Salafism is an Arabic term that refers to a people who preceded, from the earlier generations. In Islamic terminology it refers to the righteous predecessors from the first three generations of Islam. The Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) referred to them in his saying, “The best of mankind is my generation, then those who come after them, then those who come after them.” The Qur’ān also mentions them with praise, and also those who follow them, “The first and foremost in faith from the Migrants of Makkah and the Helpers in Madinah, then those who follow them in best way, Allāh is pleased with them, and they are pleased with Him. And He has prepared for them Gardens of Paradise under which rivers flow, they will remain therein forever. That is the supreme success.” Those being referred to in these texts are the Salaf, the Righteous Predecessors. They had a united belief and methodology which they learned from the Messenger Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم) and passed on to the following generations. In times of differing, controversy and upheaval, the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) commanded those who lived after him to return to his way and the way of his most trusted Companions for resolution and guidance. These early Salaf did not differ in their understanding of the Oneness of Allāh in His Lordship, His sole right of worship and His beautiful names and lofty attributes. They agreed upon the forbiddance of excommunication (takfīr) of Muslims due to sins lesser than idolatry, and agreed upon the forbiddance of rebellion against the ruler, whether righteous or tyrannical. Differing did occur amongst them, but never in the fundamentals of the religion and belief. They may have differed in subsidiary matters related to purification and its manner, or individual actions in the prayer, or the types of food that are permitted or disliked, but never in the fundamentals of the religion and belief.

Salafism is not an extremist sect

There is a misunderstanding amongst many Muslims and non-Muslims alike who have been led to believe that Salafism is an extreme or radical sect within Islam. This notion is propagated by ill-informed journalists, unscrupulous ‘academics’ and others seeking to malign the Salafis based on sectarian agendas. Unfortunately, policy makers within government are sometimes influenced by these fallacies and myths surrounding Salafism. Salafis see it as a duty to explain the falsehood of these aspersions. From the outset it should be stated: Salafism is an orthodox understanding of Islam. It is moderate and balanced, giving leeway where necessary, firmly rooted in the teachings of the Qur’ān and the Prophetic texts (hadith), based upon the interpretation and understanding of the Companions of the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم). These teachings were further explained and expounded upon by the scholars of Aḥl al-Sunnah al-ィah of the first four centuries. These generations are referred to as the Salaf. It is this methodology and its application that protects Salafism from extremism and terrorist violence. There are numerous Quranic verses, Prophetic sayings and writings of the great early Salafist scholars that vehemently oppose the killing of non-combatants: men, women and children including ambassadors and emissaries. These texts forbid attacking non-Muslim countries who have pacts and covenants with Muslim nations. War is not declared except by a ruler of a nation who sends his army into battle in a just war that is openly declared between two nations. Civilians are not to be harmed in such conflicts. This rules out the idea of insurgencies, terrorist activities and suicide bombings in any country, whether Muslim or non-Muslim. The rules of engagement in war are well-known and recorded in the books of jurisprudence and in the edicts of the Salafist scholars, past and present. We have expounded upon these in numerous published writings and articles.

Salafism is not a new sect

Salaf is an Arabic term that refers to a people who preceded, from the earlier generations. In Islamic terminology it refers to the righteous predecessors from the first three generations of Islam. The Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) referred to them in his saying, “The best of mankind is my generation, then those who come after them, then those who come after them.” The Qur’ān also mentions them with praise, and also those who follow them, “The first and foremost in faith from the Migrants of Makkah and the Helpers in Madinah, then those who follow them in best way, Allāh is pleased with them, and they are pleased with Him. And He has prepared for them Gardens of Paradise under which rivers flow, they will remain therein forever. That is the supreme success.” Those being referred to in these texts are the Salaf, the Righteous Predecessors. They had a united belief and methodology which they learned from the Messenger Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم) and passed on to the following generations. In times of differing, controversy and upheaval, the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) commanded those who lived after him to return to his way and the way of his most trusted Companions for resolution and guidance. These early Salaf did not differ in their understanding of the Oneness of Allāh in His Lordship, His sole right of worship and His beautiful names and lofty attributes. They agreed upon the forbiddance of excommunication (takfīr) of Muslims due to sins lesser than idolatry, and agreed upon the forbiddance of rebellion against the ruler, whether righteous or tyrannical. Differing did occur amongst them, but never in the fundamentals of the religion and belief. They may have differed in subsidiary matters related to purification and its manner, or individual actions in the prayer, or the types of food that are permitted or disliked, but they remained united on the core beliefs and methodology.

