among other American Salafis) as more closely associated with Islamist activism than Salafism.³²² When he was a preacher in America, his lectures fused the history of Islam with modern-day events, finding relevance for the stories of Muhammad and his followers in the contemporary social and political experiences of American Muslims. After 9/11, he called on his followers to become more politically active in response to what he believed was a war on Islam being waged by America, both at home and abroad. In doing so, he often relied on the work of Islamist ideologues, including Qutb and Maududi.³²³ As the War on Terror went on, however, al-Awlaki's perception of the increasing threat Muslims faced led him to move from calling for non-violent activism to violent jihad.

After leaving America in 2002, al-Awlaki's lectures began to take on a more militant tone, culminating in his English translation and exegesis of *Constants on the Path of Jihad*. Written originally in Arabic by Yusuf al-Uyayree, the founder of al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia, al-Awlaki's English version is one of the most popular Salafi jihadi works among radicalized Americans. After fully embracing Salafi jihadism, in 2004 he moved to Yemen. By 2008, al-Awlaki officially joined al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), where he oversaw the group's outreach to Western Muslims. During his time with the group, he was also involved in plotting attacks in the West. The most notorious of these was the so-called underwear bomb plot, in which al-Awlaki trained and prepared a Nigerian national named Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab to detonate a bomb sewn in his underwear on a flight from Amsterdam to Detroit on Christmas Day in 2009. While the device failed to detonate as the plane flew over the Eastern seaboard, al-Awlaki's involvement in this and other plots made him one of the top targets of President Obama's expanded targeted killing program. He was eventually tracked down and killed by a drone strike in September 2011 while traveling through the desert of Northern Yemen.

The work of American and other English-speaking jihadi ideologues, including al-Awlaki and a Jamaican-born preacher called Abdullah al-Faisal, also inspired the creation of one of America's only formalized Salafi jihadi organizations: Revolution Muslim. Formed in New York in 2006 by two Americans named Jesse Morton and Yousef al-Khattab, it was inspired by a model of Salafi jihadi activism pioneered by a British group called al-Muhajiroun. Online, the Revolution Muslim site ran articles in support of jihad and reproduced lectures by popular English-speaking jihadi ideologues, including al-Awlaki. In the real world, its members organized provocative street rallies in support of establishing an Islamic state and fighting jihad against America and its allies. Morton has since described Revolution Muslim as America's main "radicalization hub" which was "connected to almost 20 American and British terrorists."³²⁴ The group and its wider network was eventually dismantled in 2011 by a large-scale investigation conducted by the New York Police Department.

Since al-Awlaki's death, no other Americans (or native English speakers for that matter) have quite reached his level of respect and influence. Similarly, no indigenous American

Salafi jihadi group has yet been able to effectively replace Revolution Muslim. Salafi jihadi imams have, however, continued to emerge. In America today, among the most vocal and popular are the American-born Ahmad Musa Jibril and a Libyan national named Suleiman Anwar BENGHARSA, both of whom are profiled below. Like their predecessors, they both follow Salafi theology but have also adopted key Islamist ideological precepts which influence their support for jihadist groups. It appears, however, that these individuals have also learned from the mistakes of their predecessors. Thus far, they have successfully skirted the line between vocal support for Salafi jihadist ideology and criminal activity.

Ahmad Musa Jibril

While Ahmad Musa Jibril has recently become a household name amongst both Western IS supporters and counterterrorism analysts due to his pronouncements on the Syrian conflict, his presence within the American Salafi scene dates back to the 1990s. The content of his work during this timeframe demonstrates that Jibril is a prime example of how Salafi jihadis in America are influenced by the ideology of activist Salafism, particularly the Islamist components of the movement.

Jibril was born in 1972 in Dearborn, Michigan to Palestinian parents, and split time during his childhood between the United States and Saudi Arabia.³²⁵ He eventually studied Islamic jurisprudence in Saudi Arabia and was a follower of Islamist-influenced activist Salafis, including al-Awda and al-Hawali. Despite his later popularity among Western Salafis, there is no evidence of Jibril's early involvement with any notable American Salafi organizations such as IANA and QSS. Nonetheless, during the late 1990s and early 2000s, he was an influential figure among sections of Dearborn's young Muslim community.

His first organizational connection appears to be with chapters of the Muslim Students Association (MSA) in Michigan, which hosted him on numerous occasions at local universities in the early 2000s. For all intents and purposes, Jibril was the spiritual leader of at least one MSA based at the University of Michigan-Dearborn (UM-D), and spoke

regularly at two other universities, Wayne State University (WSU) and Wachtenow Community College during this period. Yet, within the local Muslim community, many viewed Jibril as a threat. Jibril's extremist tirades (specifically, his focus on jihad and highly sectarian views on Shi'a Muslims) eventually led to him being permanently banned from at least one mosque in Detroit in 2003, while officials at the Umar bin Khattab Mosque in Brownstown, MI, where he also preached, told its members to avoid Jibril entirely.³²⁶

Like Ali al-Timimi, Jibril began by preaching a form of politicized and activist Salafism influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood's ideology, as developed by *haraki* Salafis including *Sahwa* scholars. However, unlike al-Timimi, Jibril underwent no obvious ideological transformation. He appears to have always been an open supporter of not only violent jihad, but its global iteration as opposed to al-Timimi's classical approach. From its earliest years, he preached in support of al-Qaeda. His open extremism may have been partly due to his lack of official affiliation with IANA or QSS. Free from the restraint that often comes with representing a wider national organization, he was able to express himself as freely as he liked. His more recent works, which remain popular among radicalized Western Muslims, are less explicit than the rhetoric found in his output before and immediately after 9/11. This shift is likely due to the scrutiny Jibril faced since leaving prison in 2012 and the start of the Syrian conflict.

Early Online Activities

The first known sign of Jibril's ideological influences can be found in a November 1995 fax he sent to *CNN* praising a jihadist bombing on U.S. personnel in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The text is in line with the emerging thinking and rhetoric of al-Qaeda at the time:

The first and main goal behind this first series of bombing [sic] is to kick the Jews, Christians and Infidels from the purified lands of the Arabian peninsula...A third goal is basically a mere lesson for the Saudi regime who over the decades of their oppressing leadership never thought something this big and damaging was

imaginable let alone possible, well now we can tell our government it's possible and where that came from there is much...much...more...³²⁷

It was online, however, where Jibril offered his most explicit support for global jihad. Jibril was one of the early adopters of using the Internet to spread Salafist material, including jihadist ideas, and maintained a web presence since the late 1990s. His early Internet activities, found on his website *alSalafyoon.com*, help to give further insight into his views at the time. While regularly encouraging his students to spread Islam by the sword through jihad and to hate and kill non-Muslims, Jibril also used the site to discuss the role of other activist Salafis who influenced him.

Jibril reserved special praise for his mentor Salman al-Awda, whom he referred to as “an Imam of our Time.”³²⁸ The scholar, according to Jibril, “boldly” confronted “the American presence in the Peninsula.” During this time, in fact, he was in direct contact with both al-Awda and al-Hawali. In the Arabic version of his site, Jibril reported that he hosted both men at his house in Michigan during several visits they made to the U.S. in the late 1990s:

I met/knew Sheikh Safar [al-Hawali] when he visited us. We were honored that he stayed in our home during his visit to Michigan, U.S while I was in High School. The same for Sheikh Salman al-Ouda and their heroic colleagues who have etched their heroic deeds through their actions and renewed the method of their forebearers (the Salaf)³²⁹

In the same article, while mounting a defense of al-Hawali and al-Awda against the wrath of the Saudi state for the scholars' involvement in the *Sahwa*, Jibril also praised Sheikh al-Madkhali. Despite them being ideological opponents in Saudi Arabia, it appears the Jibril found value in the work of both figures and was able to reconcile their differences in his own ideological position.

Scholars on the extreme fringes of Saudi Islamism also influenced Jibril's views on the pursuit of jihad. He frequently recommended the work of Saudi sheikh Hamud bin Uqla

al-Shuaibi, and his acolytes Nasir al-Fahd and Ali al-Khudayr, calling them the true “imams of *tawhid*.” Speaking about al-Shuaibi’s views on 9/11 in late 2001, Jibril told his followers that al-Shuaibi was a sheikh who gave “many good fatwas” including the “best fatwas for our current situation, the 9/11 situation.”³³⁰ As noted above, al-Shuaibi’s ruling that 9/11 was a justified attack on America also influenced Ali al-Timimi, who referred to the same fatwa when urging members of the Virginia Jihad Network to take up arms against America.

