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Salafism as Gramscian informed vanguardism

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Abstract

In this study, I offer a categorization of Salafism based on the concept of vanguardism. Vanguardism suggests how Salafis inhabit the political domain, by posing as the vanguard of a privileged group endowed with a historical mission. Relatedly, I summon the Gramscian concept of “philosophy of praxis.” With this, I intend to reconfigure Wiktorowicz’s classificatory scheme predicated on too stark an opposition between *‘aqīdah* (theory) and *manhaj* (method). The philosophy of praxis accounts for the inherent tension between these two domains. Such tension is manifest in Salafis’ ambiguities, compromises, internal rifts, ideological adjustments, and revisions. Two related Gramscian concepts, historical bloc and modern Prince, bring such considerations more immediately into the political. They highlight, respectively, the political-historical context in which Salafis operate and the political-historical role they play as instances of vanguardism. I then put forth my classificatory scheme in the form of a typology. One axis is represented by the attitude towards the “historical bloc” (pro or anti) and the kind of vanguard posturing that emerges out of it (support, creation, or activation). The other axis is represented by the specific framing of the “Enemy” category on the part of the Salafi vanguard (historical/institutional or essential/identitarian), and the stance they consequently assume towards it (compromise/accommodation or rejection/denunciation). The resulting classification offers six categories (*accommodationists*, *partisans*, *delayers*, *agitators*, *mobilizers*, and *belligerents*). Stressing the fundamental political nature of contemporary Salafism—its vanguardism—they account for its inscription in a specific, modern way of thinking and acting the political.

Keywords Salafism · Vanguardism · Philosophy of praxis · Historical bloc · Modern Prince

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Introduction

Salafism is a religious and social trend within contemporary Sunni Islam. The term refers to the paradigm of the “pious ancestors” (*as-salaf as-ṣāliḥ*, whence *Salafism*), the early community of Islam, which stands as a template for the just and virtuous Islamic society (Haykel, 2009). In this study, I argue that Salafism represents a form of vanguardism. I do so by revising Wiktorowicz’s seminal contribution (2006) regarding the logic of classification of Salafi groups, suggesting instead a Gramscian inspired approach.

Wiktorowicz posited a fundamental binary. On the one hand, Salafism is characterized by a shared set of core ideational principles (*‘aqīdah*). On the other hand, it varies in its method (*manhaj*) of relating *‘aqīdah* to political and historical circumstances. The Salafi method informs “the prophetic model of putting beliefs into practice” (Wiktorowicz, 2006: 219). *Manhaj* becomes manifest as a diverse array of practices stemming from contextual interpretations of core principles. All Salafis are Salafis because of the shared *‘aqīdah*; and they can be parsed out in different categories because of the different applications of the *manhaj*. The growing literature on Salafism has since then adopted the fundamental logic of Wiktorowicz’s work and the categories he suggested: purists, politicians and jihadis. The first ones avoid politics and focus on learning and preaching; they are also referred to as “quietists.”¹ Politicians engage actively in politics, at times forming parties and other formal institutions, but they reject the use of violence. Jihadis, instead, are convinced that the deployment of Islamic sanctioned violence can and should be an instrument of political action.

The events and dynamics that have impacted the Islamic world at large, and the Arab world in particular, over the last decade (Cavatorta & Merone, 2016) have occasioned a reflection on such categories. The Arab uprisings proved pivotal for the trajectory of Salafi movements in the region. Three processes have been of particular significance. First, the opening of institutional politics (however brief) induced many Salafis to take a more direct and active political role. We have witnessed a “politicization” of Salafism² in countries like Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco (Bonney, 2018; Merone et al., 2021; Azaola-Piazza and Hernando de Larramendi, 2021); in Kuwait, Salafism built instead on a longer engagement with institutional politics (Freer, 2016 and 2018). Second, government surveillance of previously “quietist” Salafis (hitherto mostly espousing a-political stances) increased as a consequence (Al-Anani, 2016; Wagemakers, 2016a).³ Third, the

¹ This term, as Wagemakers (2020) argues, is not synonymous with purist, and thus may create some conceptual confusion. Purist refers in fact to the approach to religion, in particular the effort, shared nominally by all Salafis, to “cleanse” and “purify” Islamic doctrine and practice. Quietist is instead an eminently political referent, indicating the relation to political (namely state) authority.

² An influential thesis in this sense is the “ikhwanization” of Salafism (Utvik, 2014), according to which Salafis modify their ideology and attendant behavior in ways not dissimilar from the Muslim Brotherhood. For a critique of this thesis, see Pall (2020).

³ Wagemakers spoke of a “dual effect” of the Arab Spring onto Jordanian Salafism in this sense. Reading Al-Anani and Torelli in the same edited volume (Cavatorta and Merone, 2016), it seems also Egyptian and Tunisian Salafis underwent the same process.

rise of militant and violent Salafism in countries experiencing the collapse of central state authority (as in Yemen, Iraq, Syria and Libya) has represented the most dramatic development (Bunzel, 2016; Weismann, 2017; Merone, 2020; Blanc & Roy, 2021). The cumulative result, in Roel Meijer's estimation (2016), has been the increased conceptualization on the part of Salafism of politics as separate domain from the religious, albeit always couched in a religious language.

The fact that Salafism has become *more* consciously and explicitly political lent credibility to Wiktorowicz's initial intuition: to classify Salafis according to how they behave towards the political. At the same time, his categories confronted two sets of criticism. From an empirical standpoint, these complex politico-historical processes challenged the neat, ideal type parameters of Wiktorowicz's framework. Second and related, from a purely conceptual standpoint, scholars had already started debating those categories even before the Arab uprisings further problematized them.

