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From Obedience to Excommunication: Dissecting the Concept of Ulul-Amr in the Contemporary Discourse of Salafism

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ABSTRACT

Although Salafism is often perceived as a unified and cohesive ideological current, it encompasses a spectrum of perspectives regarding the theological and political status of Ulul-Amr (those in authority) and the corresponding relationship between rulers and the ruled. The study identifies three primary orientations in present-day Salafi thought, each reflecting a distinctive stance on political authority and religious legitimacy. The first is Pragmatic Salafism, which affirms the absolute authority of Ulul-Amr and calls for unconditional obedience to rulers. However, this strand allows for post-facto justification of regime change once it has occurred, often in the name of maintaining stability or order. The second is Revisionist Salafism, which challenges the rigid legalism of the pragmatic approach and proposes a more pluralistic and participatory reading of Sharia. It recognizes various civic rights, including public counsel (nasiha), critique of rulers, and the peaceful transformation of political structures. The third and most confrontational is Jihadi Salafism, which deems illegitimate rulers as *ṭāghūt* (false gods or tyrants) and religiously mandates their violent overthrow and excommunication (takfir). This radical reconfiguration of Ulul-Amr has served as a doctrinal justification for widespread acts of political violence across several Muslim societies. By analyzing these contrasting positions, the study reveals a significant shift from traditional doctrines of loyalty and obedience toward more fragmented and, in some cases, militant interpretations of political authority. This shift underscores the dynamic and contested nature of Salafi political theology in the modern era.

Keywords: *Ulul-Amr, Pragmatic Salafism, Revisionist Salafism, Jihadi Salafism, Jurisprudential Foundations*

Introduction

Salafism, as one of the prominent intellectual currents within Sunni Islam, has profoundly shaped both the intellectual and practical spheres of Muslim societies over the past century. Its teachings emphasize a return to the practices of the salaf, the earliest generations of Muslims, advocating strict adherence to the Qur'an and Hadith while rejecting innovations (*bid'ah*) in religious practice. Salafism "advocates a return to the practices of the salaf, the earliest generations of Muslims. Salafists emphasize strict adherence to the Quran and Hadith, rejecting innovations (*bid'ah*) in religious practices" (1). Despite its significant influence, Salafism is often misunderstood as a unified and coherent movement. In reality, it encompasses a heterogeneous array of scholars, intellectual



movements, and diverse groups that share common ground on certain issues while diverging significantly on others, including jurisprudential foundations, religious prescriptions, religious rituals, social practices, political stances, and political actions (2, 3).

The heterogeneity of Salafism manifests in various forms, including allegiance to different leaders, such as the Madkhalis; variations in religious rituals, such as differing timings for the commencement of fasting; and divergent interpretations of religious concepts. These differences extend to approaches toward religious, social, and political issues, reflecting the complexity and diversity within the movement. Within Salafi thought, there exists a spectrum of perspectives ranging from deeply entrenched conservatism to certain streams that promote violent reform. This duality is particularly evident in their varied stances toward Muslim rulers and their engagement with society at large. While some Salafi groups advocate strict obedience to established authorities, others challenge the legitimacy of rulers, leading to significant ideological and practical divides.

A central concept in this discourse is *Ulul-Amr*, meaning “those in authority,” derived from the well-known Qur’anic verse commanding obedience (*ita’ah*): “O you who have believed, obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you” (4). While obedience to Allah and the Prophet is universally accepted among Muslims, the identity and role of *Ulul-Amr* have been subjects of intense debate since the Prophet’s death in 11 AH. This controversy contributed to the emergence of various sects (*firaq*) within Islam, most notably the Sunni and Shia denominations. Beyond the question of who constitutes *Ulul-Amr*, theological and jurisprudential disputes have arisen concerning the conditions, characteristics, and limits of their authority, as well as the rights of the people in relation to these authorities. Even within Sunni Islam, no consensus exists on the ideal traits or exemplars of *Ulul-Amr*, leading to a multiplicity of interpretations that continue to shape Islamic thought and practice.

The lack of uniformity in understanding *Ulul-Amr* is particularly pronounced within Salafism, despite its roots in the Sunni tradition. Salafi discourse on *Ulul-Amr* is marked by significant contention, with differing interpretations giving rise to varied practical recommendations. Some Salafi scholars emphasize unwavering loyalty to rulers as a religious obligation, aligning with traditional Sunni perspectives that view rulers as exemplars of *Ulul-Amr*. Others, however, adopt a more critical stance, questioning the legitimacy of rulers based on their adherence to Islamic principles, which can lead to calls for reform or, in extreme cases, rebellion. These divergent views reflect broader tensions within Salafism, where intellectual and practical approaches often clash, resulting in a spectrum of positions that range from quietist to activist.

To fully appreciate the significance of *Ulul-Amr* in Salafi discourse, it is essential to consider the broader socio-political contexts in which these interpretations emerge. In many Muslim societies, Salafism’s emphasis on returning to the practices of the *salaf* serves both as a critique of modernity and as a framework for addressing contemporary challenges. The movement’s rejection of *bid’ah* and its call for a purified form of Islam resonate with those seeking authenticity in an era of rapid social change. However, the practical implications of these ideals vary widely. For instance, some Salafi groups prioritize spiritual purification and social reform, while others channel their efforts into political activism or, in extreme cases, violent resistance against perceived un-Islamic governance. These differences are not merely academic; they have real-world consequences, influencing everything from community practices to geopolitical dynamics.

