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The Politics of "Quietist" Salafism

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Introduction

Amid the current unrest across the Middle East and North Africa, Salafists of various stripes are emerging as important contenders in the new political landscape. New Salafist parties in Egypt captured nearly a quarter of the country's parliament, and Salafists in other Arab Spring countries have founded political organizations to take advantage of their newfound freedoms. Meanwhile, Al-Qa'ida and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) continue to dominate the headlines.

The political prominence of Salafists is remarkable given that most Salafists are skeptical of violent and nonviolent political participation.[1] Because Salafists tend to eschew political attention, little has been written about their political thought, and they are accordingly dismissed as "quietists." This has resulted in a gap in the understanding of the ideologies of politically engaged Salafists, who form a minority among their group. The quietist terrain shapes the politics of activist Salafists and vice versa. The silence of the quietists is the space in which one hears the political voice of Salafi activists. Through comparing the political discourse of quietist and activist Salafists, it becomes clear that there is no clear demarcation between the two.

To be sure, there are quietist Salafists who merit the label "quietist." For example, the Madkhali groups in Saudi Arabia counsel their followers to observe strict obedience to Muslim rulers and silence on political matters. While many quietist Salafists do not engage in political activities, they do contribute to political discourse regarding international, regional, and local political matters. Their political actions are quiet, but their political voice is loud. They lie on a continuum between absolute quietism and peaceful political engagement.

The continuum between quietism and political activism is best examined through the life of the most prominent quietist Salafist of the last century, Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani (d. 1999). Today, his students range from Madkhalis—the aforementioned absolute quietists—to the violent messianic insurgent group that took over the Great Mosque in Mecca in 1979. The son of a poor Albanian watch repairman who moved to Damascus in the 1920's, Albani came of age during a formative era of political and social change in the Middle East—a period not entirely unlike today's in which Salafism had not yet crystallized into the popular movement it would later become. Examining his ideas against the backdrop of these changes is thus instrumental for understanding the environmental and ideological factors that shaped what is now recognized as Salafism.

This paper argues that "quietist" is an inadequate label to describe the ambitions of Albani and his

1. While percentages are hard to measure, if most Salafists globally were involved in forming political parties or in direct violent activity, the world would look very different. The gray area, of course, is rhetorical or material sponsorship of political parties or violent activity, which is a subject that merits its own study. Rather, a more accurate characterization would be that Salafist communities around the world share basic creeds and beliefs, and may in cases express interest in or comment on political matters, both foreign and domestic, while in the process developing local identities that reflect the country-specific or regional needs. For a sense of the variety of global Salafist discourse, see Roel Meijer, ed., *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement* (London: Hurst, 2009). As one example of the kind of localized rhetoric and needs of Salafist communities, see the following recent studies on Salafism in Scandinavia: Martijn de Koning, "Changing Worldviews and Friendship: An Exploration of the Life Stories of Two Female Salafis in the Netherlands" in Ibid., 404–23; Ulrika Mårtensson, "Norwegian *Ḥarakī* Salafism: 'The Saved Sect' Hugs the Infidels," *Comparative Islamic Studies*, 8.1–2 (2012),:113–38; and Marius Linge, "The Islamic Network: A Case Study of How Salafi Da'wa Emerges, Mobilizes and Transforms in a Norwegian Context," MA Thesis, Université de Saint-Joseph, Faculté des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines. Beirut, 2013.

followers.[2] Works by Albani's students such as Ali al-Halabi's 2012 pamphlet *A Truthful Scholarly Discussion Concerning the Events in Syria* and Mashhur b. Hasan Al Salman's *Salafists and the Palestinian Question* show that these quietists were not quiet regarding political matters. In fact, in a number of cases, these individuals recommended Salafist involvement in political crises. Despite his slogan later in life that "the best policy is to stay out of politics," Albani himself took vocal, if not often controversial, stances on a number of political issues. For example, he condemned armed resistance against Israel, and supported the ideological cause of the jihad in Afghanistan.

How are we to make sense of these clear expressions of political viewpoints by a group that has gained a reputation for abstaining from politics? The simple answer is that the "political" had different connotations in different contexts. For most of the twentieth century, Islamist political involvement in the Arab Middle East nearly always took the form of political parties operating under (in the best of cases) or oppressed by (in the worst of cases) secular totalitarian regimes. However, in the initial years of the twenty-first century, and especially following the Arab uprisings of 2011, the boundaries between the political and the religious blurred as the established regimes and their institutions collapsed overnight, leaving behind vast power vacuums. Giving definition and structure to the changing events became a question of necessity rather than choice, especially as Salafists faced pressure from media and other Islamist groups to comment on these events.[3]

Given the mixed fortunes of their Islamist and jihadist counterparts, it is remarkable that Salafists continue to retain their credibility among their followers amidst the ongoing political turmoil. Much of this has to do with their distinct approaches to politics, which Albani summarized in an attack on the Muslim Brotherhood: "the ends do not justify the means." In other words, whereas Islamists and jihadists seek specific political ends (for example, the establishment of a caliphate), and at times have compromised traditional teachings in pursuit of these ends, Salafists' first priority is to correct the means that Muslims use to achieve their ends; their method. This is why so-called quietist Salafists advocate for involvement in some cases and restraint in others—the driving motive being whether action or inaction in a particular case is in keeping with what the Prophet Muhammad and his immediate followers would have done in a similar situation. For Salafists, correcting how Muslims understand and practice their faith is the primary objective; the establishment of an Islamic state forms a very secondary goal.

These two considerations—the region's mercurial politics and the Salafist insistence on *means* rather than *ends* within the political realm—explain one of the greatest ironies in Albani's life. Whereas his iconoclastic positions were so controversial and unpopular during the earlier period of his career, later in life they became the very markers of his moderation in mainstream Muslim societies. This change was likely as much a sign of the changing times as it was a pragmatic personal decision on Albani's part. During the age of Arab nationalism, quiescence to the religious and political status quo represented

2. Joas Wagemakers, for example, equates "quietist" with "apolitical" and elsewhere defines it as follows: "Quietists focus on the propagation of their message (da'wa) through lessons, sermons and other missionary activities and stay away from politics and violence, which they leave to the ruler." See Joas Wagemakers, "A Terrorist Organization that Never Was: The Jordanian 'Bay'at al-Imam' Group," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 68, No. 1, Winter 2014, 59–75, 64; Idem, *A Quietist Jihadi: The Ideology and Influence of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 9. Quintan Wiktorowicz has popularized the term "purist," which he borrows from the International Crisis Group. He explains the term in the context to the present group of Salafists as follows: "they emphasize a focus on nonviolent methods of propagation, purification and education. They view politics as a diversion that encourages deviancy." See Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 29, 2006, 207–239, 208. The term is vague,and is not entirely accurate, as these groups do engage with political issues, albeit they do not overtly acknowledge that these issues are political.
3. For example, providing input on topical affairs motivated the publication of Ali al-Halabi's treatise, *Al-'Udwan al-ghashim 'ala Ghazat Hashim: min 27/12/2008 ila 17/1/2009* (n.l.: n. pub., 2009). Here, Halabi describes the criticism he and his quietist cohort faced from the Jordanian press for their reticence on political developments in Gaza. In his response, Halabi insists that Salafīs have been vocal but that "taking to the streets is not among our aims or known methods." He further criticizes "political parades" for lacking "aims and a core."

the only acceptable position for religious leaders, and this included respecting the religious institutions they patronized. However, from the 1970's onwards, as Islam became a growing and oftentimes destabilizing force on the political stage, certain Arab governments turned to their religious authorities for guidance on neutralizing that influence. In this context, Albani's ideas—particularly his campaign for "purification and education" towards the end of his life, which was both an application of his ideas in the social and political realms and a direct criticism of Islamist agitation—coincidentally also fit neatly with the aims of local governments and the new political challenges they faced.

The Good, The *Bid'a*, and the Ugly: The Salafist Orientation

To understand Albani's political views, it is essential to examine the foundations of the Salafist orientation that he inherited.

Salafism is a literalist Sunni theological and legal orientation that takes its name from the expression "*al-salaf al-salih*" ("the pious predecessors"), a phrase referring to the first three generations of Muslims who represent the religion's "golden age." According to Salafists, these early Muslims most accurately preserved the Prophet Muhammad's statements and actions because they knew him or those close to him. Salafists seek to adhere to the reports of Muhammad's words and deeds (*sunna*) and to avoid innovation (*bid'a*).[4] Albani echoes this sentiment when he writes "my entire purpose in this life, following obedience to God's commands and laws, is familiarizing Muslims through lessons, lectures and books about the correct [understanding of] the life of the Prophet, from all perspectives and to the best of my abilities."[5]

For example, Salafists often challenge the authority of the Islamic legal schools—institutions that for centuries determined basic Islamic customs such as prayer and fasting. Salafists reject these schools because they appeared after the period of the "pious predecessors."[6] Salafist literalism traces its roots to an obscure theological debate in the ninth century between Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 855) and his circle—known as the "People of Hadith" because of their adherence to written reports about the Prophet's words and deeds—and the Mutazilites, a group that embraced reason. While the latter group advocated interpreting the Quranic verses relating to God's attributes, the People of Hadith argued that the Quran must only be understood literally due to its divine nature. For example, they held that the verses pertaining to God's physical attributes (those that allude to His sight, hands, sitting atop His throne) must be understood literally. This stance was historically a minority position and remains a major fault line between Salafists and non-Salafists today.

