In the Spring of 1978, a leading Saudi Salafi scholar by the name of 'Abd al-‘Aziz b. Baz (d. 1999) staked a claim to the necessity of gender segregation in the Islamic University of Medina’s official journal (Majallat al-Jami’a al-Islamiyya). In the article, entitled “The Danger of Women Joining Men in Their Workplace,” Ibn Baz argued that individual modest behavior by women could not safeguard public morality and that both domestic seclusion and gender segregation were necessary. A few months later, Ibn Baz turned to al-Tawhid, the flagship publication of Egypt’s leading Salafi organization, Proponents of the Muhammadan Model (Ansār al-Sunna al-Muḥammadiyya, henceforth Ansar al-Sunna). In this journal, Ibn Baz published a revised version of the original article, serialized in three installments, that made the same case for domestic seclusion and gender segregation. The appearance of this argument in publications on either side of the Red Sea reflected the centrality of Saudi Arabia and Egypt to Salafism’s development, while Ibn Baz’s concern with gender mixing indexed a key concern of this global Islamic movement.

The Salafi claim to the necessity of separating men and women is often understood by both academics and Salafis themselves to derive directly from this movement’s “literalist” approach to the Quran and the authoritative account

of the Prophet Muhammad’s life (known as the Sunna). In this book, by contrast, I show that Ibn Baz’s call to gender segregation does not hearken back to a traditional model of Islam (whether that of the seventh century or later), nor does it reflect the logical endpoint of a particular interpretative method. Instead, the Salafi position on this question—which is central, though not unique, to this movement—emerged in the 1970s out of a transnational debate between Egyptian and Saudi scholars as they sought to respond to Islamist and Secular Nationalist challengers alike. As Salafi elites worked to meet this challenge and to navigate social and economic pressures, they cited not only the Prophetic model but also sources as varied as the writings of nineteenth-century German philosophers and early-twentieth-century American suffrage activists.

This story of gender segregation was striking not merely because of its unorthodox intellectual genealogy, but also because of the considerations about female sexuality that animated it. Among scholars of Islamic law (fiqh), the concern that women’s sexuality poses a threat of strife (fitna) goes back at least to the ninth century, yet the focus was on preventing sexual relations outside of marriage. Put differently, the longstanding commitment to preventing illicit sexual relations depended on and sought to protect the existence of marriage as a social structure. By contrast, the notion that women mixing with men could corrupt society more broadly simply through their physical presence primarily reflects a modernist view of society in which each person is responsible for him or herself and is equally capable of transmitting virtue or vice.

It is the latter view that would define Salafism’s development. Most fundamentally, such an approach assumes a broad, anonymous, and homogenous space bereft of stabilizing social structures, yet filled with individuals tasked with regulating themselves as they communicate ethical positions and political allegiances alike. This approach to the social world, an outgrowth of the claims that modern states make to regulate their citizens, explains not merely efforts by Middle Eastern states to regulate bodily comportment and social space alike,


but also why varied social movements embraced such models of individual and collective regulation. Accordingly, Salafi calls for gender segregation did not reflect a historically-continuous Islamic social order, whether that of the seventh century or subsequent to it. Rather, leading lights of this movement sought to solve a distinctly modern challenge—that of society—by physically separating men from women’s allegedly irresistible sexual powers and by asking men and women to comport themselves in a manner that served this broader goal.

In this book, I move beyond the discrete question of gender segregation to chart the origins and consolidation of self-consciously Salafi social practices in the twentieth-century Middle East with a focus on Egypt. I tell the story of Salafi movement and its often-ahistorical efforts to replicate the golden model of the early Islamic community in seventh century Arabia. Just as importantly, I argue that the development of Salafism is a lens to the broader transformation of the Islamic thought and practice in modernity. In particular, I emphasize how communication becomes an ethical project and a key consequence of this shift: the increasing centrality of visible practices to understandings of piety.

THE RISE AND CONSOLIDATION OF SALAFISM

In the modern Middle East, the question of who has the rightful claim to the normative authority of the Prophetic model is inescapable. Over the course of the twentieth century, movements as varied as the Muslim Brotherhood (al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn, e. 1928), Ansar al-Sunna al-Muhammadīyya (e. 1926), and the Secular-Nationalist Ba’th party (e. 1947) sought both inspiration and legitimacy for their endeavors by citing the Prophet Muhammad and the first three generations of the Islamic community, known as the “pious ancestors” (al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ).