The contentious nature of *Ulul-Amr* within Salafism also reflects broader questions about authority and legitimacy in Islamic governance. The absence of a unified interpretation of *Ulul-Amr* highlights the challenges of applying classical Islamic concepts to modern political realities. For example, in the absence of a caliphate, who qualifies as

Ulul-Amr in contemporary Muslim states? Are they elected leaders, religious scholars, or traditional rulers? The answers to these questions vary not only between Salafi and non-Salafi Sunni scholars but also among Salafi groups themselves, further complicating the discourse.

This paper aims to investigate the semantic evolution of the concept of Ulul-Amr within contemporary Salafi discourse, with a focus on how diverse interpretations shape theological, social, and political practices in Muslim societies. By analyzing key Salafi texts and scholarly debates, this study seeks to elucidate the factors driving these divergent perspectives, including historical contexts, theological methodologies, and socio-political influences. The research explores how Salafi interpretations of Ulul-Amr differ from those of other Sunni currents and examines the implications of these differences for governance, authority, and community dynamics. Through a comparative analysis of quietist and activist Salafi streams, this paper highlights the dynamic interplay between ideology and practice, offering insights into how Salafism navigates the tension between tradition and modernity. Ultimately, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of Salafism's role in shaping contemporary Islamic thought and its impact on the broader Muslim world.

Genealogy of Ulul-Amr in Islamic Thought

Within the Islamic intellectual tradition, a diverse array of terms has historically been employed to denote the concept of Ulul-Amr and the supreme leader of the Islamic polity. The term *imārah* signifies an emirate or principality, while *amīr* refers to the emir or sovereign ruler. *Al-imāmah*, or the Imamate, traditionally connotes Islamic political leadership, and *imām* denotes the leader of the Islamic state as well as the religious leader who leads communal prayer. The title *sulṭān* also denotes a Muslim head of state. However, it is widely acknowledged that “in Sunni thought no other term enjoyed the same popularity as *Khilāfah* and *Khalīfah*” (5), thus underscoring the privileged conceptual status of the caliphate within Sunni political discourse.

From the Shia perspective, the term Ulul-Amr is primarily attributed to the infallible Imams (*ma'sūmūn*). Shia exegeses maintain that obedience to Ulul-Amr is tantamount to obedience to the Prophet Muhammad and ultimately to Allah, a premise that necessitates the assumption of the Imam's infallibility. By contrast, Sunni thought does not identify the Imams as the direct exemplars of Ulul-Amr. Within Sunni frameworks, Ulul-Amr typically denotes two principal groups: political rulers and religious scholars (*ulama*), provided their governance complies with divine injunctions, and *Ahl al-Hall wa'l-Aqd*, meaning those vested with authority to loosen and bind, whose collective consensus is considered immune to error. Nonetheless, the permissibility and scope of subjects' rights to admonish, criticize, or even rebel against Ulul-Amr have generated significant scholarly debate.

In Shia jurisprudence, predicated upon the infallibility of the Imams, there exists no legitimate ground for criticism or rebellion against the infallible ruler. However, this rigidity is attenuated during the period of occultation, when the Imam is unseen. More broadly, Shia doctrine affirms the people's right to voice grievances or rebel against a non-infallible ruler, conditional upon safeguarding one's life and property. In such precarious situations, Shia jurists advocate *taqiyya*, or precautionary concealment, entailing the concealment of true intentions to protect Muslims from the arbitrary violence of despotic rulers.

Chronologically, the conception of Ulul-Amr and the nature of ruler-subject relations evolved considerably. By the seventh century CE, the doctrine of Ulul-Amr was primarily shaped by the founders of the four canonical Sunni jurisprudential schools. Abu Hanifa, founder of the Hanafi school, held that an oppressive and corrupt ruler forfeits legitimacy and that rebellion against such a ruler is sanctioned (6). Malik ibn Anas rejected rebellion, citing the risks

it posed to the lives and property of Muslims, and advocated instead for admonition and counsel by the populace and scholars (7). Imam al-Shafi'i acknowledged tyranny but deemed rebellion impermissible. Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal emphatically asserted, "we do not set out in revolt against the rulers with the sword, even if they are unjust and oppressive" (8).

The discourse on governance and obedience persisted throughout the medieval period. Abu Yusuf, emphasizing the duties of the Muslim citizen, proscribed khurooj, or armed revolt, against any ruler, whether oppressive or not (9). Similarly, al-Mawardi considers the establishment of governance a shar'i, or religious, obligation and regards ita'at, or obedience to the ruler, as a taklif shar'i, or religious duty (10). He affirmed that "God makes it an obligatory duty upon us to obey those in authorities" (11). Al-Ghazali unequivocally rejected rebellion under any circumstance (11). Ibn Taymiyya, recognized as a seminal figure in Sunni and Salafi thought, based his theory on prophetic hadith instructing that "if three of them were on a journey, they should choose one of them as a leader" (12). He further bifurcated khilafah into khilafat al-nubuwwa, or caliphate patterned after prophetic governance, and khilafat al-mulk, or caliphate based on kingship (13), strictly forbidding any form of opposition or complaint toward any caliphate (12, 14).

Building on Ibn Taymiyya's framework, Abd al-Wahhab established the modern Salafi discourse, which similarly venerated rulers as immune to critique or opposition by the populace. For decades, the concept of Ulul-Amr remained largely uncontested within Salafism until the 1960s, when internal developments prompted revision and re-examination. Muhammad Abu Rumman, a leading Jordanian scholar, delineates three principal currents within contemporary Salafism regarding rulership: traditional, revisionist, and jihadi (15). Recognizing Salafism's heterogeneity, Quintan Wiktorowicz observes that "although Salafis share this religious perspective, divisions have emerged as a result of the inherently subjective nature of applying religion to new issues and problems" (16). He categorizes contemporary Salafism into purists, politicians, and jihadists, each with distinct theological and practical implications influencing their engagement with society, politics, and international affairs. Integrating these classifications, this study proposes a new tripartite typology of Salafi currents—pragmatist, revisionist, and jihadi—with the extent of prescribed opposition to rulers as the distinguishing criterion. Notably, the jihadi current, which challenges the dominant interpretation of Ulul-Amr, has instigated profound ideological and practical transformations within Salafism.