This emphasis on textual literalism was explained more fully some centuries later by the polymath Taqi al-Din Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), whom Salafists today regard as their main pre-modern scholarly authority, even as they often misinterpret his writings.[7] In addition to authoring a multi-volume work explaining the triumph of scripture over reason, Ibn Taymiyya criticized popular religious practices, particularly grave visitations and mystical rituals) and Shi'ism. He also stipulated the

4. The debate concerning whether *bid'a* is permissible has its roots in the medieval period, with some groups holding that there does exist a "good *bid'a*" that is permissible because it improves religious devotion. One example of this is the minaret, which did not exist during the Prophet Muhammad's time but which improves the appearance of mosques and facilitates religious practice. See See Raquel Margalit Ukeles, *Innovation or Deviation: Exploring the Boundaries of Islamic Devotional Law*, Unpublished Diss. Harvard University, 2006.
5. Albani, *Bidayat al-sul ila tafdil al-rasul*, 7, quoted in 'Abd al-Aziz bin Muhammad al-Sadhan, *al-Imam al-Albani: Durus wa-mawaqif wa-'ibar* (Riyadh: Dar al-Tawhid, 2008), 253–4.
6. Here I should clarify that I distinguish Salafists from Wahhabists. While both share the same theology and pre-modern scholarly authorities, the latter typically adhere to the Hanbali school of law and, in their present form, originate in the teachings of Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792), a preacher concerned with purifying creed and not a legal scholar, and have explicit historical ties to the Saudi state. In contrast, the former originates in a tradition of legal reform dating from the 18th century, with greater geographic scope ranging from Africa to South Asia, and whose proponents explicitly reject the authorities of both legal schools and state. There are of course overlaps, especially with Saudi patronage of Salafi publishing house and institutes around the world, and they draw on the same medieval literature, although their contemporary concerns differ due to their distinct origins. This is in keeping with recent trends in scholarship. See, for example, Daniel Lav, who distinguishes between Albani's Salafism and Saudi Wahhabism by noting that the latter's "principle preoccupation…is creed" and tends to follow the Hanbali *madhhab* [school of law], while the former "has roots…[in] reformers of *fiqh* (jurisprudence)." Daniel Lav, *Radical Islam and the Revival of Medieval Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp.109–10.
7. One example is the so-called "Satanic Verses" incident. See Shahab Ahmed, "Ibn Taymiyyah and the Satanic Verses," *Studia Islamica 87, No.2* (1998): 67–124.

qualifications of being a believer. Significantly, Ibn Taymiyya also attacked the authority of the Islamic legal schools and argued instead for direct scrutiny of the Quran and the hadith as exclusive sources of normative religious practice and faith.

Ibn Taymiyya's views and the orientation of the People of Hadith informed a number of reformist tendencies in the Middle East and Africa in the 18th–19th centuries. Among these was that of Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792) a preacher in Arabia who emphasized *tawhid* (divine unity) and condemned popular practices such as grave visitation. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's pact with Muhammad Ibn Sa'ud (d. 1765) led to the formation of the first Saudi state. His ideas, later known as Wahhabism, remain closely aligned with those of Salafism. For this reason Saudi Arabia currently funds many Salafist centers, publications, and groups. Wahhabism and Salafism differ, however, in that the former is closely aligned with the Saudi state and in legal matters generally follows the Hanbali legal school, whereas Salafists tend to reject allegiances to states and legal schools.

The distinction between the Prophet's example and human innovation forms the basis of the Salafist approach to law and by extension politics. Albani argues "we consider adding to (the *sunna*) a form of opposition to it, since the command with respect to devotional acts is to stop at what the Prophet Muhammad did and to follow him and not to rationally improve and innovate."[8] In other words, following the *sunna* means conforming to the Prophet's actions without adding to them.

Understanding *sunna* and *bid'a* is integral for understanding the Salafist approach to politics. Unlike other less literalist groups, Salafists believe that the entire scope of human activity, rather than religious rituals and beliefs, can be categorized according to whether an act is *sunna* or *bid'a*. This idea helps explain, for example, why many Salafists reject nationalism, political parties, and nation-states. Because the concepts did not exist during the Prophet Muhammad's time, they cannot be considered *sunna* and thus, according to Salafists, proper Muslims have no business participating in them.[9]

8. Albani, *Salat al-ṭarawiḥ* (Damascus: al-Maktab al-Islami, 1958), 89–90.
9. For the most coherent and oft-cited, Salafist case against nationalism see the treatise by 'Abd al-'Aziz b. 'Abd Allah Ibn Baz (d. 1999), the former Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia and one of the leading Salafist authorities in the modern period. Ibn Baz, *Naqd al-qawmiyya al-'Arabiyya 'ala daw' al-Islam wa-l-waqi,'* Sixth edition (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islami, 1988).

The Age of Ideology: Between *Sunna* and State (1945–1961)

Albani began teaching and writing around 1945, initially in the back of his watch repair shop in Damascus and then in homes across the country and at the University of Damascus's College of Sharia. His turn to Salafism a decade earlier had been personal, motivated by his broken relationship with his father. Albani's teenage curiosity in hadith, criticized by his father as a "trade of the bankrupt," transformed into rebellion when it led to conflicts with the Hanafi legal school that his father followed, leading the latter to eventually expel his son from home. It is therefore no surprise that Albani's worldview is characterized by a rejection of the traditional schools of Islamic law, which was for centuries the standard of Islamic practice. While his predecessors at least as far back as Ibn Taymiyya in the 13th–14th century denounced following the schools of law as "blind emulation," Albani called for its elimination altogether. He asserted that Muslims must instead look to the model of the pious predecessors as the earliest and therefore most authentic approach to understanding the religion's texts. For Albani, as for other Salafists, Islamic laws and creeds must be derived directly from the Quran and the hadith rather than through the rational jurisprudential tradition of the Islamic legal schools.

Albani's childhood and early career coincided with immense social and political transformation in the Middle East. Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1924, nascent Arab states fell under the control of European powers and shortly thereafter gained independence and gathered around the increasingly popular secular ideologies of Arab nationalism and socialism. With religious leadership either absent or co-opted by the state, Salafist scholars in Syria, Egypt, and Iraq saw an opportunity to apply their textual literalism to Islamic faith and practice. Seeing the increasing popularity of these new secular ideologies and institutions, which Salafists forbade as foreign to Islam, they sought to remind governments of their religious obligations during these changing times.[10]

During this period, Syrian Muslim Brotherhood members and Salafists were socially indistinguishable, writing in each other's periodicals and teaching in each other's homes and classrooms. The Salafists, however, were most concerned about reviving ritual observance in society, while the Brotherhood prioritized incorporating Islam into modern institutional developments in education and politics.[11] As Joshua Teitelbaum writes, "there was a surprising lack of emphasis on Islam *per se* in the activities of the *Ikhwan* [the Muslim Brotherhood]; indeed,

10. For example, in his *Tahdhir al-sajid min ittikhadh al-qubur masajid* (*A Warning to the Worshipper Concerning Taking Graves for Mosques*), Albani calls on the Saudi king to "return the [Prophet's Mosque in Medina] to how it was during the time of the Companions" by building a separation between the mosque and the site of the Prophet's grave so that worshippers do not pray at the grave. Albani, *Tahdhir al-sajid min ittikhadh al-qubur masajid*, First edition (Damascus: Maktabat Abu Ja'far, 1958): 69–70, 65. His criticism appears to have lasting influence among certain audiences. As recently as September 2014, a Saudi academic issued a 61-page proposal for the removal of the Prophet's tomb, using the euphemism of "expansion" to describe the changes to the mosque. See Andrew Johnson, "Saudis Risk New Muslim Division with Proposal to Move Mohamed's Tomb," *The Independent*, 1 September 2014, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/saudis-risk-new-muslim-division-with-proposal-to-move-mohameds-tomb-9705129.html.
11. One way to understand the distinction between the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafists is through the different regional contexts of both movements. The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria was influenced by the Egyptian debates on educational reform, particularly at al-Azhar University, as well as political engagement in social and political issues that likely motivated its Syrian followers to engage in similar issues in their country. Salafists in Syria, particularly for Albani, were informed by the local heritage of Syrian Salafist predecessors such as Jamal al-Din al-Qasimi (d. 1914). Qasimi called for the revival of hadith study as a way of "rediscovering" the Prophet Muhammad's *sunna*. Qasimi work was influenced by the so-called "Mujtahidun Incident of 1896" in which he and others were put on trial by establishment scholars for seeking to derive Islamic laws solely on the basis of the Qur'an and hadith. My thanks to Alan Verskin for pressing me to explain this distinction in perspective. For more information on the early stages of the Muslim Brotherhood and of Salafism in Syria see, respectively, Richard P. Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); David D. Commins, *Islamic Reform: Politics and Social Change in Late Ottoman Syria* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

at times their activities could not be differentiated from common nationalist politics."[12]

Seeing that even the Muslim Brotherhood, supposed defenders of the Islamic tradition, neglected to guide the masses in religious observance, Albani and a number of Salafist scholars focused their energies on religious scholarship. Seeking to reintroduce hadith as the exclusive source of Islamic Law, during this period Albani published treatises and articles redefining religious and cultural norms according to the hadith.