Confronting Wiktorowicz's framework took either two forms. One featured the "revision" of his work. It accepted the fundamental dichotomy positing *'aqīdah* and *manhaj* as our variables of interest (with only the second doing any classificatory work). This approach produced a more nuanced articulation of the categories presented above, with creation of hyphenated groupings⁴ (Wagemakers, 2012) or the articulation of sub-types⁵ (Wagemakers, 2016b, 2020). The other approach was to propose instead a different scheme altogether, sidestepping the *'aqīdah-manhaj* pair: a new categorization could be based on the target of political action (Hegghammer, 2009), affiliation to specific Salafi scholars' worldviews (Brachman 2008), relation to the incumbent ruler (Pall, 2018), or attitudes towards the political process (Lacroix & Shalata, 2016).⁶

Wiktorowicz was right in focusing on *'aqīdah* and *manhaj* as instances of, respectively, theory and method. That move allowed him to examine Salafism focusing on its political dimension. Discrimination of different Salafi manifestations occurred on the basis of *manhaj*: it prodded various Salafi readings of social reality, in turn producing different (political) dispositions and attendant practices. The work of Wagemakers, the scholar who more lucidly elaborated on this framework, supports this contention (2020). He does so by elegantly refining Wiktorowicz's definition of *manhaj*, connecting it more clearly with the ideological tenets of *'aqīdah* (2016c: 41). However, I argue that an alternative theoretical perspective on those two key concepts may grant us a more refined understanding of the politics of Salafism. Such understanding is needed not only to appraise the recent evolution of Salafism, but also to underline some key features which have eluded scholarly attention thus far.

In what follows, the article provides a typology of Salafism by looking at its manifestations in the Arab world. I am aware that Salafism is a phenomenon that has a global, and not merely regional, reach (Roy, 2004). Yet, the Arab world has been its epicenter in terms of modern origins and developments (Gauvain, 2012:

⁴ For instance, "quietist-jihadi."

⁵ For instance, "aloofist," "loyalist," and "propagandist" within the "quietist" category.

⁶ They proposed "revolutionary Salafis" in the context of post-Arab Spring Egypt.

5).⁷ A new classificatory effort comes out of the politicization of the trend in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings. However global, Salafism irradiates outward from the Arab world, not the other way around.

With these caveats in mind, I plan to illustrate two initial contentions regarding Salafism, namely its essentially contested nature and its vanguardist aspect. Then, I will introduce my own approach, predicated on Gramsci's "philosophy of praxis." Subsequently, I will offer a novel classificatory scheme in the form of a typology, trusting it may solve the problems engendered by too rigid a binary between *'aqīdah* and *manhaj*. This typology is based on two dimensions: relation of the (Salafi) vanguard to the historical bloc and its conceptualization of the Enemy. These dimensions give rise to six different categories to parse out Salafism. In my conclusion, I contend they shed light on the specific way in which Salafism is a modern political phenomenon.

Salafism: between conceptual contestation and vanguardism

Salafism is a term whose definition elicits scholarly consensus only at a very general level. At its most basic formulation, Salafism is an epistemological approach to Sunni Islam.⁸ This approach is scripturalist (based on the *Qur'an* and the *Sunnah*) and literalist: "a [...] religious orientation based on a specific mode of scriptural engagement coherent enough to be analytically discernible in a set of interrelated views on matters of theology and law shared by modern Salafis" (Evstatiev, 2021: 172). This contention entails, from a sociological standpoint, that "Salafis are first and foremost religious and social reformers who are engaged in creating and reproducing particular forms of authority and identity, both personal and communal. Indeed, Salafis are determined to create a distinct Muslim subjectivity, one with profound social and political implications" (Haykel, 2009: 34–35).

Formations of authority and identity are predicated upon a set of propositions in terms of theology and jurisprudence⁹ which congeal into a characteristic disposition: "all Salafists are united in one strict, unbending fundamental core idea: a return to the roots" (Abu Rumman & Abu Haniyeh, 2013: 252). Gauvain primed "purity" as the hallmark of such return: "on historical and political planes, Salafis are more concerned about 'purity' than almost anything else" (2012: 14). Purity stands

⁷ A notable non-Arab contribution to the doctrinal development of contemporary Salafism is represented by the South Asian *Ahl-e Hadīth* movement (see Zahab, 2009).

⁸ For an analysis of the relation between Salafism and "mainstream" Sunni Islam, see Duderija, 2018.

⁹ The literature on the theological, creedal, doctrinal and jurisprudential coordinates of Salafism is vast. For the purposes of this study, I will outline here three elements shared by all Salafis, at least in principle. First, the refutation of the traditional Islamic schools of jurisprudence (*madhāhib*, sing. *madhhab*) in order to rely only on the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah*, in particular a keen and focused attention to the *ahādīth* (sing. *hadīth*). Second, the strict adherence to the principle of God's monotheistic unity or *tawhīd*, articulated in unity of worship (*tawhīd al-rubūyyah*), of lordship (*tawhīd al-'ibādah*), and of God's names and attributes (*tawhīd al-asma' wa al-sifat*). Third, the rejection of unlawful innovations or *bid'a* (sing. *bida'*), the result of humans' own independent reasoning outside the boundaries of sanctioned Islam. For proper discussions on these elements, see Wagemakers, 2016c: 39–50, and Duderija, 2007, 2010.

here for the (doctrinally mandated) correct performance of rituals and practices. The enactment of this performance would bring about the “uncorrupted Islamic reality” represented by the template of the *salaf* (2013: 14). The idiosyncratic Salafi disposition is thus embodied in these practices: not merely ancillary, but constitutive components of contemporary Salafi socio-political identity (Rock-Singer, 2020: 520–1, 524).¹⁰

These elements are widely accepted. However, further consensus on what constitutes Salafism eludes Salafis and scholars alike. This is true both at the conceptual and, consequently, at the historical and political level. Intense debates, in particular, have emerged in terms of the philological and historical origins of the trend. Evstatiev (2021) maintains that his definition pertains also to “premodern precursors” of contemporary Salafism. A position rejected by Lauzière (2010), who contends early modern Islamic activists and thinkers (such as Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad ‘Abduh, and Rashid Rida) only mistakenly can be considered predecessors of present-day Salafis. This stance engendered a heated rebuttal by Griffel (2015, with a reply from Lauzière, 2016). From a security perspective instead, Blanc and Roy scrutinized the “continuum thesis” (2021: 5–11), whereby Salafism theological and jurisprudential coordinates are the conduit to militant and armed jihadism. They contested the “Salafi” nature of the latter, which is one of the most readily accepted propositions in the literature following Wiktorowicz’s work. Moreover, in the same work, Blanc and Roy look at phenomena that may merit the label of “post-Salafism:” “a revision of Salafis’ exclusivist stance through a reinvention of its modes of engagement with society at the religious, political, and cultural levels” (20). In this sense, post-Salafism may represent an instance of post-Islamism as Bayat first adumbrated (2007, 2013).¹¹ Yet, as with all “post-” labels, post-Salafism may not suggest an extension of the original concept, but an unwarranted permutation or even wholesale superannuation.¹²