Pragmatist Salafism: Articulating Ita'aa and Wahda

Within Salafism, three sub-currents coalesce under the rubric of pragmatist Salafism, which advocates absolute obedience (ita'aa) to Ulul-Amr. In this framework, Ulul-Amr includes both political rulers and religious scholars. Wahhabi Salafi discourse is foundational to this approach. Obedience to God, the Prophet, and those in authority is uniformly mandated. Historically, when conflicts arose between ulama and rulers, scholars typically deferred to rulers to avert fitna, or sedition, and to protect the state and the Wahhabi movement from collapse (17).

Wahhabi Salafists conceptualize the sultan as an earthly divine authority empowered to legislate beyond the Qur'anic text. The sultan's proclamation of adherence to the Qur'an and Sunnah suffices to legitimize his rule and command obedience (18). Provided that the ruler abstains from manifest sins such as kufr, obedience remains obligatory (19).

Invoking Ibn Taymiyya and Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab, Wahhabi scholars substantiate this doctrine. Ibn Taymiyya's assertion in al-Siyasah al-Shar'iyyah that "sixty years of an oppressive ruler are better than a day without

a ruler” is frequently cited (12). Al-Tahawi, whose writings alongside those of Ibn Taymiyya and Abd al-Wahhab constitute part of Salafism’s theoretical foundation, states that it is not permissible to rise against the imams even when they are oppressive, and that obedience to them remains obligatory (20). Ibn Baz similarly underscores obedience to Ulul-Amr, irrespective of their oppression (21).

Wahhabi scholars reject the excommunication (takfir) of rulers and reinterpret the concepts of disbelief and monotheism to legitimize rulers despite their transgressions. Ibn Baz distinguishes between major and minor disbelief, noting that sins such as adultery or usury committed knowingly constitute major disbelief, while otherwise they constitute minor disbelief or *fisq*. He does not consider secular legislation or its enforcement sufficient grounds for declaring rulers apostates. Muhammad ibn Uthaymin prescribes stringent conditions for excommunication, arguing that one must know both that the ruler has opposed the truth and that the ruler intended to oppose the truth (22).

The notion of the Ummah actively replacing rulers is virtually absent in Wahhabi discourse, which comprehensively condemns violent uprising. The definition of uprising spans from armed rebellion to mere public criticism or peaceful admonition. Consequently, even critical discourse is proscribed as haram, or forbidden (23), on the grounds that political dissent fosters chaos and threatens the stability of religion. True Muslims are exhorted to await divine intervention.

Parallel to Wahhabism, two additional Salafi currents have crystallized, both emphasizing obedience to Ulul-Amr. The current represented by Muhammad Aman al-Jami is noteworthy for its conservative affirmation of absolute obedience while abstaining from explicit political engagement. Jami affirms that Allah determines what has not been stated in the Qur’an through the channel of the sultan, emphasizing the delivery of God’s message to rulers regardless of whether they accept it (24). He endorses *nasihat al-muluk*, or advice to rulers, restricted to select scholars and explicitly forbidding vocal criticism or the fomenting of rebellion (25).

In Islamic jurisprudence, *fitna* denotes conduct that undermines political authority and engenders widespread destruction, meriting severe punishments, including death. Jami invokes this principle to condemn protests as *fitna*, stating that instigating people to rebel against rulers amounts to corruption on earth and an invitation to chaos (25). The concept of *wahda*, or unity of the Ummah, is similarly pivotal in this discourse, underscoring the precedence of society over individual interests. According to Jami, the perceived contemporary malaise of Muslim societies stems not from tyranny or rebellion but from disunity.

This line is upheld by followers of Muhammad ibn Aman al-Jami and Rabi’ ibn Hadi al-Madkhali in Saudi Arabia; Muqbil ibn Hadi al-Wad’i in Yemen; adherents of Nasir al-Din al-Albani in Jordan; Abdul Malik ibn Ramadan al-Jaza’iri in Algeria; Mohammad Sa’id Raslan, Osama al-Qosi, Hisham al-Beili, and Tal’at Zahran in Egypt; and Abdelhadi Wahbi and Sa’d al-Din Kibi in Lebanon (15).

Al-Madkhali reflects that if there were only one state for the whole Ummah, the same circumstances would not exist; he attributes contemporary fragmentation to insurgency and argues that each country must follow its own imam, admonish him privately, and avoid any action that would result in *khurooj* against the ruler, because such actions would lead to further schism, division, and disaster (26). Al-Albani Salafism, originating in Saudi Arabia and spreading across Arab societies, shares similar views regarding Ulul-Amr.

Within al-Albani’s discourse, the concept of *bid’ah*, or innovation, is used to critique modern political phenomena such as dissent, demands for participation, protests, and revolutions, associating them with apostasy (*kufr*) and abandonment of faith (*iman*). Sheikh Ibrahim Shaqra asserts that politics, with its various theories and systems, is

at odds with religious standards and Sharia, and has become a separate religion polluted by mendacity and deception (27).

