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# **KUWAITI SALAFISM AND ITS GROWING INFLUENCE IN THE LEVANT**

Zoltan Pall

MAY 2014



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# Contents

<b>About the Author</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>Summary</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Salafism in Kuwait</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>The Influence of Kuwaiti Salafis on Lebanon</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Syria and Kuwaiti Salafis</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Notes</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Carnegie Endowment for International Peace</b>	<b>28</b>



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## About the Author

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## Summary

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.

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## Introduction

Salafism in Kuwait has long been a dynamic movement with transnational linkages. In the past two decades the different Kuwaiti Salafi groups have been among the most important bankrollers of the Salafi movement worldwide. Kuwaiti Salafi charities and individual donors are financing the building and maintenance of thousands of Salafi mosques and other institutions worldwide. The reach of Kuwaiti Salafi groups increased after the Arab Spring, when they became prominent among the main sponsors of the Syrian rebel groups.

But the Salafi scene has undergone a process of fragmentation and change in recent years. Post–Gulf War debates within Salafism in Saudi Arabia led to the emergence of purist and activist factions and were responsible for the fragmentation of the movement in Kuwait. Specifically, disagreement over theological questions between Sheikhs Abdul Rahman Abdul Khaliq and Abdullah al-Sabt, two important religious authorities, caused the schism in the umbrella organization of Kuwaiti Salafis, which is known as Jama'iat Ihya at-Turath al-Islami (the Revival of Islamic Heritage Society, or the RIHS), and the emergence of the purist and activist (*haraki*) factions. The purists have become the stronger faction on the local level, but the *harakis* possess equally important transnational networks.

Moreover, regime politics and sectarian balancing have often affected the trajectory of Salafism in Kuwait. In the 1980s the Kuwaiti royal family supported Salafis in an effort to curb the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood. After the 1990–1991 Gulf crisis, the regime aided purist Salafis because of activist Salafis' ambiguous stance toward the monarchies of the Arabian Gulf.

The diverse Salafi groups and networks in this small Gulf emirate forged close contacts with Salafis abroad. And Kuwaiti Salafism's internal fissures have affected how the movement has projected itself onto the regional stage. Often cross-border relationships have led to the reshaping of the power structure of Salafism in different localities along the line of the purist-activist dichotomy.

This is particularly true in Lebanon, where Kuwaiti Salafis have contributed to the fractionalization of the local Salafi community. There, after the ousting of the *harakis*, the RIHS contributed to the emergence of a strong purist faction that became the competitor of the once-dominant activist Salafis.

In Syria, Kuwaiti Salafis have played an important role in bankrolling armed Salafi groups that belong to different ideological currents. In the current Syrian civil war, financial resources channeled by Kuwaiti purists and *harakis* have

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**The Salafi scene has undergone a process of fragmentation and change in recent years.**

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contributed to the emergence of a diverse Salafi scene within the opposition. The Kuwaiti government, meanwhile, has tried to restrict the ability of haraki Salafis to channel financial resources to Syrian Salafi rebels. The reason behind this is the fact that the Kuwaiti government has to rely on the parliamentary support of the Shia against the opposition.

It is clear that the internal developments and dynamics of Salafism in Kuwait have global significance because Kuwaiti Salafis are among the main financiers of the movement worldwide. And the influence that the evolution and fragmentation of Kuwaiti Salafism has had on the trajectory of Salafi groups in Lebanon and Syria will have far-reaching consequences.

## Salafism in Kuwait

### The Emergence

Salafism is a puritan Sunni Islamic movement whose primary concern is practicing the beliefs and religious traditions of the Prophet Muhammad and the first (three) generations of Muslims. Salafis follow a literal reading of the scripture and reject logical, metaphoric, or any other understanding. Their main aim is purifying the beliefs and practices of Muslims from what they identify as any innovation or harmful addition to the religion (*bida*). Salafis are especially hostile toward Shia and Sufi (mystical) practices. They also reject adoption of Western society customs.

The theological approach of Salafism has been present since Islam's early period in the eighth century. It emerged as a powerful religious movement in the Arabian Peninsula toward the end of the eighteenth century, though it was often wrongly labeled as Wahhabism. Salafism started to gain global prominence in the 1980s, when the Saudi Arabian state invested a huge amount of money in proselytization (*dawa*) on the international level. The movement has proved to be appealing to young generations of Muslims who face an identity crisis amid rapid social change. Salafism also influences the religious discourse of ordinary, non-affiliated believers because of its strong presence on the Internet and satellite television channels.

In most localities, Salafism is divided into two factions: purists and activists (or harakis).<sup>1</sup> Purists are those who believe in the necessity of absolute obedience to the ruler. They focus on the minute details of belief and worship. Activists are those who possess a broader political outlook. They aim to Islamize society by proselytizing and by transforming state institutions, using violence if necessary.

Salafism gained a foothold in Kuwait in the late 1960s. In the beginning Salafis spread their message by organizing religious lessons in mosques or using traditional Kuwaiti gatherings, or *diwanias*, as spaces for proselytization. Over the course of a decade Salafism gained a considerable base of followers; by the

end of the 1970s it had become a mass movement. Three main factors contributed to its growth.<sup>2</sup>

The first was the decline of Arab nationalism and the left, and the subsequent Islamic revival throughout the Middle East. In Kuwait, as in other Arab countries, the various Arab nationalist and Marxist movements enjoyed overwhelming popularity until the late 1960s. However, after the catastrophic defeat of the Arab armies in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, the reputations of the Arab nationalist and Marxist movements rapidly declined, and the vacuum was filled by an increase in religiosity and the ascendancy of Islamic movements. The main beneficiary of this process was the Muslim Brotherhood, which by the early 1980s became the strongest political force in Kuwait. Salafis were also able to take advantage of the religious upheaval because they already controlled several mosques and had direct access to young people who had recently turned to religion.

The second factor is the geopolitical shifts in the region that occurred in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution and boosted the stature of the Salafis. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 posed a severe threat to the very existence of the Kuwaiti state. In addition to the military threat that came from Tehran, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, whose Islamist regime came to power, intended to spread the revolution among the Shia communities of the Gulf. Shia militant cells in Kuwait committed several terrorist attacks during the 1980s.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the fact that Islamists were able to come to power and establish a regime based on sharia law in Iran (despite the fact that they were Shia) gave the Muslim Brotherhood new confidence that their project could also be implemented in countries with Sunni majorities. The Kuwaiti ruling family was truly frightened by the prospect of being overthrown by the Islamists. Therefore, to divide the Sunnis, the state began supporting the Salafi movement against the Muslim Brothers.<sup>4</sup>

The third factor was the Salafi movement's ability to penetrate Kuwait's economic elite. By the late 1970s, many scions of influential merchant families had become followers of Salafism. This enabled the movement to gain a presence in the financial and trading sector, thereby receiving more funding than before. Since the merchants were interested in social and political issues, the voices that became stronger in the Salafi movement were those that were keen to see religious rulings implemented in public life. This was probably one of the reasons that Salafism in Kuwait evolved in a unique way and became active in the country's political life at a time when Salafis elsewhere were mostly preoccupied with personal beliefs and religious practice.

By the early 1980s, the Salafi movement in Kuwait had achieved an unprecedented level of organizational development. While most aspects of the movement's organizational strategy retained an informal character, Salafis gained a strong presence in labor organizations and student unions, where they competed with the

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Muslim Brothers. As the next stage in their organizational development, the Salafis of Kuwait established the Revival of Islamic Heritage Society. The society was founded in 1981 with the support of the Kuwaiti state and wealthy merchants who had adopted the Salafi ideology. Although according to its founding documents, the RIHS was created for charitable purposes, from the beginning, it covered a wider range of tasks.