Jibril’s views on the legitimacy and merits of jihadist violence predate 9/11, likely owing to his association with more extreme elements of activist Salafism. Just weeks before the attacks, he posted an article entitled “The Call to Jihad in the Quran,” in which he praised violent jihad and urged Muslims to embrace its hardships. Jibril also scolded contemporary Muslims for ignoring their duties as they relate to *al-wala’ wa-l-bara’* and even suggested that many had strayed into apostasy:

So (today) they (Muslims) are leading a life of the one who knows not any Prophet, nor believes in any Divine Message or Divine Inspiration, nor expects any reckoning nor is afraid of the Hereafter....They have turned on their heels back as apostates from Islam, they have imitated them in their civilization, in their social affairs, in their political affairs, in their character and in the pleasures of their lives.³³¹

The rewards that come with fighting and dying in the cause of jihad are, in Jibril’s view, unrivalled. Even paradise is no match for martyrdom: “Nobody who dies and finds good from Allah (in the Hereafter) would wish to come back to this world...except the martyr who, on seeing the superiority of martyrdom, would like to come back to the world and get killed (in Allah's Cause).”³³²

The website also featured a poem praising Osama bin Laden and Taliban leader Mullah Omar which contained many standard Salafi jihadi themes.³³³ He bemoaned Western Muslims’ “love of life” which was preventing them from fighting to defend the *ummah* while “our women are raped and our children are butchered.” What was needed,

according to him, was a “lesson to kill by use of weapon” and “battle with joy.” The honor and dignity of Muslim women— “dignity and respect of a single Muslim woman Is most precious than all Kafir [non-Muslim] men”—is a key theme which Jibril uses to engender moral outrage among his audience with the possible intent of inspiring them to take up arms. Towards the same pursuit, Jibril uses sectarian messages, regularly referring to Shi’a Muslims as “followers of the Devils” and using the derogatory term “*rafida*” when referring to them.³³⁴ Jibril continues to successfully deploy both themes to this day in his pronouncements on the Syrian conflict.

After 9/11, many Salafis in America scrambled to distance themselves from promotions of violent jihad. However, Jibril remained defiant and made no effort to hide his views. Not only did he openly praise al-Shuaibi’s fatwa but, almost as an act of defiance, did not even seek to remove his praise of bin Laden from the site. In January 2003, he moved to a new website, *ahmadjibril.com*, although *alSalafyoon* remained online for many subsequent years. The new site continues to be maintained today, and its design and content were updated as recently as February 2018. While less explicit than what was found on *alSalafyoon*, elements of Jibril’s Salafi jihadism are still present. He avoided directly calling for jihad as he had on his old site, but does allude to it, including naming it as one of the ways of entering paradise.³³⁵ He also regularly refers to secular leaders as “*taghut*” [tyrant], a derogatory term popular among Salafi jihadis, and warns of the evils of choosing man-made law over *shari’a*. In one article he discussed *takfir*, warning that to “judge by other than *Shari’a*” was an act of disbelief that “nullified” one’s Islam and could make them an unbeliever:

The fourth cause of disbelief is to judge by other than the *Shari’a* that Allah sent down to the Prophet Muhammad. For example, those who believe that the systems and laws devised by men are better than the *Shari’a*. Likewise, believing that it is permissible to judge by other than the *Shari’a*.... Another example [of disbelief] is that Islam should be restricted to the private relationship between an individual and His Lord without entering into the other aspects of life.³³⁶

While figures like Ali al-Timimi received much more attention from the authorities and were convicted on terrorism offenses, few were as publicly explicit either in their support for jihad or their belief in *tawhid al-hakimiyya* as Jibril. His early views on these topics help us to categorize him in the spectrum of Salafis operating in America at the time. Despite beginning his career as a preacher with clear Salafi jihadi views, he also praised *Sahwa* scholars like al-Awda and al-Hawali and even quietists like Madkhali, avoiding the kind of stinging critique one would expect from a Salafi jihadi. This may be both due to his respect for the knowledge of such figures after spending time in Saudi Arabia, and because he was able to develop an outlook which accommodated teachings from each of these differing strands of the movement.

Jibril and the MSA

The earliest versions of Jibril's second website also document his activities and lectures during the early 2000s in and around the Dearborn, Michigan area. According to a schedule provided on the site, he gave weekly classes on either *tafsir* (Quranic exegesis), *fiqh*, or *tajwid* (Quranic Arabic) at WSU, UM-D, Washtenaw Community College, the Canton Mosque and his private family residence in Dearborn.³³⁷ Beginning in August 2003, Jibril also ran a Yahoo! message board where many of his students and acolytes interacted with the sheikh and one another. The main message board, "AhmedJibril-IslamClasses," was linked to his new website and had 485 members; most were students of his or his father Musa Jibril, who was also preaching in the area during that time.³³⁸ Many of the messages on the Yahoo! platform were advertisements for Jibril's upcoming appearances on the campuses he frequented, some sent from people signing off as senior members of their university's Muslim Students Association (MSA) chapter.³³⁹

According to posts on the group, during the early 2000s MSAs at both UM-D and WSU were heavily involved with Jibril. On its old website, the MSA based at UM-D lists some of the lectures and sermons he gave at their events on campus, complete with download links to the audio recordings.³⁴⁰ Alongside Jibril, the MSA also recommended a host of other Salafi preachers noted in this study, including Ali al-Timimi. Based on this, it is likely that the local MSA leadership at the time was taking its ideological line from the

American activist Salafis who would later become some of the most notorious supporters of jihad in the country.

These influences within the UM-D MSA are also documented by Geneieve Abdo, who found in her research that until 2004, “radical students had turned the MSA into a...training camp for conservative ideologues.” She claims that on many college campuses, MSA spiritual leaders and imams comprised a mixture of activist Salafis like Jibril, and revolutionary Islamists from Hizb ut-Tahrir. Abdo recounts how on the UM-D campus, an imam, thought to be Jibril, taught students that “their fellow Muslims were straying dangerously from their faith.” Among the views prevalent within this MSA at the time were that Muslims “should have little to do with Jews and Christians,” should pressure the U.S. government to change its foreign policy in the Middle East, and ensure that Muslim women were covered.³⁴¹ Abdo also found that in 2004, a new president at the UM-D MSA “revolutionized” the organization, removing extremist influences and accepting a wider array of Muslim students beyond the Jibril cohort.

In other messages on Jibril’s Yahoo! page, members advertise a private address in Dearborn as the location where Jibril would preside over study circles, or *halaqat*, with his closest followers. This is the same address which Jibril cites as his family home on his website when listing the weekly classes he held there. Considering the content of Jibril’s websites, it is especially concerning that he had unfettered access to young American Muslims and the support of the MSA at both UM-D and WSU during a substantial period of time. In one thread, which reproduced an email sent from the WSU MSA chapter giving details of a *halaqa* at the Jibril home, an MSA member expressed concern that these were taking place outside of the more controlled setting of a mosque: “Why do you have to go to the Sheik’s house instead of the mosque. I persanally [sic] always thought that mosques were for such things, not people’s houses.” To which the member received a prompt rebuke from one of the most active Jibril supporters on the message board:

Your comments are very uncalled for. Obviously you have never attended either Shiekh Ahmad [Jibril’s father] nor Shiekh Musa’s classes. A student of knowledge seeks knowledge everywhere and anywhere. Learn from your prior generations

who are more pious than us....Check your Islamic history and you will find that they studied religion in various places not just a masjid. May Allah reward Shiekh Musa and Shiekh Ahmad for opening their house to students of knowledge and May Allah guide you. ³⁴²

Known among his followers and friends in Dearborn as “AJ,” Jibril also posted about social gatherings and other occasions involving his students. In his first post, in August 2003, he asked who would like to join him on a boat trip:

were going on a boat this morning (Wed. 8-13-2003) with Abdelrazzak(Adel's brother) as our captain there is room for one or two more brothers,,,,
Call me asap if your interested in going.....
(IF more brother call than we can take priority is for those consistant in coming to our halakas) :)³⁴³

In another message he speaks fondly of presiding over the wedding of two of his followers and even joked about how the brother of the groom (whom he warmly refers to as “Chimpo”), “told him moments before I performed the *nikah* [marriage rites] if he wants to escape there is window behind him.”³⁴⁴ This is one of at least two weddings he writes about in the message board, suggesting that he was carrying out a variety of pastoral duties for the community during this period that went beyond just preaching and lecturing.

His jovial tone and use of first names and nicknames paint a picture of a closely-knit circle of friends which Jibril was at the center of as a spiritual leader and mentor. He would provide his personal mobile phone number in most of his messages, and followers regularly consulted him on issues and questions they had related to Islam. During one particularly busy period for him in August 2003, he posted an apology for not being as easily accessible as he usually was:

*I know PLENTY of brothers and sisters are mad that i'm not good in responding to email and phone calls,,,

PLEASE FORGIVE ME!!!!

It's not personal,, inshallah during this week and after it i will be catching up on calls and emails,,,

I WILL BE ANSWERING MY PHONE inshallah everynight from 9:30pm to 2am for any questions, and concernns.