Obedience to Ulul-Amr is paramount for unity and the rejection of pluralism (28). Al-Albani states that it is not permissible to form several groups in Muslim society, each adopting a particular method and leadership, because schism would arise (29). Thus, any activity that precipitates fitna must be avoided. He warns that the excommunication of rulers results only in sedition, citing events such as the Mecca incident, the assassination of Sadat, and conflicts in Syria and Algeria as consequences of opposition to the Qur'an and Sunnah (30).

Muqbil ibn Hadi al-Wad'i offers a strict definition of Salafism in *This Is Our Call and Doctrine*, prohibiting political activism, including rebellion. Engaging in such acts disqualifies one from Salafism (31).

Ali al-Halabi, a prominent Jordanian Salafi, disavows oppositional or critical political activism, excludes jihadis from Salafism, labels them takfiri, and likens them to the Kharijites. He defines Salafism as a call to knowledge, worship, doctrine, behavior, education, and ethics, asserting that Salafism is too important and too glorious to become a political party, movement, or organization, whether secret or public. Hence, he dissociates Salafism from political activism (32).

In summation, pragmatist Salafism admonishes against criticism or rebellion against rulers primarily for two reasons. First, it seeks to preserve public order, as rebellion threatens societal stability. This current thus fundamentally supports existing institutions for the sake of public welfare. Second, it holds that there is no religious basis for rebellion, since the Qur'an and Sunnah do not confer the right to revolt. Consequently, pragmatist Salafists seldom critique rulers or discuss political change, favoring compliance and appointment.

Nonetheless, pragmatist Salafism exhibits political adaptability. For instance, Egyptian Salafi leaders, who initially supported the Mubarak regime and condemned opposition as fitna, later endorsed protests as the regime faltered, surprising both authorities and scholars (33). When Mohamed Morsi was challenged, traditional Salafists who had previously advocated unconditional obedience supported the coup. These Salafi factions, which had once deemed rebellion haram, not only permitted but actively engaged in opposition.

This pragmatic orientation fosters close scholar-ruler ties. The unconditional scholarly support for governments has fueled the rise of dissident Salafi discourses, particularly since the 1990s (34). Pragmatist Salafism articulates a vision of unwavering obedience to Ulul-Amr grounded in theological, historical, and jurisprudential arguments. It prioritizes social stability and unity, viewing rebellion and political activism as sources of chaos and disintegration. While generally resistant to political change initiated by the populace, pragmatist Salafism allows for regime shifts when such changes preserve order and continuity. This current has significantly shaped contemporary Islamic political thought by emphasizing order, hierarchical obedience, and the rejection of dissent, thereby influencing the dynamics of Muslim societies facing political challenges.

The Revisionist Discourse: From Admonishment to Peaceful Change of Ulul-Amr

The roots of the revisionist and reformist current trace back to the broader Islamic modernist movement. This dynamic current, influenced significantly by the Muslim Brotherhood, conditions obedience to rulers upon their implementation of Sharia law. It asserts that if a ruler fails to uphold Sharia, he loses legitimacy, and obedience to him is no longer obligatory. Another source of this intellectual trend stems from the emergence of the Sahwa, or Awakening, movement in Saudi Arabia, which first arose in the 1990s.

Sahwa activists “argue that it is impossible to be a true Muslim and live under regimes whose rulers do not abide by and apply the strict rules of Islam” (35). Furthermore, they contend that “the so-called Sahwa movement criticized the Saudi ruling family for its autocratic attitude and subservience to unbelieving foreigners” (35).

This current upholds the view that an Islamic government must be governed by Sharia and that the people have the right to protest or demand reform when faced with an un-Islamic regime. It stresses that governance is not an unconditional contract; rather, the legitimacy of the ruler is inherently linked to compliance with Islamic law, which serves as a moral and legal standard.

Accordingly, since the 1960s, when Saudi Arabia began to expand its relations with the outside world, traditional Salafism gradually witnessed the rise of new and challenging discourses and alternative interpretations concerning the relationship between rulers and subjects. During this period, Saudi Arabia opened its borders to thousands of refugees from Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Palestine, many of whom were affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood and carried reformist perspectives heavily influenced by Sayyid Qutb, the Brotherhood’s intellectual figure. The Saudis pursued “an open-door policy” toward the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1960s to serve their own struggle against Nasserites and Ba’thists (23).

Consequently, these developments fostered the crystallization of the new Sahwa discourse. Drawing upon some intellectual foundations of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Sahwa discourse critically engaged with and sought to revise key concepts of Wahhabi Salafism. Influenced by Brotherhood thought, the Sahwa discourse maintains that the Ummah possesses the right to act as its own guardian. Unlike traditional Salafism, the Sahwa discourse imposes numerous conditions and constraints upon Islamic rulers. A ruler must embody specific qualifications to legitimately hold office (36). Moreover, once in power, the ruler must govern in strict accordance with Sharia. Failure to meet these conditions results in a loss of legitimacy, rendering rebellion permissible. However, delineating these conditions and determining the permissibility of rebellion ultimately depends on the interpretations of Ahl al-Hall wa’l-Aqd (18).

The Sahwa movement also challenges the inviolability traditionally afforded to Islamic rulers in other domains. Wahhabi discourse long emphasized al-wala’ wa al-bara’, or allegiance and disavowal, as a core tenet of faith (iman). This principle justified preventing infidels (kuffar) from entering the Arabian Peninsula. However, when the Saudi Kingdom, with the approval of Wahhabi scholars, invited Western armies, considered infidels under Salafi ideology, into Saudi Arabia during the First Gulf War, this presented a critical opportunity for dissident leaders to expose the disloyalty of their rulers to this principle. A new generation of religious leaders argued that the presence of foreign forces would inevitably lead the country toward secularism or non-Islamic governance. Therefore, they claimed that Ulul-Amr had violated the principle of al-wala’ wa al-bara’ and committed munkar, or evil.

