

4. TRENDS IN SALAFISM

OMAYMA ABDEL-LATIF

In much current writing it is argued that Salafist thought and doctrine is responsible for a good deal of the violence that the West and the Arab world have experienced during the past two decades. The rise of Salafism (the most puritanical strain of Islam) is seen as a key ingredient of re-radicalisation. Some of these assumptions are being challenged, however, by the existence of Salafist groups that do not espouse violence as a mechanism for social and political change.

There are clearly diverse interpretations of Salafism today. The key denominator that distinguishes one Salafist group from another has to do with the stand each group chooses to take regarding the crucial question of whether there should be a separation between the religious and political domains in Salafist thought. Three main currents appear to be dominating the scene:

- a) *Al-Salafyia al-elmyia*, or scholarly Salafism, which is concerned with the study of the holy text and Islamic jurisprudence;
- b) *Al-Salafyia al-harakyyia*, or activist Salafism, which describes both politically active Salafist groups and those groups that are not politically active but occupy a place in the public sphere through their charity work and networks of social support and religious education institutes. This current also includes *al-Salafyia al-Islahyyia*, or reformist Salafism; and
- c) *Al-Salafyia al-jihadyia*, a brand of jihadist Salafism that concerns itself with implementing jihad. This strand commands much media attention but does not have a significant powerbase.

Following the 9/11 attacks, Islamists – and Salafists in particular (both activist and non-activist) – faced what one observer described as the “biggest crisis in their recent history”. Their scholarly and humanitarian

institutions became the target of a state security hunt in different parts of the Arab world. Their activities were curtailed. Pressure was exercised that forced them to compromise their long-held convictions. The outcome was a successful policy of reigning in their most radical figures. Saudi Arabia provided the example. But such policies also targeted the non-activist current of Salafism, which had traditionally been preoccupied with the scholarly aspects of the holy text and had focused much of its activity on charity work. Most importantly, this strain of Salafism had no interests to pursue in the political game.

This chapter looks at these particular Salafist movements. It attempts to map out the most prominent groups on the scene today and capture the debate that is taking place among these groups regarding three key issues: a) the approach to politics, b) the relations of these groups with ruling regimes and c) the use of violence. It takes examples from Salafist movements across the Arab world, but places special emphasis on those in Lebanon. The chapter reveals significant variation in the directions that different Salafist movements are taking. External actors need to be much more mindful of this and develop policies to embrace the fluidity of debates among Salafists.

1. Defining Salafism

Some Arab scholars, such as Muhammad Abed al-Jabir and Fahmi Jedaan, consider every Islamist a Salafist. The assumption goes that since all Islamists are committed to an old founding text (the Quran and the Prophet's Sunna), then it is only natural to conclude that all the variations of Islamist groups are Salafist (including al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun (the Muslim Brotherhood), jihadist groups, Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Turkish Justice and Development Party, the Tunisian Ennahda and the Egyptian al-Wasat).

For Islamists, however, Salafism has a more specific meaning. It stands for the school of thought that takes *al-salaf al-salih*, the righteous predecessors (i.e. the Prophet and his companions), as its only point of reference. It does not attempt to provide new interpretations or views other than those already existing. Its main preoccupation is with the fundamentals of the faith and doctrinal purity. Yassir Burhami, a leading Egyptian Salafist, understands Salafism to be "Islam pure" as descended from the Prophet. Such a definition reflects how Salafists perceive themselves to be the true guardians of the faith. This explains why they are constantly accused by their opponents of being exclusionary. Such a

definition excludes a wide range of political Islamic forces that might have embraced Salafist doctrine when they began, but which have moved far from it through years spent in politics.

Although Salafist movements say their ultimate mission is to emulate *al-salaf al-salih*, this should not suggest that they live in a frozen moment in the history of Islam, for these movements are the products of modern times. In other words, these are modern movements and they interpret the holy text and select from the life of the Prophet and his companions whatever suits their message of the day. Although the recent manifestations of the activist branch of Salafism should be understood within the context of the rise of Islamist politics in the Arab and Muslim world during the past three decades, it originally dates from the 1920s and 1930s. This branch found expression in the form of emerging social movements, religious institutions and charity associations. These included the Muslim Brothers of Egypt (during its early years), Ansar al-Sunna al-Muhammadiyah [Supporters of the Prophet's Sunna], al-Jam'iyah al-Shar'iyah [Association of Islamic Youth in Syria], the Scholars Association in Algeria and the Movement for the Return of the Caliphate in India and Indonesia.