Please leave a message if i do no respond because I may be speaking to someone else...³⁴⁵

Jibril was regarded by those who interacted with him as a legitimate Islamic authority, and they came to him with a variety of questions. He would also be on hand to answer numerous queries via email, especially during Ramadan, where he dealt with various issues relating to how to pray and how to ensure one keeps their fast pure.³⁴⁶ Questions came in from visitors to his site and members of the Yahoo! group from around the country. Often, these focused on the tiny minutiae of worship. One particularly fastidious follower asked if, during his fasting for Ramadan, “will it break my fast if I use my fingers to clean the bacteria from the back of my tongue (deep inside the throat) which cause bad breath?”³⁴⁷

Other postings from Jibril on the forum included longer articles focusing on issues of creed and politics, including one essay on the grandson of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, in which Jibril refers to al-Wahhab as the “reviver of Islam.” The article is also critical of the current Saudi leadership, using arguments that were in line with the activist Salafi movement from which he was drawing ideological succor. The vision of al-Wahhab was lost, in his view, under “the so-called al-Sauod” regime which “became enslaved by British and Western foreign policies.”³⁴⁸ The final sentences of the article employ an aggressive tone, which Jibril usually avoided on the message boards, serving as a reminder of his most extreme pronouncements on the *alSalafyoon* site:

O Allah, You alone we worship and to You we pray and prostrate, for your sake we strive. We hope for your mercy and fear your punishment, for your punishment

will certainly reach the disbelievers. O Allah, punish those who are preventing others from following and spreading your way.

Jibril's other forays into politics on the forum included a furious commentary on the 2004 Israeli assassination of the former Hamas leader Ahmed Yassin.³⁴⁹ Describing Israel as "the killers of the messengers," he told his followers that "for those who are MUSLIMS! And are concerned with the situation of our brothers, sisters and mothers overseas they know this happens there on a daily basis."

Shortly before his 2004 trial, during a period where Jibril was subject to a wide-reaching federal investigation, he posted an article about the imprisonment of Ibn Taymiyya during the early 14th century.³⁵⁰ While he does not explicitly refer to his own circumstances, this is unlikely to be a coincidence, and may be an attempt to present himself, like Ibn Taymiyya, as a victim of powers intent on stifling his efforts to spread Islam in its purest form. Near the end he writes that "legends" like Ibn Taymiyya "live on forever," while "savage...informants [and] sellouts...die out fast." Jibril's final post on the message board was in November 2004, and soon after he was arrested and imprisoned. His students continued to be active on the message board for some time, using it to spread his works and asking for members to pray for him and his family.³⁵¹

Conviction and Imprisonment

Between 2005 and 2012, Jibril was incarcerated in the Communication Management Unit (CMU) at the Federal Correctional Complex in Terre Haute, Indiana after being convicted alongside his father on a litany of charges. None were terrorism or extremism-related, but a jury found both men guilty of bank fraud, mail fraud, social security fraud, money laundering, possession of firearms (3 shotguns) and ammunition by a felon, and failure to pay income taxes.³⁵² According to a supplemental sentencing memorandum from the case, the father-son duo were found to have been "systematically destroying their rental properties for the insurance proceeds, and bullying and threatening tenants in the process."³⁵³

While these convictions were unrelated to terrorism, during the sentencing phase of his trial, the government presented evidence that Jibril was an extremist to support its arguments for him to receive the maximum penalties. As part of this argument, the memorandum cited materials from Jibril's original website, *alSalafyoon.com*, and also drew attention to a family photo album found during the search of a Jibril family property. The album included photos of Jibril as a teenager dressed as what the government describes as a "holy warrior"; photos of very young children brandishing apparently real firearms, "playing" at holding each other hostage and aiming the weapons at each other's heads.³⁵⁴ Additionally, the memorandum noted that several pro-Hamas images were displayed in the house, included a framed emblem depicting the Star of David pierced by a bloody fist brandishing an AK-47 assault rifle.³⁵⁵

During Jibril's time in prison, his students from the Dearborn area continued to maintain his website. The sheikh also contributed from behind bars, sending articles to his followers who later posted the material on his behalf. In one piece, Jibril praised Abduwali Muse, a Somali pirate and the sole survivor of the gang of pirates who hijacked the *Maersk Alabama* off the coast of Somalia in April 2009. Muse was also an inmate at Terre Haute, and Jibril wrote that he was allowed to visit him, even though Muse was being held in solitary confinement. Jibril also wrote that he spoke "on behalf of the Muslims" in the prison when he asked the authorities to place Muse in the general population, which he claims that "they gladly did."³⁵⁶

While in prison, Jibril wielded considerable influence as the unofficial spokesman for the Muslim prisoners of FCC Terre Haute. One article on Jibril's site is purportedly a letter from a prisoner who was held with him in Indiana. The prisoner praised Jibril's leadership qualities and backed the claim that he was influential among Muslim prisoners, even referring to him as their "emir":

Prior to his arrival we had many internal problems. Muslims with each other, Muslims with non-Muslims and Muslims with staff. The problems among the Muslims themselves stem from the diversity of the brothers here; we have modernists, we have nationalists who fought with the PLO in the 80's, we have

Salafis, we have *Ikhwan* [Muslim Brotherhood], we have very young brothers....As soon as this blessed Shaykh arrived we all saw in his apparent *taqwa* [piety] vast amount of knowledge, charisma and personality; a man who would change our situation. The Muslims here for the first time since the CMU opened and I was among the first to come to this unit when it opened all agreed by consensus for the first time that he should be our Amir days after he arrived.³⁵⁷

The prisoner apparently respected Jibril due to both his training as an Islamic scholar in Saudi Arabia and his legal knowledge. The latter came in especially handy, according to the prisoner's letter: "He is also a graduate of Law from Michigan so he knows how to deal with the staff and their intrusions upon our rights!! I'm not sure if it's respect or fear (I lean more to the latter) but he is running this unit by the blessing of Allah." Similar to how he operated in Michigan, he held daily *halaqat* with prisoners during which they studied *fiqh*, *sira* [prophetic biography], *aqida* and *tajwid*.

Among the most interesting claims in the letter is that he was close with John Walker Lindh, who is serving a 20-year sentence in FCC Terre Haute for fighting alongside the Taliban in Afghanistan. According to the inmate, Lindh was mostly a recluse before Jibril's arrival and did not participate in religious activities with other Muslim inmates. Since Jibril began to gain influence, however, Lindh would attend his *halaqat* and "Jibreel loves him more than us... we are jealous [of] Shaykh Ahmad's love for him."³⁵⁸ If the claims made by Jibril and in the inmate's letter are true, it is extraordinary and concerning—that Jibril had this level of influence within the prison. However, it is also not surprising—his charisma and apparent Islamic knowledge and oratory skills could easily have won over Muslim prisoners as they had the young members of the MSAs in Michigan.

Current Activities

Since his release from prison in 2012, Jibril has become one of the most popular Salafi preachers among Western IS supporters. Based on an analysis of over 845,646 tweets from 1,782 English-language pro-IS accounts, Ahmad Musa Jibril is the most frequently named religious figure. Drawing reference in 1,696 tweets, Jibril received more attention

than IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (1,489), Abu Muhammad al-Adnani (1,079), Anwar al-Awlaki (802), and Osama bin Laden (384).³⁵⁹ It is difficult to determine precisely why he reached this level of popularity—despite being so active during the first half of the last decade both in Michigan and online, his appeal at the time was still limited and he was a relatively unknown figure when he was jailed in 2005.

One likely reason is that he continued to spread his teachings online, this time with the help of social media. A 2014 study of online networks of Western foreign fighters, for example, found that Jibril's account on Facebook was the most-liked by Western IS fighters and that Jibril was also the “most influential” religious figure on Twitter for the same population.³⁶⁰

Most of Jibril's post-incarceration lectures are available on his YouTube page.³⁶¹ However, he now presents a calmer exterior and avoids the explicit support for violence found on his old static websites. His lectures cover more traditional Salafi themes such as in-depth discussions about *tawhid* and other matters related to worship. However, some of this content betrays his previous views, containing regular expressions of support for overturning secular states and establishing Islamic law, while encouraging hatred of non-Muslims and other Muslim sects.