In Islamic jurisprudence, when munkar is committed, everyone is obligated to publicly oppose the vice. As Sheikh Salman al-Owdah articulates, the primary concern of the Sahwa movement is the public denunciation of munkar, which traditional Salafism construes as fitna. Traditionally, only the state and officially sanctioned scholars are entitled to oppose societal vices. However, scholars such as al-Owdah challenge this view, asserting that “it is the responsibility of all” (23).

In this framework, Islam assigns to the entire Muslim community, rather than a privileged sect, the duty of publicly opposing vice. Every Muslim bears responsibility for both societal and personal futures. Hence, the Sahwa perspective diverges from the traditional approach regarding Ulul-Amr. Although cautious in its treatment of rulers, it nonetheless adopts a more open stance toward political accountability.

This stance has been met with severe resistance by ruling regimes; Sahwa leaders have been imprisoned, and their followers have been suppressed. Under these pressures, many Sahwa adherents gradually became more conservative, with some even defending the policies of Arab states (33). Over time, they distanced themselves from political Islam, instead favoring a civil Islam that emphasizes social and civil reform.

From this evolution emerged a significant current identifiable as revisionist Salafism. This discourse seeks to play a more constructive role in the development of Arab states. It advocates political reforms and peaceful transitions toward constitutional monarchies. Furthermore, it supports the enforcement of law, the expansion of public freedoms, and increased public participation in political decision-making. These stances situate revisionist Salafism within the opposition spectrum, although it generally refrains from regular political activism.

Revisionist Salafism endeavors to reflect contemporary global realities in both the thought and practice of Salafism. Accordingly, it has reinterpreted certain Salafi principles and selectively emphasizes portions of the Qur'an and Sunnah that support distancing from authoritarianism and alignment with democratic values. In contrast to pragmatist Salafism, which venerates rulers and champions societal stability, revisionist Salafism diminishes the sacralization of power and calls for change.

Its proponents argue that neither the Qur'an nor the Sunnah explicitly forbids the monitoring or supervision of rulers. Rather, they highlight commands that mandate opposition to tyrannical rulers as a significant duty. Revisionist Salafists invoke the Prophet's hadith: "Verily, when people come across a tyrant and do not stop him from oppression, God will undoubtedly punish them all for his tyranny." They contend that calling for reform does not constitute fitna. In Islam, the principle of *amr bi'l-ma'ruf wa nahi 'an al-munkar*, or enjoining good and forbidding evil, empowers Muslims to prevent one another from wrongdoing. Repeatedly emphasized in Islamic jurisprudence, this principle obliges Muslims to hold everyone accountable, including rulers. In this view, neither appointment nor coercion is a legitimate method of acquiring power. Rashid Rida regarded admonishing rulers as a universal duty and a component of *amr bi'l-ma'ruf wa nahi 'an al-munkar*, requiring participation not only from scholars but also from all elites and the populace. He asserted that *Ahl al-Hall wa'l-Aqd* bear responsibility for monitoring government performance and encouraging support for legitimate governments or the reform of tyrannical ones (37).

Abdul Rahman al-Kawakibi defined the admonishment of rulers as a form of public oversight and accountability, warning that without rigorous popular supervision, even seemingly just governments quickly succumb to despotism. In this view, any just sovereignty, if immune from responsibility and accountability due to the neglect or deception of the people, hastily assumes the mantle of despotism and, once this period elapses, never relinquishes it (38).

Yusuf al-Qaradawi argued that within an Islamic political system, the ruler is the people's agent and trustee, neither infallible nor in possession of absolute authority. He emphasized that the entire community holds the right and even the duty, collectively or individually, particularly in the absence of others, to admonish the ruler and, if necessary, hold him accountable or remove him (39).

Rashid al-Ghannouchi, a leading theorist of Tunisia's Ennahda movement and a prominent reformist figure, repeatedly underscores the social and political significance of *amr bi'l-ma'ruf wa nahi 'an al-munkar*. He contends that rulers should not be unaccountable to their communities. Opposition to rulers through the forbidding of evil is not only a right but also a religious and political duty intrinsically linked to freedom of expression, consultation, and accountability (40).

This current also embraces nonviolence in political change, advocating peaceful means and the development of institutional mechanisms to manage societal disputes and conflicts. It maintains that Islam was not propagated by

the sword. The legitimacy of jihad is understood primarily as a means to liberate people to choose their religion freely and to resist any oppression that hinders this freedom (19). While Islam possesses the capacity to overpower infidels militarily, it permits them to practice their religion freely because Islam opposes imposing faith by force or coercion. Thus, Muslims are permitted to retaliate only if attacked or oppressed by infidels (41).

Reformist Salafism, which originated from the Sahwa movement and remains active in the sociopolitical spheres of Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries, emphasizes values of progress, justice, consultation, jurisprudential facilitation (taysir), and institution-building to preserve Islamic identity, ethics, and tolerance toward dissenting views.

The Salafi current known as Haraki Salafism is also recognized as part of this neo-Salafi trend. Active in countries such as Kuwait, Egypt, and Jordan, this movement, akin to the Sururis and Sahwis, conditions obedience to the ruler upon adherence to Sharia and acknowledges the legitimacy of political protest and party-based activism. As noted, “they are in agreement on the legitimacy of political activism and opposition and in refusing violence as a means of conflict management” (15).