The most important manifestation of Salafism, however, emerged at the turn of the last century under the rubric of reformist Salafism, *al-Salafiyah al-Islahiyah*. This brand of Salafism calls for a new interpretation of the text that engages with society's problems and concerns and offers an alternative to the Western model from within an Islamic frame of reference.

During the past three decades, the emergence of Islamist forces that have made breakthroughs in electoral politics across many parts of the Arab and Muslim world have forced a debate among Salafists regarding the place of politics and political activism, which was once considered taboo.

Unlike other Islamist activists, the Salafists do not possess a specific vision of politics. They have failed to articulate a political platform or project, and their opponents charge that they are preoccupied with what is *halal* [permitted] and what is *haram* [forbidden] and are still not qualified to be part of the political process. Yet, two political factors are cited as shaping Salafism's evolution and discourse: relations with the 'imperial' West and the emerging nation-state. Both have provoked the Salafist movement to staunchly defend Islamic identity at all levels - religious, political and social.

While the Salafists are the only Islamist group that does not have a structural hierarchy as such, they still share some commonalities with other contemporary Islamist movements. Early Islamists were concerned with developing a new paradigm for a renaissance that is grounded in an Islamic frame of reference, whereas the main concerns of the neo-Islamist movements are identity and ways to defend it.

2. Salafists' approach to politics and ruling regimes

Traditionally, the Salafist approach towards political activity has often been driven by suspicion and hostility. Some of the key dividing lines between the traditional Salafist and activist Salafist groups have to do with their stances vis-à-vis three main issues: the political process, ruling regimes and the use of violence.

2.1 Political activity

Salafists are far from united about where to place politics and political action among their priorities. There are two dominating points of view among Salafists. The first condemns any act of political participation to the point of imposing a ban on their followers. Political participation for Islamists, they argue, always comes with a heavy price. One of the founding fathers of the Salafist movement, Sheikh Nasser Eddin Al-Albani, is of the view that politics should be shunned altogether. This position reflects the traditional Salafist view that the real solution to the problems of the *umma* involves focusing on two main principles – filtering religion from all the *bidah* [innovations] and educating Muslims about the faith.

Traditional Salafists criticise those Islamists who seek change through either embracing political action or resorting to violence. For them both methods lead to nowhere because the original ill is in correcting the faith. Abdel-Aziz Kamel, editor of *Al-Bayan* (a Salafist magazine published in London), believes that from a Salafist perspective political activism means “changing the status quo in favour of Islam”. He considers “resistance to occupation” as the highest degree of political activism. Kamel argues that political activism should not be confined to the ballot box. One of the weaknesses of the Salafist movement, he once wrote, is that the place of

history and intellectualism is central to its discourse and vision, leaving no space for political activism.¹

Other more radical Salafist movements impose a ban on politics entirely, which extends to include any form of participation in the political process, as expressed by their famous slogan of 'no politics in religion and no religion in politics'.

Salafist groups based in Europe hold that same view. They refuse to engage in any form of political action. For example, Salafist groups in France were conspicuously absent from the debate of December 2003 to January 2004 about the veil. Among the thousands of protesters and the several Islamist associations that joined forces against the ban, none belonged to the Salafist movement. An interpretation of what one observer described as the 'insularity' imposed on Salafists was that they were abiding by the fatwas of Saudi scholars.

But if experience is anything to go by, it has proven that many of these movements have changed their rigid positions with respect to politics and have accepted the status quo. The Yemeni Al-Hikmah Association is a case in point, as later discussed.

A different approach to politics is taken by a second group of Salafists. In his 1985 book, *Muslims and political action*,² Abdel-Rahman Abdel-Khaleq argued that politics was at the heart of religion and political activities cover more than just governance. He defended "the democratic system" and urged followers to "invest in it" because the alternative was "a tyrannical system". He held that "[t]he political system which allows Muslims to form political parties should be supported". Abdel-Khaleq also supported participation in parliaments, because it helps to guarantee that legislation will not be passed that is contradictory to Islamic law. Opponents from the more radical Salafist groups accuse traditional Salafists of being complacent.