In light of these discussions, Evstatiev finally submitted that Salafism is best described as an “essentially contested concept.” Such concepts generate “endless disputes [...] on the part of their user” (Gallie, 1956: 169; see also Griffin, 2006 and Collier et al, 2006)¹³ since they entail a “widely shared agreement on a concept but not on its most proper use and realization” (2021: 174). Without claiming to offer any “proper use” of this contested concept, I shall not focus on the “pre-modern Salafis,” nor on the emerging “post-Salafis.” Instead, for the sake of analytical consistency and definitional coherence, I prime the exclusivist epistemological stance that best seems to categorize Salafis *qua* a discernible phenomenon in

¹⁰ Rock-Singer points out to praying with shoes on, gender segregation, and beard trimming as examples of Salafi performances in Egypt. Such practices differentiate Salafis from other Islamist actors, notably the Muslim Brothers.

¹¹ See also Sinani (2022) for “post-Salafism” in Saudi Arabia and Thurston (2018) in West Africa.

¹² For instance, post-modernism and post-colonialism may propose an overcoming of both modernist and colonial fundamental tenets. I intend here to heed to Sartori’s (1970) warning about concept stretching and “misformation.”

¹³ Examples of “essentially contested concepts” are “democracy” and “rule of law,” as discussed by Collier et al, 2006.

contemporary Islam. Crucially, this move allows me to further discriminate Salafis in relation to the key concepts of *‘aqidah* and *manhaj*.

In this sense, I proceed to analyze Salafism via one dimension of immediate political import: vanguardism. With Gray, I define vanguardism as a “political phenomena based upon an intermeshing of ideology and organizational form.” Vanguardism is based upon “an epistemology that holds that only some types of people [...] are capable of seeing the ‘truth’ of historical and social dynamics. This population of the epistemologically privileged, in turn, will reshape the world into something new and better, based on [...] their own world-historic role in the dynamic of history itself” (2020: 1). Vanguardism is a modern phenomenon in that the masses feature as the subjects embodying the epistemologically privileged community. This community is the object of the attention of the vanguard: a committed group of individuals, stemming from such population, who represents the organizational form of vanguardism. The task of the vanguard is to lead the target (mass) community towards fulfilling its historical role. Only the vanguard is capable of discerning the trajectory of History by virtue of its access to science (2020: 1; 16–20).¹⁴ This view of history is crucial: while already ordained by a higher order, it needs the action of the vanguard to come to actualization. It follows that theory and ideology are meaningful only insofar as they are translated into action: an active praxis that must bear onto to the political. This action is directed eminently against the Enemy: the ultimate ‘Other’ that defines, via a dialectical and Manichean opposition, the epistemologically privileged population and legitimizes the action of the vanguard (Gray, 2020: 14–16; 20–22).

There are two reasons to read Salafism through the concept of vanguardism. First, as modern phenomenon,¹⁵ vanguardism is based upon an epistemological premise that comes to articulate an ideological stance.¹⁶ The relation between epistemological claims and access to truth closely echoes such a fundamental trait of Salafism.¹⁷ The ideological edifice of Salafism, notwithstanding its various and diverse articulations, is based on the certainty secured through a (reputedly) infallible system to attain knowledge. Second, Salafi discourse makes explicit reference to a configuration with clear vanguardist undertones. According to a sound (*ṣaḥīḥ*) *hadīth*, Islam will splinter into seventy-three sects. Only one, “the saved sect” (*al-firqah al-nājiyah*), will attain salvation, thanks to the guidance offered by the “the victorious group” (*al-ta’ifah al-mansūrah*; Evstatiev, 2021: 187). In this framework, such group poises as the vanguard: Salafi shaykhs, preachers, scholars.¹⁸ Stemming themselves from

¹⁴ We should not consider “science” necessarily in a positivist or technical fashion. Rather, it indicates an intimate, exclusive and infallible understanding of social reality and historical dynamics.

¹⁵ The heyday of vanguardism was, in the West, between the end of the XIX century and the interwar period, dramatically peaking with the Bolshevik Revolution and the rise of Fascism. For the rest of the world, the peak occurred after World War II, especially during the national decolonization struggles. See Gray (2020: 9–15).

¹⁶ This is a formal definition, independent of the specific ideological content of any given vanguardist movement. The ideological content may refer to class, nation, race, gender, and, for our purposes here, also the divine and religious communities.

¹⁷ For a discussion on this point, see Wagemakers (2016c: 51).

¹⁸ Wiktowicz makes a similar point, too (2006: 212).

the epistemologically privileged population of the “saved sect,” they shall lead it to salvation. This occurs via proper education (*tarbīyyah*) and consequent purification (*tafṣīyyah*; Gauvain, 2012: 14) from the innovations (*bid'ā*) and unbelief (*kufr*) that have polluted Islam after the hallowed times of the pious forefathers.¹⁹ Such process of salvation is set against the threat and opposition of outsiders, representatives of a variously framed Enemy. This exclusivist approach, from the epistemological to the ideological, is underscored by a “particular emphasis on a set of Islamic boundary-drawing imperatives, such as loyalty and disavowal (*al-wala' wa al-bara'*)” (Evstatiev, 2021: 187).²⁰

Salafis indeed show remarkable consistency, as the cases below will illustrate, in their organizational configurations: the vanguard of preachers seeks to recruit fellow Muslims receptive of Salafi call (*da'wah*)²¹ who, by virtue of that, represent members of the privileged community. The fulfilment of its historical role congeals as the return, via re-establishment, of the hallowed template of the *salaf*.²² In this sense, while not all Salafis openly or explicitly advocate to enact that template under the paradigm of the “Islamic State,” it is also equally challenging to find explicit rejection of such ill-defined concept.²³

Having proposed vanguardism as a privileged framework to read Salafism *qua* political phenomenon, I turn now to scrutinizing the relation between *aqīdah* and *manhaj*.