Often, Albani's hadith-based calculus caused rifts in society and brought him and his cohort negative attention. A periodical in Damascus described "a young Albanian" who "became famous among [the youth] for his service to the hadith," and reported that some of his followers "would stir agitation, and because of this others conspired against their teacher [Albani]."[13] His first pamphlet, *A Warning to the Worshipper Against Taking Graves for Mosques*, argued that prayer was forbidden in the Umayyad Mosque—the largest and most famous in Damascus—because hadith reports suggested the head of John the Baptist is buried below the mosque. Praying there would therefore be tantamount to worshiping a dead saint, which Salafists equate with idolatry. Elsewhere Albani argued for the permissibility of wearing shoes during prayers and for breaking the Ramadan fast at dusk rather than after the call to prayer—both contrary to common Islamic practice.[14]

Albani's 19th century predecessors in Syria were put on trial by the state-sponsored scholars for their radical initiatives to derive the law directly from the Islamic scriptures rather than from institutions or accredited scholars. By the mid-twentieth century, particularly with the establishment of the third Saudi state in 1932, hostilities towards Salafists, (including Albani's cohort) intensified, and opponents designated them with the derogatory label "Wahhabi."[15]

Seeking to redefine social and political norms according to the example of the Prophet, Albani criticized the popular ideology of Arab nationalism. During this period, his writings on hadith identified where such secular ideologies led the masses astray. Like his nineteenth century forebears, Albani challenged the prevalent legal institutions and their laws; however, during his time national politics and state formation took precedence over religious instigation.

Albani's most famous writing during these years, and possibly of his entire life, is his series of works on weak and strong hadith reports, *The Series on Weak and Forged Hadith Reports and Their Bad Influence on the Community* and *The Series on Sound Hadith Reports*, originally published in the Salafist journal *Islamic Civilization*. In these articles he examined hadith reports and discussed their social and political applications.

For example, Albani discussed Arab identity through the hadith "If the Arabs become lowly Islam will become lowly." He wrote that "the strength of Islam is not connected only to Arabs but rather God strengthens it through other believers, as was the case during the period of the Ottoman Empire, especially during its beginning." For Albani, "an Arab has no virtue over a foreigner except through

12. Joshua Teitelbaum, "The Muslim Brotherhood and the 'Struggle for Syria,' 1946–1958 between Accommodation and Ideology," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (May, 2004), pp. 134–58. 136.
13. Muhammad Nasr al-Din al-Albani, "Al-Ta'qib al-ḥathith wa-l-radd 'alayhi" *al-Tamaddun al-Islami*, 22 (1375/1956), pp. 734–40. 734.
14. 'Isam Musa Hadi, *Muhaddith al-'asr al-imam Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani kama 'araftuhu* (al-Jubayl, Saudi Arabia: Dar al-Siddiq, 2003), 95
15. "Wahhabi" literally means "followers of [Muhammad ibn 'Abd] al-Wahhab," the 18th century Najd-based preacher. Wahhabis and Salafists consider the label derogatory because it implies that they are partisan to a person rather than to the understanding of the religion that existed during the Prophet Muhammad's time. More often, Wahhabists would refer to themselves as "Muwahhidun" (those who affirm divine unity and so reject polytheism), from the word *tawhid*. Salafists referred to themselves as "Salafists," or even applied the phrase "people of the *sunna*." A more loaded term that in general Islamic parlance refers to Sunnis, Salafists strategically exploit the term on the basis of their insistence on directly following the *sunna* and avoiding *bid'a*.

piety;" it was only when the Ottoman Empire issued European laws that "their rule shrank from those lands and others until they withdrew from their own lands."[16]

Albani neither explicitly calls for a rejection of the present-day political order nor the construction of a Salafist political movement. However, he does implicitly instruct his followers to privilege the Salafist view of *sunna* over any other identity. At the end of his *The Prayers of the Two Festivals in the Outdoor Prayer Space is Sunna*, Albani responds to a hypothetical concern that his new approach to law might cause divisions in society. He writes that "reviving this *sunna* requires the foundation of a new group that calls upon all these other disparate groups in the many mosques" whose aim is "to gather all the [other] groups into one, just as it was during the time of the Prophet and that of the Rightly-Guided Caliphs."[17]

Albani avoided direct political engagement or criticism during this period of his life. Nonetheless, his integration of political observations into religious instructions suggests that politics directly affects religious life. Thus, rather than advocate for any new categories of political involvement or association, Albani aimed to advise the political institutions and governments of his time to protect religious observance and faith in the face of significant social and political change.

16. Albani, "Silsilat al-ahadith al-da'ifa: 21," *al-Tamaddun al-Islami* 22 (1375/1956): 748–53, 752–3. Emphasizing the superiority of Arab ethnicity due to its relationship to Islam, Albani writes elsewhere, "This does not deny the fact that the Arab ethnicity is better than that of other nations, and this is what I believe—despite my being Albanian, I am Muslim, thank God—and that which I mentioned about the virtue of the Arabs is what the Sunnis follow....But it is important that the Arab not take pride in his ethnicity since that is the stuff of *jahiliyya* [Pre-Islamic "ignorance"] which our Arab prophet nullified...just as he should not forget the reason for the Arab right to virtue...and that is what they have been endowed with in their minds, tongues, traits and actions, the matter that has made them suited (for pride) is that they are carriers of the Islamic call to the other nations, and when the Arab knows this and preserves this then he will be able to be an upright member in carrying the Islamic call. But if he gives this up then he has no aspect of virtue but rather the foreigner who acts with Islamic traits is better than him without doubt, since true virtue is following what the Prophet sent of faith and knowledge..."
17. Albani, *Salat al-'idayn fi l-musalla kharij al-balad hiyya l-sunna*, Third edition (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islami, 1952, 1984) (Amman: al-Maktaba al-Islamiyya, 1987), 38.

Crashing the Party: The Problem of Political Factions (1961–1981)

1961 was a pivotal year in Albani's career. He was invited to teach at the Islamic University of Medina (IUM), an institution of great strategic importance to Saudi Arabia at the time.[18] The country's first Islamic university, IUM served a dual domestic and foreign policy purpose when it was founded.[19] On the domestic front, Crown Prince Faysal wanted to assuage the concerns of conservative clerics who were unhappy with the recent establishment of the secular Riyadh University in 1957. At the same time, Faysal sought to promote a kind of pan-Islamic unity to counteract Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser's secular Arab nationalism. The establishment of IUM in the Prophet Muhammad's final resting place of Medina directly challenged al-Azhar University, the premier Islamic institution that Nasser had recently nationalized. From its beginning, the IUM—to this day the country's only all-male institution of higher education—enrolled and staffed predominantly foreign students and faculty members, many of whom were members of the Muslim Brotherhood expelled from Egypt and other countries.

Wahhabi Islam was central to the university's curriculum. Although IUM was part of an educational system "at the service of the [Muslim] Brotherhood"[20]—owing to the high numbers of Brotherhood members who staffed these universities and helped shape their curricula—the Brothers had little influence on creedal issues.[21] One could not move up in the ranks in the university system unless one adopted the Wahhabi creed.