¹ "Interview with Abdel-Aziz Kamel", *Islamonline.net*, 22 June 2008 (retrieved from http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=ArticleA_C&cid=1212925442892&pagename=Zone-Arabic-Daawa%2FDWALayout).

² A.-R. Abdel-Khaleq, *Muslims and political action*, Riyadh: Adar al-Salafyia, 1985.

2.2 *Relations with ruling regimes*

Another important characteristic of Salafist thought pertaining to politics is the stance taken on relations with ruling regimes. Traditional Salafists do not legitimise any acts of protest or rebellion against the ruler, no matter how unjust he might be (i.e. 'no denial, no boycott and no rebellion').

Instead, they call for full political conformism to the ruler, which is the defining element of their approach to politics. Change should only be sought through giving advice. Contrary to other Islamist movements, which use violence as a way to change the status quo, traditional Salafists have maintained what could be described as relatively stable and good relations with the ruling regimes. Salafists of this stripe are not perceived by the state as a threat to regime security or stability, as has always been the case with other political Islam forces.

Salafists themselves argue that relations between any Salafist group and the ruling regime are governed by the political realities of each country. Some observers call this brand of Salafism *al-Salafiyah al-rasmiya* or 'official' Salafism. Its key feature is its subservience to the ruling regimes, at times working closely with them. It provides religious legitimacy to support the rulers' actions and dispel any popular questioning of state policies under the slogan of 'no to sedition'. The most obvious example of this brand of Salafism exists in Saudi Arabia. It is often referred to as *al-Gam'iya* or *al-Madkhalyia* (expressing an attribution to Sheikh Adel Gami or Sheikh Rabe' al-Madkhali). This Salafist strain believes that the authorities should make decisions on behalf of the *umma* and that there should not be any rebellion against the ruler so long as 'the calls to prayers can be heard in the streets'.

Although some analysts like to place jihadist Salafism in a league of its own, it could be argued that this brand of Salafism - born during the Russian invasion of Afghanistan and consolidated over years to reach its peak and most dramatic moment on 9/11 - is the extreme form of activist Salafism, *al-Salafiyah al-harakiya*. Jihadist Salafism places special emphasis on politics and the need to rebel against rulers.

3. **Salafists' change of heart**

3.1 *Salafist movements in Saudi Arabia*

The confrontation that took place between the al-Qaeda organisation on the one hand and both US and Arab regimes on the other is among the main

factors that have helped shape the discourse on Salafist movements during recent years. This confrontation, conducted under the catchphrase 'war on terror', eventually led to dramatic changes within the Saudi Salafist movement. The beginnings of this transformation could be discerned when prominent Salafist figures, previously known as staunch opponents of the US and its Arab allies, reversed their positions. These included Sheikh Safar al-Hawali, Salaman al-Ouda and Muhammed Srour Zein al-Abdeen. These figures have worked hard to temper the rebellion of the Salafist youth who were opposed to the Saudi regime and its alliance with the US, liaising with al-Qaeda followers and sympathisers in Saudi Arabia.

Some observers regard Ouda's change of heart as a manifestation of the emergence of this new current within the Salafist movement in Saudi Arabia.

Since its foundation, the most famous branch of Salafism - Wahhabi Salafism - has allied itself with the political regime of al-Saud (although the more radical elements have grown increasingly aggressive against the regime because of its alliance with the US and the West). This new stream also takes a pacifist approach to political and social change. Thus, the dilemma facing this emerging Saudi Salafism (i.e. pro-government and anti-violence) is whether it can articulate a vision of social change that would be acceptable to its followers. This process of reflection and self-criticism has forced leading Saudi Salafist figures to dilute their radicalism. The Salafist movement in Yemen has undergone a similar process, as discussed below.

3.2 Transformation of the Salafist movement in Yemen

In one decade, the Al-Hikmah Association, a young Salafist movement in Yemen, has gone through massive changes regarding its discourse and stance on politics. Initially, it followed the path of the traditional Salafist school, and rejected the notion of political parties, parliamentary elections and democracy. It maintained good relations with the ruling regime and was silently hostile to the opposition.