It is for this reason, one finds that the early scholars of Aḥl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā’ah produced writings in the field of belief that were identical in the core elements of creed and methodology. These scholars may have been separated by seas, and huge land masses due to the vastness of the Muslim lands and may have lived in different generations, but their writings in which they expounded upon the creed of the Companions of the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) is virtually identical in content, though their styles of writing may have differed. It is truly a blessing from Allāh that many of these works from the first four centuries are still with us, have been verified from manuscripts, translated, and available to study. Thus, one can test the veracity of the Salafist claims by simply studying these texts. For example, The Creed of Al-Bukhārī (died 256H), The Foundations of the Sunnah of Ahmad b. Hanbal (died 241H), The Explanation of the Creed of Al-Barbahārī (died 329H) and there several dozen works from that era that are now published and available to the English reader. In these times, a Salafī in religious terms is a person who follows the Salaf in creed, methodology, worship, and every aspect of religious life. He must be true to the ascription and not merely claim it whilst acting contrary to the principles of Salafism. These books are a must-read for western academics who seek to understand Salafism.

Salafism is not an extremist sect

There is a misunderstanding amongst many Muslims and non-Muslims alike who have been led to believe that Salafism is an extreme or radical sect within Islam. This notion is propagated by ill-informed journalists, unscrupulous ‘academics’ and others seeking to malign the Salafis based on sectarian agendas. Unfortunately, policy makers within government are sometimes influenced by these fallacies and myths surrounding Salafism. Salafis see it as a duty to explain the falsehood of these aspersions. From the outset it should be stated: Salafism is an orthodox understanding of Islam. It is moderate and balanced, giving leeway where necessary, firmly rooted in the teachings of the Qur’ān and the Prophetic texts (hadith), based upon the interpretation and understanding of the Companions of the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم). These teachings were further explained and expounded upon by the scholars of Aḥl al-Sunnah al-ィah of the first four centuries. These generations are referred to as the Salaf. It is this methodology and its application that protects Salafism from extremism and terrorist violence. There are numerous Quranic verses, Prophetic sayings and writings of the great early Salafist scholars that vehemently oppose the killing of non-combatants: men, women and children including ambassadors and emissaries. These texts forbid attacking non-Muslim countries who have pacts and covenants with Muslim nations. War is not declared except by a ruler of a nation who sends his army into battle in a just war that is openly declared between two nations. Civilians are not to be harmed in such conflicts. This rules out the idea of insurgencies, terrorist activities and suicide bombings in any country, whether Muslim or non-Muslim. The rules of engagement in war are well-known and recorded in the books of jurisprudence and in the edicts of the Salafist scholars, past and present. We have expounded upon these in numerous published writings and articles.

If Salafism and Islam are both one and the same, why use the term at all?

This is a question that Salafis are often asked and the simple answer is that Islam itself called to distinguishing the people of truth from the people who are misguided. The Muslims were always destined to fall into schism just as occurred with the Jews and Christians. The Prophet foretold that the Muslims would divide into ‘seventy-three sects’, one sect was described by the Prophet as being ‘saved there is leeway in our Religion. Surely, I was sent with the pure and forgiving Religion.” As-Sahih of Albānī (881).
from Hell. When asked by his Companions to describe the one distinguished and ‘saved sect’, he replied, “Those who follow that which I and my Companions are upon.”