This book is focused on a subset of these movements, such as Ansar al-Sunna, who adopted the term Salafism (al-Salafīyya) and today can be found from the Middle East to South Asia to Western Europe and the United States. Members of this movement, in turn, distinguish themselves by articulating an interpretative commitment not only to neo-Hanbali theology (known as Madhhab al-Salaf)\(^5\)

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5. Neo-Hanbali theology sets out God’s oneness through three core concepts: The Unity of Lordship (Tawḥīd al-Rubūbiyya), the Unity of Lordship or Worship (Tawḥīd al-ʿIbad) and the Unity of God’s Names and Attributes (Tawḥīd al-ʿAsmāʾ wa l-Sifāt). As Joas Wagemakers notes, “The Salafi position is virtually the same as the Hanbali one. . . .
and to deriving law from the Quran and Sunna, but also through distinct social practices. While this movement is not limited to the Arab world, this region’s most populous country, Egypt, was a dynamic space of religious contestation in which it emerged. Specifically, it was during the 1920s that Egypt saw a cacophony of religious appeals, ranging from the Muslim Brotherhood to the Young Men’s Muslim Association (al-Shubbān al-Muslimūn) to the Lawful Society For Those Who Work According to the Quran and Sunna (al-Jamʿiyya bi-l-Kitāb waʾl-Sunna, henceforth the Jamʿiyya Sharʿiyya). In the midst of this vibrant religious competition, al-Fiqi, a graduate of Egypt’s leading religious institution, al-Azhar University, and former student of the noted Islamic reformer Muhammad Rashid Rida (d. 1935), founded Ansar al-Sunna.7

Salafis do believe God has a certain form based on the relevant verses, but they do so without descriptive designation (bi-lā takyīf). Instead, they accept that God must be different from the human form that they are familiar with.” These debates are not merely theoretical, bearing on the status of Quranic revelation and the role (or lack thereof) of rationalism (ʿaql) in engaging with the Quran. See Joas Wagemakers, Salafism in Jordan: Political Islam in a Quietist Community (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 41–42. Furthermore, Henri Lauzière notes that “in scholarly parlance . . . a Salafi was an adherent to Hanbali theology who could follow any school of Islamic law or none in particular. The term did not have a legal connotation [prior to the early twentieth century]” (The Making of Salafism: Islamic Reform in the Twentieth Century [New York: Columbia University Press, 2016], 28). While Islamic Modernists such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad ʿAbduh have long been categorized as Salafis, there is no evidence that they used this term to describe themselves. See Lauzière, The Making of Salafism, 6.

6. My usage of the term Salafism and periodization follows Lauzière’s groundbreaking 2016 book on this topic (The Making of Salafism, 28, 96). What is distinctive about Salafism is that it fuses longstanding theological and legal approaches, the latter of which involves the rejection of the legal schools. This position can also be found beyond the Arab world, most notably in the Indian Ahl-i Ḥadīth movement. See Martin Riexinger, “Ibn Taymiyya’s Worldview and the Challenge of Modernity: A Conflict Among the Ahl-i Ḥadīth in British India,” in Islamic Theology, Philosophy and Law: Debating Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, ed. Birgit Krazietz and Georges Tamer (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2013), 493–517. In the late twentieth century, scholars from this movement have also claimed the attribution (nisba) of al-Salafi. For example, Muhammad Luqman b. Barakallah b. Muhammad Yasin b. Salamat Allah b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzim Siddiqi (d. 2020), a member of this movement and author of a prominent Urdu Quranic commentary, Taysir al-Rahman li-Bayyan al-Quran, is known as Muhammad Luqman al-Salafi. I wish to think Muhammad Qasim Zaman for pointing me to this naming practice.