The association then underwent both ideological and political transformations that have led to the de-radicalisation of much of the basis of its founding vision. One of its leading figures, Sheikh Muhammed bin al-Mahdi, has spoken openly about the need to engage in dialogue with the

Zaydis (a Shia sect in Yemen) and praised “the Islamic brotherhood” – a bond between the two. Such rhetoric had been unheard of from a Salafist organisation.

Al-Hikmah’s political transformation has been reflected in their close relationship with power circles and their attempts to revise their stance on the issue of political parties. For example, they now accept a multi-party system, although they still condition their acceptance with the view that political parties should depart from an Islamic frame of reference.

Even so, Al-Hikmah’s experience has proven that Salafists tend to have an ambiguous relationship with politics. While they have made clear their alliance with the state and their silent hostility to the opposition, the leaders of Al-Hikmah insist that they are not politically active and that theirs is not a political party, but rather a charitable and social movement that cares about the Islamic call.

Such statements continue to reflect a vague – and at times confusing – relationship with the political domain, particularly given the change to much of the anti-political discourse. Ahmed al-Daghshi, an expert on the Yemeni Salafist movements, has argued that it will not be long before the Salafists launch their own political party.³ He bases his argument on the idea that much of the Salafists’ rigid discourse concerning democracy and electoral politics has reduced – after the process of revision – to an issue of *ijtihad*.⁴

It shows that the movement has come a long way since its early days, when in 1993 they launched a campaign against parliamentary elections, calling them illegitimate. What is more, they also used mosques to incite voters against participating in what they described as ‘the democratic

³ “Interview with Ahmed al-Daghshi”, *Islamonline.net*, 5 June 2007 (retrieved from http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=ArticleA_C&cid=1180421326371&pagename=Zone-Arabic-Daawa%2FDWALayout).

⁴ *Ijtihad* refers to the effort of a qualified Islamic jurist to interpret or reinterpret sources of Islamic law in cases in which no clear directives exist. In the early Muslim community, every qualified jurist had the right to exercise such original thinking, mainly *ra’y* [personal judgment] and *qiyās* [analogical reasoning].

secular game'. In 1997, this radical stance and rejection turned into silence – or what could be referred to as 'implicit consent' – as an outcome of the revision process.⁵

3.3 *Traditional and reformist strains in Egypt*

Egypt's Salafists have gone through a different experience. They are a mix of traditional and reformist Salafists. The bulk of their work is focused on educational and proselytising activities within the mosques. They target the individual with a view to making a better Muslim out of him/her and they are most active on university campuses. Unlike other Egyptian Islamists, the Salafists have no hierarchical structures or organised entity. They refer to the words 'collective action', the most important condition of which is 'not to confront governments' and not to resort to underground or violent activities. They nonetheless point out that not condoning violence does not mean that they do not recognise jihad by force. They have taken a clear position on jihad in the Muslim countries they regard as being occupied by enemies, such as Bosnia, Iraq, Palestine and Chechnya.

Their tools of influence include seminars and religious courses as well as medical and educational support for poor families. Despite being a pacifist movement that has not been involved in any violent activities, Salafists have had their difficult times with the security apparatus. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, security forces sought to put an end to their activities and institutions. Alexandria, the Mediterranean governorate that is host to the most influential Salafist movement in the country, witnessed a number of security strikes against Salafists. These resulted in the arrest of key leaders in 1994, a ban on the publication *Sawt al-dawaa* and the closure of the Al-Furqan Institute (the first Salafist institute from which Salafist preachers graduated). From 1994–2002, Salafist activities continued on university campuses but then these also came to a standstill.

Egypt's Salafists do not have a specific political project or vision for the country. In spite of the political turmoil that the country has been going through and the many issues that have caused political and social polarisation, Salafists have kept their heads above the murky water of politics and have rejected any attempts to be dragged into it. There was one

⁵ "Interview with Ahmed al-Daghsi", *Islamonline.net*, 5 June 2007 (op. cit.).

incident, however, in which they flexed their muscle – in support of the nomination of the first woman candidate on the Muslim Brotherhood’s list in the year 2000 in Alexandria. This was an unprecedented move for the Salafists, and Jihan Al-Halafawy spoke clearly about the support and encouragement she received from the Salafist base during her electoral campaign.