In a narration he said, “They are the Jamā’ah.” The term jamā’ah refers to a body of Muslims who adhere to the truth even if they are small in number. It was a well-known characteristic of the early Muslim scholars to use terms to distinguish the various Islamic sects in line with their particular beliefs so, for example, the early terrorists, insurgents and extremists were known, and are still known, as the Khawārij (the Rebellious Ones). The sect that rejected the first three Rightly Guided Caliphs, and virtually all the other Companions save a handful, and then ascribed divinity to ‘Ali (inshallah) and his offspring, were known as the Shi‘ah (the Faction of ‘Ali), or the Rāfidah (the Rejecters). When these and other sects appeared, the Companions of the Prophet and the scholars after them, made the correct path and creed distinct in the following ways: 1) By refuting the innovated ideologies that deviated from the established and agreed-upon creed and methodology (manhaj) of the Prophet. 2) Clarifying the truth with quotes from the revealed texts and with reasoned arguments. 3) Alllying with the people of truth, their scholars and the Saved Sect. These early scholars used several titles to identify the adherents of the Saved Sect, such as: Ahl as-Sunnah wa al-Jamā’ah, Ahl al-Hadīth (The People of Narration), and the Salafis. The usage of the term Salaf dates back to the Prophet ( sala Allahu 'alayhi wasallam), when he described himself as being a “blessed Salaf” of his daughter, Fātimah. In the third century it was known that scholars would refer to the upholders of the correct creed and methodology as Salafis. In fact Ibn Taymiyyah and other scholars reported a consensus of the Muslims in approving the usage of the ascription Salafi.

—SALAFISM IS ONE CREED & METHODLOGY, NOT DIVISIBLE: IDENTIFYING THE FALSE CLAIMANTS

Part of the problem that Salafis are faced with in these times is that there are extremist and politicised groups that have misappropriated the Salafi label and claimed it for themselves. This has caused difficulties in identifying the true adherents from the false claimants. The proliferation of Salafist literature and lectures has meant that Muslims have become more enlightened regarding true Salafism and this has led to a large influx of Muslims and new converts into the Salafist creed in recent years. This proliferation did not go unnoticed by the radical groups who saw an opportunity to entice unsuspecting Muslims to their cause by misappropriating the label. They did not of-course adopt those core elements of Salafist doctrine that forbids excommunication (takfir) of sinful Muslims, as well as terrorism, killing of innocents and rebellion against righteous or oppressive rulers. Salafis in fact are not the target audience of extremists because Salafis are the most theologically aware of all Muslims and are acquainted with the deviations of the Khawārij. So instead, extremists focus on recruiting common criminals, simple-minded youth and new converts. There is a myth propagated by some observers which states that Muslims are initially attracted to a ‘quietest’ form of Salafism, and then move on to radical and violent expressions of Islam. This is a false notion which has been disproved through academic research. A recent survey of nearly four thousand English-speaking Salafis from more than twenty countries has shown that Salafism unequivocally turns people away from extremism. One academic stated that she found Salafi preachers to be “very vocal and active in condemning ISIS in the strongest possible terms”. So far from being a stepping stone to extremism, Salafism is a proven conveyor belt that carries people away from terrorist ideologies to the balanced and moderate path of the Prophet Muhammad (sallallahu ‘alayhi wasallam).

13. Tirmidhi (2641)
14. Ibn Mājah (3992). This is proof that the jamā’ah is not the majority, but those who follow the Prophet and his Companions.
15. The Companion, Ibn Mas’ūd said, “The Jamā’ah is what agrees with the truth, even if you are just one person.” Al-Bā‘ith ‘ala Inkar al-Bid‘ah wa al-Hawādith of Abu Shāmah (22).
16. Bukhārī (6285), Muslim (2450).
17. As an example: Muhammad Ibn Khalaf Al-Wakī’ (died 306AH) described the scholar, Ismā’īl Ibn Hammād as “a true Salafi.” Akhīr al-Qudāt (2/167).
18. Such as: Albānī, Ibn Uthaimīn and Ibn Bāz.

20. Conducted by an independent online survey provider, from July 2016 to February 2017, as part of a PhD thesis.