7. For example, see “Jamaʿat Ansar al-Sunna al-Muhammadīyya bi-l-Sudan,” al-Hadi al-Nabawi, Jumada al-Ula 1360/~May 1941, 27, and “Sawt min Jamaʿat Ansar al-Sunna al-Muhammadīyya bi-l-Sudan,” al-Hadi al-Nabawi, Shawwal 1364/~September 1945, 360. The approximate Gregorian dates (indicated by a tilde) correspond to the fact that the magazine
Scholarship on Salafism in Egypt and beyond has tackled questions of theology, legal method, ritual practice, political participation, and military conflict. Salafism’s broader impact, however, lies in its emergence as a social movement that has reshaped Islamic thought and practice in Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority settings alike. This book, accordingly, explores an ostensibly secondary question that cuts to the heart of Salafism’s development: the history of the daily practices through which Salafis have sought to emulate the Prophet Muhammad. In the following six chapters, I trace the emergence of distinctly Salafi social practices between 1936 and 1995 and argue that, far from seamlessly replicating either the model of early Islamic Arabia or established models of Islamic piety, these embodied routines emerged out of the assumed communicative power of the body that is characteristic of modernity. It is certainly the case that Salafis competed with and were shaped by their ideological rivals, whether secular nationalists, Islamists, or traditionalist scholars committed to a legal approach based on existing schools of law (s. Madhhab, pl. Madhāhib). What is crucial, however, is that they have done so not because of their fundamental differences, but rather because they share the same field of competition: a commitment to shaping the ideas and practices of a communal body known as “society.”

was published on the first day of each Hijri month. See “al-Majalla fi Thawb Jadid,” al-Hadi al-Nabawi, Dhu al-Hijja 1369/ September 1950, 12.
12. The Salafi commitment to emulating Muhammad is sometimes classified as an example of Fundamentalism. On the broader applicability of the term for Islamic movements, see Michael Cook, Ancient Religions, Modern Politics (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 377–98. In the case of Salafism, the framework of fundamentalism reveals a great deal regarding how Salafis understand themselves, yet tells us comparatively little about how they act in practice.
Most fundamental to the development of Salafi practice would be the relationship between ethics and communication that secular nationalist visions, too, had absorbed from the operating logic of modern states. In this formulation, bodily practice came to be both a tool of regulating the self and an incontrovertible symbol of allegiance to or rejection of particular political projects. By carefully tracing the genesis and consolidation of four practices—praying in shoes, gender segregation, a distinctly Salafi beard, and shortened pants or robes—I show the centrality of the assumptions and demands of communication in the emergence and consolidation of Salafism and, more broadly, in the transformation of the Islamic tradition in the twentieth century.

The challenge in writing a history of the emergence of distinctly Salafi practices is that both Salafi elites and rank-and-file members are deeply committed to the proposition that such embodied acts represent a precise reproduction of the model of Islam bequeathed by Muhammad and his Companions in seventh-century Arabia. Salafis insist that their interpretation of early Islamic history is superior to that of other Muslims because it is based exclusively on the Quran and Sunna, and they castigate Islamic modernists and Islamists alike for their adoption of self-consciously modern questions and concerns. By contrast, Salafis proceed on the epistemological premise that they have succeeded in inoculating themselves not merely from “non-Islamic” influences but also from what they understand to be the faulty interpretations of the madhhab tradition.

A focus on a set of practices which Salafi elites claim emerge directly from the Quran and Sunna requires an ambitious approach to sources. In line with recent scholarship that emphasizes the role of transnational linkages in the movement’s development, I draw on leading Salafi periodicals published across the Middle East, including in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Yemen as well as pamphlets, some digitized and others culled from archives in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Israel. When it is relevant, I also use mosque lessons and sermons recorded on audiocassette and digitized as

audio files. Collectively, these sources reflect and reveal an interconnected transnational arena of Salafi debate in which it is not uncommon to see the same writer appear in multiple publications, for one magazine to quote or excerpt another, or for a print debate to be echoed in audiocassette sermons and vice versa.