Nevertheless, Salafist leaders still dismiss any involvement in the political game. The reason, Burhami suggests, is that being part of the political game of today means that one has to compromise one’s ideals and principles. He argues that “[t]he experiences of Islamist movements in politics is not encouraging at all as we have seen how they have given up their Islamic ideals and identity for a position here or an opportunity there”.⁶ Thus, “Islamists cannot be allowed to participate in elections and use the tools of democracy except after they make compromises at the expense of their Islamic values”.

Burhami also believes that avoiding political participation in its present form of organising protests, participating in elections and setting up political parties is in itself an act of political protest. “Not being part of this political scene is one way to delegitimise it.” Yet the Salafists have taken a clear stand regarding the different crises facing the *umma*.

4. The stance on violence

The legitimacy of the use of violence with its two levels – symbolic violence and physical violence – has also been at the heart of much of the debate among Salafists. Traditional Salafist figures have held an unambiguous position on the issue.

Burhami rejects the notion that jihadist Salafists are the military wing of the Salafist movement. He criticises what he describes as “jihadi Salafists” who are not committed to the “jurisprudential restrictions and conditions for jihad”.⁷ He points out that they have gone too far in acts involving bloodshed, such as planting explosives in public places including

⁶ Y. Burhami, “Political participation and the balance of power” (in Arabic), *Sawt al-salaf*, 20 March 2007 (retrieved from <http://www.salafvoice.com/article.php?a=664>).

⁷ Ibid.

streets, markets and even mosques, and in calling other Muslims apostates. He does not condemn these acts outright but says, “Muslims should be committed to the rulings of jihad as ordained by Islam”. He also explains that jihad is “an act in which people should find mercy and not a means to vindication”. This sums up the traditional Salafist school of thought in relation to current actions conducted by those who call themselves jihadist Salafists.

Such criticism should not be taken to mean that traditional Salafists renounce the concept of jihad altogether. They remain firm believers in the concept of jihad and despite their condemning some of the operations committed in its name, to them it remains ‘a sacred duty’. Some Salafist figures have spoken about the need to ‘rationalise jihad’ in accordance with the general interests of both Islam and jihad, and in a manner that could render the concept an unquestioned consensus of the *umma*. One of the key conditions set by Abu Hafs Rafiki (who is known to be a staunch Moroccan Salafist) is that jihad should obtain the support of both scholars and the *umma*, thus preventing it from being a divisive issue. He has said that scholars’ acceptance and support is what legitimises jihad and makes it significant. Traditional Salafists have implicitly criticised what they describe as the operations that do not target the real enemy because these allow the opponents of jihad to call it terrorism and extremism and scare off Muslims. Echoing the view of many traditional Salafist figures on the issue, Rafiki has explained that “[e]ven the jihad against the occupiers in Palestine and Iraq should not lead to bloodshed. Public places should not be targeted. ...[P]eople understand jihad to be fighting but the more important meaning of jihad is the call for God.”⁸ He has also spoken about the need to have a political platform parallel to military activity and has said that the most important conditions for a successful jihad is to increase the number of supporters of the concept among Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

⁸ “Interview with Abu Hafs Rafiki”, *Islamonline.net*, 10 May 2007 (retrieved from http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=ArticleA_C&cid=1178193317702&pagename=Zone-Arabic-Daawa%2FDWALayout).

5. Lebanon and its brands of Salafism

One notable example of Salafism's evolution can be seen in Lebanon. In mid-August 2008, Hizbullah, the Lebanese Islamic Resistance Movement, signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with a Salafist group based in the Lebanese city of Tripoli. The event was hailed as a major breakthrough – given the doctrinal complexities and enmity that has historically dogged relations between the Salafists and the Shia in general. The MOU took place against a background of sectarian-inspired violence between Tripoli's Sunnis and the country's Alawite minority of Jebel Mehsen. The agreement was initially rejected by a segment of Tripoli Salafists who are Saudi-funded, thus creating a schism among the Salafist rank and file. The Salafist rivals agreed to put the MOU on hold to allow time for more discussion. Yet the most significant outcome of this move was that even within the circles of those considered the most literal and extreme among Islamists, there are prospects for change in what could be viewed as a radical and dogmatic discourse on politics.