In the 1980s the RIHS served as an umbrella organization for Kuwait's Salafis and provided the institutional framework for engaging in the political process. In 1981, for the first time anywhere in the world, Salafis were nominated for parliamentary elections. Around this time, Salafis elsewhere did not support any kind of political participation in secular and parliamentary regimes, since they were heavily influenced by the Saudi religious line, which abstained from any serious political involvement aside from legitimizing the autocratic rule of the royal family. Most Kuwaiti Salafis, however, took a different stance, due to the revolutionary ideology propagated by their main religious authority, Abdul Rahman Abdul Khaliq, an Egyptian scholar who settled in Kuwait in the 1960s.<sup>5</sup>

Until the second half of the 1990s Abdul Rahman was the sole authoritative figure to whom the majority of the Kuwaiti Salafis turned for guidance, and he can be regarded as one of the founders of the haraki Salafi current. He did not fit the profile of the typical Salafi religious scholar of the time, which can be characterized by extreme isolationism and a parochial outlook. Abdul Rahman was one of the first Salafis who extensively wrote books and articles about politics and intended to reform Salafi jurisprudence about politics and participation in social protest and using new media.

He disagreed with the majority of contemporary Salafis who argued that Muslims were in the stage of the early Meccan period of Islam, when the Prophet had not participated in politics and focused only on dawa. As he wrote in one of his famous books, *Politics According to the Shar'ia*, "The Prophet also created secret society (when Muslims were oppressed in Mecca), then a society that worked publicly to change the social system. He used every available media like the interpersonal conversation, sermon . . . the media warfare against pagan beliefs, and all of these are politics."<sup>6</sup>

### **After the Liberation of Kuwait**

While the Salafi movement was quite united until 1990 under the umbrella of the RIHS and the leadership of Abdul Rahman, this was no longer the case after the liberation of Kuwait from the Iraqi occupation. The schism occurred because of debates within the Salafi movement in Saudi Arabia at the time of the 1990–1991 Gulf crisis, which led to the fragmentation of the movement on the global level. As a result of this, the RIHS went through a radical transformation, lost its predominantly haraki profile, and became a purist

organization. This development, in turn, determined the structure of the Salafi scene in Kuwait, as is discussed below.

Activist-minded Salafis in Saudi Arabia opposed the Saudi royal family's decision to allow American soldiers in the kingdom. They expressed their discontent by launching a protest movement called Islamic Awakening, or *Sahwa*, and demanded large-scale political reforms in the kingdom. Traditional-minded Salafis emphasized the need for unconditional obedience to the Muslim ruler and harshly condemned the activists. Although the activists' movement was later repressed, this division shaped the face of Salafism worldwide.<sup>7</sup> The debates over the obedience to the ruler and the necessity to enact political reforms spread to outside the kingdom and resulted in the fragmentation of Salafism to purist and *haraki* currents on the global level.

During the Gulf War, most Kuwaiti Salafis escaped to Saudi Arabia, where they rapidly began to play active parts in these debates. They were able to integrate quickly into the different Salafi networks and groups in Saudi Arabia because they were often connected to Saudi Salafis through kinship.<sup>8</sup> Many of them became active participants in the *Sahwa* movement. Upon their return to their home country after the war, these individuals became pioneers of the *haraki* wing of Kuwaiti Salafism, as was the case for Hakim al-Mutairi, Sheikh Hamid al-Ali, and Abd al-Razzaq al-Shayji.

During the occupation of Kuwait, others sided with the purist camp, which was represented by the official Saudi *ulema*. Their main reason for doing so probably was the fact that the purists did not oppose Kuwait's liberation, even though it was undertaken by Western forces. After the liberation, when most Kuwaiti Salafis returned home, the debates were exported to Kuwait, and in the 1990s, the local Salafi community split along *haraki* and purist lines. This schism, in turn, had an impact on the RIHS. Until that time, the organization had been under the unquestionable influence of Abdul Rahman.

In the first half of the 1990s, Abdul Rahman was suddenly ousted from the RIHS and the organization's ideological direction changed radically. In around 1996–1997, a purist stream gradually gained control over the RIHS, led by Sheikh Abdullah al-Sabt and Sheikh Hayy al-Hayy, who were both influenced by Sheikh Rabee al-Madkhali and other leading purist sheikhs from Saudi Arabia.<sup>9</sup> The purists allegedly were given intensive state support, since the ruling family no longer trusted Abdul Rahman and his followers.<sup>10</sup> There were two reasons for this. First, Abdul Rahman had personally sympathized with Saddam Hussein prior to the invasion, due to the Iraqi president's anti-Shia stance. Although Shia were not the only victims of Saddam's persecution, many Salafis sympathized with him because he harshly repressed Shia Islamic movements such as the Islamic Dawa Party. Second, the Kuwaiti state was threatened by activist Salafis due to their ambiguous stance toward Arab rulers.

The direct reason for the expulsion of Abdul Rahman and most of his followers from the RIHS was an open feud between him and Abdullah al-Sabt, his former pupil, over a theological issue. Al-Sabt criticized his mentor's views

on *tawhid*, or the unity of God. Salafi theology mainly revolves around this concept, namely that nothing can be associated with or compared to the one, omnipotent God. Salafis traditionally distinguish three parts of *tawhid* that concern first the unity of lordship, namely that God is the only possessor of supernatural powers and everything in the universe depends on his will; second, that only God can be worshipped; and third, that God is unique in all of his attributes, nothing is comparable to him. Abdul Rahman in his writings put a fourth component to *tawhid*, *tawhid al-hakimiyya* or oneness of the governance, which, according to him, means that divine revelation represents the only legitimate source of legislation and governance.

The idea of oneness of governance comes back repeatedly in the writings of activist Salafis and probably was inspired by Sayyid Qutb's concept of *hakimiyya*. According to the influential Egyptian ideologue, the government should be based on the sovereignty of God, which means that the legal system must be based entirely on sharia. The ruler must rule justly, and must be chosen by the ruled, who must then obey the ruler. However, this obedience is dependent on the ruler's obedience to God.<sup>11</sup> If the ruler often goes against the rules of Islam, his subjects can remove him.

Abdullah al-Sabt accused Abdul Rahman of covertly calling for revolt and the removal of the emir in Kuwait. Soon the organization split into two; the purist faction stood with Sabt, and the activist faction supported Abdul Rahman. In the outcome of this struggle, the purists took complete control of the RIHS. Abdul Rahman was sidelined, and his followers left the organization. They gathered under the banner of a new organization, al-Haraka al-Salafiyya (Salafi Movement), in 1997.

After these events the character of the RIHS completely changed. Abdul Rahman's books disappeared from the organization's publishing houses, which instead began printing the works of the Saudi religious establishment and works by Kuwaiti scholars with purist views. These publications focus on two main issues: the relationship between the ruler and the ruled, and the question of jihad. The reconstituted RIHS also withdrew any material support from activist Salafi groups and endowments abroad and started to support exclusively purist groups and causes.

The fragmentation of the Kuwaiti Salafis, who had been previously unified under the RIHS banner, led to the current structure of the Salafi scene. The movement in this oil-rich country is clearly divided into purists and activists. At the same time these factions are themselves very diverse, as will be shown in the next sections.

### **The Purists of Kuwait**

Most of the purists identify themselves as close to the RIHS, which now serves as their umbrella organization. Although the charitable institution's discourse has

changed radically, it is still active in politics and has retained a relatively developed organizational structure in comparison to those of other Salafi groupings.

Members of the largest Salafi parliamentary block, al-Tajammu al-Salafi al-Islami (Salafi Islamic Gathering), are closely connected to the RIHS. The group was established in 1981 as the charity's representative in institutional politics.<sup>12</sup> Despite being politically active, group members pursue predominantly purist aims in their parliamentary work. They always emphasize the need to obey the emir of Kuwait, and they are mostly concerned with the Islamization of social practices, such as segregating the sexes in public institutions and universities and obliging Muslim women to wear a headscarf when they appear in public. As one of the Salafi members of Parliament explained, with the dawa not at an advanced stage, it is endangered by both Westernized "liberals" and "extremists." Parliament offers an excellent opportunity to defend the dawa and support legislation that ensures the Islamic character of society. For example, he mentioned how Salafis had contributed to the creation of a law forbidding the selling of alcohol on Kuwait Airways flights.<sup>13</sup> The members of the Salafi Islamic Gathering are often severely critical of those who are perceived to have insulted the emir, whom they consider to be the legitimate ruler, therefore above criticism.<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, the RIHS preserved the organizational structure that had been established when Abdul Rahman had dominated the institute. Although the Salafis who belong to the circle of the RIHS tend to rely on informal networks, they maintain a more elaborate formal institutional structure than Salafis elsewhere. At the core of this is the charitable organization itself and its branches in Kuwait's different districts. Besides mobilizing funds to implement projects abroad, these branches organize local Salafis. They establish local committees, which set up programs for RIHS adherents.