Salafism as philosophy of praxis: a Gramscian approach

The work of Antonio Gramsci²⁴ has been widely applied both to contexts beyond interwar Fascist Italy, and to disciplines other than Marxist political economy or cultural studies. Indeed, the moniker of a “Travelling Gramsci” (Filippini, 2021)

¹⁹ See especially the work of Nasir ad-Din Al-Albani (2000), a prominent Syrian scholar (1914–1999), on *tarbīyyah* and *tafṣīyyah* (Olidort, 2015).

²⁰ In Gray's theory on Vanguardism the concept of the “Enemy” may be substantiated via different historical subjects (e.g., the “bourgeoisie” for the Bolsheviks, or the “Jew” for the Nazis). Salafis do not have a single or unified subject performing this role (see below), nor do they use a single term or concept to refer to the Enemy. I would like to thank Dr. Djallil Lounnas for his insights on this issue. We may argue instead that the concept of *al-wala' wa al-bara'*, with its socio-political implications (see Wagemakers, 2012), illustrates the process whereby Salafis at one time construct and separate themselves from the Enemy.

²¹ As a personal anecdote, I received myself the Salafi *da'wah* after interviews I carried out in Amman in the context of fieldwork research. Remarking upon my interest in Islam and Arabic, local preachers said I would have made for a fine member of their community upon conversion, hence technically joining the “epistemologically privileged community.”

²² Abu Rumman and Abu Haniyeh (the latter himself a former member of a militant Salafi circle in Jordan during the early 1990s) contend that, regardless of the different positions we may find within Salafism as a trend, this goal is shared by most, if not all, Salafis (2013).

²³ The most poignant critiques to the idea of the Islamic State may be found, albeit not directly or mainly addressing Salafism, in Roy (1994) and Hallaq (2013).

²⁴ The thought of Gramsci is articulated through his *Prison Notebooks* (PN), which he wrote between 1926 and 1935 while incarcerated by the Fascist regime. In the present study, I have used the most influential collection of such notes in the English-speaking world, the Ohare and Nowell Smith edited volume *Selection of the Prison Notebooks* (1971). I will refer to it as “SPN” henceforth in the paper.

only points to the reach of his concepts and overall theoretical apparatus.²⁵ In this study, I summon Gramsci on the basis of three interrelated accounts: first, his philosophy of praxis in addressing the Salafi *'aqīdah* and *manhaj* pair; second, his concept of “historical bloc,” which stands for the cultural-institutional context in which Salafis operate and their interpretation of it; and third, the program for a “New Prince” and its vanguardist elements.

With the expression “philosophy of praxis,” Gramsci offers his own elaboration of Marxism.²⁶ The term does not merely indicate a new or updated set of theoretical propositions. Instead, Gramsci conceives it as “a philosophy that renews from head to toe the *mode itself* of doing philosophy—since it puts itself forward as a mass philosophy that is not only an individual elaboration but also a collective praxis, an organized political will” (Frosini, 2016: 531. Emphasis in the original). The philosophy of praxis has material existence in the activities of the people, providing guidance for and informing “practical conduct and moral behavior” (Simon: 1991: 66). In Gramsci’s words, it is equivalent to “a religion understood in the secular sense of a unity of faith between a conception of the world and a corresponding norm of conduct” (SPN²⁷: 631). In this sense, Gramsci intends to find a dialectical unity between the theoretical and practical dimension: he posits neither can be defined in isolation from the other, nor be reduced to the other.

Let us insert the terms *'aqīdah* (the theoretical, doctrinal core of Salafism, however defined) and *manhaj* (the method inspiring concrete life and deeds of Salafis, however coherent) in the Gramscian construct. They relate to one another in the same dialectical fashion. An ideational position (*'aqīdah*) is “affirmed as an intellectual choice”; and a conduct for moral behavior (*manhaj*) informs a praxis which “emerges from the real activity of each person and which is implicit in his or her mode of action” (SPN: 632). Therefore, it is not possible to look at the ideational/*'aqīdah* and the method/*manhaj* as mutually independent domains, as Wiktorowicz’s scheme posited. Furthermore, not only do they exist only in relation to one another, they do so also in reciprocal tension. A specific method informing political practice will need to amend, modify, or otherwise read differently given items in the fabric of the *'aqīdah*. Conversely, a given doctrinal and theoretical perspective will strive to make the practical, socio-political engagement stemming from the *manhaj* congruent to its dispositions.

An important implication follows then for the study and classification of Salafism. Salafis do not vary, as Wiktorowicz claimed, only at the level of reading social reality and its attendant socio-political manifestations (their *manhaj*), while

²⁵ Two particular strains of the “Travelling Gramsci” are relevant here. First, his application to post-colonial contexts (Green 2011 and 2013; see also Chalcraft for application in the Arab World (2021), and the introduction by Chalcraft and Marchi to the special issue of *Middle East Critique*, 30:1, 2021 on the same subject). Second, his more specific deployment for issue pertaining to Islamism (Butko 2004; Kandil, 2011; Merone, 2020; Tuğal, 2002 and 2009). With regard to Gramsci’s concept of “common sense” and Salafism, see Dawood, 2021.

²⁶ The focus of the present study does not allow to delve appropriately in the various aspects of the philosophy of praxis, or the other Gramscian concepts presented. For a comprehensive discussion of these topics, see Thomas, 2009.