Explaining the motives behind the agreement with Hizbullah, Safwan al-Zo'abi, head of the Kuwaiti-funded Endowment for Islamic Heritage (Waqf al-Turath al-Islami), said that “we wanted to send a clear message that Salafists are not terrorists and that they accept to dialogue with the other no matter how ideologically or politically different it is from us” [sic].⁹

Another leading Salafist figure echoed the same view. Salafism, explained Hassan al-Shahal of the Tripoli-based Guidance and Proselytisation Institute, is “an intellectual rather than a militant current. ...Salafists and terrorists are two completely different things. Those Salafists who embraced militancy and commit acts of violence have deviated from ‘*nahj al-salaf al-salih*’ [the approach of the righteous predecessors].”¹⁰ Analysing this development can help provide clues to thinking among the ‘new Salafists’.

⁹ Derived from an interview with the author in Beirut, September 2008. The analysis in this chapter draws upon three interviews (two in Tripoli and one in Beirut) conducted in September 2008 for the purpose of this research. All the interviewees agreed to be quoted.

¹⁰ Author interview in Tripoli, September 2008.

5.1 *The rise of the Salafists*

The Salafist movement is the oldest Islamist movement in Lebanon. It is considered a Wahhabi Salafist movement, which puts a high premium on teaching the Quranic text and Hadith. It embraces a conservative vision of politics and society. Its followers hold an ambivalent view of the Lebanese state: while some consider it an illegal entity, other Salafists say they can seek reform but only without resorting to violence. In the 1980s, the group attempted to form a military wing called 'the Islamic army', but it was short-lived and the group's military ambitions ended. In 1990, the movement operated through the Islamic Charity and Guidance Association, whose goals were to reform society, build mosques, schools and centres for teaching the Quran, as well as to help the poor and needy.

In 1996, the Lebanese government accused the association of inciting sectarian hatred in its education curricula. It was dissolved. The followers moved to another charity organisation called the Endowment for the Revival of Islam, which focused on social work. In 2006, the Salafist movement set up an association called the Zad al-Akhera Institute. The growth of the Salafist movement in Lebanon has been linked to the emerging role played by Saudi Arabia – which has replaced the traditional venue of Al-Azhar in Egypt – as a destination for Lebanese preachers to receive their religious education. Many have come under the influence of the Wahhabi school of thought and have taken home some of its ideas. Unlike other Islamist movements, the traditional Salafist movement is a social one, which shuns politics and does not involve itself in the electoral game.

Leaders of the traditional Salafist movement identify it as 'the true face of Islam'. They have no political project or vision for Lebanon, they say, other than spreading *dawah* [the call for Islam] in society. "Our *dawah* is a call to go back to the basics of Islam," says Dai al-Islam al-Shahal, head of the Islamic Hidayah wa al-Ihsan Association and a leading Salafist figure.¹¹ This undertaking is primarily done through religious institutions, Quranic schools and charity organisations under the movement's supervision. The Salafist movement enjoys an expanding social base, particularly in the north of the country, mainly thanks to their social services. Their method of

¹¹ Author interview in Tripoli, September 2008.

influence has two strands: their religious schools and a network of social services. This approach has enabled them to accumulate social capital, again especially in the north, where poverty rates are the highest in the country. Filling the void left by an absent Lebanese state is a classic case of Islamists moving in to address a vacuum left by the state.

Although according to its leaders the Salafist movement is (in theory) an independent apolitical movement, it has not been immune to the deep political polarisation that has gripped the country during the past few years. In politics, they make no secret of being closer to the 'March 14th camp'. Such a political alliance between the traditional Salafists and Western-backed political forces may come as a surprise to some, but it can be understood within a context of two factors. First has been the sectarian affiliation – since former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri was viewed by the majority of Lebanon's Sunnis as their leader. Despite disagreement with Hariri over a number of issues, Salafists did not seek confrontation with Hariri because a) the bulk of his social base was made up of Sunnis and b) it would have belied a sense of opportunism on the part of some Salafist leaders. In that sense, both could claim to be standing against a common enemy (politically speaking), namely Hizbullah. Yet at least in public, Hariri did not associate himself or his movement with Salafist movements.