The revisionist Salafi discourse represents a significant evolution within Islamic political thought, challenging traditional norms that historically sanctified absolute obedience to rulers. By reinterpreting key Islamic texts and jurisprudential principles, this current emphasizes the conditional legitimacy of rulers, the collective responsibility of Muslims to hold their leaders accountable, and the primacy of peaceful and institutional means for political reform. Its insistence on nonviolence, public accountability, and legal governance reflects an effort to harmonize Islamic doctrine with contemporary political realities and democratic values. Consequently, revisionist Salafism offers a nuanced and reform-oriented framework that seeks to balance religious fidelity with socio-political pragmatism, providing an alternative pathway for political engagement in the Muslim world.

Khurooj Discourse and the Break from Salafi Tradition

The emergence and evolution of the khurooj, or rebellion, discourse represent a radical departure from both traditional and reformist Salafi doctrines. This transformation cannot be understood in isolation from the broader historical and geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East. Regional and international conditions, particularly the Persian Gulf War in 1990, the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, and the Iraq War in 2003, created fertile ground for the growth and expansion of jihadist Salafism. These conflicts not only led to the deterioration of state legitimacy but also contributed to the perception that Western-backed regimes were fundamentally incapable of addressing the political, economic, and moral grievances of Muslim populations. These perceptions triggered a paradigmatic shift from reformist patience to militant activism, as the legitimacy of peaceful opposition was repeatedly undermined by authoritarian crackdowns and foreign intervention. In such a context, the appeal of discourses advocating radical change and swift action became increasingly prominent.

The suppression of the Sahwa discourse, which had earlier emphasized peaceful reform and societal awakening within the framework of Islam, played a significant role in this shift. As peaceful avenues for protest were systematically closed, particularly by authoritarian regimes in the Arab world, many former proponents of Sahwa came to believe that nonviolent resistance was ineffective. Consequently, some began to gravitate toward jihadist ideologies. Hegghammer notes that this disillusionment was instrumental in redirecting support toward jihadist currents that rejected gradualism and instead advocated armed struggle as the only viable means of change (42). The erosion of confidence in reformist strategies contributed to the delegitimization of any political movement perceived as too accommodating or conciliatory toward entrenched regimes.

“Defeated” states, meaning those unable to meet the basic needs of their populations, became one of the primary catalysts for the diffusion of jihadist Salafi discourse. Empirical evidence from court testimonies and data on jihadist recruitment reveals that the majority of those drawn to this ideology came from economically and socially marginalized communities. While there are exceptions, the general pattern confirms that poverty, exclusion, and lack of political agency fueled the appeal of militant solutions (43). In such societies, where traditional mechanisms for grievance redress are absent or ineffective, radical ideologies find receptive audiences, particularly among the youth. This demographic vulnerability becomes more acute in contexts of high unemployment, perceived injustice, and the absence of credible avenues for civic participation.

Furthermore, the failure of moderate Islamic movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, to achieve their political objectives through democratic engagement contributed to the erosion of trust in peaceful political processes. The Brotherhood had long advocated a strategy of incremental Islamization of the state and society through parliamentary means and public engagement. However, the backlash following the Arab Spring, particularly in Egypt, where hundreds of Brotherhood members were imprisoned, highlighted the vulnerability of such movements to state repression. Their failure not only discredited the feasibility of peaceful reform but also intensified frustration and radicalization among segments of the population seeking immediate and uncompromising solutions. In effect, the Brotherhood’s defeat became emblematic of the limits of electoral and legalist engagement in deeply authoritarian contexts.

Simultaneously, traditional Salafi discourses, which emphasized obedience to rulers and avoidance of political activism, proved increasingly out of touch with the demands and sensibilities of a younger, more politically conscious generation. These discourses continued to insist on loyalty to rulers, regardless of their legitimacy or governance practices, thereby alienating youth who perceived such positions as complicit in sustaining tyranny. As a result, traditional Salafists lost both ideological appeal and political credibility, particularly in societies with high rates of education and political awareness (43). The disconnect between traditional Salafi leadership and socio-political realities on the ground created a vacuum that was readily filled by more radical voices.

Against this backdrop, jihadist Salafi leaders developed a new discourse rooted in the reinterpretation of Islamic texts. These leaders mobilized support by appealing to the Qur’an and Sunnah, offering new hermeneutics that challenged the core assumptions of traditional Salafism. While traditional discourses, such as those of Jami and Albani, emphasized the importance of unity, avoidance of fitna, and unconditional obedience to Ulul-Amr, jihadist and takfiri Salafists viewed these principles as inadequate in the face of systemic injustice and apostasy. They proposed a more confrontational stance, arguing that true Islamic fidelity required not merely patience but confrontation against oppressive rulers. This reinterpretation also redefined the ethical boundaries of jihad, framing it as a moral imperative rather than a contingent political choice.

A critical innovation of jihadist Salafi discourse was its redefinition of tawhid, or monotheism. Traditional Salafists recognized three dimensions of tawhid: al-uluhiyyah, the oneness of God’s divinity; al-rububiyah, the oneness of God’s lordship; and al-asma’ wa al-sifat, the oneness of God’s names and attributes (44). However, jihadist Salafis introduced a fourth category, tawhid al-hakimiyyah, or the oneness of divine sovereignty, which emphasized that only God has the right to legislate. This addition was not merely theological but profoundly political, as it provided the basis for declaring modern secular laws and governments manifestations of shirk, or polytheism, and kufr, or disbelief. It allowed for a doctrinal rationale that made rebellion not only permissible but necessary.