²⁷ Cf. fn. 23.

retaining sameness and coherence at the theoretical level. From a philosophy of praxis perspective, we can account for the variations of *‘aqdāh* that we witness. On issues such as *imān* (faith), *kufr* (unbelief) and *takfīr* (excommunication), *al-wala’ wa al-bara’*, and of course violence and *jihād*, Salafis clearly do not hold the same views²⁸ precisely because they read social reality, and consequently behave, so differently. In fact, differences must occur across various ideational configurations of Salafism as they are dialectically related to different methods and attendant practices. Negotiating the constraints and opportunities of the political prods Salafis to engage in thorough and at times painful ideological (re)positioning. Conversely, such ideological (re)positioning suggests a number of socio-political choices, be them more dogmatic or pragmatic.

Therefore, according to this perspective, the political affects Salafism on both levels: ideational and methodological/practical. For Gramsci, it follows that a concrete historical situation reflects the unity and tension between these two domains. As he reflects upon concrete political arrangements, he coins the phrase “historical bloc.” It indicates “the way in which a hegemonic class combines the leadership of a block of social forces in civil society with its leadership in the sphere of production” (Simon, 1991: 31). As he expands on the Marxist framework, class dominance, or even hegemony,²⁹ reverberate throughout society not only at the economic and institutional level. They find expression also at the societal, ideational, and cultural level. In this sense, the historical bloc is the form that dominance and hegemony take at a specific juncture. The unity of “coercion and consent”—the material and the ideational—sustains hegemony. Consequently, a historical bloc features a specific political and institutional arrangement of social and economic forces; and such arrangement is sustained by material as well as ideational and ideological elements.

Each historical bloc Salafis confront (a regime with given characteristics in terms of class structure, production processes, institutions, rules, practices; and the attendant discourses, images, and ideology) will offer a set of opportunities and constraints, incentives, and sanctions. At the same time, Salafis will read such power configuration through the lenses of their disposition *qua* Salafis; and they will craft a specific path that tries to accommodate their ideological convictions with their preferred course of action.

As they make such choices, they never lose their vanguardism. As I illustrated above, Salafism is always characterized by notions of separateness and selectness. This stance is intimately related to their foundational epistemological approach that, consonant with a vanguardist stance, claims exclusivity and solitary (not just preferential) access to truth. As they position themselves in relation to the wider

²⁸ For a discussion, see Wagemakers (2016c: 28–60).

²⁹ Hegemony is likely the most popular concept of the Gramscian vocabulary. For the purpose of this paper, suffice to say that Gramsci usually refers to it as a specific condition of class domination, or “consent armored by coercion.” Sheer, naked domination would be defective in the crucial element of willing consent and thus rely more on coercion. The formulations and discussions about the proper content and features of Gramscian hegemony vary greatly. For an assessment that stresses the incongruent characteristics of the concept in the PN, see Anderson (2017 [1976]). For a rebuttal, maintaining Gramsci’s overall coherence, see Thomas (2009).

society, Salafis play out their vanguardism. In this sense, the last term I shall consider from the Gramscian vocabulary is the “modern Prince.” An explicit reference to the work of Machiavelli, the modern Prince is the most clearly vanguardist proposition in Gramsci’s formulation. It serves us well to connect his reflections with this key trait of current Salafism.

As with other concepts in the *Prison Notebooks*, the modern Prince appears in different guises. While we can readily exclude any “great man” theory, two interpretations have gained more currency. First, the modern Prince is the communist party.³⁰ Second, it may represent a historical process born out of the party-masses relation: a new way of doing politics. In this more sophisticated formulation, the modern Prince acquires historical connotations beyond its mere cogent institutional form (the party). It becomes a moral and intellectual reform, “the simultaneous representation and realization of a politics of a different type part of a new conception of history and politics” (Thomas, 2013: 31).

Gramsci reconciles these two aspects of the modern Prince. He posits: “[w]hen does a party become historically necessary? When the conditions for its ‘triumph,’ for its inevitable progress to State power, are at least in the process of formation, and allow their future evolution [...] to be foreseen.” (SPN: 360). He goes on to illustrate the features of the modern Prince: a “mass element;” a “principal cohesive element;” and “an intermediate element,” “which articulates the first [mass] element with the second [cohesive element] and maintains contact between them, not only physically but also morally and intellectually” (SPN: 360–1). These reflections reveal a clear vanguardist position: the necessary presence of the masses; the historical role they must fulfil, which may grant them unity and cohesion of purpose; and the job assigned to an ‘intermediate’ element, that is to say a vanguard, to guide and mobilize them to action.

It is a construct beset by an inherent tension, as Karabel (1976) has observed. On the one hand, we observe the party. It claims to represent the vanguard of an epistemologically privileged population, the working class: a population endowed with a historical mission. As Gray says, this stance implies that “the interests and aims of the vanguard party organization are merged and subsumed under the “true” interests of the vanguard category” (Gray, 2020: 26. Emphasis in the original). On the other hand, the party is necessary to ensure that the mission will actually be carried out successfully: and it can only do so by positioning itself above the population it seeks to guide. Access to “truth” via “science”³¹ enables the vanguard party to play this role. Yet, it also confers upon the vanguard itself the power to steer, rectify, and possibly upbraid a reluctant privileged population.

We may discuss whether Gramsci found a satisfactory theoretical solution to this tension.³² Be that as it may, Gray believes this conundrum has never been solved: the

³⁰ In the words of Gramsci: “The modern Prince, the myth-Prince, cannot be a real person, a concrete individual. It can be only an organism. [...] This organism is already given by historical development; it is the political party” (SPN: 323). Together with Bordiga, Terracini, Togliatti, and others, Gramsci founded the Italian Communist Party (PCI) in 1921, the result of a split from the Italian Socialist Party. Gramsci became PCI’s first secretary. For a biography of Gramsci, see D’Orsi, 2017.

³¹ See footnote 10.

³² Karabel (1976) thinks he has done so, with his theory of the organic intellectuals. For a similar and more updated discussion, see also Rupert (2005) and Thomas (2009, 2013).

issue lies in the premises of vanguardism itself and its epistemologically exclusivist claim to truth. With these considerations in mind, I introduce a Gramscian-vanguardist based classification of contemporary Salafism.

