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Ideological Similarities and Differences between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafi Movement

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I) Introduction

This briefing paper will look at the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and the Salafist movement with regard to overlaps and discrepancies in ideology. While the MB combines piety with some modern traits and can broadly be considered a “political lobby group”, the Salafists have, since the 1970s, been seeking to purify Islam according to the first three generations of Islam’s “pious ancestors”¹.

Although influenced by a former MB ideologue, Sayyid Qut’b (1903–1966 CE), the *Salafist* trend blames the MB with its “slow” strategy for watering down Islam². The *Salafists* advocate quick Islamic “reform” based on the literal interpretation of the *Qur’ān* and sunnatic sources³.

II) Ideological Similarities

The MB and the Salafists have a “core ideology” in common⁴. MB founder Hassan Al-Banna propagated an absolute Islamic political system (*nizām al-shāmil*)⁵. Akin to the

¹ see Milton-Edwards, 2015,152; Mandaville, 2007, 100; Mandaville, 2014, 46 ; Olidort, 2015, 1; Oxford, 2018, 1

² Mandaville, 2014, 89; Awad, 2016, 6

³ *Salafists* are unwilling to compromise with “deviant” competitors whom they accuse of human reasoning and innovation (Rubin, 2011, 1; see Jacob, 2016, 8-10; Olidort, 2015, 1).

⁴ Counter Extremism Project, 2017, 1

⁵ But he also included *Ṣūfī* worship of remembrance (*dhikr*) in the MB’s “daily regimen” (Wimhurst, 2016, 9-12; Mandaville, 2007, 59).

Salafists, he did not subscribe his movement to a particular school of jurisprudence⁶. The MB exalts to a similar extent as *Salafists* the ideologues Rashid Rida (1865–1935 CE) and Sayyid Qut’b⁷ ⁸.

Salafist jihadism was born of “the politicisation of *Salafism* in Saudi Arabia”, as Egyptians emigrated to the Kingdom where, consequently, Saudi religious ideas began to spread⁹. Egyptian expatriates promulgated militant Islamism¹⁰. Qut’b’s revolutionary anti-Westernism was taught by the avant-garde of *Salafis* in Saudi universities¹¹. One of them was Jordanian Abdullah Azzam (1941-1989 CE)¹². “According to his doctrine[s]”, disregard of jihad, which comprised indiscriminate murder, was sheer “sin”¹³ ¹⁴. In the late 1970s, Egyptians returned from Saudi Arabia to Egypt¹⁵. The returnees have at times been labelled “*Ikhwān Salafis*”, referring to the MB and Salafism¹⁶. “An exchange of ideas ... was almost inevitable as Salafists and MB Islamists joined in [jihad against] Soviet-backed Nasserism throughout the Islamic world”¹⁷.

Over time, another threat emerged: the global jihadist organization al-Qaeda¹⁸. “[P]olitical *Salafis* do engage in [political] activities ... They sometimes even run for parliament in elections”, inspired by the MB¹⁹. In the end, *Salafi*-style “Islamic organizations – including al-Qaeda and the Taliban militia – want the same thing the Brotherhood does: [a] *shari’ah*-enforcing caliphate”²⁰.

⁶ Mandaville, 2007, 70

⁷ Jacob, 2016, 13-14

⁸ Qut’b’s revolutionary stance caused the Egyptian regime to crack down on Islamists and prompted the latter “to flee to Saudi Arabia” (Jacob, 2016, 13-14).

⁹ Wimhurst, 2016, 9-12; Racimora, 2013, 6

¹⁰ Jacob, 2016, 20-24

¹¹ *idem*, 26-30; see Mandaville, 2007, 241

¹² Jacob, 2016, 26-30

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ *idem*, 26-30; see Wimhurst, 2016, 12-14

¹⁵ Karakoc, Köse & Özcan, 2017, 737-38

¹⁶ Bin Ali, 2012, 53

¹⁷ Stratfor, 2012, 1

¹⁸ *ibid*

¹⁹ Oxford, 2018, 1

²⁰ Ibrahim, 2013, 4-7

III) Ideological Differences

a) Vis-à-vis Shari'ah

It has been pointed out that the MB follows a 'double standard' in communication, based on the doctrines of precautionary denial (*taqīyah*) and ambiguity (*tawriya*), appearing more liberal in English and "more ... rigid" in Arabic^{21 22}. This attitude leads to "contradictions, caveats, or significant" obscurities²³. Overall, the MB takes care to appear pragmatic towards Western audiences with respect to subjects such as "welfare policies, healthcare, education, and fighting corruption"²⁴. But Al-Banna "delineated transitional goals" from indoctrinating families and society to subsequently founding a *caliphate* and, lastly, "mastership of the world"²⁵.

The most extreme among the Salafists, especially *Jihadists*, "reject any ... for[m] of democratic governance as a violation of 'pure' *shari'ah*", instead opting for the fast establishment of a "theocratic state", or *caliphate*²⁶. But there have been discussions about the step-by-step introduction of Islamic legal provisions among the MB as well. Radicals split from the gradualists, who first want to promote a return of society to Islam before establishing a *caliphate*, from the 1950s onwards²⁷. Currently, the MB is divided into an old guard and revolutionaries.

The Salafists advocate swift change "on matters like banking, alcohol ... or entertainment" and discriminate openly against females²⁸. They focus on "the purification of" religious sources and "prophetic guidance rather than political institutions", whereas the MB mostly argues in political terms²⁹.