Opponents of the RIHS in Kuwait often accuse the organization of being a puppet of Riyadh, or even of cooperating with Saudi intelligence. This is based on the fact that the Kuwaiti purists who are associated with the RIHS are closely affiliated with Saudi Arabia's religious establishment. They follow the instructions and religious advice of the Saudi great ulema. The RIHS's committee of religious scholars issues rulings, or fatwas, only in cases that are not discussed by the Saudi ulema. Besides, the leadership of the charity is connected to the religious establishment of the kingdom through personal knowledge and informal ties. Saudi purist sheikhs frequently go to Kuwait to deliver lectures, conduct seminars, or just discuss issues with their fellow scholars in this small Gulf monarchy.

Not all of the Kuwaiti purists belong to the RIHS, though. Some, in fact, are hostile to the organization, which they accuse of betraying the principles of Salafism by participating in parliamentary elections and maintaining institutional structure. These individuals are commonly called "Madkhalis," a reference to their most important religious authority, the Saudi Sheikh Rabee al-Madkhali. For them, participating in politics and creating formal



organizations lead to the corruption of one's belief because these actions make people loyal to the organizations and their leaders instead of to God.

Despite the Madkhalis' negative stance toward the political process, one of the cornerstones of their discourse is showing unquestioning loyalty to the ruler and being harshly critical of those who—in their opinion—disobey him. Compared with other purists, Madkhalis interpret this part of the purist Salafi ideology in a much narrower way. Mainstream purists think that Muslims can disobey the ruler and side with the opposition if the ruler uses extreme and unjustified violence against his subjects. For example, most purist Salafis in the RIHS opposed the Libyan revolution, but when the government of Muammar Qaddafi started to murder large numbers of demonstrators, they felt justified in supporting the revolutionaries. Likewise with the Syrian revolution and the brutal actions of Bashar al-Assad's government.<sup>15</sup> By contrast, Madkhalis attacked the RIHS for taking this stance. Sheikh Salim al-Tawil, probably the most important local authority among the Kuwaiti purists, called Assad *wali al-amr* (the legitimate ruler), forbade fighting his army in a fatwa, and harshly attacked those Salafis who sent material support to the revolutionaries.<sup>16</sup>

Although fewer in number than the followers of the RIHS, the Madkhalis have extensive transnational networks in the Middle East, Europe, and Southeast Asia. The Madkhali stream in Kuwait was developed around individuals who seceded from the Salafi mainstream when Salafis entered the political process in 1981. During the Gulf War they became close to the circle of Rabee al-Madkhali. In the early 1990s, many young Salafis who rejected the RIHS's main ideological line became attracted to the Madkhalis. Central to this wing of the Salafi movement in Kuwait are some charismatic sheikhs, such as Salim al-Tawil, Hamad Othman, Falah Mandakar, and, from the younger generation, Ahmad al-Sibai and Muhammad al-Anjari.

### Activist Salafis

The core of the activist faction in Kuwait is made up of followers of Abdul Rahman, who seceded from the RIHS in 1997. The majority of Salafis in Kuwait could probably have been considered activists even before the Gulf War, but the Iraqi invasion spurred activist thinking within the movement to develop further. The young generation of Salafis in particular was exposed to the ideas of the Saudi Sahwa, and many of them adopted several elements of Sahwi thinking. The most important figure of the young generation of Kuwaiti activists is probably Hakim al-Mutairi.<sup>17</sup> He became the de facto leader of the activist-minded youth wing within the RIHS that remained loyal to Abdul Rahman.

During the 1990–1991 Gulf War, al-Mutairi, who at that time was pursuing graduate studies in Mecca, became involved in a network centered around Muhammad Surur Zayn al-Abidin, a leading figure in the Sahwa movement. The experience radically changed his thinking.<sup>18</sup> Al-Mutairi is often described as an unusually charismatic person who is able to gain admirers and friends

quickly. In a short time, many young Kuwaitis who had escaped to Saudi Arabia joined him and formed a network of activist Salafis.

Upon returning to Kuwait after the liberation, this group remained within the RIHS and established a strong haraki platform within it. After the purists took over leadership of the organization and Abdul Rahman had been sidelined, most of the members of this platform seceded and created the Salafi Movement (SM), under the leadership of al-Mutairi.

The SM has never developed a sophisticated institutional structure. Instead, in the beginning it served as the umbrella organization of different activist Salafi groups in a way very similar to how the RIHS functioned before the fragmentation of Kuwaiti Salafism. The most important shared sentiment of those who gathered under the auspices of the SM was their enmity toward purist Salafis. Activists regarded the purists as tools of an American-Saudi conspiracy to suppress voices that demand political freedom in the Gulf, because the purists have no wider sociopolitical agenda and emphasize the necessity of unconditional obedience to the ruler. Most activists were opposed to Kuwait's alliance with the United States and wanted to reform the emirate's political system. They demanded the application of sharia as the only source of legislation. They also called for the appointment of the government by the parliament, instead of by the emir.

However, this network of activist Salafis did not remain united for long. Internal differences surfaced quite soon. The main cause of the rift was how Hakim al-Mutairi and his deputy, Sheikh Hamid al-Ali, envisioned the future of the SM. The former intended to transform the SM to a well-organized, modern political party. The latter, however, preferred to retain the organization's loose network structure. When al-Mutairi traveled to Birmingham to pursue his doctoral studies, Hamid al-Ali took over the leadership. After he started to implement his own agenda by putting greater focus on transnational charity activity and proselytization, and less on national politics, al-Mutairi decided to leave the SM. When he returned from Britain in 2005, he established a political party, Hizb al-Umma (Umma Party), with other activist Salafis who left the SM.

Activist Salafis have never been able to gain the same degree of influence in Kuwaiti society as the purists. Obviously, most of the committed Salafis in the country sympathize with the RIHS. Activists usually have only one member in the parliament, Waleed al-Tabtabaie, while the Salafi Islamic Gathering has eight to ten members. The relative weakness of the activists is probably due to the fact that the Kuwaiti Muslim Brotherhood (Islamic Constitutional Movement), which traditionally has had a strong representation in the parliament, provides an appropriate platform for many who are attracted to activist Salafism. Unlike the Brotherhood in other countries, most cadres of the

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Islamic Constitutional Movement are influenced by Salafism, and their discourse is similar to that of the activists.

Despite this relative lack of influence at home, compared with the purists, Kuwaiti activist Salafis are important members of transnational Salafi networks. The country is a significant transnational meeting point for activist-minded Salafis who come from all over the world to meet individuals such as Sheikh Abdul Rahman or al-Mutairi. Prior to the Arab Spring, Kuwait was considered to be the only country in the Middle East where Salafis did not face pressure from the government or security forces and where they were able to freely exchange views. Abdul Rahman claims that the idea that Egyptian Salafis should participate in politics emerged during the meetings and workshops that these Salafis had attended in his house and mosque.<sup>19</sup>

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### The charitable activities of the activist Salafis are significant.