Given his unpopular legal views that eventually led to his expulsion from Saudi Arabia in 1963, Albani realized the importance of explicitly integrating this Wahhabi theology into his formulation of Salafism.[22]

In addition to serving as a tool for rapprochement with the Kingdom, the Albani also used Wahhabi creed to criticize Islamist groups. Recognizing the ideological spectrum of Islamist groups prompted Albani to frame Salafism through a pure and original method, in order to distinguish his group from all other movements. Some years later he wrote, "in our classes and lectures we beseech (students) that when we proselytize it is not enough to call people to follow the Quran and the *sunna*, but we must also add 'according to the model of the pious predecessors' or the like…this is necessary especially today, when the call to the Quran and *sunna* has become the fashion of the age, and the call of all Is-

18. For the most comprehensive study on this institution to date, see Michael Farquhar, "The Islamic University of Medina since 1961: the Politics of Religious Mission and the Making of a Modern Salafi Pedagogy," in M. Bano and K. Sakurai, eds. *Globalizing Islam: al-Azhar, al-Medina and al-Mustafa* (Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming).
19. Ibid.
20. Stéphane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia*, trans. George Holoch (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 42–8.
21. The creedal curriculum was shaped by the influx of non-Saudi Salafist scholars, such as Albani. See Farquhar, "The Islamic University of Medina since 1961."
22. For more on Albani's time in Saudi Arabia, see Stéphane Lacroix, "Between Revolution and Apoliticism: Nasir al-Din al-Albani and his Impact on the Shaping of Contemporary Salafism," in *Global Salafism*, 58–80. Lacroix summarizes the conditions under which Albani was hired to teach at the university and subsequently dismissed, only to be granted "symbolic rehabilitation" when he was invited to join the university's High Council. This summary is the most detailed published account of Albani's relationship with Saudi Arabia, in either English or Arabic. It is worth noting that I have not come across this account in hagiographical biographies of Albani, which typically focus on his contributions to the university's instruction of hadith and advocacy for divine unity. In chapter six of my forthcoming dissertation, I discuss Albani's experience in Saudi Arabia and provide a detailed assessment of his writings on theology, which he began publishing after he left the country. I argue, based on both his tense experiences there and a distinct change in his rhetoric and bibliographic record from the early 1960's onwards in which he begins to address theological concepts *on their own terms* (i.e. without reference to hadith, his declared area of expertise), that this represented a clear campaign to reclaim his Wahhabi credentials. See Jacob Olidort, *In Defense of Tradition: Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani and the Salafi Method* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton University, 2015) (*forthcoming*).

lamic groups and Islamic missionaries…even while there are those among them who are enemies of the sunna in practice, and who claim that calling to it causes unnecessary divisions."[23]

Albani began to criticize Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood because, he felt, they rushed into popular mobilization through forming political parties. By prioritizing the political arena over the theological, Albani felt that they promoted an incorrect version of Islam—one that erroneously conflated traditional teachings with modern politics. He would later say that Brotherhood members "gather around any ideas, cultures and traits that come to mind."[24] Elsewhere, Albani explains that although Islamists' "interest lies in Islamic ethics and educating their followers about politics and economics…We see some of them not even praying, all the while calling to establish an Islamic society and Islamic governance. How preposterous! For an Islamic society cannot be realized unless its call resembles that of the Prophet's call to God…"[25]

Until this point, Albani had enjoyed amicable relations with the Muslim Brotherhood. He wrote in their journals and taught in their classrooms in Damascus, and his longtime publisher Zuhayr al-Shawish (d. 2013) was a prominent member of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood.

Two personal and ideological factors seemed to have influenced Albani's turn against the Muslim Brotherhood. The first was his realization that he, unlike the Muslim Brotherhood, could gain the favor of the Saudi state by explicitly incorporating the Saudi Wahhabi creed into his own worldview. The Brotherhood's political activism drew the disapproval of the Saudi state, with its ever-cautious monarchy. Indeed, the Brotherhood's radical Qutbist strain directly influenced the country's Sahwa Movement several decades later.[26] The second, and related, factor was his anticipation of the waning popularity and success of the Brotherhood's political mobilization in other Arab states.

By contrast, Albani's incorporation of the Saudi Wahhabi creed into his teachings was a natural extension of his insistence on following the method of the pious predecessors, since Wahhabism drew on the same theological tradition of Ibn Hanbal that Albani prized. Albani's strategy was effective: Saudi Arabia formally restored his reputation in January 1999 by awarding him the King Faysal Prize for Islamic Studies for his "service to the Prophetic hadith." The text of the award mentions that "Shaykh al-Albani is considered a scholarly figure and founder of a distinguished school."[27]

The Brotherhood's opportunistic streak pushed the group to incite political change at any cost, consistently inciting repression at the hands of secular Arab regimes. After the Brotherhood's attempted assassination plot, Nasser ousted or incarcerated many Brotherhood members in a prison system that became notorious for both its brutality and for the radical groups that took shape in its cells.[28] The

23. Albani, *Sifat salat al-nabi Ṣifa* (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Ma'arif), 25.
24. Hadi, *Muhaddith al-'Asr*, 92. In an introduction to one work, Albani includes the following colorful anecdote as evidence of the Islamists' waywardness: "So long as I live I will never forget this discussion that took place about ten years ago in Medina [1962] with one of the preachers and sermonizers…who visited us during a pleasant evening at which were gathered a group of Salafist students such as myself…[The visitor said]: we live at a time during which Muslims are surrounded by strife (*fitan*) from every side, and these [forms of] strife touch at the very core of faith and creed. [Here Albani paraphrases that the visitor mentioned 'the atheist Communists, Nationalists and other unbelievers' as those causes of strife.] It is incumbent upon us all to unite in fighting these [aforementioned] groups and to defend against their threat to the Muslims, and put aside discussions and debates about matters of juridical disagreement such as issues of the night prayer and intercession and the like!" See Shams al-Din al-Dhahabi, *Mukhtaṣar al-'Uluw li-l-'ali al-ghaffar*, ed. Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani (Damascus, Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islami, 1981), 58.
25. Ibid., 59.
26. For more on the Sahwa movement, see Stéphane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia*, trans. George Holoch (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).
27. "*Barā'at jā'izat al-malik Fayṣal al-'ālamiyya li-l-dirāsāt al-Islāmiyya*,"15–18 Ramaḍān 1419/5–6 January 1999, reprinted in Sarhan, *al-Imam al-Albani*, 230.
28. Among these were *al-Takfir wa-l-Hijra*, Ayman al-Zawahiri's *al-Jihad* (one of whose members assassinated Egyptian President Anwar Sadat), and *al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya* of Omar 'Abd al-Rahman (the "Blind shaykh"), mastermind of the 1993 World Trade Center attacks.

repression of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists intensified in Syria under the Ba'thist government of Hafiz al-Asad, most famously during the 1982 crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood in the city of Hama, which led to tens of thousands of casualties. Despite his ideological differences with the Muslim Brotherhood, Albani was also subject to Ba'thist repression, and was imprisoned twice in 1969 and placed under house arrest in the late 1970's.

Albani additionally nursed a lifelong grudge against the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's Supreme Guide 'Abd al-Fattah Abu Ghudda. Abu Ghudda was also incarcerated in the 1960's (presumably for his association with the Brotherhood) but spent the 1970's and 1980's safely criticizing the Assad government from his residence in Saudi Arabia; he was later rehabilitated by Bashar al-Asad's government before his death. Unlike Albani, Abu Ghudda—an avowed follower of the same legal school against which Albani rebelled during his youth—also secured a position as a professor of hadith in Saudi Arabia. Although Albani predicates his criticisms on Abu Ghudda's knowledge of hadith, identification with a legal school, and association with the Saudi government, Abu Ghudda's prominent Muslim Brotherhood affiliation likely shaped Albani's negative impression.[29]

Although Albani's deployment of creed to undermine other Islamists proved effective, it became a double-edged sword in his engagement with jihadists. While jihadists were equally committed to creed they understand creedal definitions of "true" Muslims very differently.

29. For Albani's extensive criticism of Abu Ghudda, see the introduction to Albani, *Sharh al-'Aqida al-Tahawiyya*, Eighth Edition (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islami, 1984).

"Purification and Education": A Practical Approach (1981–1999)

From the late 1970's Islam began to replace Arab nationalism as the language of popular politics in the Middle East. In addition to the growing prominence of the Muslim Brotherhood, the region's oldest Islamist group, the 1979 Iranian Revolution and subsequent takeover of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by a zealous messianic group awakened the world to Islam's potential as a social and political force. Saudi Arabia felt the pangs of religious unrest in 1991, when Saudi students protested against the nation's consent to host US troops during Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. These protestors argued that the state had betrayed its reputation as protector of Islam by partnering with unbelievers and thereby "ruling by other than what God revealed"—a phrase that thereafter became a slogan for these groups and their followers, who condemned other Arab governments for partnering with Western governments and legislating secular laws.

But just as Islamist political rhetoric was heating up, Albani began to adopt a cooler approach to political engagement characterized by restraint and moderation. In 1981 he settled in Jordan, after both the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia 'Abd al-'Aziz ibn Baz—Albani's former host in Saudi Arabia and lifelong ally—and one of his students interceded with King Hussein to allow Albani to re-enter the country.[30] He would spend the rest of his life in Jordan. He had been ousted from the country several months earlier after Jordanian security raided his home in search of cassettes they believed to be sources of radicalization. This stigma in his new home, combined with hostile conditions in Syria and his mixed history with Saudi Arabia, likely contributed a new, pragmatic tone to his ideas.