The choice to rely primarily on print media reflects not only the available source base, but also the suitability and centrality of this medium to the promotion of strict models of embodied practice. The ease of reproducing printed material in the modern period facilitated a call to standardized religious practice,\(^{14}\) while magazines and pamphlets constitute what Wilson Chacko Jacob terms “a performative cultural space in which the making and potential unmaking of subjects was accorded an iterative structure . . . ”\(^{15}\) Furthermore, as Benedict Anderson argues, print created an imagining of simultaneous readings that allows it to be both a structure for otherwise-unstructured social space, and to reflect particular dynamics of authority.\(^{16}\) Print media thus served as a site not merely for the transmission of particular models of piety, but also as a space for those outside the Salafi scholarly elite to understand themselves as Muslims committed to replicating the model of the first three generations of the Muslim community. As these readers read about the ostensibly unchanging and timeless model of this golden period, they worked to translate a theoretical commitment into an ethical project of embodied self-regulation. Finally, the medium of print reflected and reinforced broader dynamics of authority within the Salafi movement by enabling editors—who were also elites within the movement more broadly—to police the boundaries

\(^{14}\) In his classic study of the roots of legal stringency in Jewish Ultra-Orthodoxy during the second half of the twentieth century, Haym Soloveitchik similarly highlights the importance of print in creating standards of precise religious practice that did not reflect this community’s lived history. See “Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy,” *Tradition* 28, no. 4 (1994): 68–69.


\(^{16}\) Indeed, Anderson quotes Hegel to draw an explicit parallel with religious practice: “The significance of this mass ceremony—Hegel observed that newspaper serve the modern man as a substitute for morning prayers—is paradoxical. It is confirmed in silent privacy . . . [y]et each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion” (Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* [New York: Verso, 1991], 35–36).
of acceptable discourse and practice not only by selecting articles but also by accepting or rejecting fatwa requests and letters to the editor. 17

In this book, I draw on the insights of historians of nationalism, on the one hand, and gender, on the other, to offer an alternative approach to the history of Islamic reformism and reformist movements. Historians of Islamic reformism tend to focus disproportionately on the development of abstract concepts over time, 18 while those who study the Muslim Brotherhood emphasize the political and intellectual dimensions of this movement’s development. 19 Scholars of nationalism and gender, by contrast, highlights the centrality of social practice and embodied performance to social movements that span the ideological spectrum, including nationalist movements that subsequently rise to power and use state institutions to further regulate such practice. 20 As such, this history of Salafi piety brings the history of Islamic reform into broader

17. While Ansar al-Sunna’s periodicals included fatwa sections, they differed from their Islamist competitors in that they did not include letters to the editor.


historiographical debates over the relationship between ideological change and bodily practice.

This history of the rise of distinctively Salafi practices also seeks to reorient the study of Salafism towards the social. Rather than approaching this trend’s history primarily as a story of scholarly engagement with past authorities, a focus on religious ritual, or political participation, I argue for the centrality of daily practice to both the movement’s development and impact. Put differently, to be a Salafi is not merely to hold specific theological or legal commitments but also to engage in particular visible practices. In this book, I show that the social practices that distinguish Salafis were formulated in the twentieth century in order to enable this movement to compete with its ideological foes, thus casting light on the balance among theology, law, and social contestation in the formation of this Islamic movement.

The emergence and consolidation of varied Salafi social practices also reveals how Salafi efforts to shape society are inescapably animated by a modern logic of communication and related linkage of ethics and visible self-regulation. The Salafi movement constitutes a valuable lens to the transformations of the Islamic tradition in modernity precisely because it understands its mission as direct and unmediated preservation. While previous scholarship acknowledges that Salafism emerges in the modern period, \(^{21}\) I show that modernity is constitutive of Salafism and, indeed, of today’s Islamic movements more broadly. \(^{22}\) To make this point more concrete, such an approach

\(^{21}\) For example, see Bernard Haykel, “On the Nature of Salafi Thought and Action,” in *Global Salafism: Islam’s New Religious Movement*, ed. Roel Meijer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 33–57. Other scholars, however, argue that “Salafism has deep roots in Islamic religious development, with various movements throughout history championing the revival of Islamic tradition based upon a return to the ways of al-Salaf al-Salih (the pious ancestors).” (Ismail, *Rethinking Salafism*, 28).