Al-Maqdisi, a key ideologue of jihadist Salafism, articulated this vision by asserting that true monotheism required the rejection of all human-made legal systems (45). In his view, *hakimiyyah* is a basic part of *tawhid* (46). He argued that other Salafi currents had diluted the message of *tawhid* by focusing only on idolatry related to graves and tombs while ignoring the more egregious idolatry of rulers who replace divine law with secular legislation. Al-Maqdisi emphasizes that authentic Salafi-jihadi movements strive to elucidate the concept of *tawhid* to individuals, aiming to guide them toward a pure understanding and practice of devotion to God alone rather than to His creation. These movements highlight the perceived erosion of monotheism in the contemporary era, where legislative authority is often attributed to human institutions, resulting in the adoption of secular laws and the marginalization or abolition of divine commandments (46). For Maqdisi, the addition of *hakimiyyah* not only distinguished jihadist Salafism from other discourses but also justified rebellion against regimes that failed to implement Islamic law (47). Similarly, Abd al-Qadir bin Abd al-Aziz emphasized that issues such as legislation and governance were central to Islam, not peripheral. He maintained that failing to implement divine law constitutes apostasy and that those responsible, including rulers, legislators, and judges, should be declared unbelievers (48). This emphasis on *hakimiyyah* served to fuse theology with revolutionary praxis.

Unlike pragmatic or quietist Salafists, jihadist leaders viewed all existing political institutions in Muslim societies as illegitimate because they lacked a basis in Islamic law. Accordingly, they argued that dismantling these institutions was a necessary step toward re-establishing an authentic Islamic order. This view was further influenced by Sayyid Qutb, who regarded contemporary Muslim societies as immersed in *jahiliyyah*, or pre-Islamic ignorance, and who justified armed rebellion against both rulers and citizens who did not conform to Islamic principles.

Sayyid Qutb argued that *jahiliyyah* manifests when there is an assault on God's sovereignty (*al-hakimiyyah*), particularly by undermining the divine attribute of supreme authority. This occurs when humans usurp the right to govern by establishing their own perspectives, values, legislation, laws, and systems of governance independently of the comprehensive divine framework ordained by God (49). As Meijer notes, Qutb believed that "violence was allowed against rulers and Muslims who did not abide by Islamic rules" (35).

Jihadist Salafists extend this logic to reject all Western political models and institutions. According to their interpretation, any Muslim ruler who adopts Western-style governance or aligns with non-Muslim powers becomes an apostate. Abdul Salam Faraj, a key jihadist theorist, views current political regimes in the Islamic world as heretical (*kafir*). He grounds his declaration of *takfir* against these states in their legislative systems, which are controlled by secular authorities. These systems establish the populace as the origin of sovereignty and authority, recognizing parliaments as the exclusive legislative bodies within their constitutions. As a result, Islamic law (*Sharia*) is marginalized, constituting only a minor component of the legal framework, which primarily draws from capitalist, socialist, nationalist, or Arab nationalist ideologies (49). Faraj argues that this renders contemporary states *kafir*, aligning with the Qur'anic statement: "And whoever fails to govern by what Allah has ordained—those are the disbelievers" (4).

Saleh Saria, in *Risalat al-Iman*, declared that even if people profess Islam verbally, their adoption of non-Islamic systems renders them infidels and liable to be fought. Based on Saria's perspective, all political systems in Muslim countries are deemed heretical (*kufr*) due to their laws and regulations conflicting with Islam, and their societies are considered ignorant (*jahiliyyah*). The *takfir* of states is grounded in legislation and practices contrary to Islamic principles. At the individual level, Saria asserts that anyone who supports these regimes, considers them Islamic,

or endorses their misguided policies is regarded as an unbeliever (kafir) (50). This rejectionism produces a rigid ideological framework in which no compromise or cooperation with existing systems is tolerated.

Ayman al-Zawahiri also contributed to this discourse by citing the Qur'anic verse, "Those who do not judge with what Allah has sent down are the unbelievers," to justify the excommunication of rulers who replace divine law with secular codes (51). Abd al-Qadir bin Abd al-Aziz, who later revised his stance, similarly held that anyone involved in the legislative process based on human law, regardless of their practice of the five pillars of Islam, should be considered an apostate (52).

Jihadi Salafists also condemned participation in international organizations, which they viewed as symbols of global kufr. They revived the classical dichotomy of Dar al-Islam and Dar al-Kufr to argue that Muslim-majority countries governed by secular laws no longer constituted Islamic lands. They assert that emigration from such countries is mandatory, as they represent Dar al-Kufr. This radical interpretation created a binary worldview that left no room for pluralism, political negotiation, or coexistence. Their logic centers on the belief that Islamic identity is incompatible with modern state structures influenced by Western legal traditions.

Moreover, jihadist Salafists accused traditional Wahhabi scholars of double standards. While Wahhabi clerics have historically issued excommunication fatwas against various Muslim groups and sects for political or theological reasons, they refrained from applying the same judgment to Saudi rulers, even when these rulers deviated from Sharia. Traditional Salafis required clear evidence and intention of disbelief before declaring someone an apostate. In contrast, jihadi Salafists held that the abandonment of divine governance itself constitutes kufr, irrespective of the ruler's inner belief (53).

This more absolutist approach justified not only rebellion against rulers but also the targeting of security forces and bureaucrats defending the regime. According to Moshawah, killing such individuals is not considered sinful, as they are viewed as active agents of oppression and even more culpable than the rulers themselves (54). Such positions reveal the radical ethical inversion at the heart of the jihadist worldview.