The vanguard and its Enemy

I have hitherto argued that a defining feature of Salafism is its vanguardism. I propose then to reflect on how Salafis articulate and enact their role as vanguard. I do this by offering an explanatory typology whose property space, according to Elman's (2005) framework,³³ is defined by two axes. On the first axis, I concentrate on the Salafis' reading of the historical bloc: what do they make of it, and what do they recognize the main preoccupation of the vanguard ought to be. I posit three possible positions: if they manifest and express backing for the incumbent power relations, we speak of "support from the vanguard," if not, of "creation of the vanguard," and "activation of the vanguard." On the second axis, I discuss the category of the Enemy: given its traits, Salafis will conceptualize and act out their role as vanguard in different fashions. Here, I differentiate between "historical/institutional" and "essentialist/identitarian" Enemy. These two theoretical stances give rise to two corresponding practices: *compromise/accommodation* and *denunciation/rejection*, respectively.

Historical bloc: positioning vanguardism

Salafis, as the vanguard of the faithful, address the mass of believers. All (Sunni) Muslims represent, potentially, their target audience. They all are endowed with the epistemological potential to become part of the "saved sect." This project entails the creation of a new Muslim subjectivity, anchored in the template of the pious forefathers (Haykel, 2009) and embodied in a set of behavioral practices (Gauvain, 2012; Rock-Singer, 2020). In this plan, the devotional and spiritual must find ultimately a socio-political outlet: Salafis acts as "a vanguard party [that] seeks to direct this population toward the 'true' religion while simultaneously pushing this population to gain political and social power within a given society" (Gray, 2020: 173).

However, this push to attain social and political power seems moot, subdued or even downright absent when we look at many concrete manifestations of Salafism. The constant reminders within literature of the largely apolitical attitude of most Salafis are reflected in the proliferation of labels such as quietist, traditionalist, scientific, or purist. All these terms point to the Salafis' reluctance to step onto the political domain and take on the authorities. They appear content with the *status quo* they witness in their given historical bloc—or else indifferent towards it, as they devote themselves in avowedly *prima facie* non-political activities such as studying and praying.

³³ Elman posits that, "[e]xplanatory typologies invoke both the descriptive and classificatory roles of typologies [...] in a way that incorporates their theoretical focus' (296). In my study, I construct the property space as to heed to Elman's question "[i]f my theory is correct, what do I expect to see?" (298).

Yet, this attitude does not make them non-vanguardist. It does not mean they have confined themselves to a completely apolitical territory³⁴ or that their activities cannot be regarded still, in some fashion, as political.³⁵ Rather, they consider the political authorities in charge, and the overall socioeconomic and institutional arrangements of the historical bloc, as worthy of their support. The Salafi vanguard holds the incumbent regime more of an ally than an obstacle on the way to furthering its goals. I group these Salafis under the master category of “support from the vanguard” precisely to indicate the backing they offer to the regime and attendant socio-cultural situation.

Conversely, other Salafis showcase a dissatisfaction with the incumbent regime. Such displeasure may be articulated in two different forms. First, Salafis may believe they still have to concentrate on the creation of a proper vanguard in order to launch into overt political action.³⁶ It is not time—yet—to follow through with their overall plan of change and overhauling of the incumbent historical bloc. Conditions are not ripe. Their work thus is primarily devoted to the proper establishment of (the vanguard) *al-ṭaʿifah al-manṣūrah*. This operation will make sure (the privileged population) *al-firqah al-nājiyah* may actually find salvation in the (coming) re-enactment of the hallowed Islamic politic of the *salaf*. I group these Salafis under the master category of “creation of the vanguard.” Second, Salafis may on the other hand consider the times appropriate for action. They are ready to take on a vanguardist role that actively and practically seeks to upend the *status quo*. The master category that defines this last group of Salafis is “activation of the vanguard.” Crucially, the other axis I present here will further—and decisively—differentiate between specific, concrete instances of Salafism we found within the master categories just offered.

Framing the Enemy

Positions within and towards the historical bloc would not suffice, in and of themselves, to categorize Salafis properly. A key element is the notion of the Enemy. Along this dimension, I consider how Salafi conceptualize their Enemy, and, consequently, what courses of actions are adumbrated and advanced given its attributes. The Enemy can take various forms, and combinations thereof, depending on the given Salafi movement, trend, or individual. It can be the incumbent local regime; the world hegemon (i.e., the USA, and often times its allies); master narratives such as capitalism, nationalism, secularism, democracy, liberalism, socialism (and attendant notions such as human, civil, and political rights; feminism;

³⁴ Nasir ad-Din Al-Albani was famous for articulating this position: “*tark as-siyasah min as-siyasah*,” “leaving politics is a political.” In Lacroix, 2009: 69.

³⁵ See in particular Abu Rumman and Abu Haniyeh (2013: 217–277). The two Jordanian scholars are strong proponents of the inherent political nature of Salafism even when discussing Wiktorowicz’s “purist” Salafis in their home country.

³⁶ It is worth reminding how, in a philosophy of praxis-vanguardist framework that I have presented here, action.

multiculturalism); or even other religious groups (Shi'is and Sufis, in particular) and political-religious movements (like the Muslim Brothers and often other Salafis).³⁷ The key is for the Enemy to be able to sustain, as a dichotomous Other, the claims to righteousness and truth advanced by the Salafis *qua* vanguard of the epistemologically privileged population. In order to play this role, the Enemy must infallibly benefit from existing “negative present” (Gray, 2020: 45), the historical-political situation Salafis want to rectify. At this juncture, let us consider the questions: Does the dialectical opposition of the Enemy category engender the possibility of compromise and accommodation? Or does it only lead to rejection and denunciation of the (ultimate) Other? In the first case, Salafis consider the Enemy as a ‘historical/institutional’ adversary. The Enemy’s nature is transient, connected to a given historical time, location, and set of institutions. These conditions may change. Compromise is then possible because the Enemy itself therefore may change. Its essence is not intimately inimical to Salafism and its truth. Otherwise, in the second case, we witness an essentialist and identitarian stance. The Enemy is not confined to a given historical era (marked by specific features); rather, it endures at a transhistorical, immutable ontological level. Consequently, no compromise is possible, only denunciation of the Enemy, and its relentless rejection.