In one lecture, “The Only Path to Victory,” given via Skype to an audience at a mosque in Kenya with links to al-Shabaab³⁶², Jibril preached the importance of implementing *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* and showing love for Muslims while hating non-Muslims and avoiding any engagement with them, or any of their practices and traditions:

our religion was sent to be supreme not equal and we must be different than other faiths...just hours ago, masses of the *ummah* were joining with the *kuffar* in their New Year's celebration...whoever imitates a group will be amongst them.³⁶³

Jibril elaborated further, suggesting that praying for dead non-Muslims is prohibited and leads to corruption:

deficiencies in *tawhid* surface when *kuffar* die...and the emotions override the principles making the prohibited prayers [for non-Muslims] permissible...the worst Muslim dying anywhere in the world is more worthy of mourning and attention than the best *kaffir* no matter how big and good they think he is.³⁶⁴

Continuing his criticism of Western Muslims who take on the values of their nations, he bemoaned the “catastrophe” of “downplaying the *shari’a*” and supporting democracy over the law of God by “saying that the rule of the majority should rule.”³⁶⁵ He even pronounced *takfir* on them, claiming that “those who follow other than what Allah legislated are *mushriqin* [idol worshippers].” In order for Muslims to be “victorious,” they had to fulfill the “simple condition” of *tawhid al-hakimiyya* which “reforms...civilizes...[and] humanizes.” This is a recurring theme in many of Jibril’s other sermons. American Muslims, he believes, are putting their faith at great risk through committing acts of *shirk* and *kufr* by accepting and involving themselves in man-made systems of law.³⁶⁶ For Jibril, “no ideology, no law, no system of governance that can be even compared to the laws given to us by Allah.”³⁶⁷

While it only comprises a fraction of his overall output, Jibril is most well-known for his pronouncements on the ongoing war in Syria. He does not openly exhort followers to travel there in order to join jihadist groups and take part in the conflict, but when analyzed in their totality, it is possible to understand why he is an important figure in the radicalization of Western Muslims. In his most popular lecture on the topic, “Syria in our hearts,” Jibril discussed the crimes committed against Sunni Muslims in the country by both the Syrian Alawi soldiers and Shi’a militias, while criticizing his audience for doing nothing about it. Similar to previous pronouncements in support of jihad, Jibril focused on crimes committed against the honor and dignity of Muslim women: “They entered a house full of females, they raped every single one of them...the *rafida* [derogatory and sectarian term for a Shi’a Muslim] gang-raped your sisters in Syria.... if our women, our honor, are being raped and you don’t get mad then our faith is at stake.”³⁶⁸ Muslims must act now as, “their [Syrian Sunnis] honor is your honor, their blood is your blood, their soul is your soul” and yet “we eat while our brothers are hungry...we laugh while they cry.”³⁶⁹

The United States, Jibril often reminds his audience, stands by and does nothing as this slaughter takes place. This is not, in Jibril's view, due to any complex foreign policy concerns but rather because they "are perverted in their nature when it comes to Sunni Muslim blood, they are waiting for the maximum amount of deaths to pleasure and delight their hearts."³⁷⁰ Jibril suggests to followers that they should make *hijra* (migrate from non-Muslim lands) as a result of America's secular laws. In his view, if they are not allowed to "believe in Allah and reject the *taghut* [secular leaders]," then they must seek out where they can travel in order to live under Islamic law.³⁷¹

This type of inflammatory rhetoric is common in Jibril's commentary on the Syrian conflict. It is designed to shock, shame, and enrage his audience with the hope that this will spur them on to join IS, a group they see as fighting to defend the honor of Muslims in Syria. His vitriolic attacks on Shi'a and Alawi Muslims, support for *tawhid al-hakimiyya* and calls to make *hijra* to lands governed by Islamic law, combined with his previous support for jihad, leaves his audience to conclude that IS the only legitimate force operating in Syria. This line of argument, along with his American-accented English and obvious charisma and oratory skills helps to explain why he is so popular among Western IS supporters.

Evidence of the role of Jibril's videos in encouraging participation in Salafi jihadist groups, even if they do not directly call for violence, is found in cases of Americans and other Westerners joining or acting on behalf of IS. Most recently, it was reported that Jibril's sermons influenced Khurram Butt, who, along with two accomplices, carried out the June 2017 attack on London Bridge and the nearby Borough Market in South London, killing eight and injuring 48.³⁷² The extent of how Jibril's work specifically influenced Butt is unclear, and it is likely he was one of multiple likeminded preachers whose work Butt had followed. However, the fact that Butt, a long-time member of the UK Salafi jihadist group al-Muhajiroun, was drawn to the highly politicized and inflammatory Salafist rhetoric of Jibril is no surprise. Butt had already been prevented from travelling to join IS by his family, and Jibril's strong pronouncements on the conflict which was

couched in religious and sectarian rhetoric would likely have helped bolster his already pre-existing views about jihad and the establishment of *shari'a* law.

In addition to the recent cases overseas, Jibril also reportedly influenced several individuals arrested on terrorism charges in the United States. In a case from 2016, FBI officials named Ahmad Musa Jibril as an “ISIL supporter and Salafi shaykh from Michigan” in connection to videos of some of Jibril’s lectures available on YouTube shared between the case’s co-conspirators in Maryland and the UK respectively.³⁷³ Jibril’s lectures have also come up in two cases in Michigan, involving one individual who discussed “shooting up” a church and another who purchased a large arsenal of firearms and explosives, allegedly to use in an attack.³⁷⁴ In all three cases, Jibril was not in direct contact with the individuals in question, although they accessed videos of his lectures.

It is notable, however, that there is no record or evidence of Jibril directly calling for domestic terrorist attacks in the West. Since his calls to jihad in the late 1990s and early 2000s on his old website, he has avoided making explicit statements in support of any terrorist group after re-emerging in 2012. Yet, it is his latest work, found in his Twitter messages and YouTube videos, that had the clearest impact. His presence on mainstream platforms like YouTube also assists Jibril in cultivating an image of a popular and legitimate figure whose pronouncements on Islam carry genuine scholarly weight. His followers, who come across sermons of Jibril’s during solo online research and in conversations with other supporters of Salafi jihadism, are diverted from information regarding Jibril’s past (including his extensive criminal record, ostracization from the Muslim community in Dearborn, and relative lack of formal Muslim education) and directed to a figure who appears far more credible online than his offline persona would suggest. In this fashion, Jibril magnifies his own legitimacy amongst his followers and remains one of the most influential English-speaking Salafi jihadist ideologues on the Internet.

As a result of his views, Jibril has for many years been criticized and attacked by American quietist Madkhali Salafis for what they view as his following of “Qutbiyyah” and “Sururiyyah.” On one popular Salafi forum, *Salafitalk*, one of the most comprehensive of

such refutations can be found. It follows the typical Madkhali style—it is lengthy, draws upon Sheikh al-Madkhali’s pronouncements and contains great suspicion of any discussion of overthrowing rulers. It was written in the hope of reaching “the brothers of Michigan who hold him up as a person of knowledge” and correcting their deviancy. The criticism is based on the more extreme elements of Jibril’s output discussed above.

According to the author, among the signs of Jibril straying into the path of the Qutbis and Sururis is that he is “Declaring the Saudi government to be a government of Kufr” and made “Takfeer of Muslim Rulers widely and generally.” The article also told readers not to overlook Jibril’s admiration for Hamud bin Uqla al-Shuaibi, whose pronouncements on 9/11 and general rebellion against the Saudi state is seen by purists as tantamount to heresy. The author warned American Muslims that despite Jibril’s skills, including “his recitation of the Qur’aan, the length of his standing in prayer...his constant fasting...his good and excellent words in knowledge,” Muslims should not be deceived by his “way and methodology...of the Khawaarij.”³⁷⁵

While they are critical of Jibril, there are aspects of his teachings that quietists do support, hence the comment about his “excellent words in knowledge.” Indeed, other than his reminders of the importance of establishing God’s law, many of Jibril’s other pronouncements differ little from what quietists also teach. On *al-wala’ wa-l-bara’*, he is clear about its centrality in preserving Islamic identity in the face of Western secular culture, something that any category of Salafi would agree with. He notes how, as Muhammad Adly had also mentioned to the author, some Salafis avoid the topic due to the controversy surrounding it. Nonetheless, he argued that “why are people afraid of *wala’* and *bara’*? It has no violence in it—*wala’* and *bara’* is to maintain your identity.”³⁷⁶ American culture and values are a dangerous influence that too many “lowlife deluded modernist sheikhs” are allowing to creep into their faith and be taught to their followers. The celebrated American “melting pot,” according to him, swallowed up and stained the purity of Islam through trying to integrate it into American culture and values. Again, similar to Salafis of any stripe, Jibril regards prayer and learning of *tawhid* as “making the immune system strong” against Western influences.³⁷⁷

Like other Salafis, Jibril is also very suspicious and critical of the concept of interfaith dialogue, referring to it as “interfaith ideology” which is “a principle of kufr.” The “idiots, corrupt and ignorant” Muslims who take part in this are not following prescriptions of *al-wala’ wa-l-bara’* to separate Islam and Muslims from other beliefs. These people are “working day and night to strip one of his religion.”³⁷⁸ Again, this is language that is indistinguishable from standard conservative Salafist thought, and would not be considered as extreme by any shade of Salafi. Take, for example, the words of quietist American Salafi Abu Yusuf Khaleefah, imam of the Madkhali-influenced Masjid Nurullah in Queens, when discussing interfaith dialogue, specifically an interfaith Christmas service in New York that involved an imam:

Allah is not pleased with Christianity and Allah is not pleased with Judaism...we must refute those who engage in interfaith dialogues...it is a call of *kufr*...we are never to unite with the Jews and the Christians...they are upon *shirk*...they are upon *kufr*...Allah does not forgive those who are partners and associate with them. How can an imam...speak about how people of different religions can come together? This man is upon deviation as are those who are with him and support him...what is the purpose of getting to know the Jew or the Christian? These people are compromising the *deen*.’³⁷⁹

This overlap among different types of Salafi, or what Olidort refers to as a “shared DNA,” partially helps to explain the appeal of jihadists like Jibril. The majority of his work is largely indistinguishable from that of other Salafis, and he even shows respect and reverence for Sheikh al-Madkhali despite his deep opposition to pro-regime Saudi scholars. This allows him to present a veneer of religious authenticity, similar to other Salafis, which he can then exploit by injecting political messages and arguing that violent action is the only legitimate way to achieve the goals of the Salafi movement. Like Ali al-Timimi, his views on jihad can be understood as a product of the teachings of leading activist and jihadi Salafis in Saudi Arabia, some of whom (such as al-Hawali) appear to have been close family friends.