Alarming press reports that repeatedly spoke of a growing presence of al-Qaeda on Lebanese soil raised fears that religious extremists now see Lebanon, like other failing states, as an attractive terrain in which to establish a foothold. Indeed, following the end of the Lebanese army's military campaign against Fatah al-Islam in September 2007, many questioned the fate of Salafism in Lebanon. Salafist leaders acknowledge that the three-month confrontation pushed jihadist Salafists into the margins, leaving the ground open for the more peaceful form of Salafism – scholastic Salafism.

Even though the north is home to as many as 20 Salafist associations in the form of religious teaching institutes and a vast network of charity organisations, these associations do not organise themselves under a unified leadership. There has been a previous attempt to address the issue of an absence of leadership: in 2004, Hassan al-Shahal set up the Islamic Politburo as an umbrella under which Salafist organisations could come together. His goal, in his words, was to "monitor the political developments in Lebanon". This reflected an unprecedented interest

among Salafists in Lebanese political affairs. It also broke with a long tradition of aversion to politics that had been inherited from the 30 years of Syrian presence in Lebanon. With the assassination of Hariri in February 2005, the Salafist movement embraced political Sunnism as a political ideology. Under the slogan of 'defending *ahl al-sunna*', some Salafists lifted the ban on engaging in politics. This interest was clearly manifested during the 2005 elections, when they helped Tayyar al-Mustaqbal (the dominant political movement among Lebanon's Sunnis) through campaigning and votes to achieve a landslide victory.

It is difficult, however, to measure the influence of the Salafists as a political force on the scene today. While some observers suggest that the strength or the weakness of any Salafist organisation should be measured in terms of the number of institutions it owns and the number of personnel it employs, others believe that the Salafists are powerful in as much as they mobilise the street. Hence, in times of deep polarisation and sharp sectarian divisions, as is the case in Lebanon today, the balance is tipped in favour of those Salafists who embrace an extreme hard-line discourse against Hizbullah and by association the Shia. There is another view that suggests the Salafist movement derives its significance from the crucial role it could play in exacerbating sectarian tensions and conflicts. This is evident in the statements and religious sermons of some Salafist figures, who conjure up the threat that the Shiites, and with them the Alawites, pose to the Sunnis.

5.2 *The 'new Salafists'*

What is significant about the 2008 MOU between Hizbullah and the Tripoli-based Salafist group is that it has brought into focus those Salafists whose discourse differs from the mainstream Salafist movement. The differences between the two parties – those who signed and those who opposed the move – are old ones. These clearly surfaced during the meeting convened by the Mufti of Tripoli, Sheikh Malik Shaar, in mid-July at the Islamic Sunni Centre. This meeting brought together 50 Salafist personalities, among whom were the previously mentioned Hassan al-Shahal and Safwan Al-Zo'abi, the latter being one of the architects of the agreement with Hizbullah. Absent from the meeting was Dai al-Islam al-Shahal, a representative of 'official' Salafism.

This meeting saw the birth of what came to be dubbed in the media as the 'new Salafists', a term coined to refer to those Salafists who have adopted a discourse different from the conventional one. They have

championed dialogue with Hizbullah, refused to be party to sectarian-inspired conflict with the Shia and refused to be subservient to either the political establishment (Tayyar al-Mustaqbal) or the religious establishment (Dar al-Fatwa). In this sense, the initiative with Hizbullah can be seen as the outcome of this new Salafist discourse. The new Salafists claim to represent most Salafists in the north. The main association leading this new current among Salafists gets its funding from Kuwait, as opposed to the rest of the Salafist associations, which obtain their funding from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Its charity projects are spread across every village in the miserable north.

Underlining the divergences between these new Salafist forces and other Salafist groups, the former have opted for the following approaches:

- a) *They have offered a discourse about Salafism that differs from that prevailing among Muslims and the Lebanese.* In this respect, as Zo'abi declared, the meeting and the dialogue with Hizbullah are intended to show the "true moderate face of Salafism". Zo'abi denounces some Salafist groups that are interested in "fomenting tension and intimidating others"¹² – an allusion to the alliance between Dai al-Islam al-Shahal and the Future Movement.
- b) *They have refused to be used as a scarecrow to frighten the Shiites, as one of Tripoli's Islamists put it.* Nor does this Salafist faction want to be implicated in a battle against the Shia to the benefit of Tayyar al-Mustaqbal, which many Salafists consider a secular movement. According to Zo'abi, "[p]eople viewed Salafists as backward and barbarians...we wanted to tell them that we are human beings, we want to dialogue, we recognise the other. We have proven that we are by far more moderate than many political parties described as such."¹³

5.3 *A reformist Salafist: A voice in the wilderness*

Sheikh Muhammad Al-Khoder represents a group of Salafist figures who are leading a reformist movement. He formed the Lebanese Islamic Forum for Dialogue and Dawah. Being critical of the state of Islamist movements

¹² Author interview in Beirut, September 2008.