By this time, Albani's campaign to institute a methodology had received an international following, helped, no doubt, through his partnership with IUM and Ibn Baz. He had already gained a reputation for his opposition to Islamist groups and political parties. In the remaining years of his life he sought to translate these ideas into a forward-looking social and political program, which for his students would remain the crowning legacy of his career.

"Purification and education,"[31] as Albani named it, called for "purifying the (Islamic) creed of whatever false and ruinous beliefs, corruptions, and forms of polytheism entered it, and purifying the *sunna* of everything than entered it that is foreign to it." Likewise, the program aims to "purify the law from the views and innovations that entered it and which contradict the sound texts." Once these initial steps are achieved, the third phase consists of "educating oneself first, then those around him second, according to what has been established as correct from the Prophet Muhammad."[32]

Rather than a submissive call to political restraint, "purification and education" was in fact intended as the foundation for building an Islamic state and society. "When we examine the experiences of Islamic groups that have been around for about a century, and their ideas and practices, we find that many of them have neither benefitted nor given any benefit, despite their clamor and noise, in their aim of (establishing) an Islamic government," Albani writes.[33]

30. Al-Sadhan, *al-Imam al-Albani*, 261.
31. Although by some accounts Albani allegedly coined this phrase during a prior visit to Jordan in the early 1970's, he himself admits that what distinguishes Salafism in Jordan is the fact that it "is founded upon two bases, 'purification and education.'" See Albani, "Hukm ta 'addud al-jama'at al-hizbiyya," http://www.alalbany.net/3392 Accessed 30 September 2014; Idem, *al-Tasfiya wa-l-tarbiyya wa-hajat al-Muslimin ilayhima* (Amman: al-Maktaba al-Islamiyya, 2000), 3.
32. Albani, *al-Tasfiya wa-l-tarbiyya*, 3–4.
33. Albani, *al-Tahdhir min fitnat al-ghuluw fi l-takfir*, ed. Ali b. Hasan al-Halabi (Cairo: Dar al-Minhaj, 2005), 74.

In his treatise on the subject, Albani suggests "purification and education" as an alternative to the Islamist parties' rush to form Islamic states. "When we call for establishing an Islamic state, this state must have a clear constitution with clear laws. Upon which legal school should such a constitution be founded? And according to which legal school should this legal constitution be explained?!"[34] He goes on to instruct that "without these two introductory steps (of purification and education) it is impossible, in my opinion, to build a pillar of Islam or Islamic government or an Islamic state."[35] Albani summarized his program with the following motto: "Build an Islamic state in your hearts, and it shall be built for you on your land."[36]

Critical of the political Islamists for their lax approach to religious instruction, Albani instead called upon religious scholars to institute this program. He writes that, "It is incumbent upon the scholars to guide the education of the new Muslim youth in light of what has been established in the Quran and the *sunna*, and it is not permissible to call to people according to the teachings and errors they have inherited, some of them being decidedly false."[37]

Albani's program held political implications for the Palestinian question, and the jihad causes in Algeria and Afghanistan. When asked whether Palestinians in the West Bank should leave their land to escape repression, Albani replied that "It is obligatory for them to leave a land in which they have no power to expel the unbeliever, for a land in which they are able to establish the Islamic observances." thereby emphasizing the religious obligation of migration.[38] In support of his position—which, he clarifies, applies not only to Palestinians but to oppressed Muslims in all lands facing such conditions—he explains that "Mecca is greater than Palestine, yet nonetheless Muslims migrated from there and, moreover, at their helm was our Prophet Muhammad and his Companions who migrated to Ethiopia, a land of unbelief, when they saw they could not practice their religion."[39] The underlying logic seemingly prioritizes the Islamic religious duty of migration over the nationalist and political sensibilities of Arab Muslims. Albani's views were thus met with harsh criticisms from his Arab contemporaries.[40]

Albani also condemned waging jihad in Algeria during the Algerian Civil war, on the grounds that jihadists are comparably weak and therefore destined to fail. Once again looking to the example of the Prophet Muhammad, Albani asks rhetorically, "Did the Prophet [Muhammad] wage jihad in Mecca?" alluding to the early period when the Muslim community was outnumbered and fled to Medina rather than fight their oppressors in Mecca.[41]

Albani was more ambiguous on the subject of waging jihad against Soviets in Afghanistan. Although he nominally prohibited non-Afghans from waging jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan due to the lack of proper religious intention in this context he defends the *principle* of jihad in such circumstances. Citing the classical distinction between the jihad waged by a select group on behalf of the community, and that waged by every member of the community, Albani explains that in theory everyone must participate in the jihad against unbelievers who oppress Muslims. In this context, jihad is justified for its defensive purposes, and "no one may delay performing this obligation." He cites the case of the anti-religious Soviet forces fighting Muslims as a prime example of this obligatory defensive jihad. However, as a prereq-

34. Albani, *al-Tasfiya wa-l-tarbiyya*, 27.
35. Ibid., 31. See Sadhan, *al-Imam al-Albani*, 249.
36. Albani described this statement as a "summary of all that I have said…and which in my opinion is like a divine inspiration." Although Albani never attributed this phrase, it was in fact originally said by Hasan al-Hudaybi, the Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood after Hasan al-Banna, which is ironic given Albani's opposition to the Brotherhood.
37. Albani, *al-Tasfiyya wa-l-tarbiyya*, 29–30.
38. See Alan Verskin, *Oppressed in the Land? Fatwās on Muslims Living under Non-Muslim Rule from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2013), pp. 151–2.
39. Sadhan, *al-Imam al-Albani*, 284.
40. For one example, see that of Muhammad Sa'id Ramadan al-Buti in Verskin, *Oppressed*, 153–5.
41. Abu Razan al-Jaza'iri, "Al-Shaykh al-Albani yufahhim sa'il Jaza'iri 'an hukm al-jihad fi l-Jaza'ir – kalam min dhahab," YouTube video, 16 January 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ghJLgXzZ5XY.

uisite Muslims must first conduct their own "internal jihad," affirming within themselves that they are fighting on behalf of God and not on behalf of any other cause. "The issue is not only of Afghanistan… but is also in Palestine as well. But the unfortunate reality is that despite the clear legal obligation of jihad waged by the entire community, they are not able to do so either through their governments or their people. This is so because Muslims have forgotten about their personal jihad to which the Prophet [Muhammad] referred, 'the fighter is one who exerts his energy towards God.'"[42]

Albani also regarded secular political institutions with suspicion. He criticized elections and parliaments, writing that "every Muslim raised with a sound Islamic upbringing knows that elections and parliaments are not Islamic systems. But many who have had an Islamic upbringing mistakenly believe that the parliament is like the Islamic (concept of) consultation, and this is most certainly not the case…and so we can say that the parliament is not founded upon the Quran and the *sunna*."[43] Elsewhere, he condemns Muslim participation in Arab parliaments because "the ends do not justify the means,' since (the idea of) entering parliament to achieve reform is fiction….since most of those in parliament are not Islamic (in their ways)."[44]

Writing on political reform, Albani explains "we view it as essential to begin with 'purification and education' together, rather than beginning with political matters. Those who are preoccupied with politics may very well have devastatingly ruinous beliefs, and their Islamic ways may be far from the divine law."[45] Therefore, he explains elsewhere that "reform is not achieved through creating political parties and creating divisions… since the Quran and the *sunna* prohibit creating divisions."[46] Besides their un-Islamic origins, Islamic political parties fall short of achieving their aims, and Albani goes on to explain that "reform is not achieved through creation of political parties since, as we have seen in the last half-century, political parties do not bring about religious welfare but rather…divides Muslims and drives them away from Islamic traits."[47]

In his writings on contemporary issues, Albani emphasized the primacy of "correct" Islamic education in Muslim communities. One student recalled a conversation with Albani after the student's visit to Spain. Hearing about their freedom of worship there, and how one Spanish city even facilitated parking for Muslims during the 'id holiday, Albani exclaimed, "God is Great! Muslims have experienced in the lands of the unbelievers the kind of justice and freedom that they have not experienced in the lands of Islam!"[48]

Albani's calls to re-introduce Islamic creed to Muslim communities and to define Islamic approaches to political and social events became especially pronounced during this later period because of his engagement with a distinctly new phenomenon: Salafist-jihadism. Albani became a persona non grata among Salafist-jihadists for his views on *takfir*, or excommunication based on belief. Albani's position on neglecting prayer particularly drew the ire of the jihadists. In a 1992 pamphlet on "The Ruling Concerning One Who Neglects Prayer," as well as in audio-recorded classes, Albani argues that one who does not pray, whether deliberately or accidentally, has "committed an act of unbelief" but is not considered an unbeliever. In other words, while there is no question that the person transgressed, he remains a believer by virtue of his pronouncing the Islamic attestation of faith.