Suleiman Anwar Bengharsa

While Ahmad Musa Jibril may be the most vocal Salafi jihadi preacher currently operating in the United States, a Maryland-based imam named Suleiman Anwar Bengharsa is one of the only others openly preaching in America today. Previously a prison chaplain in the Maryland area between 2006 and 2009, he later became an imam at the Maasjid al-Umar in Woodlawn, MD and at the Islamic Society of Annapolis, while also touring other Islamic centers in America and Canada as a preacher.³⁸⁰ According to a biography on his now defunct Facebook page, he trained in the “fundamentals of the Islamic faith” at Egypt’s al-Azhar University. In addition, he claims to have received a master’s degree in Islamic Jurisprudence and Law from Sana’a University in Yemen, and a master’s degree in comparative Islamic jurisprudence (comparative schools of thought) from the International Islamic University in Islamabad, Pakistan.

Bengharsa briefly attracted the attention of national media after being linked to two IS-related terrorism trials, but he does not appear to have a significant following. His YouTube videos rarely attract over a thousand views, paling in comparison to the popularity of figures like Jibril and al-Awlaki on the platform. Instead of the online video and audio content preferred by the titans of America’s Salafi jihadist scene, Bengharsa defaults to other methods to reach his audience. In June 2015, he established the Islamic Jurisprudence Center (IJC).³⁸¹ Advertising it as “Your Islamic Jurisprudence Center,” Bengharsa styled the center as a dispensary of Islamic rulings on all issues related to practicing Islam in America and implementing *shari’a* law. It appears to operate primarily as an online resource, with no physical location beyond a post box in Clarksburg, Maryland which serves as the center’s address in official filings. Likely due to media and FBI scrutiny, the website was taken down, though it is unclear if Bengharsa chose to do this voluntarily.³⁸²

Bengharsa used the site as a platform to promote himself as a scholar and advisor on a variety of *shari’a*-related issues. While it was still operating, the front page of the IJC website described it as “an independent Islamic law resource center for Muslims living in

predominantly non-Muslim societies.” Its stated mission was to “promote and advance the understanding of and compliance with Islamic law (*Sharia*) in all facets of life.”

In one section of the site, “Islamic Business Practices Consulting,” readers are told that Bengharsa can assist companies seeking to “attain the most Sharia-compliant process, product or service.” On another page, he posed as a *shari’a* judge, offering non-legally binding *shari’a* judgements in which “IJC provides Islamic dispute resolution and mediation services to those who wish to avoid the secular court system.” He also opined on civil issues related to Muslims in America, encouraging his readers to ensure that their lives are lived in compliance with *shari’a*, as opposed to Western values. Writing about Muslim marriage, he complained that “Muslims are failing miserably and much quicker than the kuffar in their marriages because they are following the Western-oriented idea or model of marriage.” While Western culture, Bengharsa argues, focuses on the importance of love, Muslim must avoid “basing their entire marriage on this illusive, Western and romantic idea called love, which obviously does not work. If it worked, the kuffar would not have such a high rate of divorce.”³⁸³

Much of the commentary on the site therefore does little to distinguish him from wider Salafi thought. Like any other Salafi living in the West, he writes of the importance of living a *shari’a*-compliant life in the West and criticizes Western secular and liberal culture, seeing it as a damaging influence of Western Muslim piety. He, like all American Salafis, is also weary of participation in interfaith initiatives as they assume that all religions are equal, thus undermining the superiority of Islam above all other faiths.

However, like the other politically oriented Salafis profiled in this study, Bengharsa distinguishes himself from other Salafi trends in America in his views on the urgency of establishing an Islamic state along with a focus on *takfir*. The IJC site’s introductory statement also makes no secret of Bengharsa’s ideological leanings, stating that “IJC management firmly believes and propagates that Islamic law (*Sharia*) is divine law, and therefore, incomparably and supremely superior to man-made laws.”

This is a theme that characterizes much of the output on the rest of the site. One of the services provided by IJC were fatwas penned by Bengharsa directed specifically at Muslims living in the West. One injunction, entitled “Believing/Participating in Secular/Non-Islamic System of Governance,” pronounces *takfir* on Muslims who reject *tawhid al-hakimiyya*: “whosoever willingly believes in and/or participates in any secular or religious system of governance (other than Islam), including democracy, is a kafer (disbeliever).” Bengharsa also declared *takfir* on Muslims in the West who are in any way involved, either personally or professionally, in secular democratic activities or groups. Even if a Muslim was to carry out all of their other religious duties such as prayer and fasting, these acts would be rendered “invalid” if they accept man-made law. He placed this at the very top of the list of requirements, above any of the accepted five pillars of Islam, arguing that “a person’s...Islam can only be valid after his/her rejection of *taghut* (an individual, group or system which calls to other than the obedience to Allah and following of His system of life).” Instead, Muslims must work toward and support “the Islamic system of governance.”

Bengharsa’s use of the term “*taghut*” to refer to modern secular forms of government and political leadership helps to further place him within the spectrum of Salafis who have adopted core Islamist concepts. *Takfir* focused not on wider aspects of belief or practices, such as that which is pronounced by Salafis on Sufism and Shi’a Muslims, but on the view towards support for secular governance and *tawhid al-hakimiyya* places Bengharsa very close to, if not firmly within, the Salafi jihadi category.

Bengharsa’s apparent support for the establishment of an Islamic state and the importance of Muslims joining it precedes both the founding of the IJC and the rise of IS. During a Salafi gathering in Canada in 2010, he told his audience that once an Islamic emirate or the Caliphate is established, “you need to pack your bags and go home.” He also spoke in favorable terms about the Taliban, suggesting that more Muslims should have traveled to the “emirate” that was established before it was toppled by the United States in response to 9/11.³⁸⁴

A related fatwa on the IJC site warned against following “evil” scholars who do not teach the importance of *tawhid al-hakimiyya* and instead rely on “logic and/or the reality that we live in” when giving advice or Islamic rulings. These scholars are, in his view, often puppets of the state whose teachings go against the interests of pure Islam. Bengharsa declared that any Islamic scholar in America who is not opposed to the government “cannot be trusted.”

As part of his attack on “puppet” scholars, he also provided a shortlist of who he believed to be the worst offenders. This included well-known American sheikhs including Yasir Qadhi, along with Saudi scholars regarded by Salafi jihadis and other politically oriented Salafis as beholden to the Saudi government. These include the most respected sheikhs of the quietist Salafi movement, Sheikhs al-Fawzan and al-Madkhali, along with Abdul-Aziz ibn Abdullah Al ash-Sheikh, the current Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia.

Along with attacking their sheikhs, Bengharsa is specifically critical of the Madkhali/QSS strand of American Salafism. Referring to them as “pseudo-imams,” he attacks them for “blindly” following the Saudi government, which he regards as having abandoned the principles of true Islamic governance. Due to their unwavering devotion to the rulings and teachings of the Saudi sheikhs, Bengharsa sees them as functioning “more like a cult” than a true Islamic movement.

However, Bengharsa shares with the Madkhalis a strong dislike for politically-oriented Islamic groups such as MAS, MSA, and the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), although the nature of his critique is markedly different. Instead of attacking them for polluting belief with politics, he sees them as compromising core *aqida* in order to gain political and social influence in America. In particular, he derided their role in encouraging Muslims to take part in the political process in the United States, an act he strictly forbids. The uncompromising and rigid approach outlined by Bengharsa is in stark contrast with the pragmatism of politically aligned Muslim organizations who are willing to work within the democratic system to effect change, something that Salafi jihadists expressly reject.