¹³ Ibid.

in Lebanon today, Khoder believes the forum is an attempt to search for common ground on which to found a common Islamic project/vision. Khoder considers the traditional Salafists to be out of touch with reality. Although it has a wider following among the young, the movement has nonetheless failed to articulate a political project. Khoder explains that “Islamist activists – Salafists in particular – lack both a leadership and a vision for political and social change”.¹⁴

Khoder has articulated what can be described as a reformist vision. It is a view that accepts ‘the other’. His is a Salafism that adapts itself to a multi-confessional society such as that of Lebanon. The challenges facing Khoder and his supporters include how to change the perceptions and views of their followers – mostly young men – who have been fed a rigid religious discourse. “We want to move our young men from ideas of extremism and we are receiving a positive response to that,” he said. The real challenge, however, is the internal schism within the Salafist movement itself. This schism has been exacerbated by the position adopted by the traditional Salafist leaders, who block any initiatives for change and reform. “There are attempts to project us as undermining the Salafist traditions [and as having] given up our principles and therefore not representing the Salafist movement.”¹⁵

His views on relations with the other sect of Islam make him part company with his traditional Salafist counterparts. While he acknowledges the doctrinal differences with the Shia, he insists that the Salafist *ulema* [scholars] have not called the Shia apostates. It is not their approach to exclude the Shia altogether. The conflict in Lebanon is not a sectarian one, he believes. It has a regional edge to it. The biggest threat according to Khoder is the US-Israeli hegemony: “It is the new Middle East Project which aims to change the identity and culture of the region that remains the biggest threat to us.”¹⁶ Accordingly, Khoder takes the same position as Hizbullah, a fact that he acknowledges yet is hesitant to go public with for fear of being undermined by other more traditional Salafists.

¹⁴ Derived from an author interview in Tripoli in September 2007 for O. Abdel-Latif, *Lebanon's Sunni Islamists: A Growing Force*, Carnegie Paper No. 6, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, D.C., January 2008.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

The relationship of this group with the traditional Salafists is one of competing for turf and influence among the young Sunnis. Traditional Salafists enjoy a more popular base, and Khoder explains that the more radical they are, the more popular they become. At times of sectarian tension, the traditional Salafists take over, as proven true by the obstacles imposed on reconciliation with Hizbullah.

Conclusions

The central argument of this chapter is that there is growing evidence to suggest that the stances and discourses of Salafist movements concerning politics, the use of violence and relations with other Islamists are not unchanging or dogmatic. Examples of Salafist movements in Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Lebanon show how such movements have shifted from a radical position on the political process – with some imposing a total ban on all political activity – towards embracing some of the fundamentals of the political process such as elections. Contrary to their rigid outlook and discourses, Salafist movements have proven capable of moving from the stricter and more radical end of the spectrum towards a more mainstream approach to politics.

These movements are not static. They are operating in ever-changing socio-political contexts and as much as they seek to influence such contexts, they are undoubtedly influenced by them.

But experience has also proven that more often than not Salafists have developed an ambiguous relationship with politics. This is not so much the result of a deliberate effort as it has to do with a lack of an overarching vision of politics and its role in their world vision. Being newcomers to a political scene that has long been dominated by other more seasoned forces of political Islam, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, the political naïveté of the Salafists is hardly surprising.

For the EU this implies that dialogue with Islamist groups of all stripes is important and channels of dialogue should be kept open. But for it to be a fruitful one, the Europeans must abandon their habit of going to meetings with a list of demands to which the Islamists should adhere. A constructive dialogue means that both parties think of each other as equals, rather than one party dictating its list of ‘shoulds’ and ‘should nots’ to the other.