42. Akaber Al Elm, "Ma hukm al-jihad fi Afghanistan li-ghayr al-Afghaniyyin? Al-Shaykh al-Albani," YouTube video, 19 October 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EIsglzP-Z6I.
43. Ahmad Mustafa, "Fatwa al-shaykh al-Albani fi hukm al-intikhabat al-barlimaniyya khati'at al-hizb al-Salafi," YouTube video, 5 December 2011. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xW9-OpJxv3c.
44. Muhammad Amin, "Dakhalu al-barliman li-l-islah fa-fasadu (nasihat al-shaykh al-Albani)," YouTube video, 2 October 2011 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ywq4AsVlVLs.
45. Shaybani, *Hayat al-Albani*, 378.
46. Ahl al-sunna, "Su'al al-Huwayni li-l-Albani 'an al-intikhabat wa-l-ahzab," YouTube video, 6 October 2011 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rUMORj5GSk4.
47. Ibid.
48. Isam b. Musa al-Hadi, *Muhaddith al-'asr*, 110–1.

Belief Versus Action: Views of Different Islamic Schools

The relationship between actions and belief lies at the heart of the Salafist-jihadist worldview and is one of the oldest debates in Islamic history. The aforementioned school of Ahmad ibn Hanbal held that belief is affirmed "in the heart, on the tongue and in actions"—one's actions are expressions of one's beliefs. His opponents, the Murji'ites ("those who defer [judgment]"), argued that belief is found in the heart and that judgment about one's status as a believer is deferred to the Hereafter. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab revived Ibn Hanbal's views in claiming that one's belief could be nullified by one's actions. The concept reemerged in the twentieth century in the writings of the radical Egyptian ideologue Sayyid Qutb, who described his Egyptian society as being in a state of pre-Islamic ignorance (jahiliyya), making those who live there by definition unbelievers. His followers, known as Qutbists, as well as Salafist-jihadists, borrowed this formulation of takfir in deeming other Muslims, especially Muslim rulers, untrue Muslims because they do not enforce Islamic laws.

By this time, Jordan, particularly the city of Zarqa near Albani's residence, had become a hub for Salafist-jihadists, the most famous of whom, al-Qa'ida's leader in Iraq, Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, was killed by the U.S. in Iraq in 2006. Albani condemned the group for its excesses in *takfir*, which had earned them the derogatory label "Takfiris." The label deliberately distinguishes them from the "Salafist" label.

The subject of *takfir* became a top priority for Albani in the last years of his life. It was the subject of his last written work—a forward to a student's publication—which remained incomplete due to his urgent hospitalization prior to his death in 1999. He writes in the forward that, "the unbelief for which one is removed from the community is the unbelief of the heart, which sometimes appears in speech…and occasionally through actions, such as haughtiness of not submitting to the divine law." He attacks "extremists" for excommunicating governments simply on the basis of their not implementing divine law, without investigating "whether or not that action reflects what is in their hearts."[49]

Albani's 1996 treatise on *takfir*, *A Warning Against the Discord of Excommunication*, addresses excommunicating Muslim rulers for not ruling on the basis of what God revealed, and thereby, in jihadist parlance, violating God's sovereignty. Albani explains that though governments may commit "actions of unbelief," this does not in any way negate their "belief in the heart"—the sole arbiter of belief. He bases this argument on a central tenet stipulating that committing an act of unbelief does not remove someone from the community—there can be "(an act of) unbelief without (total) unbelief."[50]

Albani used this rationale to condemn the Salafist-jihadists, explaining that "you cannot…judge each and every ruler who governs based on heretical Western laws that if he were asked about 'ruling by other than what God revealed' he would answer that 'ruling based on these laws is the correct way of these times and that ruling based on Islamic laws is prohibited.'" If the words and deeds of rulers do not acknowledge the legitimacy of divine laws, they should be considered unbelievers themselves. Albani points to a contradiction in the jihadists' worldview, challenging them for "judg[ing][rulers] to be unbelievers on the basis of their living under the exact same system under which you live! And yet you call them apostates."[51]

Albani distances jihadists groups from Salafism by affixing them with the derogatory term "Takfiris."

49. Hadi, *Muhaddith al-'asr*, 75–7.
50. Albani, *Fitnat al-takfir*, 61–2.
51. Ibid., 64–5.

He explains they do not follow the traditional regulations of waging jihad but instead coalesce around an incorrect notion of *takfir*. Returning to his emphasis on "method," he indicates that simply calling to the Quran and sunna is not enough for one to be a Salafist; rather, one must be of "sound, complete and upright method."[52] Much like with his criticism of the Brotherhood, "method" becomes a tool for isolating errant Islamic practice while providing definition and structure to his own group: "Muslims may not stop at simply understanding the Quran and *sunna* through tools of understanding, such as language but they must refer to what the Prophet's Companions did."[53]

Albani also refers to jihadists as "Kharijites" ("those who removed themselves [from the community]"), referencing an early Islamic sect known for their excesses in *takfir*. The Kharijites infamously assassinated the fourth caliph and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, Ali ibn Abi Talib. The reference to the early Islamic period, again, is meant to highlight the distinction between jihadists and Salafists who followed the correct "method."

As with other contemporary political issues, Albani's addressed the rise of takfir through his call to "purification and education." In his treatise on takfir, he pleas: "it is incumbent upon all Muslims, especially those who are interested in establishing Islamic rule, to begin where the Prophet Muhammad began, with two light words, 'purification and education.'" In contrast, he writes, "these extremists have nothing [to their approach] but the excommunication of rulers," which, in turn, caused them to commit "great discord in the Great Mosque of Mecca, then in Egypt, killing Sadat, and recently in Syria, and now in Egypt and Algeria."[54]

In light of the gains of the global jihadist movement from 2001 until the present day, Albani's calls to moderate Islamic political activism as an alternative to violence have become ever more timely. His students in Jordan diligently carried on this non-violent legacy: they approach politics with caution and moderation, being situated, as one of their followers eloquently explained to me, in "the land of the middle." The Arabic word for "middle" refers to Jordan's geographic location in the "middle" of the region's conflicts and, therefore, its moderate political orientation.

52. Ibid., 64.
53. Ibid., 55.
54. Ibid., 72.

Albani's Legacy: Political Quietism or Islamic Realism?

Jordan has become the nerve center for Albani's legacy. Aiming to preserve their teacher's legacy, Albani's students established the Imam Albani Center for Research and Scholarly Studies outside of Amman, where they operate bookshops, websites, study circles, conferences and, until recently, a periodical. Contrary to traditional Islamic scholarship in which students claim links to multiple teachers with different specializations, Albani's students regard him as their primary teacher. Albani's Jordanian students are from Gaza, the West Bank or Jordan, and some have militant pasts.[55] These commonalities are significant in Jordan, where Palestinians comprise a demographic majority and are also regarded as potential sources of destabilization. Because of this stigma—much like in Albani's case—these students employ avowedly anti-jihadist and, in some cases highly pro-monarchical, rhetoric in their work.[56]

As Palestinian Jordanians, Albani's students are able to address political issues relevant to Palestinians and other Arab communities with a degree of closeness that Albani—an Albanian—could not. Sweeping analyses of Middle Eastern Islamic groups often overlook the fact that many Salafists are Arabs and thus hold Arab personal and familial sensibilities. Albani's students carry the mantle of their teacher in promoting the "correct" approach to the study of Islamic creed and hadith, framing their studies as "methodological" and appending the label "al-Athari" ("scripturalist") to their names to signify their commitment to his approach. These students also consistently comment on Arab political causes, particularly those holding religious implications, such as the Syrian conflict.

Albani's students—composed mainly of university professors and mosque preachers—dissociate their group from Salafist-jihadists, whom they call "Takfiris," "extremists," and "terrorists," and assert that Salafist-jihadists have corrupted the Salafist name and method.[57] They define Salafism as "the method of belief, safety, and security," a phrase with a particular rhythm in Arabic (*manhaj al-iman wa-l-aman wa-l-amaan)*. Conscious of the antagonism they face from jihadists, they address their writings not specifically to jihadist leaders but to journalists and academic experts on Islam in order to fulfill their teacher's instructions of "education" about the correct Islam while demonstrating their wide literacy.