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The charitable activities of the activist Salafis are also significant. Their charitable organization, Mabarrat al-Amal al-Khayriyya (Benevolent Work Charity), has projects all over the Middle East and Africa, and it cooperates with the Qatari Eid bin Muhammad Al Thani Charity Association, which is probably the biggest and most influential activist Salafi-controlled relief organization in the world. Activists also raise funds in informal gatherings, such as diwanis, where they often collect material contributions from believers for different purposes. Often this money goes to other activist Salafi groups and endowments in poor Muslim countries. It is used also to help Muslim refugees in troubled regions, or even support militants, as will be explained later in the case of the Syrian civil war.

## The Influence of Kuwaiti Salafis on Lebanon

### Reshaping the Salafi Scene in Northern Lebanon

The struggle for power in Kuwait between harakis and purists was most acutely felt in Kuwait, but Kuwaiti Salafis have long had an impact in the Levant. As haraki personalities declined in power within the RIHS in Kuwait, there was a corresponding effect on the rise of purists in North Lebanon, particularly in Tripoli.

Although its roots go back to the 1940s, Salafism started to appear on the sociopolitical playground of the Sunni community of multi-sectarian Lebanon in the early 1990s. The movement started to grow when about fifty Lebanese graduates of the Islamic University of Medina in Saudi Arabia returned to their home country and began their proselytization activity. The sociopolitical circumstances were particularly favorable to Salafism to gain a foothold in North Lebanon, where the majority of the Sunnis live. Salafis at that time had few competitors. In the period after the 1975–1990 civil war in the

country, leftist and nationalist movements that had been previously dominant in the Sunni community's political landscape lost most of their influence. Mainstream Islamist movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic Unification Movement, were unable to gain long-lasting popularity among the Sunnis.

The other important factor that made the external environment favorable for Salafism was the chronic weakness of the state's official Sunni religious establishment (Dar al-Fatwa). Since the assassination of the charismatic chief mufti, Hassan Khalid, in 1989, the institution has lacked the kind of leadership that could successfully manage it. Therefore in the post-civil war era it lost much of its respect in the wider population. Though Dar al-Fatwa organized the Sunni religious activities and services quite effectively before the civil war, it has suffered from insufficient funding since the war ended in 1990.<sup>20</sup> As a result, it was not able to employ enough religious professionals to perform religious services such as delivering the Friday sermon, giving religious lectures, issuing fatwas, and consulting the believers in religious and social matters.

Some segments of the society, such as parts of the religiously committed lower middle class, saw an alternative in Salafism. Salafi sheikhs were very active in providing religious services for the Sunni population. Joining their networks also provided the believers with access to patronage or space for socialization. Students with no ability to afford public or private schools could get primary and secondary education in the Salafi religious colleges. Some Salafi scholars became successful mediators in social conflicts, which usually erupted between local families over financial issues or homicide cases. All of this elevated the respect of the movement and attracted a significant number of followers.<sup>21</sup>

Lebanese Salafism at that time could be characterized as being overwhelmingly activist. The thinking of most of the sheikhs was closer to the Saudi Sahwa movement. Salafis in the long term aimed to acquire political power by participating in the elections and either putting forth their own candidates or supporting others.<sup>22</sup> At the same time they tried to mobilize Sunni youth by turning their attention to the "danger" coming from Hezbollah and the growing political and economic power of the Shia community in the country. Salafis presented themselves as the vanguard of the Sunnis, capable of resisting the Shia "threat" and saving Sunnis.

Prior to 1997, one of the main supporters of the Association of Guidance and Charity (AGC), the al-Shahhal family's relief endowment, was the RIHS, which was still under the control of activist Salafis. Sheikh Dai al-Islam al-Shahhal befriended many members of the Kuwaiti relief organization during his studies in Medina. These individuals saw potential in Shahhal to represent their interests in Lebanon. Al-Shahhal followed them to Kuwait, where he stayed for a couple of months. While there, he built up excellent contacts in Kuwait's activist Salafi circles and later became a frequent guest at diwanis, conferences, and other Salafi meetings in the country. When he returned to

Lebanon in 1990 to start his proselytization activities, the RIHS gave him hundreds of thousands of dollars, likely in excess of \$1 million, to establish religious colleges in Tripoli.<sup>23</sup>

### **The Rise of the Purists**

However, this situation changed around 1997–1998. When Abdul Rahman was ousted from the RIHS and the purist Salafis took over the leadership, the charity largely abandoned supporting its previous haraki beneficiaries. This development had a serious impact on the power balance within the Lebanese Salafi movement. The fact that the RIHS stopped bankrolling the AGC and looked for others to support was partly the reason purists were able to gain ground.

The purists' rise was further enabled by a repressive campaign against activist Salafis by Lebanese authorities in the late 1990s. Just before the new millennium a battle erupted in the Dinniyah region, east of Tripoli, between the Lebanese army and a group of Salafi militants that left scores dead on both sides. Some members of the armed group had contacts with al-Shahhal's network, which led to a large-scale crackdown on Salafis by both the Lebanese authorities and the occupying Syrian forces. Dozens of people in al-Shahhal's network were arrested and tortured, while al-Shahhal himself escaped to Saudi Arabia to avoid prosecution. The AGC was closed down, along with many of the Salafi religious colleges and other institutions. Al-Shahhal's network disintegrated completely.

With Sheikh Dai al-Islam al-Shahhal's absence, the Lebanese Salafis lost both their leadership and their access to financial resources. Therefore they started to look elsewhere for potential donors. Many of them traveled to the Gulf and contacted charities that had previously supported al-Shahhal. Those that were purists in their thinking but had been marginalized due to the AGC's predominantly activist outlook reconnected with the RIHS. The Kuwaiti charity at that time already had become dominated by purist Salafis and was willing to grant financial support to fellow purists in Lebanon.

In the first years of the new millennium, the RIHS granted rather modest financial support to certain purist Salafi sheikhs to enable them to continue their proselytization. The Kuwaiti charity was able to engage in more serious activities, and when Syrian forces left Lebanon after the so-called Cedar Revolution, the RIHS set up a branch in Tripoli and became the dominant sponsor of the purists in Lebanon. Compared with money channeled by the Kuwaiti charity, other sponsors, mainly from Saudi Arabia, had a marginal role.<sup>24</sup> The RIHS financed the establishment of a network of Salafi religious institutions in Tripoli and its surrounding areas under the name Islamic Heritage Endowment (IHE). Under the leadership of the relatively young Sheikh Safwan al-Zaabi, the IHE became the backbone of the emerging purist faction in North Lebanon.

The IHE attempted to unify purist Salafis in Lebanon and at the same time coordinate their activities by granting them material support. Al-Zaabi gathered other sheikhs from North Lebanon and made them sign an agreement to follow some basic tenets in their proselytization activity as a condition of the IHE's bankrolling them. First, the document stresses the need to remain loyal to the Saudi great ulema and forbids "mocking them" (the latter is a reference to those harakis who call some of the great ulema the "ulema of menstruation," because of their lack of attention to political issues when lost in the detail of daily religious practice). Second, it calls for the creation of an Islamic society by peaceful dawa and to be patient regarding the injustices of the rulers. The document forbids revolt against the rulers, even if they are not Muslim (referring to Lebanon's Maronite Christian president) and condemns the understanding of jihad propagated by militant groups. Instead, it calls for peaceful coexistence with non-Muslims and respect for "the treaties and contracts made with Muslims and non-Muslims."<sup>25</sup> These points closely resemble the preferences of the RIHS after the ousting of Abdul Rahman.

The IHE also formed a fatwa council composed of some of the most renowned Salafi scholars. Its task was to issue legal opinions in local Lebanese cases where the fatwas of the Saudi great ulema did not fully apply or were not specific enough. The council, for example, legitimized al-Zaabi's attempt to participate in institutional politics and mobilize voters for his preferred candidates in a fatwa. The writers of the legal opinion state that "it does not harm the [Muslim] candidate if he uses the parliament . . . as a tool for the da'wa by offering his thoughts and principles. . . ."<sup>26</sup> The writers of the fatwa argue that participating in the election of representatives to parliament is legitimate, since Lebanese law does not oblige them to make decisions that are un-Islamic.