\(^{22}\) In making this argument, I build on Thomas Bauer’s study of the shift from ambiguity to a commitment to Cartesian-inspired certainty in Islamic history, which includes analysis of the Saudi Salafi scholar Ibn al-ʿUthaymin. As Bauer rightly declares, “The Salafist position . . . is the kind of reform that is based on an intolerance of ambiguity. Thus, it must be understood as the most radical attempt so far to modernize Islamic law.” (A *Culture of Ambiguity: An Alternative History of Islam*, trans. Hinrich Biesterfeldt and Tricia Turnstall [New York: Columbia University Press, 2021], 128). My argument, which foregrounds the adoption of distinctly modern logics of identity and social organization, is distinct from the linked claim that Salafis engage in modernity’s political, social and economic processes as they mediate social change. See Ousman Kane, *Muslim Modernity in Post-Colonial Nigeria: A Study of the Society for the Removal and Reinstatement of Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 1–7.
explains not only why Salafis lay claims to models of facial hair or pants that distinguish them from those of their secular-nationalist and Islamist competitors alike, but also why all these factions are concerned with controlling their communication as a form of ethical practice in the first place. By contrast, a focus on Salafi theology reveals little about the world in which theological principles are cited, and is thus of limited value in understanding why Salafi calls for the exclusive worship of God (al-Tawhīd) have powerfully challenged entrenched models of sovereignty and society alike in the twentieth-century Middle East.

My emphasis on social practice also challenges existing scholarship on Islamic piety that separates moral cultivation from social performance. Influential ethnographic studies, most notably by Saba Mahmood and Charles Hirschkind, foreground the continued relevance of a discursive tradition of ethical cultivation to varied Muslim communities in Egypt and beyond.23 Most notably, Mahmood draws on Foucault’s understanding of Aristotelian ethics to emphasize the capacity of individuals to act on their own bodies in a way that transforms them into willing subjects of a moral discourse.24 In this study, I consider embodied ethical practice not as separate from social performance, but rather as intimately linked to it.25 It is not that Salafism’s


24. Mahmood, The Politics of Piety, 27–31, 120–22. Indeed, while Mahmood notes the prominence of “outward markers of religiosity—ritual practices, styles of comporting oneself, dress, and so on,”—she sees them as oriented inward (31). Jeannette Jouili makes a similar argument that offers a greater emphasis on the limits to such projects of self-cultivation in a European context (Pious Practice and Secular Constraints, 14–22).

25. Jouili is an exception to this literature in that she takes seriously “the complicated connections between . . . [pious] practices as communicable identity markers and their embeddedness in long-standing traditions of self-cultivation. . . .” (Pious Practice and Secular Constraints, 13). Her argument, however, is that a concern with visual signification is a consequence of these Muslims’ “diasporic context,” rather than an outgrowth of broader shifts of modernity. Arsalan Khan, too, emphasizes “pious sociality structured by hierarchical relationships,” yet he is not concerned with questions of visual signification (“Pious Sociality,” 105).
ethical project demands visibility, but rather that its ethics take into account the inescapable social condition of constant visibility. This study also bridges practices of piety and intellectual history by casting light on how Islamic scholars (the ʿulamāʾ) engage with social practice. Muhammad Qasim Zaman and Junaid Quadri have shown how scholarly use of longstanding discourses and methods of Islamic law can mask significant shifts in argumentation. By focusing on practice rather than discourse, I bring out the social conditions that animate Islamic legal reasoning, particularly the citation of past authorities, in the modern period. Specifically, I explore how a claim to the binding nature of a particular practice based on citation of reports of the Prophet Muhammad’s statements and actions (s. hadīth, pl. aḥādīth) is a response to particular political, social and economic conditions and an effort to extend scholarly authority into society in a manner that mirrors state efforts to regulate individual citizens.

In line with my argument that communication is central to Salafi social practice, I approach citation not merely as a verbal or text-based claim (for example, a reference to a particular hadīth report), but also as a practice of embodied knowledge that echoes, but is distinct from, pre-modern Islamic models of embodiment. As Salafi men pray in shoes or adopt particular


28. For a recent work that takes seriously the material conditions of Islamic thought, see Leor Halevi, Modern Things on Trial: Islam’s Global and Material Reformation in the Age of Rida, 1865–1935 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).