Vanguard-based classification of Salafism

Table 1 below illustrates the resulting matrix. It offers us six different categories: *accommodationists* and *partisans*; *delayers* and *agitators*; and *mobilizers* and *belligerents*. In what follows, I offer case studies of episodes of Salafi socio-political mobilization exemplified by specific scholars, activists, and militants. I do this by relying on the extensive secondary literature available on these episodes. Each of them illustrates a category within my typology. These accounts provide descriptive and classificatory analytical moves before informing my explanatory typology (Elman, 2005: 296).

Accommodationists

These Salafis read the incumbent historical bloc as desirable, or at any rate acceptable. They may not live in a proper re-enactment of the template of the *salaf*; at the same time, conditions are deemed such that the vanguard of the faithful may perform its role while offering support to the incumbent power structure. In fact, such structure may be amenable to further changes and improvements precisely thanks to the work of the Salafi community. The Enemy may still be present in some of its institutions and practices; but the challenge the Enemy represents, while important and relevant, is not such that it cannot be accommodated under the present political, institutional, and cultural framework.

An example of this category may be Jordanian shaykh Ali Hassan Al-Halabi (1960–2020) (Wagemakers, 2016c: 118–143). After the death of his mentor Nasir ad-Din Al-Albani in 1999, he was recognized as amongst the most prominent leaders

³⁷ Only to an extent surprising and paradoxical, Salafis infights can be particularly acrimonious. For an example, see Meijer (2011).

Table 1 Vanguardism and Salafi categories

		Positioning vanguardism	
		Pro historical bloc	Anti-historical bloc
		Support from vanguard	Creation of vanguard
		Activation of vanguard	Activation of vanguard
Enemy frame	Historical/institutional	Accommodationists (Al-Halabi)	Delayers (Al-Albani)
	Essential/identitarian	Partisans (Al-Madkhali)	Agitators (Al-Maqdisi)
		Compromise/accommodation	Mobilizers (Al-Khaliq)
		Rejection/denunciation	Belligerents (Al-Baghdadi)

of the Jordanian Salafi community. With the establishment of the Imam Al-Albani Center for Knowledge and Methodological Studies (Wagemakers, 2016c: 137; Abu Rumman & Abu Haniyeh, 2013: 240), he accessed state funding and sponsorship. In the relatively liberal and pluralist environment of the small Levantine country,³⁸ Al-Halabi readily accepted the presence in public life of discourses and practices informed by the principles of secularism and democracy, in particular the always thorny issues, for Salafis, of man-made laws—as opposed to God given *shari'ah*. At the same time, he and his acolytes chose to maintain amicable, if not warm, relations with the Jordanian authorities. They received favorably the religious credentials of the Hashemite monarchy and the policies adopted in the kingdom in regard to personal law status, regional politics, and official religious discourse (Ramaioli, 2021).

Partisans

Support from the vanguard for the incumbent historical bloc may not entail, however, the compromising attitude of the *accommodationists* with what Salafis hold as their Enemy. The case of Saudi scholar Rabi' Al-Madkhali (b. 1931) and his followers illustrates this point. They maintained an uncompromising and rigid ideological and practical posturing vis à vis the Enemy. *Partisans* consider modern political institutions such as parties, overly political organizations as the Muslim Brotherhood as well as other Salafi trends, or thinkers of “takfiri” tendencies such as Sayyed Qutb as tantamount to heretical phenomena. No degree of accommodation can be contemplated in their regards (Meijer, 2011). At the same time, like the *accommodationists*, the avowed and apparent detachment from politics is only at first puzzling (Meijer, 2011: 392). It can be explained by Al-Madkhali's view of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as already praiseworthy an example of Islamic state (Wagemakers, 2016c: 54). It deserves the support of the Salafi vanguard, insofar as and precisely because the regime holds similar views on the phenomena disparaged by this type of Salafis.

Delayers

Unlike his successor Al-Halabi, Al-Albani maintained throughout his life an ambiguous relation with the Jordanian state. Wagemakers (2016c: 52) described the renowned *hadith* scholar as an “aloofist”: seeking to place himself and his message above (or separate from) the political fray. At the same time, Abu Rumman and Abu Haniyeh (2013; cf. ft. 29) never considered Al-Albani's position a-political. His social activism—preaching, proselytizing—to carry out his declared mission of “education and purification” had instead implicit, yet detectable, political imperatives. He shared a compromising attitude in many ways non dissimilar from the *accommodationists*; however, Al-Albani never declared loyalty to, let alone overt

³⁸ In Jordan, there is a degree of political openness: regular, largely free, and fair elections; presence of political parties (albeit under the watchful eye of the security services); and moderately free press. Limitations in other crucial domains (for example, the extensive and mostly unaccountable powers of the king) are equally relevant here.

support for, the incumbent regime and the historical bloc sustaining it. His work was functional, ultimately, to preparing the ground for a thorough renovation, moral as well as political, along the guidelines of the template of the *salaf*. A profound renovation which entailed the grooming and cultivation of a vanguard capable of carrying out such momentous task. Such deliberate and meticulous strategy best defines Salafis like Al-Albani as *delayers*: they pursue the renewal of the Muslim community via a painstaking and patient pedagogical approach which shall deliver, in due time, the establishment of a new, properly Islamic, historical bloc.

Agitators

Palestinian-Kuwaiti ideologue Abu Muhammad Al-Maqdisi (b. 1959) has represented a confounding type of Salafi. Learnt, bookish, and scholarly, he has promoted ideas that earned him the admiration of many militant and armed Salafi formations (McCants & Brachman, 2006). At the same time, Al-Maqdisi's own history of belligerency is rather unimpressive. He has displayed little, if any, of the (often violent) militancy that his ideas have inspired in others. A similar case would be his colleague and associate Abu Qatada Al-Filastini (b. 1960). It seems they are content with working on the preparation of the Salafi vanguard, positing a future where the incumbent historical bloc shall be overthrown. Unlike the *delayers*, however, they profess ideas and advocate practices clearly bent on a relentless and unyielding adversarial posturing against the Enemy: in Al-Maqdisi's case, he vehemently attacked local regimes in the Arab Middle East as well as concepts such as liberal democracy.³⁹ Of particular relevance, from an ideological standpoint, is Al-Maqdisi's re-articulation of the Salafi socio-religious concept of *al-wala' wa al-bara'* into a political doctrine (Wagemakers, 2012). Salafis like Al-Maqdisi are best described as *Agitators*: preparing a radical vanguard, yet not committing it to action yet.