While the IJC site is now down, Bengharsa's online presence remains through his new personal website, *suleimananwar.com*, created in 2017. It contains similar fatwas to those analyzed above but modified slightly to be less explicitly jihadi. Despite his more openly political and *takfiri* outlook, Bengharsa has some degree of connection to the more quietist Muhammad Adly, who is profiled earlier in this report. His current website states that his latest publications, screeds dedicated to minor issues of *fiqh*, were published in 2017 by Adly's own in-house *Adly Publications*, based in South Carolina.³⁸⁵

Alleged Terror Links

Despite not being convicted of any terrorism offenses, Bengharsa's name appeared in connection with at least two IS-related cases in the United States. His views about establishing an Islamic state and excommunicating Muslims who reject *tawhid al-hakimiyya* may have influenced his decision to become, according to the FBI, an "an avid ISIL supporter and disseminator of ISIL propaganda."³⁸⁶ FBI agents arrived at this assessment of Bengharsa during an investigation of American IS sympathizer Sebastian Gregerson, in which they discovered links between Gregerson and Bengharsa.³⁸⁷

In May 2017, Gregerson pled guilty to unregistered possession of explosives as part of a plea agreement with federal prosecutors. He purchased the explosives, including several fragmentation grenades, from an undercover FBI agent in Monroe, Michigan in July 2016 during a year-long investigation. The FBI immediately arrested Gregerson following the transaction.³⁸⁸

Gregerson came to the attention of the FBI after an anonymous tip to its Detroit office from a local Muslim who became concerned about his pro-IS statements, including an apparent desire to move to IS territory with his family. While Gregerson did not plan a specific attack in the United States, he amassed a large arsenal of weapons and ammunition while regularly expressing support for IS terrorist attacks in the West. He was, according to prosecutors, taking "extensive steps to carry out a central ISIS directive" by preparing himself "for battle in the ongoing war with their 'enemies'."³⁸⁹ Upon his

arrest, authorities uncovered ten firearms, a grenade launcher, an assortment of knives and almost 8,000 rounds of ammunition.³⁹⁰

Investigations into his online activity found that, using the alias Abdurrahman Bin Mikaayl, Gregerson used Facebook to consume and disseminate IS propaganda, including a post supporting the 2015 Paris attacks as a legitimate act of war against the enemies of Islam. An avid reader of the group's English language magazine *Dabiq*, he was also found in possession of 96 CDs containing a collection of lectures by Anwar al-Awlaki.³⁹¹ Gregerson also regularly expressed support for IS terror attacks to an FBI undercover employee who befriended him, often referring to IS attackers as "brothers" fighting "jihad in the cause of Allah."³⁹²

While looking into Gregerson's past, investigators also found a long-standing connection with Bengharsa, whom they suspect was involved in his radicalization. The two first met when Gregerson attended an unnamed mosque in Maryland (likely the Masjid al-Umar) where Bengharsa was the imam. After moving to Michigan in 2014, he stayed in touch with the preacher via phone and email, sometimes sending him messages expressing support for IS attacks. According to a search warrant related to the Gregerson case, the FBI was investigating Bengharsa in 2015 for possible conspiracy to provide "material support or resources to ISIL."³⁹³

Part of the investigation involved a search of Bengharsa's Facebook activities. His posts included links to various IS videos, including one entitled "Capture and Slaughter of a Savafid [reference to an Iraqi Army] Soldier" which depicted the throat cutting of an Iraqi soldier. While posting links, Bengharsa sometimes augmented the content with his own commentary. On one occasion, along with posting a news article entitled "Islamic State terror group kills Iraq army chief with bulldozer packed with explosives," he commented favorably, exclaiming "Allahu Akbar!! [God is great]"³⁹⁴

One of the most damning claims from Gregerson's trial relates to funds that he allegedly received from Bengharsa. Shortly after a phone call between Gregerson and Bengharsa on June 23, 2015, the preacher wrote a check made out to Gregerson for \$1,300 which,

according to the memo line, was for *zakat*, or charitable giving.³⁹⁵ This was not the only time Gregerson received money from Bengharsa. A year later, in June 2016, Gregerson deposited a \$1,200 check from Bengharsa, also made out for *zakat*.³⁹⁶ Shortly after receiving each check, Gregerson used the money to purchase a variety of the weapons he was later found to be in possession of, including a rifle and handgun. Bengharsa had more than enough cash to provide after receiving a dozen wire transfers into his account between 2014 and 2015 totaling over \$900,000.³⁹⁷ Based on their shared support for IS, the checks sent to Gregerson that he used to buy weapons and the regular contact between the two, the FBI concluded that “there is reason to believe that Bengharsa and Gregerson are engaged in discussions and preparations for some violent act on behalf of ISIL.”³⁹⁸

Gregerson’s trial documents also connect him with another IS-related case in Maryland, that of Yusuf Wehelie. In July 2017, he was convicted of being a felon in possession of a firearm and sentenced to 120 months in prison. While sentencing guidelines for this offense range from 33 to 41 months, Wehelie received a higher sentence because the judge determined that he was a danger to the public after investigations revealed his professed support for IS. While in contact with an undercover agent, Wehelie mentioned a desire to either travel to IS territory or plan an attack on a U.S. military recruitment station.³⁹⁹ According to media reports, investigators also explored contacts between Wehelie and Bengharsa.⁴⁰⁰

Despite his relatively low profile among American Salafis, Bengharsa had an influence on at least two American jihadis who reached out to him on the basis of their belief that he is a legitimate Islamic scholar. Similar to Jibril, while Bengharsa holds openly Salafi jihadi views, he has not been found guilty of breaking any U.S. terrorism laws and is protected by the First Amendment. This ability to preach support for jihadist groups that is often couched in heavily coded, conservative religious language ensures that the savviest American Salafi jihadist preachers will continue to wield some measure of influence over their radicalized followers. This is likely to remain a significant challenge to authorities who continue to grapple with how to combat the spread of extremist ideology while preserving the liberties enshrined in the U.S. Constitution.

Conclusion

The Salafi landscape of America is broad, complex and multifaceted. This study shows that American Salafi preachers and groups are influenced by a large variety of ideas and thinkers, both past and present. While many consider Salafism, with its strict moral codes, obsession with original practice, and desire to transcend culture and race, as impervious to any form of social or cultural influences, we have seen how specific currents within the movement have emerged in an American context.

For instance, the Madkhalis in America are strictly beholden to the rulings of Saudi sheikhs, just as they are anywhere around the world. However, the American Madkhali community have also created their own unique culture and language influenced by the American cultural and historical context, as well as local issues and concerns. In contrast, other American quietist Salafis represented by organizations like TAM have shed the loyalist and propagandist approach of the Madkhalis. They now seek to engage directly with the state and fight extremism through the promotion of a conservative Islam based on Salafi ideology. Meanwhile, modernist “post-Salafis,” exemplified by the imams of the al-Maghrib Institute, represent one of the most unique directions taken by Salafism in the U.S. They have contributed to the development of an Americanized version of Salafism which, while conservative in its theology, has also taken on and addressed national and international political issues.

On the more activist side of the Salafi spectrum, this study finds that it is impossible to understand American Salafi jihadism without an appreciation for how it is influenced by other forms of Salafism, in particular the creed of the activist *harakis*. Both Ahmad Musa Jibril and Ali al-Timimi, for example, had close personal relationships with some of the most senior Saudi Islamists and activist Salafis, and elements of their creed can be found in both of their works. Al-Timimi is a fascinating case study due to his steady progression across the wider American Salafi milieu: from student of the traditional quietist Saudi sheikhs and participant in the QSS, to a leading figure in the activist IANA, and finally, to an open promoter of Salafi jihadism. Al-Timimi’s case, and others like it, demonstrate that the Salafi movement in America is by no means frozen in amber; its contours, and

the ideas and rulings of the movement's key figures, change and react to political and social events in the outside world.

While this study focused on Salafi leadership figures, more research is necessary to better understand the Salafi grassroots in America. How Salafi ideas motivate followers to take actions, including violent ones, remains a question of interest for governments, analysts, and scholars seeking to understand radicalization. Clearly, some of the most influential Salafi jihadist leadership figures in America were influenced by theological and ideological concepts when deciding to accept jihadist violence as a legitimate response to a perceived threat. What remains to be understood, however, is how applicable this relationship is in examining decisions to turn to violence made at a grassroots level.

