
Framing Salafism: Lessons From Yemen

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REVIEW OF LAURENT BONNEFOY

***Salafism in Yemen:
Transnationalism and Religious Identity***
(Hurst and Company; London, United Kingdom, 2011)
Available in the United States through
Columbia University Press, New York in 2012; 289 pages.

Salafism in Yemen: Transnationalism and Religious Identity by Laurent Bonnefoy is not for the novice or for those wanting to immerse themselves in the comfortable delusion that all Muslims, much less Salafis, think alike. Rather, Bonnefoy's work is for those wanting to understand Islam in Yemen without the hysteria that surrounds the topic.

Bonnefoy is a French scholar on the Middle East with particular expertise on the Arabian Peninsula. He currently serves as a researcher at the *Institut Français de Proche-Orient* (IFPO, or the French Institute of the Middle East) whose offices are situated in Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. Bonnefoy spent four years in Yemen conducting field research on Yemeni society and from his work has published an excellent, detailed, and nuanced account of Salafism in Yemen.

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Salafism represents a return to the example of the pious founders. However, deciding precisely who these “pious founders” are and exactly what “a return to their example” means is debated within the movement. In Bonnefoy’s most interesting chapter, “Framing Salafism,” Bonnefoy identifies the cacophony of Salafi views across the Islamic world from Waliullah in India to Abdul-Wahhab in Arabia. He notes the differences and antagonisms between *Salafiyya Dawiyya* (Missionary Salafis) and *Salafiyya Munazamma* or *Harakiyya* (Political Activist Salafis), as well as both of their differences with *Salafiyya Jihadiyya* (Violent Salafism, associated with al-Qaida).

These divisions are especially pronounced because every Salafi considers his own interpretation to be superior; in fact, Salafis give themselves the label *al firqa al-najiyya* (the team that has been saved) in order to exclude Muslims and non-Muslims who do not share their view. Thus, Missionary Salafis argue that *ibada* (worship) and *aqeeda* (dogma) are more important than the material gains obtained through politics. Violent Salafis have contempt for both Missionary Salafis, for being quietists, and Political Salafis, for being active participants in the democratic process. Lastly, Political Salafis have acquired new political space as a result of the Arab Spring and challenge the other strands of Salafism as they have evolved into a serious opposition group to the Muslim Brotherhood in places like Egypt.

Understanding not only the differences inherent in a global population of 1.5 billion Muslims is not enough analytically, but also understanding the schisms inherent within a Sunni Hanbali sub-group like Salafism is required to begin comprehending the new landscape of the Arab Spring. Bonnefoy has done an exceptional job introducing Western readers to these nuances. Moreover, what makes Bonnefoy a delight is his ability to describe these complexities within Salafism in the way Arabs would discuss it. This is the kind of nuance needed in discourse among those engaged in counter-terrorism efforts in the United States.

Turning to Yemen, Bonnefoy notes that Islam in Yemen generally can be divided into Sufi, Shiite (Zaydi), Shafei (a Sunni school), and Salafi (a subsection of Hanbali Sunni Islam). The reality is that there are wide spectrums even within these groupings that are influenced by tribalism, nationalism, politics, and identity. Bonnefoy delves into Salafism in Yemen through some of its major figures, including Muqbil al-Wadii (d. 2001), a former Zaydi Shiite who converted to Salafism and was a disciple of Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani (d. 1999), the main advocate of quietist salafism in Saudi Arabia. Wadii would go on to establish the Dimaj Institute

and would undertake a scathing criticism of *hizbiyya* (political activism by Salafis), inventing such monikers as *al-Ikhwān al-Mufliseen* (the Bankrupt Brotherhood) to play on the Arabic phrase *al-Ikhwān al-Muslimeen* (the Muslim Brotherhood).

Bonnefof also discusses the splinter groups that formed after Wadii's death. Among Wadii's disciples are Muhammad al-Raymi, who works with tribes and proselytizes Salafism, Yahya al-Hajuri, who takes a more hard-line zealous view that many tribes find uncompromising, and Musatafa Sulaymani, the Egyptian exile from the militant group al-Takfir wal-Hijra who formed a school and charity infusing the teachings of Sayyid Qutb into his activism.

Additionally, a chapter focuses on the nuanced subculture of Yemenis in Saudi Arabia. Bonnefof describes how Saudi millionaires of Yemeni origin prevented the deportation of thousands of Yemenis from Saudi Arabia after Yemen's support for Saddam Hussein in Operation Desert Storm. Because of tribal connections, most of those sponsored by these wealthy Saudis of Yemeni origin came from former Marxist Yemen. This is because many of the Hadrami (those from the Handramaut Mountains Region in Yemen) mercantile magnates in Saudi Arabia (Bin Laden, Bin Mahfouz, and Binzager) come from villages that happened to be located in what would become Marxist Yemen. This shows the deep connections that transcend politics rooted in kin, clan, and tribe that dominate Yemeni culture.

The front of the book contains an excellent glossary that is divided into personalities, institutions, and concepts—helpful for those keeping track of Arabic references. The body of the book, however, is not a beginner's guide, but rather a work for those wanting to dive deep into the human terrain of the region. ■