A telling episode may highlight the rift separating *agitators* like Al-Maqdisi from the likes of ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria), whom I address below. Militants of the radical group seized Jordanian pilot Mu'ath al-Kasasbeh in December 2014 after downing his jet fighter over Raqqa, in northern Syria. Jordanian authorities asked then detained Al-Maqdisi to help negotiate the pilot's release with ISIS—a movement whose ideological leanings were reputedly inspired by the work of the Palestinian-Jordanian scholar. Yet, Al-Maqdisi was readily derided by the battle-hardened Islamists as a puppet of the regime and a renegade to the cause (Zelin, 2020).

Mobilizers

Salafis often consider formal political institutions, such as parliaments and parties, as a prime example of unlawful innovations (*bid'a*). Figures such as Al-Albani and Al-Madkhali expressed unambiguously their reservations and condemnations: either

³⁹ See in particular his major works in this regard: *Democracy is a Religion* (n.d.) and *Millat Ibrahim* (1984).

because obviously not present in the hallowed era of the *salaf* (especially the former) or because fomenting divisions and fragmentation in the Islamic community (*fitna*, especially the latter). Yet, despite such positions within the Salafi trend, the Arab uprisings have only magnified the increased participation of Salafis in institutional politics. This phenomenon, however, is not new. Since the early 1980s, Salafis in Kuwait chose to enter institutional politics. We may refer to them as *mobilizers*: still fundamentally opposed to secular political arrangements, nevertheless willing to play by such rules in the hope to spur further meaningful change. The Gulf emirate allowed in fact for a degree of meaningful participation in public affairs. In 1981, local Salafis, under the leadership of Egyptian born ‘Abd al-Rahman ‘Abd al-Khaliq (b. 1939)⁴⁰ founded the Revival of Islamic Heritage Society (or RIHS, *Jama’a Ihya al-Turāth al-Islāmiy*). It emerged as a political platform⁴¹ posting candidates for parliamentary elections. Winning seats, its representatives (running as independents) focused primarily on issues of public morality. In the 1990s, their electoral success brought them into ministries, for example, Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs. The RIHS never developed into a true opposition force to the Al-Sabah regime; at the same time, Al-Khaliq maintained that, “abstaining from politics is equal to handing victory to the enemies of the faith” (Utvik, 2014: 11). He thereby justified and legitimized Salafis’ overt and active—yet institutional—political engagement. Successive splits within RIHS brought to the fore how the relation to the regime, and even more crucially the role of Salafis as political actors within Kuwaiti society, remains a bone of contention. Whether *mobilizers* can become more like the Muslim Brotherhood is still a matter of debate (cf. fn. 2). Even more contentious is the embracing of democratic principles and norms (the averred Enemy), and not just procedures.

Belligerents

The last category I propose refers to Salafis who have attracted most scholarly as well as public and policy makers’ attention. *Belligerents* stands here for the well-known label of *jihadis*. Doing away with such term seeks to disassociate the understanding of *jihād* from a purely (or even mostly) violent and militant practice. Relatedly, it wants to indicate that all Salafis uphold *jihād* as an important, at times essential, component of their faith. However, most Salafis underscore primarily the spiritual, devotional aspects of *jihād*. In fact, whether Salafism leads to militant jihadism is now a matter of scrutiny (Blanc & Roy, 2021: 10–24): most Salafis regard the actions of the *Belligerents* as totally outside the realm of Salafism itself. Be as it may, *Belligerents* not only notoriously take *jihād* as Islamic sanctioned political violence, advocate for it, and are ready to deploy it; but also, they clearly regard themselves as Salafis. They espouse uncompromising attitudes towards the Enemy (the world hegemon for Al-Qaeda;

⁴⁰ A follower and disciple of Nasir Ad-Din Al-Albani.

⁴¹ It was not registered, however, as a formal political party. While formally sanctioned by the constitution, parties have never been legalized since independence.

local regimes and Shi'ites for ISIS), which sustain often times paroxysmal levels of violence. *Belligerents* hold such violence as an essential component of both their discourse and practice, crucial to lead the vanguard of the faithful towards the (re)establishment of the ideal caliphate. No other leader embodied such ideas as Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi (1971–2019) at the time of ISIS expansion in the Fertile Crescent between 2014 and 2016. In following such principles and practices, the former ISIS leader eerily walked the footsteps of other, uncompromising and militant vanguards of the XX century.

Conclusion

Al-Baghdadi was not unlike Lenin:⁴² leaders of an uncompromising vanguard, hellbent on the rejection of the incumbent historical bloc, ready to deploy violence to upend such order, zealots in their representation the Enemy. The scientific truth adumbrated by an averred correct understanding of history granted both ISIS and the Bolsheviks brazen confidence and frightful resolve. It revealed in their ideology and attendant political praxis. Both domains remain dialectically related. It will not do to reduce one to the other, or to posit the pre-eminence, for classificatory purposes, of the political practices over ideological constructs.

This contention holds true for our understanding of Salafism writ large, when its manifestations may not be as dramatic as the *Belligerents* of ISIS. Salafism is not a unified, or even uniform, movement. It harbors differences that confound researchers and policy makers alike; even those who claim to be Salafis do not fare much better in defining its “essentially contested” contours. However, positing Salafism as an instance of modern vanguardism may grant us much leverage in understanding both its mystifying features and its diverse manifestations. Crucially, by re-elaborating the relation between its discourses and praxis, Salafism emerges as a distinctive Modern Prince, resting uneasy in its various relations with the times it inhabits and with the enemies it seeks to defy.

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⁴² For a deep and learned discussion of Lenin's politics, see Pollan (1984). For a biography, see Service (2000).

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