Anecdotally, in certain cases, including that of Jalil ibn Ameer Aziz, previously non-jihadi Salafis came to view IS as a group that purports to put their pre-existing Salafi values into practice. IS may attract Salafis by using similar religious terminology and relying on the works of mutually revered scholars to provide a course of action for Salafi concepts once deemed to either be purely theoretical or irrelevant to the current situation of Muslims around the world. This helps to explain, for example, why much of IS' propaganda focuses on its implementation of Salafi values through its establishment of *shari'a* law. While it is the violent propaganda which garners the most media attention, studies have shown that these infamous videos and images make up only a fraction of IS media output. In the remainder of its propaganda, IS portrays itself as the true standard-bearer and implementer of Salafi Islam, and uses messaging strategies that are persuasive to Salafi adherents.⁴⁰¹ Further empirically-based research, focused on particular contexts, is necessary to understand the relationship between Salafi ideas and recruitment to jihadist groups like IS—and even in light of this research, the connection may be less straightforward that governments and analysts might sometimes wish.

In addition, while this study helped to further understanding of the contours of the Salafi movement in America, there is much left to explore about its continued growth and evolution. Given that the Salafi movement in the United States is in constant flux as it responds to the world around it, there are many among the younger generation of Salafis

in America, on whom the author has not focused, who may be able to further reveal how the movement continues to change and adapt. Any future research on the topic must therefore seek to identify which figures, ideas, and influences among the Salafis in America are growing in prestige and investigate the ways that they are driving the Salafi movement in the United States forward.

Notes

¹ This is a debate which of course extends beyond the West, but the discussion is framed in this way for the purposes of this paper, which focuses almost solely on Western nations.

² There are some notable exceptions. See for example: Shadee Elmasry, “The Salafis in America: The Rise, Decline and Prospects for a Sunni Muslim Movement among African-Americans,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 30 (2) (2010), 217-236; Christopher Heffelfinger, *Radical Islam in America* (Potomac Books, 2011); Umar Lee, *The Rise and Fall of the Salafi Dawah in America: a memoir by Umar Lee* (St Louis Stranger, 2014). Nonetheless, discussion of Salafism in America remains on the fringes of debates about terrorism and radicalization.

³ Recent region-specific studies on Salafism include: Roel Meijer (ed.), *Global Salafism: Islam’s New Religious Movement* (Hurst, 2009); Henri Lauzière, *The Making of Salafism: Islamic Reform in the Twentieth Century* (Columbia University Press, 2015); Robert Rabil, *Salafism in Lebanon: From Apoliticism to Transnational Jihadism* (Georgetown University Press, 2014); Zoltan Pall, *Salafism in Lebanon: Local and Transnational Movements* (Cambridge University Press, 2018); Francesco Cavatorta, *Salafism After the Arab Awakening: Contending with People’s Power* (Oxford University Press, 2017); Alexander Thurston, *Salafism in Nigeria: Islam, Preaching, and Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2016); Laurent Bonnefoy, *Salafism in Yemen: Transnationalism and Religious Identity* (Oxford University Press, 2012); Mohamed-Ali Adraoui, “Radical Milieus and Salafis Movements in France: Ideologies, Practices, Relationships with Society and Political Visions,” European University Institute, 2014.

⁴ These are made up of Muhammad and companions (the *Sahaba*) and the two generations which succeeded them (the *tab'iun* and the *taba tabi'in*).

⁵ Bernard Haykel, “On the Nature of Salafi Thought and Action,” in Roel Meijer (ed.), *Global Salafism: Islam’s New Religious Movement* (Hurst, 2009), 39.

⁶ There are four Sunni schools of jurisprudence: Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi’i and Hanbali.

⁷ Translated by Haykel in “On the Nature of Salafi Thought and Action,” 38.

⁸ Madawi al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 15-19.

⁹ Stephane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam* (Harvard University Press, 2011), 11. Because of al-Wahhab’s influence on Salafism, the term is often incorrectly used interchangeably with “Wahhabi” (a term that some Salafis see as derogatory). While all Wahhabis can be described as Salafi, not all Salafis follow or support the Saudi Royal Family or the Wahhabi scholars of the country’s religious establishment. In addition, unlike Wahhabis who follow the Hanbali school of *fiqh*, Salafis reject the four *maddhabs*. Not only do they see them as a form of sinful division among Muslims, but the existence of these schools run counter to the Salafi belief that there is only one correct approach, that which is outlined by Allah in the primary sources of Islam. For more see: Quintan Wiktorowicz, “The New Global Threat: Transnational Salafis and Jihad,” *Middle East Policy* 8 (4) (2007).

¹⁰ This is a potted history of Saudi Arabia. For a more in-depth treatment, see: David Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission in Saudi Arabia* (I.B. Tauris, 2009).

¹¹ So-called Wahhabis do not refer to themselves as such.

¹² For more on the differences between Wahhabis and Salafis see: David Commins, “From Wahhabi to Salafi,” in Bernard Haykel, Thomas Hegghammer and Stephane Lacroix (ed.), *Saudi Arabia in Transition: Insight on Social, Political, Economic and Religious Change* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 151-166.

¹³ Roel Meijer, “Introduction,” *Global Salafism: Islam’s New Religious Movement* (Hurst, 2009), 4.

¹⁴ Quintan Wiktorowicz, “Anatomy of the Salafi Movement,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29(3) (2006): 208.

¹⁵ Wiktorowicz, “Anatomy of the Salafi Movement,” 208; Haykel, “On the Nature of Salafi Thought and Action,” 47-50.

¹⁶ For more see: Joas Wagemakers, “Revisiting Wiktorowicz: Categorising and Defining the Branches of Salafism,” in Francesco Cavatorta and Fabio Merone (ed.), *Salafism After the Arab Awakening: Contending with People’s Power* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹⁷ One of the most influential quietist Salafi scholars, Muhammad Nasir-ud-Din al-Albani, for example, supported the political notion of an Islamic State, but only after the purification of society through a *manhaj* based on *da’wa* and *tarbiyah*. For more on the teachings of al-Albani see: Stephane Lacroix,

“Between Revolution and Apoliticism: Nasir al-Din al-Albani and his Impact on the Shaping of Contemporary Salafism,” in Roel Meijer (ed.), *Global Salafism: Islam’s New Religious Movement* (Hurst, 2009), 58-81.

¹⁸ Quoted in Jacob Olidort, “The Politics of ‘Quietist’ Salafism,” Brookings Center for Middle East Policy, February 2015, 5.

¹⁹ Olidort, “The Politics of ‘Quietist’ Salafism,” 5.

²⁰ Wagemakers, “Revisiting Wiktorowicz: Categorising and Defining the Branches of Salafism,” 16.

²¹ Samuel Tadros, “Mapping Egyptian Islamism,” Hudson Institute, December 2014, 7; Mohamed Abdel Samad Al Hajri, “Hadadia: Jamiya’s Schisms,” in El Jamiya, Al Mesbar Studies and Research Centre, 2010.

²² Samuel Tadros, “Islamist vs. Islamist: The Theologico-Political Questions,” Hudson Institute, December 2014, 42.

²³ Roel Meijer, “Politicising *al-jarḥ wa-l-ta’dīl*,” in Nicolet Boekhoff-van der Voort, Kees Versteegh, and Joas Wagemakers (ed.), *The Transmission and Dynamics of the Textual Sources of Islam Essays in Honour of Harald Motzki* (Brill, 2011), 387-388.

²⁴ Zoltan Pall, “Kuwaiti Salafism and its Growing Influence in the Levant,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 2014, 23.

²⁵ Wagemakers, “Revisiting Wiktorowicz..”

²⁶ Tadros, “Mapping Egyptian Islamism,” 32; Pall, “Kuwaiti Salafism and its Growing Influence in the Levant.”

²⁷ Lacroix, *Awakening Islam*, 52.

²⁸ Tadros, “Mapping Egyptian Islamism,” 6; Meijer, “Politicising *al-jarḥ wa-l-ta’dīl*,” 388.

²⁹ For more see: Madawi al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State: Islamic Voices from a New Generation* (Cambridge University Press, 2007) and Toby Jones, “The Clerics, the Sahwa and the Saudi State,” *Strategic Insights* 4 (3) (2005).

³⁰ Haykel describes how the Surur’s followers “blended the organizational methods and political worldview of the Muslim Brotherhood with the theological puritanism of Salafism.” Originally a member of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in the 1960s, Surur moved to Saudi Arabia where he was influenced by Salafism. For more see: Bernard Haykel, “Al-Qaeda and Shi’ism,” in Assaf Moghaddam and Brian Fishman (ed.), *Fault Lines in the Global Jihad* (Routledge, 2011), 187.

³¹ Sayed Khatab, *The Power of Sovereignty: The Political and Ideological Philosophy of Sayyid Qutb* (Routledge, 2006).

³² Lacroix, *Awakening Islam*, 53.

³³ Toby Jones, “The Clerics, the Sahwa and the Saudi State.”

³⁴ Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission in Saudi Arabia*, 4.

³⁵ These included the 1979 Iranian revolution and the Siege of Mecca in which a group of Saudi rebels led by Juhayman al-Utaybi occupied the Grand Mosque during a 14-day siege. For more on the Siege of Mecca see: Yaroslav Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca: The Forgotten Uprising in Islam’s Holiest Shrine* (Penguin, 2008).