During the 2009 Lebanese elections the IHE mobilized voters to support candidates who belonged to different political groupings. In exchange for the IHE's support, al-Zaabi received material benefits from the candidates. Those who won a parliamentary seat, for example, provided purist Salafis with access to jobs and other services. At the same time the IHE's ability to recruit voters gained influence for its bankroller, the RIHS, in Lebanese politics.

By the end of the 2000s an influential purist stream had emerged in North Lebanon that was able to compete with the activist Salafis. The network of the RIHS's local branch reached almost all towns and villages in North Lebanon. As al-Zaabi stated, in most settlements there is at least a mosque that receives funds from the IHE.<sup>27</sup> The organization also receives funds from the RIHS to employ purist Salafi *dais* (missionaries) and send them to remote regions in North Lebanon to carry out proselytization activities. The IHE also organized courses in the Tripoli mosques about *hadith* (prophetic tradition) and the basics of jurisprudence (*fiqh*). Upon completing these courses, participants received a diploma that affirmed their competence in these subjects.

### The Reemergence of the Harakis

The growth of the purists lasted until the 2011 Arab Spring. After the revolutions in the other Arab countries, the IHE's network lost ground to the reemerging haraki Salafis. This reflects developments at the global level, where the revolutions led to the rapid expansion of haraki Salafism and to a simultaneous decrease in the popularity of the purists. The main reason for this is that the purist sheikhs supported and legitimized the autocratic Arab regimes until the last moment and issued fatwas against the demonstrations and their participants all over the Middle East.

The IHE was also weakened when the RIHS fired Safwan al-Zaabi and installed a new administration for the institution. Al-Zaabi was ousted over his earlier attempt to normalize Salafis' relationship with the Shia Hezbollah and his close contacts with the Syrian regime. Previously, he had signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Hezbollah with the support of the Kuwaiti charity in 2008. However, in the first months of 2011 an anti-Shia group gained domination of the RIHS, and it did not tolerate al-Zaabi's close contacts with the Shia party.

Nevertheless, the IHE remained active in Lebanon. The RIHS channels hundreds of thousands of dollars for its local branch to support Syrian refugees—the number is said to exceed a million—who fled to Lebanon.<sup>28</sup> The IHE is very active in providing shelter, medical care, and basic amenities for the refugees. At the same time purist Salafis regard the presence of the refugees as a good opportunity for proselytization. Along with the material help, they offer religious services and distribute books and leaflets.

Activist Salafis, despite the persecution they faced, did not lose all of their influence. They remain strong in the Islamic scene of northern Lebanon. After the withdrawal of the Syrian forces in 2005, al-Shahhal was able to reestablish his charity network. At the same time other charismatic activist religious scholars who were independent of the AGC appeared on the scene, and they did not need the patronage of Dai al-Islam al-Shahhal. One of them is Sheikh Salem al-Rafei, who remains one of the most influential Sunni sheikhs in Lebanon today.

As has been mentioned, the sociopolitical environment created by the Arab Spring resulted in an increase in the influence of the harakis, who are also supported by Gulf charities.<sup>29</sup> Nowadays some of their preachers attract thousands of Sunnis to their mosques during the Friday sermon. These sheikhs successfully exploit Sunni-Shia tensions, which have been further deepened by the civil war in Syria, to gain more followers. The fact that there are no other powerful religious streams and movements that would offer an alternative further boosts the haraki Salafis' authority.

Lebanese haraki Salafis are also active in supporting the Syrian opposition. Many of them have crossed the border and fight with Syrian Salafi groups against the Assad regime. Most of the main Salafi authorities, such as Dai al-Islam al-Shahhal or Salim al-Rafei, advocate al-Jabha al-Islamiyya (the Islamic

Front), a coalition of Sunni Islamist rebel groups. However, some of the young *harakis* allegedly favor the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (commonly known by the acronym ISIS), a militant movement affiliated with al-Qaeda that often engages in armed conflict with other rebel factions.<sup>30</sup>

## Syria and Kuwaiti Salafis

### Kuwait Harakis Fund Syrian Jihadist Currents

The initially peaceful revolution in Syria that began in March 2011 transformed into a ruthless sectarian civil war over the course of just a couple of months. Salafis, who in the past had not managed to gain a foothold in the country, dramatically increased their influence. Their ideology proved to be compatible with the deepening anti-Shia sentiments of the mostly Sunni-armed opposition. The popularity of the Salafi movement multiplied. Salafi fighters are now playing a very significant, if not dominant, role in the armed opposition. Resources coming from the Gulf are crucial for the different Salafi armed factions.

The Salafi groups and networks in Kuwait are especially active in gathering and transferring material support for the Syrian Salafis—jihadis that are associated with both the Nusra Front and ISIS, and Salafi groups that reject jihadi ideology but regard fighting against the regime as permissible. When Salafism began growing rapidly in the rebel-held areas starting in the second half of 2011, Kuwaiti Salafis started to establish contacts with their Syrian fellow activists. Both purists who belong to the RIHS and *harakis* are sending millions of dollars to Syria.

Supporting the Syrian opposition has created an opportunity for Kuwaiti Salafis to extend their authority at home by presenting themselves as the ones who take care of the affairs of the *umma* (Islamic nation). This stance increased their authority in an environment where the legitimacy of the political institutions has been weakened and where Sunni-Shia tensions are rapidly deepening. Salafis commonly argue that they are the ones who resist Shia intentions to dominate the countries of the Middle East. The way Salafi preachers often frame the contemporary events of the Middle East is that the Shia, led by Iran, are trying to sideline Sunnis and achieve hegemony. The most important battlefields are Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Yemen.

Partly due to such rhetoric, many ordinary Kuwaiti Sunnis were mobilized to give their support to Salafi preachers who were collecting aid for the Syrian opposition. *Haraki* Salafis were the first contacted by their Syrian fellow activists and channeled material support to them. Probably the two best known sheikhs are Shafi al-Ajmi and Hajjaj al-Ajmi, who collected money and sent it

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to Syria. Both started their activism in a haraki Salafi milieu hallmarked by al-Haraka al-Salafiyya. They effectively employed both conventional and social media to attract donations.<sup>31</sup>

Shafi al-Ajmi is a lecturer at the College of Sharia and Islamic Studies of Kuwait University. He began to establish himself in late 2011 as one of the most prominent authorities among haraki Salafis. Often thousands of people appeared on Fridays in his mosque in a suburb of Kuwait to listen to his sermon. His television show on the state channel was one of the most popular among the Sunni population of the country. Like other Salafis, Shafi al-Ajmi portrayed the Syrian conflict as an apocalyptic war between good and evil: good being represented by the Sunnis, and evil by the Shia—who according to Shafi al-Ajmi want to destroy Islam from the inside. He calls upon Muslims to give their donations to assist their brethren in Syria to win this war against the “forces of evil.”

Hajjaj al-Ajmi, whose views are nearly similar to Shafi’s, relies on the vast wealth of his family and the donations sent to his foundation. He holds diwan-iyas every day in his house where donors can make their contributions. Both sheikhs are active on Twitter. Besides frequently posting what they claim is firsthand news from the Syrian conflict and disseminating their opinions, they frequently provide the numbers of bank accounts to which anyone can transfer money to support the Syrian opposition.