Ali al-Halabi is one of the group's leaders, and disseminates many of Albani's previously unpublished works on his website. Halabi has also authored works defining Salafism, both as a larger concept and within the specific context in Jordan. Writing on the depiction of Salafism in the media, Halabi clarifies that "Salafism does not permit terrorism or the killing of innocent civilians," adding that after 9/11 "Salafism has appeared in many media outlets in a negative, erroneous, and disorganized way."[58] In a different work on the history of Salafism in Jordan, Halabi links the emergence of his Salafist community there with the "acts of violence and terrorism in Iraq and Pakistan...and the killing of Muslims…all of which go against the core of Is-

55. Basim al-Jawabra, a professor of Islamic creed at the University of Jordan, explains that he used to belong to a takfiri group in Jordan in his youth until Albani persuaded him to join his ranks. Sadhan, *al-Imam al-Albani*, 157–8.
56. This is the case with Ali al-Halabi, for example, considered one of the group's leaders, who gave a speech before King Abdullah II following the 2005 suicide bombings in Amman and has cited the King's writings and speeches in his religious treatises. Indeed, Jordan's jihadists—ever opposed to Arab governments—call him a "Murji'ite," as they had termed Albani.
57. See, for example, the 2004 conference hosted by Albani's students, published as *al-Tatarruf wa-l-ghuluw wa-l-irhab: asbabuhu, mazahiruhu 'ilajuhu*, Silsilat al-Nadwat al-'Ilmiyya, Markaz al-Imam al-Albani li-l-Dirasat al-Manhajiyya wa-l-Abhath al-'Ilmiyya (Amman: al-Dar al-Athariyya, 2004), 15.
58. Ali al-Halabi, *Hadhahi hiyya al-Salafiyya: Da'wat al-iman wa-l-aman wa-l-amaan, al-manhajiyya al-'ilmiyya al-tarbawiyya wa-kashf al-athaar al-tadmiriyya wa-takfiriyya* (n.l., www.kulalsalafiyeen.com, 2011), 5–6.

lam." He explains that his group "saw it as (our) obligation to serve as a front against these evil movements that Islam opposes."[59] In an effort to distance his own group from jihadists, Halabi explains "we Salafists have a legal, clear and correct position with respect to these big events, derived from our scholarly examinations and from our methodological principles." He adds that "(Salafism) is not only a call to jihad," showing that jihadists do not rely on established methods for waging jihad.

Halabi and his cohort demonstrate that, far from quiescence, quietists engage with political developments—and even stipulate the correct framework for waging jihad—at a rhetorical level. Like Albani, Halabi argues that in contrast to the violence of Salafist-jihadists and the political activism of Islamists, Salafists resort to an established "method." As other Islamic groups lack this "method," Halabi's group should frame major contemporary political developments in a "proper" Islamic context.

Other Albani students also apply their Salafist worldview to contemporary politics. In his work *The Politics that Salafists Seek*, Mashhur ibn Hasan Al Salman separates "political" policy—how a nation conducts its domestic and foreign affairs—from a "[religious] legal" (Sharia) policy, a classical Islamic concept defining how Muslim rulers implement laws in accordance with the aims of religious law. Al Salman argues that the notion of "policy" exists in Islamic sources as a component of religious law, and therefore "policy" necessarily agrees with the Islamic holy texts, which "encompass everything that benefits the affairs of people."[60]

Salman argues that in order to achieve positive reform through this definition of "policy," Muslims must first be educated and redirected to the foundations of their religion. Citing the Qur'anic verse "God does not change anything in a people until they change what is inside themselves," (Q. 13:11), he explains that this process of redirection must happen through gradual change. "What is meant by 'change'," he writes, "is that [the process] have bases and foundations…since part of the word 'policy' (siyasa) is foundation (*ta'asis*), which is the work of preachers, students of religion, sermonizers, and those who command right and forbid wrong."[61] Salman also compares the zeal of political parties to the more levelheaded Salafist approach of "advice-giving and guidance." This approach, Salman explains, stems from an interest in serving religious knowledge, since "its benefits extend to all people."[62]

Salman also cautions his readers against explicit political engagement: "If we were to enter the political arena, we would have done so loudly…and we would lead the entire community to attain its rights, for the easiest thing for us to do is to practice what we describe." However, Salman notes that a leader who says to his citizens "You have been denied your rights, and I want to give them to you" is less authentic than a leader claiming the traditionally grounded "You have strayed from the principles of your religion, and I wish to guide you."[63] By emphasizing religious principles over citizens' rights, Salman shows that Salafists can engage with political concerns so long as they are framed within their proper religious contexts.

Albani's ideology also serves as a framework for his followers in confronting the region's major challenges. Because of its sectarian dimension, the Syrian conflict represents an opportunity for Salafists to align themselves with a pan-Arab cause while adhering to their method. Halabi has criticized Bashar al-Asad's actions as expressions of his Alawite Shi'ite background. In a highly sectarian tone, he condemns Alawites and Shi'ites on the basis of Asad's actions in Syria, calling them "greater unbelievers than Jews

59. Ali al-Halabi, *Mujmal tarikh al-da 'wa al-Salafiyya fi l-diyar al-Urduniyya: nasha'tan wa-intisharan* (Amman: al-Athariyya, 2009), 9–10.
60. Mashhur ibn Hasan Al Salman, *al-Siyasa allati yuriduha al-Salafiyyun* (n.l.: n.pub., 2005), 14, 16.
61. Ibid., 50–2.
62. Ibid., 53.
63. Ibid., 53. By this last line he suggests that one who frames a political platform in the context of "rights," rather than "religious principles," is likely to win more popularity in the political arena.

and Christians," after Ibn Taymiyya.[64] Halabi writes "Despite our well-known opposition to demonstrations and rallies…what is happening in Syria…is a defeat for Muslims and Islam…while some consider Alawites unbelievers, we say 'nay, they are not even Muslims in the first place."

Albani's students have also applied his ideology to contemporary Palestinian conflict. In a treatise on Israel's 2008 war in Gaza—written to deflect his opponents' criticism of Salafist inaction on Palestine—Halabi prioritizes the oppression of Muslims over Palestinian identity or statehood. "Taking to the streets is neither our aim nor among our known methods," he writes, condemning "passionate political rallies, lacking both aim and core." Halabi quotes the book of his colleague Mashhur ibn Hasan Al Salman, *Salafists and the Palestinian Question:* "victory (in this conflict) is impossible without the correct creedal and methodological edifices, and these are the most important means towards victory after [material and physical] preparations."

In keeping with their historical stance on Salafist-jihadists, Albani's followers condemn ISIS as "a jihadist takfiri group."[65] They reject the ISIS self-proclaimed caliphate as "not being based on God's *sunna*"[66] and further argue that even other jihadist groups such as Al Qaeda have deemed it too extreme.[67] Ali al-Halabi and Mashhur Al Salman cite ISIS's wayward actions to remind followers of the importance of adhering to the correct method: by not following this method, ISIS "drowns itself and others in error."[68]

Similarly, Salman (who pejoratively describes ISIS members as Kharijites) dismisses the idea that they are a "temporary movement," stressing that "Kharijism is a method that will remain until the Day of Judgment, appearing and receding at different times."[69] For Al Salman, the rise of ISIS must be seen in the context of Iraq's Shi'ite majority population. He explains "when the Shi'ites show their horns,[70] you should look for the Kharijites and you will find them. When you find the Kharijites, look for the Shi'ites and you will find them. For the Kharijites and the Shi'ites are two sides of the same story from the beginning."

64. Abu Talha al-Athari, "Ra'y al-shaykh 'ali al-Halabi fi-ma yahduth fi Suriya," YouTube video, 9 September 2011. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PbO77xTlUgg. See also Ali al-Halabi, "*Kalima Haqq 'ilmiyya fi ahdath Suriyya*," (n.l.: www.kulalsalafiyeen.com, 2012).
65. Ali al-Halabi, "*Kalimat shaykhina Ali al-Halabi hawl tanzim (Da'ish) al-Irhabi*," *Kulalsalafiyeen.com*, 15 January 2014, http://kulalsalafiyeen.com/vb/showthread.php?t=55633.
66. Mashhur b. Hasan Al Salman, "Ta'aliq al-shaykh Mashhur Hasan Salman hawla i'lan al-khilafa fi Dawlat al-Iraq wa-l-Sham-Da 'ish," YouTube video, 24 July 2014, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fleI1xYBI1M.
67. Mashhur b. Hasan Al Salman, Twitter Post, 18 June 2014, https://twitter.com/alhalaby2010/status/479472047039315968. The idea of "God's *sunna*" is rhetorically interesting, since usually the Prophet's *sunna* is cited. The phrase "*sunnat illah*" ("God's sunna," namely, the practice that God approves] appears five times in the Qur'an. For example, Q. 33:62 "Such was the practice (*sunna*) [approved by] God concerning those who lived before, and you will not find a replacement for the practices that God approves." Like Halabi, Al Salman explains that this is a caliphate established by a group "that kills those whom it excommunicates" and that because its call for establishing a caliphate is not "based on God's *sunna*, it cannot be firmly established and cannot last."
68. Ali al-Halabi, "*Kalimat shaykhina*."
69. Mashhur b. Hasan Al Salman, "*Ta'aliq al-shaykh Mashhur Hasan Salman hawla i'lan al-khilafa fi Dawlat al-Iraq wa-l-Sham-Da 'ish*," YouTube video, 24 July 2014, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fleI1xYBI1M.
70. This turn of phras has become common among Salafists—both jihadists and non-jihadists—today. The phrase "the horns of the Shi'ites" seems to be based on a hadith in Bukhari (4:336) in which the Prophet Muhammad allegedly warned that chaos will spread and will originate in the House of A'isha (the Prophet Muhammad's daughter, who married 'Ali b. Abi Talib, from whom Shi'ites trace their leadership). The text in that hadith is "The turn of unbelief is here, where the horns of Satan will emerge." For another example of its polemical usage today, see the 2012 video by the Iranian Salafist-jihadist group Ansar Iran, posted on Jihadology on 11 July 2012 http://jihadology.net/2012/11/07/new-video-message-from-%E1%B8%A5arakat-an%E1%B9%A3ar-iran-iran-the-horn-of-the-shiah/.

