

The Salafi Movement From Fundamentalism to Jihad

The unrest, activism, and outright terrorism in both Muslim and Western countries today is informed by a religious fundamentalist ideology called salafism. Though there are many different Salafi groups, all subscribe to the ideal to return to the Islam of Mohammed and his companions, and embrace no practice or belief not found in earliest Islam.

“Pure” Islam, as practiced by the Salafis did not jibe well with a modernized Islam that had made many adjustments to Western ways. At first tolerated and supported by some governments, notably Saudi Arabia, salafism grew in numbers, and spread widely across the Muslim world. But advocacy of Sharia law and criticism of the secularity of Muslim leaders led to a crackdown on the movement in Egypt. Taking refuge in Saudi Arabia Salafi scholars turned their criticisms into political action. They were especially enraged at the placement of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia during the Gulf War.

Salafi purists in Saudi Arabia pushed back, supporting Muslim kings and dictators and saying their role was limited to advising rulers. But Salafi activism persisted. It moved to Pakistan and then Afghanistan, where Russian troops occupied the country. Here it took the form of Jihad. Expelled from Saudi Arabia Osama bin Laden continued to attack American military targets, set up training camps in Afghanistan, and wrote a strong defense of Jihad. The struggle has continued to the present day including outbreaks in several countries, most notably Iraq and Syria where ISIS has set up an Islamic State, but also in Egypt and sub Saharan Africa.

This seminar explores the evolution of Salafi thinking, moving from fundamentalist religion to radical extremism and terrorism. How could devout, peace loving Muslims turn so viciously against their own? How, on the strength of the earliest forms of Islam could they justify and even demand jihad against their leaders and even noncombatants? In a unique way of thinking required by their fundamentalism, Salafi scholars worked hard to come up with parallels to the actions of Mohammed and his companions that replaced the “hate” in jihad with zeal for Allah.

Hopefully, this seminar will give us an understanding of Salafi motives, but also will expose the dilemmas inherent in fundamentalism. We need to find a way for religion to be meaningful in this secular world, yet not harmful.