In addition to the concept of tawhid, jihadist Salafists rely on the principle of al-wala' wa al-bara', or loyalty and disavowal. They argue that many Muslim rulers have violated this principle by forming alliances with non-Muslims. The most notorious example is the stationing of American troops in the Hejaz during the Persian Gulf War. The Qur'anic injunction, "Believers, the idolaters are unclean. Do not let them approach the Sacred Mosque," is cited to argue that such cooperation violates divine law (4). As a result, rulers who permit such alliances, and those who fail to oppose them, are seen as violators of Islamic principles and subject to excommunication.

This ideological rupture led jihadist scholars to issue unprecedented fatwas permitting jihad against rulers in Sunni Muslim lands. The leaders of al-Qaeda, for instance, accused the Saudi regime of abandoning Islamic principles by aligning with the United States and supporting Israel. Within this discourse, the Saudi alliance with the United States was interpreted as evidence that the Saudi state had abandoned the idea of a unified Muslim world (17). For jihadist ideologues, this betrayal signified apostasy and justified open rebellion.

Unlike other Salafi discourses, which limit jihad to conflicts outside Saudi Arabia, such as those in Iraq, Chechnya, Syria, or Yemen, jihadist Salafists reject any territorial distinction. They advocate rebellion against local rulers and all institutions supporting them. Traditional Salafism conditions jihad on the permission of the ruler, but jihadist Salafism rejects this requirement. They argue that requiring such permission is a Shia innovation and that jihad is an individual obligation (fard 'ayn) for all Muslims. In their view, jihad is not merely a collective duty but a personal religious responsibility tied to one's faith.

Ultimately, the jihadist reinterpretation of Ulul-Amr, rooted in the doctrines of tawhid al-hakimiyyah and al-wala' wa al-bara', marks a decisive break from traditional Sunni political theology. While reformist and Sahwa discourses continue to seek nonviolent means of reform through education, da'wah, and civil engagement, jihadist Salafism adopts an uncompromising militant approach. For Maqdisi and his followers, jihad against apostate rulers is not only justified but necessary to uphold the purity of faith and fulfill the obligation of disavowal (55).

This ideological shift represents a profound transformation in Islamic political thought. The khurooj discourse, as formulated by jihadist Salafism, radically redefines the boundaries of legitimate authority and reshapes the ethical framework within which rebellion is justified. By fusing religious doctrine with political militancy, it challenges the core tenets of both traditional quietism and modern reformism, offering a revolutionary alternative that continues to reverberate across the contemporary Muslim world. As this discourse gains traction in various socio-political contexts, it prompts renewed debates on the legitimacy of power, the nature of Islamic governance, and the future trajectories of political Islam in the twenty-first century. Its continued relevance and ideological persistence underscore the urgency of scholarly engagement with its theological claims, strategic orientations, and long-term implications for Muslim societies.

Conclusion

Contemporary Salafism is often represented in research as a single and homogeneous movement, although it contains various interpretations on many issues. One major point of contention within Salafism, which has generated divergent interpretations, is the longstanding concept of Ulul-Amr. The question of whether people are entitled to admonish, criticize, demand reform from, or rebel against their rulers has given rise to three currents within contemporary Salafism, ranging from absolute obedience to rulers to the excommunication of rulers. The first current, as the oldest form of traditional Salafism, involves three discourses: Wahhabism, Jami Salafism, and scientific Salafism. These currents view Ulul-Amr as a pivotal principle in society and contend that any revolt against the ruler results in sedition and schism. In Wahhabi discourse, any criticism of the ruler, or even admonishment by official figures, is deemed unrighteous. Jami Salafism similarly does not recognize such rights for the people. It is argued that this position prevents sedition and schism in society and brings benefits through cooperation among the people, scholars, and Ulul-Amr. However, Jami discourse acknowledges advising rulers under certain conditions. Under such circumstances, only official scholars, not ordinary scholars or the people, may admonish Ulul-Amr privately. Although al-Albani, another representative of traditional Salafism, does not uphold current policies across Muslim societies, he prescribes reforming and training the public instead of engaging with modern politics or rebelling against rulers, on the grounds that political contestation results only in schism and insecurity. For scholars of al-Albani Salafism, genuine Islamic politics is achievable only through comprehensive da'wah, the purification of hadith from superstition, and the purification and cultivation of people. Hence, this current also invites people to eschew politics and, in effect, does not recognize any right for people to criticize or rebel against their rulers.

Beyond the traditional interpretation of Ulul-Amr, contemporary branches of Salafism question the principle of absolute obedience to rulers and hereditary rule. These branches mainly include two currents. The first has a revisionist approach, contending that if rulers do not respect Islamic Sharia, they should not be obeyed. If they exceed religious limitations, every Muslim individual is obliged to criticize them and, if necessary, is entitled to rise for the purpose of changing the ruler. Sahwa scholars adopted this approach, but they were widely suppressed by

Arab states. Another branch of this discourse offers a more secular interpretation and maintains that if rulers do not respect people's rights, people may use peaceful means, including elections, to change them and articulate their demands. However, the major departure from the traditional interpretation of the relationship between the people and Ulul-Amr has occurred in jihadi Salafism. In jihadi Salafism, obedience to Ulul-Amr is permissible only if all the conditions of Dar al-Islam are met in society. It is argued that rulers of Muslim societies have failed to observe the fundamental rules of Dar al-Islam, including tawhid, al-hakimiyyah, and al-wala' wa al-bara'; hence, they have effectively acceded to Dar al-Kufr and deserve excommunication. In jihadist thought, when a society becomes Dar al-Kufr, what is incumbent upon every Muslim is jihad, even if the most violent means are required.

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