Conclusion

Albani and his Salafist followers consistently addressed political issues, refuting scholarly arguments that all "quietists" on the Salafist continuum categorically avoid political topics.[71] Albani's students have also written on the conflicts in Syria and Gaza albeit through an Islamic and humanitarian—rather than political—lens, recommending their readers to further Muslim causes through non-violent means. Quietist Salafists thus influence political events while adhering to their ideological principles of non-political participation.

Quietest political commentary demonstrates the diversity of the Salafist landscape, which extends past Salafist-jihadists or the Salafist political parties such as the Nur Party in Egypt. Salafists contend that following the example of the Prophet Muhammad and the "golden age" of Islam provides an "Islamic" approach to all aspects of everyday life, including politics.

More importantly, Albani's ideological legacy demonstrates the adaptability of Salafism, which has evolved due to the tempestuous political arena in the modern history of the Middle East, and the diverse backgrounds and loyalties of self-described Salafists. The case of Albani's students—all of whom have Palestinian roots and live in one of the region's few stable countries where they can perpetuate Salafist teachings in relative safety—illustrates the sensitivity and urgency of taking a political stand, even if it is one of subservience to the local government. These students feel it is their "obligation" to respond to the Salafist-jihadist threat through their writings, which reframe the most pressing issues in Middle Eastern geopolitics as Muslim causes.

The political opening initiated by the Arab Spring will lead to further diversity in the Salafist political landscape. Momentous political events driven by militant groups invoking Islam such as ISIS will further invite Salafist commentary. As the security threat posed by jihadist groups increases and Salafist political parties flounder, the political voice of quietist Salafists is sure to grow louder.

71. See, for example, Wagemakers, "'Seceders' and 'Postponers'? An Analysis of the 'Khawarij' and 'Murji'a' Labels in Polemical Debates between Quietist and Jihadi-Salafis," *Contextualizing Jihadi Thought*, ed. Jeevan Deol, Zaheer Kazmi (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 145-64.145-6. Wagemakers does not outright say that quietists avoid political discussion, but seems to suggest this when he contrasts them with "politicos." He writes, "Western scholars have divided Salafis into three different branches: quietists or purists, who shun political action but focus on missionary activities (*da'wa*) and education (*tarbiyya*); Salafi Islamists or 'politicos', who do engage in political debate and action; and jihadis, who believe in the use of violence to bring about what they see as truly Islamic rule in Muslim countries." Wagemakers is more precise in a recent piece, calling Salafists "a-political" and explaining that "Although Salafism in Jordan is diverse and also includes 'reformist' Salafis, who have a more socially and politically relevant message, and Jihadi-Salafis, who excommunicate the regimes of the Muslim world…most Salafis in Jordan belong to the quietist branch that focuses on al-tasfiya wa-l-tarbiya." Here he clearly distinguishes Jordanian Salafists from those he calls 'reformist' Salafis. See Wagemakers, "Contesting Religious Authority in Jordanian Salafi Networks," in *Perseverance of Terrorism: Focus on Leaders*, ed. M. Milosevic and K. Rekawek (Amsterdam, the Netherlands: IOS Press, 2014), 111–25. 111, 113.

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The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World is a research initiative housed in the Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution. The Project's mission is to engage and inform policymakers, practitioners, and the broader public on the changing dynamics in Muslim-majority countries and to advance relations between Americans and Muslim societies around the world.

To fulfill this mission, the Project sponsors a range of activities, research projects, and publications designed to educate, encourage frank dialogue, and build positive partnerships between the United States and Muslim communities all over the world. The broader goals of the Project include:

- Exploring the multi-faceted nature of the United States' relationship with Muslim-majority states, including issues related to mutual misperceptions;
- Analyzing the social, economic, and political dynamics underway in Muslim societies;
- Identifying areas for shared endeavors between the United States and Muslim communities around the world on issues of common concern.

To achieve these goals, the Project has several interlocking components:

- The U.S.-Islamic World Forum, which brings together leaders in politics, business, media, academia, and civil society from the United States and from Muslim societies in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. The Forum also serves as a focal point for the Project's ongoing research and initiatives, providing the foundation for a range of complementary activities designed to enhance dialogue and impact;
- An Analysis Paper Series that provides high-quality research and publications on key questions facing Muslim states and communities;
- Workshops, symposia, and public and private discussions with government officials and other key stakeholders focused on critical issues affecting the relationship;
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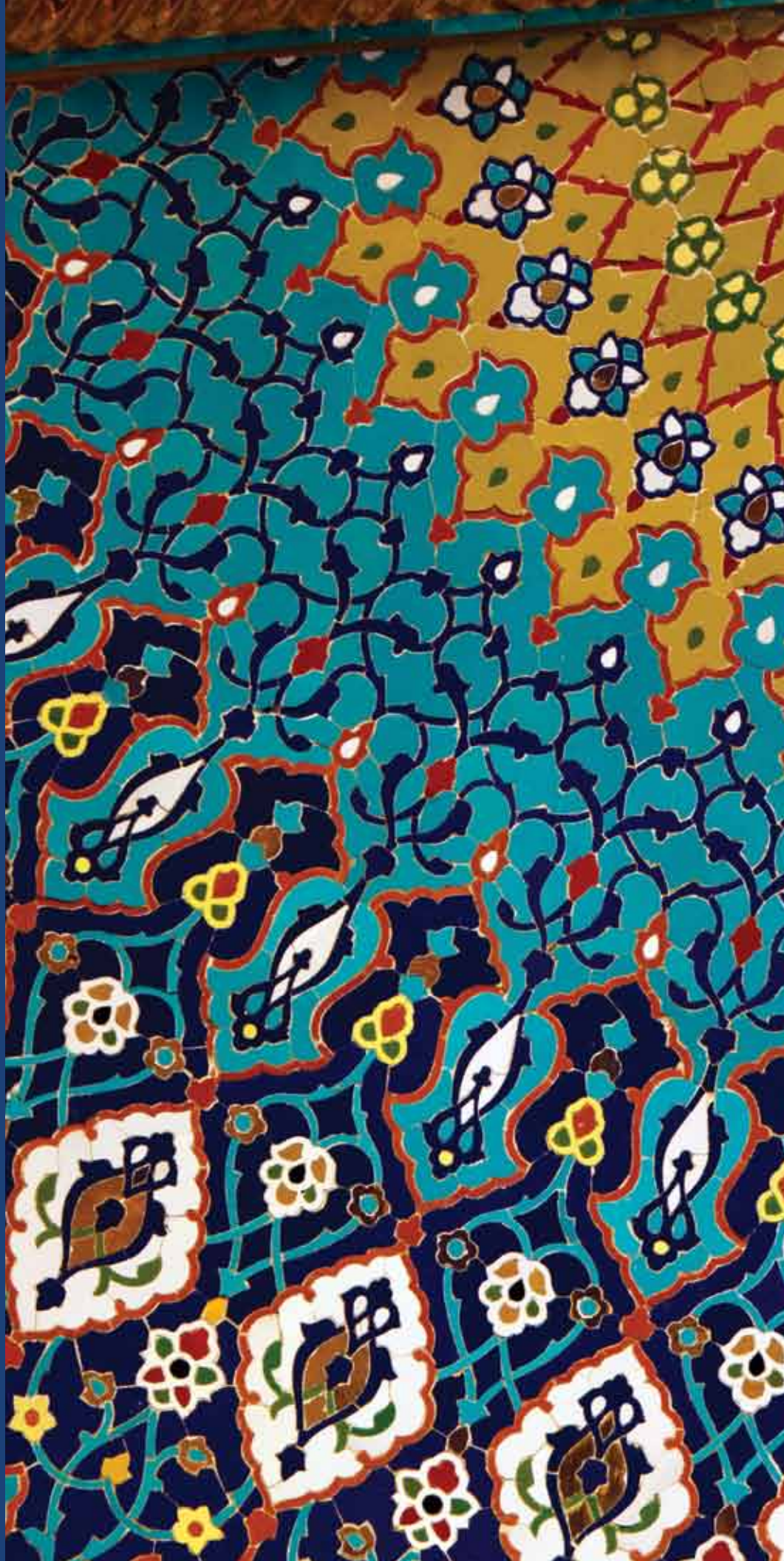

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