³⁶ Lacroix, *Awakening Islam*, 42.

³⁷ Heffelfinger, *Radical Islam in America*, 58; Lacroix, *Awakening Islam*, 42.

³⁸ Lacroix, *Awakening Islam*, 42.

³⁹ Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 83.

⁴⁰ Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia*, 7.

⁴¹ Haykel, “On the Nature of Salafi Thought and Action,” 48. These diverging views of jihad are partly due to the different historical experiences of members of each strand. The Salafi jihadis emerged and gained prominence after the Afghan war, and as a result they regard fighting as the only legitimate method for establishing an Islamic society. Thus, whereas the politicos adopted political activism through study and education, jihadis received their political training on the battlefields, seeing politics solely through the lens of warfare. For more, see: Wagemakers, “Revisiting Wiktorowicz..”

⁴² In particular Sayyid Qutb and Abul A’la Maududi.

⁴³ Wiktorowicz, “Anatomy of the Salafi Movement,” 225-228. To further complicate matters, Wagemakers also notes that the assumption that jihadist are radicalized politicos is erroneous “since the relative political isolationism of purists can lead (and in some cases has led) to radicalization as well. In practice, this means that Jihadi Salafis can just as easily have a purist background as a political one. Moreover, purists and jihadis share a certain rejection of party politics that politicos, who are more sophisticated and

politically savvy in their world view, do not agree with.” Other scholars who have discussed the role of the activist Salafism in the emergence of the jihadi strand include Roel Meijer and Robert Rabil. The latter traces the roots of the Salafi jihadi movement to a hybridization of the Muslim Brotherhood’s political approach and the Salafi creed, claiming that “the foundation of the Salafi jihadists can be traced to that of the *Ṣaḥwa*...the ideology of the Salafi jihadist is an extension to the ideology of politicized Salafists.” Robert Rabil, *Salafism in Lebanon: From Apoliticism to Transnational Jihadism* (Georgetown University Press, 2014). 44.

⁴⁴Indeed, the Salafi jihadi movement was originally established by pioneering Saudi sheikhs who were influenced by the emergence of *Haraki* Salafism, including Sheikh Hamud bin Uqla al-Shuaibi and Sulayman al-Ulwan along with ideologues including Yusuf al-Uyayree and Abu Qatada, all of whom were influenced by the writings of Sayyid Qutb. For more on this see: Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia*, 83. Yusuf al-Uyayree was, according to Meijer, not only involved in the *Ṣaḥwa* but even while he was active in al-Qaeda, “always regarded himself as part of that movement.” While he criticized *Ṣaḥwa* sheikhs for not engaging in violent jihad against the Saudi state, al-Uyayree regarded them as ideological brethren due to their willingness to comment on political matters concerning Muslims and saw al-Qaeda as a more militant expression of the same movement. For more on this see: Roel Meijer, “Re-Reading al-Qaeda: Writing of Yusuf al-Ayiri,” *ISIM Review* 18 (2006), 17.

⁴⁵ Shiraz Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea* (Hurst, 2016), 15.

⁴⁶ Jacob Olidort, “The Politics of ‘Quietist’ Salafism,” 5.

⁴⁷ Thomas Hegghammer, “Jihadi Salafis or Revolutionaries?” in Roel Meijer (ed.), *Global Salafism: Islam’s New Religious Movement* (Hurst, 2009), 263.

⁴⁸ Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia*, 234.

⁴⁹ Jacob Olidort, “The Politics of ‘Quietist’ Salafism,” 5.

⁵⁰ “The Involvement of Salafism/Wahhabism In The Support And Supply Of Arms to Rebel Groups Around the World,” Directorate-General for External Policies, European Parliament, June 2013, available at:

[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/join/2013/457137/EXPO-AFET_ET\(2013\)457137_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/join/2013/457137/EXPO-AFET_ET(2013)457137_EN.pdf).

⁵¹ Erik Kirschbaum, “German intelligence chief warns about growing number of Salafi Muslims in his country,” *LA Times*, September 14, 2016, available at: <http://www.latimes.com/world/europe/la-fg-germany-salafi-20160914-snap-story.html>.

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another. But I wasn't in Pakistan for long and my involvement with LET was mainly sending people there to train and doing media relations and developing their email newsletter.”

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³⁷⁴ Niraj Warikoo, “Dearborn Heights Man Accused of Supporting ISIS Sentenced to 5 Years.” *Detroit Free Press*. April 6, 2017, available at:

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³⁷⁵ “Beware of ‘Sheikh’ Ahmad Musa Jibril,” *Salafitalk.com*, available at:

<http://www.salafitalk.net/st/viewmessages.cfm?Forum=6&Topic=1021>.

³⁷⁶ Ahmad Musa Jibril, “Advice on Hijra: You be the Judge.”

³⁷⁷ Ahmad Musa Jibril, “Advice on Hijra: You be the Judge.”

³⁷⁸ Ahmad Musa Jibril, “Advice on Hijra: You be the Judge.”

³⁷⁹ Abu Yusuf Khaleefah, “No to interfaith!,” available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nLAIW1VAzvw>.

³⁸⁰ Scott Shane and Adam Goldman, “Extremist Imam Tests F.B.I. and the Limits of the Law,” *New York Times*, September 30 2016.

³⁸¹ According to official business filings, Suleiman set up two separate companies, The Islamic Jurisprudence Center (IJC), which was founded in October 2015 and is still active, and The Islamic Jurisprudence Center, Inc., which was dissolved in February 2017, just 6 months after it was created. However, the IJC’s now defunct Facebook page states that it was founded in June 2015.

³⁸² The author is in possession of a fully archived version of the now defunct IJC site.

³⁸³ Suleiman Anwar Bengharsa, “The Dilemma of Muslim Marriages,” *suleimananwar.com*, June 24 2016, available at: <https://suleimananwar.com/2016/06/muslim-marriage-islamic-marriage>.

³⁸⁴ Suleiman Anwar Bengharsa, untitled lecture, available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MYoyeHnWK9o>.

³⁸⁵ The titles are: *The Concise Fiqh of Purification, Prayer & Fasting* (Adly Publications, 2017) and *The Fiqh Of Trade: Obligatory Knowledge For Merchants* (Adly Publications, 2017).

³⁸⁶ Affidavit in Support of an Application for Search Warrant, *USA vs. Gregerson*, United States District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan, 5-6.

³⁸⁷ Affidavit in Support of an Application for Search Warrant, *USA vs. Gregerson*.

³⁸⁸ “Detroit Resident Pleads Guilty to Illegally Acquiring a Firearm,” U.S. Department of Justice, May 2 2017, available at: <https://www.justice.gov/usao-edmi/pr/detroit-resident-pleads-guilty-illegally-acquiring-firearm>.

³⁸⁹ Government Sentencing Memorandum, *USA vs. Sebastian Gregerson*, 8.

³⁹⁰ Government Sentencing Memorandum, *USA vs. Sebastian Gregerson*, 10.

³⁹¹ Government Sentencing Memorandum, *USA vs. Sebastian Gregerson*, United States District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan, 3-5.

³⁹² Government Sentencing Memorandum, *USA vs. Sebastian Gregerson*, 6.

³⁹³ Affidavit in Support of an Application for Search Warrant, *USA vs. Gregerson*, 4.

³⁹⁴ Affidavit in Support of an Application for Search Warrant, *USA vs. Gregerson*, 6.

³⁹⁵ Affidavit in Support of an Application for Search Warrant, *USA vs. Gregerson*, 14.

³⁹⁶ Affidavit in Support of an Application for Search Warrant, *USA vs. Gregerson*, 26

³⁹⁷ Government Sentencing Memorandum, *USA vs. Sebastian Gregerson*, 26. Investigators later found that Bengharsa wired some of these funds to unnamed recipients in Yemen. For more see: Affidavit in Support of an Application for Search Warrant, *USA vs. Gregerson*, 15.

³⁹⁸ Affidavit in Support of an Application for Search Warrant, *USA vs. Gregerson*, 16.

³⁹⁹ Government Sentencing Memorandum, *USA vs. Sebastian Gregerson*, 44.

⁴⁰⁰ Shane and Goldman, ““Extremist Imam Tests F.B.I. and the Limits of the Law.”

⁴⁰¹ For more on IS propaganda output see: Charlie Winter, “The Virtual ‘Caliphate’: Understanding Islamic State’s Propaganda Strategy,” Quilliam, 2015; Daniel Milton, “Down, but Not Out: An Updated Examination of the Islamic State’s Visual Propaganda,” Combating Terrorism Center, July 2018. It is worth noting here that Milton finds that, while earlier IS propaganda prioritized a focus on its state-building project over depictions of violence, recent years have seen a shift in this balance towards the latter.



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