²¹ *idem*, 1-4

²² As was the case after the attack on the U.S. embassy in Benghazi, Libya, in 2012 (House of Commons, 2016, 23-25).

²³ For instance, when it comes to the more radical theses of Sayyid Qut'b or the question of corporal punishment (House of Commons, 2016, 25-28).

²⁴ see *ibid*

²⁵ Ibrahim, 2013, 4-7

²⁶ House of Commons, 2016, 28-30; see Friedland, 2015, 13

²⁷ Milton-Edwards, 2015, 154-155; see Friedland, 2015, 1

²⁸ Kirkpatrick, 2011, 1

²⁹ Olidort, 2015, 1

b) Vis-à-vis Jihadism

Sayyid Qut'b is one of the founding fathers of jihadism. In his reading, "offensive *jihad* was the tool needed to instil Islamic order and establish an Islamic state"³⁰. "[N]o middle ground exists in [the] struggle between God and Satan"³¹. However, the MB has officially disavowed the most questionable parts of Qut'b's legacy. While the MB did promulgate *jihad* in case of occupations of Muslim territory, it refused the idea of an individual duty to *jihad* as "a central pillar of Islam"^{32 33}.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan" was "a catalyst for" Salafism³⁴. The event let many *Salafists* from being politically engaged to being engaged in violence, and training towards armed combat in Afghanistan³⁵. Egyptian radical Abdul Salam Faraj (ca. 1952-1982 CE) formed the concepts of *jāhiliyyah* and *hakimiyya* – ignorance v. sovereignty of God – "into a new model" which up until today is at the base of *Salafi Jihadist* thought³⁶.

Salafists generally "believe *jihad* — in its spiritual, social, and military forms — is a legitimate concept in Islam; this is not limited to *Jihadi Salafists*³⁷. But the latter also maintain that jihad be waged to overthrow 'illegitimate' governments in Muslim-majority countries³⁸. *Jihadists* go so far as to deny the application of traditional, defensive rules and limitations of *jihad*, instead opting for "total war", individual duty to commit acts such as suicide attacks and indiscriminate assassinations^{39 40}. Quietists usually "abhor such violence"⁴¹. They "emphasise the importance of individual adherence to proper thought, practice"⁴². Arguably, most *Salafists* can be subsumed under the category of quietism, and do abstain from political, let alone militant, activism⁴³.

³⁰ Jacob, 2016, 13-14

³¹ Ibrahim, 2013, 1-4

³² Lynch, 2010, 473-474

³³ It must be noted that the MB has been aiding Hamas in the Palestinian territories and "been linked to violence in Egypt since the 2013 fall of the Brotherhood-led government" (Counter Extremism Project, Undated, 1).

³⁴ Jacob, 2016, 8-10 & 32-33

³⁵ idem, 32-33

³⁶ MEMO, 2014, 1

³⁷ Oxford, 2018, 1

³⁸ ibid

³⁹ Jacob, 2016, 13-14; see Mandaville, 2007, 248-49

⁴⁰ Ayman al-Zawahiri (b. 1950 CE) has coined the expression 'global *jihad*' (Oxford, 2018, 1).

⁴¹ Oxford, 2018, 1

⁴² Mandaville, 2007, 248-49

⁴³ Oxford, 2018, 1

The MB, for its part, has reiterated its promotion of “reform and ... social justice” and distanced itself from “Qut’bist splinters”⁴⁴. The MB participates only indirectly in civil wars⁴⁵. However, it “countenance[s] violence ... where gradualism is ineffective”⁴⁶. For instance, the MB “repeatedly defended Hamas attacks against Israel, including the use of suicide bombers and the killing of civilians”⁴⁷.

IV) In Closing

Salafists, including those within the MB, “maintain an unbending conviction that they are the only trustworthy guardians of Islamic *shari’ah* and” social values⁴⁸. They criticise the more pragmatic leaders of the MB both on a religious and a political level for their failure to uphold sunnatic injunctions, for “unorthodox innovations” and their forsaking absolute divine sovereignty (*hakimiyyah*)⁴⁹.

While *Salafists* see themselves “as outside of a corrupt *jahiliyyah*[, or] pre-Islamic society”, the MB considers itself “part of society, changing it from within through open political and social action”⁵⁰. The MB respects civil law and state borders, however its condoning of violence against the U.S. and Israel is highly problematic⁵¹. “The two trends embody very different visions of the ideal Islamic state. The Brotherhood’s pragmatism is rooted in a doctrine of moderation (*wasatiya*), which is anathema to the doctrinal purism of the *Salafi*-jihadist trend”⁵². The MB has not fully distanced itself from Sayyid Qut’b’s ideas, which *Salafists* subscribe to as well. Such will not happen per se: “although political-Islamist groups may be democratic or non-violent, they are not ‘liberals’”⁵³.

⁴⁴ House of Commons, 2016, 35-37; Lynch, 2010, 469-70

⁴⁵ *idem*, 33-38

⁴⁶ *idem*, 31-32

⁴⁷ *idem*, 34-35

⁴⁸ El-Sherif, 2015, 14-16

⁴⁹ *ibid*

⁵⁰ Lynch, 2010, 272-73

⁵¹ *ibid*

⁵² *idem*, 483

⁵³ House of Commons, 2016, 26-28 & 30-31

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