Shafi and Hajjaj al-Ajmi are not the only ones in the haraki Salafi community who are active in gathering financial support for the jihad in Syria. Salafi authorities such as Hakim al-Mutairi and Hamid al-Ali also collect alms, and Salafi sheikhs who are less known but have bonds to the Kuwaiti haraki networks regularly organize diwan-iyas and receive donations. Charity organizations with links to the harakis, such as the Benevolent Work Charity, also channel a considerable amount of material resources to the rebel groups.<sup>32</sup>

The Syrian rebels are not unequivocally positive in their view of the Kuwaiti contributions to the uprising. Not all of the donations reach the main rebel body, the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Jihadi groups, which refuse any cooperation with the FSA, receive millions of dollars from the Gulf monarchy. One of the main religious authorities of the Syrian rebels, Sheikh Adnan al-Aroor, a Syrian Salafi scholar who currently resides in Saudi Arabia, harshly criticized both Shafi and Hajjaj al-Ajmi. According to his statements on his popular television shows, the material support that they channel to Syrian jihadi groups (mostly to the Nusra Front and ISIS) leads to fragmentation of the lines of the opposition. Jihadis, by controlling large amounts of money, are able to attract fighters to leave the FSA, or even to fight against it.<sup>33</sup>

For his part, Shafi al-Ajmi, in a number of television interviews, accused many of the local military councils that constitute the backbone of the FSA of being corrupt or cooperating with foreign intelligence services. Al-Ajmi claimed that a number of these councils are ineffective and steal donations they

are sent to build up their own patronage networks in their district. Others, according to him, are mere tools of U.S. or Russian intelligence agencies.<sup>34</sup>

The financial support of the Kuwait haraki Salafis has played a crucial role in enabling the emergence of a Salafi opposition that is independent of the FSA. By that, they largely contributed to the fragmentation of the anti-regime forces. When the purists also joined in financing Syrian Salafi militias, it further increased the fractionalization of the rebels.

### **Kuwaiti Purists Split Over Supporting Syrian Rebels**

Purist Salafis in Kuwait originally vehemently opposed the revolutions. Sheikhs with ties to the RIHS issued fatwas against the demonstrations and gave lectures in which they condemned those who revolted against their “legitimate” rulers. However, when a full-scale civil war developed in Syria, opinions became less unequivocal. Many within the RIHS argued that the revolution against Bashar al-Assad cannot be called un-Islamic because the president cannot be regarded as Muslim (he belongs to the Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shiism). Today most Salafis argue that Shia are apostates who intend to penetrate Islam and destroy it from within.<sup>35</sup>

Many within the RIHS argued that the Syrian revolution was a mistake because the revolutionaries were not prepared to abolish the regime. Therefore, the revolt led to more negative consequences than if Assad’s rule had not been challenged at all.

However, in the current situation Muslims feel they have to help their brothers regardless of any mistakes committed by the revolutionaries. The president of the RIHS’s fatwa council, Nazim al-Misbah, one of the most renowned Kuwaiti Salafi scholars, said in an interview, “I was not asked by those who started the demonstrations. If they would inquire my opinion, I would say refrain from going to the streets in the current circumstances. However, today an apostate regime is slaughtering Muslims, therefore it is our obligation to help [the opposition].”<sup>36</sup>

Although all of the Salafis who are tied to the RIHS agree on the need to send aid to Syria, they are divided into factions over whether the charity should simply assist the refugees or whether it should also support the armed opposition.

Probably the majority within the RIHS sticks to the purist credentials and approves only helping those Syrian families who gather in refugee camps in the northern part of Syria and neighboring countries. They closely cooperate with Kuwaiti authorities and emphasize that they do not provide material support to anyone who participates in the fighting. This faction sends money, clothes, and medical equipment to the camps in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and Syria. In these countries the RIHS relies on local Salafi charities to distribute the material and carry out relief work on the ground. In Lebanon, for example, the Kuwaiti charity cooperates with the IHE, which has established a strong presence in the northeastern border regions. In Syria, a group of purist Salafis

established a charity endowment called Jama'iat Ahl al-Athar (Society of the Community of the Tradition) that mostly operates in the north in the adjacent regions to Turkey.

For the RIHS helping the refugees is more than a purely charity project. In all of the refugee camps and regions where they are present, they carry out *dawa*. The missionaries sent by the organization distribute leaflets and booklets and organize religious lessons where they disseminate the message of purist Salafism. The RIHS views Syria as a fertile ground for preaching, and where it can create strong foundations for Salafism that could play an important role in the country in a post-Assad regime.

The other faction within the RIHS openly supports the armed opposition. Its leaders include Fahad al-Khanna, a former member of Parliament, and Sheikh Othman al-Khamis, one of the most famous Kuwaiti scholars. According to their reasoning, the current rebellion against the Assad regime is neither an illegitimate revolt against the ruler nor a strategic mistake as other purists think, but a war to stop the corruption of Islam by the Shia. They argue that the Assad regime was actively supporting the efforts of the Shia to convert Sunnis. This threat to eliminate Sunnism in Syria, therefore, legitimized the revolt.<sup>37</sup>

In 2012 Fahad al-Khanna and another purist Salafi politician, Muhammad Hayef al-Mutairi, the leader of the Thawabit al-Umma (Principles of the Islamic Nation) political group, established Majlis al-Daimin Li-l-Thawra al-Suriyya (Council of the Supporters of the Syrian Revolution, or the CSSR), a platform of purists who collect donations for Syrian Salafi fighters who reject the ideology of al-Qaeda. Most of the CSSR's members are closely related to the RIHS; in fact, many of them are employees of the charity.

The leaders of the CSSR established good relations with many Salafi and other Islamic groups within the armed opposition in Syria. In September 2013 the council played a leading role in unifying six Salafi militias and creating Jaish al-Islam (Army of Islam) in the rebel-controlled outskirts of Damascus. According to a statement by Zahran Alloush, the CSSR donated \$470,000 to the Army of Islam to be able to start its operation.<sup>38</sup> It is difficult to measure the extent of the CSSR's control over the Army of Islam, but by actively contributing to its creation it is clear that Kuwaiti Salafis are directly involved in the politics of the Syrian rebel factions.

The establishment of the Army of Islam probably was strongly supported by the Kuwaiti ruling family.<sup>39</sup> The militia already attracts a lot of financial aid from the governments in the Gulf, whose declared aim is to strengthen it and thereby achieve balance with groups affiliated with al-Qaeda such as the Nusra Front or ISIS. Although according to the statements and posted videos of the Army of Islam, its ideology is not radically different from that of the Nusra Front, it is expected that in the aftermath of the Syrian conflict it would act differently. Its members are almost exclusively locals who have little connection with the transnational jihadi movement. Therefore it is unlikely that these fighters would turn

their weapons against the regimes in the Gulf, unlike the other Salafi militias, which are filled with nationals from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

Until early 2013 the Syrian opposition received financial support from Kuwait almost without control. One of the main reasons was the Kuwaiti population's enthusiasm for helping the rebels. According to one of the prime minister's advisers, the government would risk pushing the country into instability if it imposed any constraints on the bank transfers and other means of sending money to Syria.<sup>40</sup> Salafi preachers were almost absolutely free to praise the Nusra Front and the ISIS and to publicly collect donations for them.

The situation, however, recently started to change. Many Kuwaitis somewhat lost sympathy with the cause of the Syrian armed opposition when militants inspired by al-Qaeda increasingly became a dominant force within it. At the same time, after the dissolution of the parliament in 2012 and the subsequent elections, which were boycotted by the majority of the opposition forces, the government had to rely on the Shia members of Parliament to retain some popular support. The Shia population, however, was frightened by the ascendance of the Salafis and the massacres of Shia in Syria. To satisfy them, the government had to take steps to restrict the Salafis' freedom to materially and verbally support the Nusra Front and ISIS.

In August 2013 the Shafi al-Ajmi's television show was banned after he was accused of inciting sectarian tensions.<sup>41</sup> Authorities also started to monitor Friday sermons in the mosques and forbade several (mainly Salafi) sheikhs to preach. At the same time the government implemented new measures for oversight and control over outgoing financial transactions. A new law enabled the public prosecutor to freeze funds if there was suspicion that the money would go to armed factions. A financial intelligence unit was set up, mainly to investigate the financial support of the Syrian opposition by Kuwaiti Islamic forces.

