KUWAITI SALAFISM AND ITS GROWING INFLUENCE IN THE LEVANT

ZOLTAN PALL

The internal developments and dynamics of Salafism in Kuwait have global significance. In the Middle East, where Salafism’s influence has been rising since the Arab revolutions began in 2011, diverse Kuwaiti Salafi groups and networks have forged close contacts with Salafis in other states. But competition among Kuwaiti Salafi currents has produced corresponding fissures in local Salafi communities in Lebanon and Syria, with far-reaching consequences for each country.

Key Themes

- The purist-activist schism in the Revival of Islamic Heritage Society, an umbrella organization of Kuwaiti Salafis, is at the heart of the internal dynamics of Salafism in Kuwait. Purists mainly focus on peaceful proselytization and daily religious practices and are willing to cooperate with other religious groups. Activists, or haraki, believe in broader political involvement and often see violence as acceptable to achieve their aims.

- Kuwaiti Salafis have built up vast transnational networks by financially supporting Salafi groups worldwide, making them one of the main financiers of the international movement. This practice has provided them with significant influence over Salafism on the global level.

- Kuwaiti purist Salafis effectively contributed to the fragmentation of Salafism in North Lebanon. Their financial support was among the crucial factors that led Lebanese purists to dramatically increase their influence and counterbalance the activists.

- After the Arab Spring, purist Salafis lost ground to the reemerging haraki Salafis all over the Middle East largely because purist sheikhs had supported the autocratic Arab regimes during the uprisings and issued fatwas against the demonstrators.

- The different Kuwaiti Salafi groups mobilize vast financial resources from Kuwaiti citizens to sponsor a variety of Salafi armed groups in Syria, which has contributed to fragmentation and sectarianism within the Syrian armed opposition.

Recommendations for the Kuwaiti Government

Consolidate support for the rebel Free Syrian Army. The government should consider urging Kuwaiti Salafis to press their beneficiaries in Syria to join the groups associated with the Free Syrian Army in order to strengthen opposition to the Syrian regime.

Advocate for purist Salafism. The Kuwaiti government should assist purist Salafis in strengthening the peaceful purist current in Lebanon. If purists attract more Salafi youth, these young Salafis will be less likely to end up fighting in Syria.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Zoltan Pall completed his PhD in the Department of Theology at Utrecht University in 2014 and is currently a visiting lecturer at the Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

CONTACT

Christopher Dockrey
Government Affairs Manager
+1 202 939-2307
cdockrey@ceip.org

Clara Hogan
Media Manager
+1 202 939-2241
chogan@ceip.org

CARNegie ENDowment FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE
The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace is a unique global network of policy research centers in Russia, China, Europe, the Middle East, and the United States. Our mission, dating back more than a century, is to advance the cause of peace through analysis and development of fresh policy ideas and direct engagement and collaboration with decisionmakers in government, business, and civil society. Working together, our centers bring the inestimable benefit of multiple national viewpoints to bilateral, regional, and global issues.

© 2014 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. All rights reserved.

The Carnegie Endowment does not take institutional positions on public policy issues; the views represented here are the author’s own and do not necessarily reflect the views of Carnegie, its staff, or its trustees.

CarnegieEndowment.org