These measures successfully restricted the flow of financial resources, especially to the Nusra Front and ISIS, but far from stopped it.<sup>42</sup> Salafis still find ways to send money to these groups. Very often they smuggle cash through Iraq or Saudi Arabia.<sup>43</sup> The donations to those groups, which are supported by the Kuwaiti government, reach Syria undisturbed. The Army of Islam is said to regularly receive hundreds of thousands of dollars from the RIHS, which is channeled by Fahad al-Khanna and his close associates within the charity.<sup>44</sup>

Lately, Salafis in Kuwait started to dominate the activities of funding the Syrian rebels. They managed to control the *zakat* committees in the majority of the districts of Kuwait. These committees collect the obligatory religious taxes in Islam and also receive donations from ordinary citizens. The Muslim Brotherhood had to reduce its support of the Syrian rebels after the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood's rule in Egypt in June 2013. The overthrow of Mohamed Morsi and demise of the power of the Egyptian Brotherhood opened

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**The overthrow of Mohamed Morsi and demise of the power of the Egyptian Brotherhood opened an opportunity for the Kuwaitis to take on a leading role in the movement on the international level.**

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an opportunity for the Kuwaitis to take on a leading role in the movement on the international level. Therefore they mobilized their financial resources to support their fellow activists worldwide and restricted channeling money to Syria.<sup>45</sup> The Kuwaiti Muslim Brothers might also be concerned by the possibility that the state could use their support of Syrian armed groups as a justification to oppress them.

## Conclusion

In the future, Kuwait will most likely remain one of the centers, and most important sponsors, of Salafism globally. Kuwaiti Salafi groups control vast financial resources, and their networks extend to dozens of countries around the globe. Their ability to influence Salafi groups in other countries makes it important to observe and understand the dynamics and ongoing internal debates of the movement in Kuwait. New ideas and ideological directions emerge rather frequently among Salafis in Kuwait, which can lead to further fragmentation of the movement. This not only would influence the Kuwaiti sociopolitical scene, but also could have significant transnational impacts.

Salafism in Lebanon probably will be an important sociopolitical actor in the future, considering its current popular support. The links with Kuwaiti Salafi groups probably will remain strong, and discourses in Kuwait will affect the Lebanese Salafi scene. The same is true regarding Syria. Salafism is unlikely to lose its influence in the near future in the country. Syrian Salafis have strong contacts with the Kuwaitis. Developments and fragmentations in the Kuwaiti Salafi movement will have resonance in Syria as well.

The Kuwaiti government needs to observe and control more effectively the financial transactions of the local Salafi groups and organizations. It should urge and assist Salafis to channel financial resources to groups associated with the FSA, and it should make an effort to forbid haraki Salafis, such as Shafi and Hajjaj al-Ajmi, to collect and transfer funds to the Nusra Front and ISIS. The government should also consider urging the CSSR to support FSA instead of the Army of Islam. Alternatively, leaders of the CSSR could press the Army of Islam to establish closer cooperation with the FSA. By insisting that funds go to the FSA rather than other organizations, the government of Kuwait could contribute to creating a more unified Syrian opposition.

The Kuwaiti government should assist the RIHS in strengthening the purist current in Lebanon. Purists are more concerned with peaceful proselytization and are willing to cooperate with other religious groups in the multi-sectarian country. If purists were able to attract more Salafi youth to their point of view, they would be less likely to end up fighting in Syria in the lines of one of the Salafi militias. Providing funds for the RIHS to use in Lebanon would be essential to enhance this process.

## Notes

- 1 The terms “purists” and “activists” were used first by Quintan Wiktorowicz. I refined his classification on the basis of my empirical observations. Quintan Wiktorowicz, “Anatomy of the Salafi Movement,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29, no. 3 (2006); Zoltan Pall, *Lebanese Salafis Between the Gulf and Europe: Development, Fractionalization and Transnational Networks of Salafism in Lebanon* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), 22–28.
- 2 Interviews with Abdul Rahman Abdul Khaliq, Kuwait, January 21, 2010, and February 10, 2013.
- 3 Magnus Ranstorp, *Hizb’allah in Lebanon: The Politics of the Western Hostage Crisis* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 117.
- 4 This coincided with Saudi Arabia’s policy to promote Salafism worldwide as a counterweight to postrevolutionary Iran’s growing influence. See Madawi Al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State: Islamic Voices From a New Generation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 105, 126–133.
- 5 Abdul Rahman Abdul Khaliq left his country of origin, Egypt, to study in Saudi Arabia in his youth. He became affiliated with Salafism while studying at the Islamic University of Medina. Allegedly he was close to the Saudi Muslim Brotherhood, which deeply influenced his thinking. He arrived to Kuwait in 1965 to work as a secondary school teacher. Soon, he became the main authority of the nascent Salafi movement. Sheikh Abdul Rahman is regarded as one of the most important contemporary Salafi thinkers. He wrote dozens of books about the means through which Salafis have to carry out political and social activism. Besides defining the character of Kuwaiti Salafism, his books are widely read by haraki Salafis in Egypt, Indonesia, Lebanon, Jordan, and Western Europe.
- 6 Abdul Rahman Abdul Khaliq, *al-Muslimun wa-l’Amal al-Siyasi* (Muslims and Political Activism), undated book, accessible online at [www.salafi.net](http://www.salafi.net).
- 7 One of the best analyses of the Sahwa movement is provided by Stephane Lacroix. See Stephane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 2011).
- 8 Most Kuwaitis have numerous relatives in Saudi Arabia, especially those who have tribal origins. All of the tribes that are present in Kuwait have extensions in Saudi Arabia.
- 9 Sheikh Rabee al-Madkhali is known for his unusually harsh criticism of haraki Salafis and the Muslim Brotherhood. The networks of his followers stretch around the globe.
- 10 Interview with a former leading member of the RIHS, Kuwait, February 9, 2012, and interview with Sheikh Abdul Rahman Abdul Khaliq, Kuwait, March 12, 2012.
- 11 William E. Shephard, *Sayyid Qutb and Islamic Activism: A Translation and Critical Analysis of Social Justice in Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 117.
- 12 The Salafi Islamic Gathering was established as an officially independent organization due to a Kuwaiti law that forbids any political involvement by welfare organizations. However, in reality it constitutes one entity with the RIHS.
- 13 Interview with Ali al-Umayr, January 15, 2010.

- 14 “Al-Tajammu‘ al-Salafi: Narfudu Ayya Massas Bi-l-amir” (Salafi Gathering: We Refuse Touching [the Person] of the Emir), *al-Qabas*, October 12, 2012.
- 15 Interview with Khalid Safran, a youth leader of Ihya al-Turath, Kuwait, March 5, 2012.
- 16 See [www.youtube.com/watch?v=jKblfbmb1E4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jKblfbmb1E4). Sheikh Salim’s fatwa incited a huge campaign against him, led by the Muslim Brothers and activist Salafis. In early March 2012 he was severely criticized in public sermons, on Internet sites, and in social media (Facebook and Twitter). See also interview, Kuwait, February 3, 2013.
- 17 Hakim al-Mutairi (b.1964) originally was influenced by the famous Syrian haraki thinker Muhammad Surur in the late 1980s and early 1990s when he was pursuing his studies at Umm al-Qura University in Mecca. Later he received his PhD in Muhammad Surur’s research institute, the Center for Islamic Studies. He became an internationally renowned haraki thinker after his book, *al-Hurriya aw al-Tawfan* (Freedom or the Flood) (Beirut: al-Mu‘assasa al-‘Arabiyya li-l-Dirasat wa-l-Nashr, 2008) was published. In this publication al-Mutairi argues that according to scripture, Muslims have the right to choose their leaders, and any form of authoritarianism is rejected in the religion. He implicitly states that democracy and Islam are not only compatible, but the former is an organic part of the latter.
- 18 Muhammad Surur is one of the leading ideologists of haraki Salafism. Between the 1970s and the 1990s, one of the two dominant activist Salafi networks in Saudi Arabia closely associated itself with his teachings. See Lacroix, *Awakening Islam*, 63–70 and al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State*, 73–77.
- 19 Interview, al-Bayan district, March 12, 2012.
- 20 Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen, “The Sunni Religious Scene in Beirut,” *Mediterranean Politics* 3, no. 1 (1998): 71.
- 21 In the first half of the 1990s Salafism in North Lebanon was equated with the al-Shahhal family and its relief endowment, the Association of Guidance and Charity (AGC). The al-Shahhals were among the first who engaged in preaching Salafi ideology in the country. Sheikh Salim al-Shahhal (1922–2008), the founder of the clan, was influenced by Egyptian Islamic Reformism and became one of the most influential preachers of Tripoli in the second half of the 1940s. His sons and the younger generation of the family turned to Salafism while they were pursuing their studies in Saudi Arabia. The most influential member of the al-Shahhal clan, Dai al-Islam, managed to access Salafi charities in the Gulf, which provided him with ample financial resources to establish a relatively large network of mosques and religious colleges where the tenets of Salafism were taught. Most of the Salafi sheikhs were employed in al-Shahhal’s institutions, as preachers, teachers, and employees in the charity endowments.
- 22 Interview with a Palestinian Salafi sheikh, Tripoli, October 11, 2009, and interview with Sheikh Hilal Turkomani, Miryata, October 18, 2009.
- 23 Interview with Dai al-Islam al-Shahhal, Tripoli, August 9, 2011; interview with a Palestinian Salafi sheikh, Tripoli, October 11, 2009, and interview with Sheikh Hilal Turkomani, Miryata, October 18, 2009.
- 24 It is hard to get information about the exact amounts of money that the RIHS channeled to the IHE. According to Safwan al-Zaabi, the Kuwait organization invested “millions of USD” to establish the IHE. The maintenance of the network involved a large amount of money, probably \$2–3 million per year. Interview with Sheikh Safwan al-Zaabi, Tripoli, September 29, 2009. The Saudi Ministry of Religious Affairs gave financial aid to Mahad al-Bukhari in Akkar province. According to Sheikh Saad al-Din al-Kibbi, Saudi individual sponsors occasionally channel financial resources to Lebanese purists. Interview with Sheikh Saad al-Din al-Kibbi, Akkar, October 13, 2009.
- 25 See “Wathiqat al-Tafahum bayn Hizb Allah wa ba’d al-Jama’iyyat al-Salafiya al-Lubnaniyya bayn al-Tarhib wa-l-Tahaffuz” (Memorandum of Understanding Between Hezbollah and Some of the Lebanese Salafi Groups: Between Welcoming and Reservation), *Al-Sharq Al-Ausat*, August 20, 2008.

- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Interview, Tripoli, October 9, 2009.
- 28 “Syrian Refugees Looking for a Life in Lebanon,” BBC News, January 24, 2014, [www.bbc.co.uk/news/in-pictures-25858265](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/in-pictures-25858265).
- 29 Probably the main sponsor of the Lebanese *harakis* is the Qatari Sheikh Aid Charity Association. It helped them to resume their activities when the repression by the authorities was lifted. Kuwaiti relief organizations also provided financial resources for activist Salafis in North Lebanon. The above-mentioned Benevolent Work Charity, a close associate of SACA, regularly donates financial resources to AGC.
- 30 Mona Alami, “ISIS-Nusra Rift Divides Tripoli Salafis,” NOW, <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/reportsfeatures/isis-nusra-rift-divides-tripoli-salafis>.
- 31 See, for example, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=CB9FkCFR8K](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CB9FkCFR8K); “Shafi al-‘Ajmi yatahaddath ‘an Majzarat al-Hatla wa Nahr Sayyid Shi‘i wa Ibnahu” (Shafi al-Ajmi Talks About the Massacre in Hatla and the Killing of a Shia Man and His Son), [www.youtube.com/watch?v=3FRRbgjDKoA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3FRRbgjDKoA); “Dr. Shafi al-‘Ajmi Jad‘u ila Jama‘ al-Silah li-Thawwar Suriya” (Dr. Shafi al-Ajmi Calls for Collecting Weapons for the Syrian Revolutionaries), [www.youtube.com/watch?v=PkYQtb2aFBU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PkYQtb2aFBU); “Kalimat Jari‘a min Ard al-Sham li-l-Sheikh Hajjaj al-‘Ajmi” (Sheikh Hajjaj al-Ajmi’s Brave Words From Syria) [www.youtube.com/watch?v=eU3HkZ5SuTs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eU3HkZ5SuTs); “Min Ard al-Sham Hajjaj al-‘Ajmi Yujib ‘ala Su‘alayn Muhimmayn” (Hajjaj al-Ajmi Answers Two Important Questions From Syria), [www.youtube.com/watch?v=y6TpWthS5h0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y6TpWthS5h0); <https://twitter.com/hajjajalajmi>; and [https://twitter.com/sHaFi\\_Ajmi](https://twitter.com/sHaFi_Ajmi).
- 32 Series of meetings with Hakim al-Mutairi and the pupils of Sheikh Hamid al-Ali, November 2013 and January 2014.
- 33 “Tawdih Mawqif al-Sheikh ‘Adnan al-‘Araur min Shafi al-‘Ajmi” (Sheikh Adnan al-Aroor Makes His Stance Clear Regarding Shafi al-Ajmi), [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ArAF9xQA4WA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ArAF9xQA4WA); see also Elisabeth Dickinson, “Playing With Fire: Why Private Gulf Financing for Syria’s Extremist Rebels Risks Igniting Sectarian Conflict at Home,” Analysis Paper no. 16, Saban Center at Brookings, December 2013, 10–11.
- 34 “Dr. Shafi al-‘Ajmi Yuwaddih Sabab al-Khilaf ma‘ al-‘Araur” (Dr. Shafi al-Ajmi Explains the Reasons of the Disagreement With al-Aroor), [www.youtube.com/watch?v=IjX9g6U\\_N4U](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IjX9g6U_N4U).
- 35 Series of interviews with scholars and officials from the RIHS, February–March 2012, November 2013, and January 2014.
- 36 Interview, Kuwait, November 9, 2013.
- 37 Discussion with Fahad al-Khanna in his diwaniya, January 28, 2014.
- 38 “Qa‘id Jaysh al-Islam Zahran Allush: La Tad’amna Dual wa Itaqayt bi Za‘im al-Nusra” (Leader of the Army of Islam Zahran Allush: We Are Not Supported by States, and I Met the Leader of al-Nusra Front), *Al-Hayat*, November 21, 2013, <http://alhayat.com/Details/574467>.
- 39 Interview with an adviser of the Kuwaiti government, Kuwait, November 7, 2013.
- 40 Interview, Kuwait, November 7, 2013.
- 41 “Waqf Barnamij Tilfiziyyuniyya fi-l-Kuwait ba’d Tasrihat Ta’ifiyya li-Sheikh Sunni” (Stopping a TV Program in Kuwait After a Sunni Sheikh’s Sectarian Statements), August 14, 2013, <http://ara.reuters.com/article/topNews/idARACAE9B2GWT20130814>.
- 42 The April 2014 statement of U.S. Treasury Undersecretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence David S. Cohen that Kuwait had become the “epicenter of fundraising for terrorist groups in Syria” signifies the importance of Kuwaiti donors, the majority of whom are Salafis, in financing Syrian armed factions. See Karen DeYoung, “Kuwait, a U.S. Ally on Syria, Is Also the Leading Funder of Extremist Rebels,” *Washington Post*, April 26, 2014, [www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/kuwait-top-ally-on-syria-is-also-the-leading-funder-of-extremist-rebels/2014/04/25/10142b9a-ca48-11e3-a75e-463587891b57\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/kuwait-top-ally-on-syria-is-also-the-leading-funder-of-extremist-rebels/2014/04/25/10142b9a-ca48-11e3-a75e-463587891b57_story.html).



- 43 Series of interviews and informal conversations with Kuwaiti Salafis in November 2013.
- 44 Interview with an adviser of the Kuwaiti prime minister, Kuwait, November 7, 2013.
- 45 Interview with a local official of Jama'at al-Islah al-Ijtimai, the main charity branch of the Kuwait Muslim Brothers, Kuwait, February 4, 2014.



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