

No Scholars in the West: Salafi Networks of Knowledge from Saudi Arabia to Philadelphia

EMILY GOSHEY

Abstract

Seeking knowledge from scholars is an imperative for Salafis. But what does that mean for Salafis in the West who deny that there are any scholars among them? Since the 1960s, Western Muslims have been taking advantage of the scholarships available for Islamic studies programs in Saudi Arabia. A steady stream of students has gone, studied with leading Salafi scholars in the heart of the Muslim world, and returned home to promulgate Salafi teachings and lead their communities. Why do none of these former students count as scholars? If they are not scholars,

Emily Goshey is a postdoctoral researcher at the Global Studies Center, Gulf University for Science and Technology, Kuwait. She specializes in modern Islamic studies in the Arab/Persian Gulf region. She completed her dissertation on Omani Ibadism at Princeton University in 2019 and her most recent work has focused on the role of faith and religion in social movements.

Goshey, Emily. 2022. "No Scholars in the West: Salafi Networks of Knowledge from Saudi Arabia to Philadelphia." *American Journal of Islam and Society* 39, nos. 1-2: 41–71 • doi: 10.35632/ajis.v39i1-2.2991
Copyright © 2022 International Institute of Islamic Thought

then what is the nature of their role as local leaders? To answer these questions, this study looks closely at the predominantly African American Salafi affiliate community in Philadelphia. The arguments here contribute to a growing body of literature on global Salafism and specifically studies of so-called Madkhali communities tied to the Islamic University of Medina. Primary fieldwork from 2010 to 2013 and interviews as recent as 2021 inform the conclusion that this community's pattern of knowledge transmission perpetuates and even celebrates the continual reliance of Philadelphia's Salafis on scholars abroad.

Introduction

“For indeed there [are] no scholars in the West.”

—Hassan Abdi, recorded lecture, 2012

When the imam of one of America's largest and most influential Salafi mosques stated that there are no scholars in the West, his audience would not have been surprised. Abdi was stating not just his own opinion but a position that has been an identity marker for his community since at least the turn of the millennium.¹ In the recording, Abdi passes through this statement quickly on his way to a larger point about the danger of aggrandizing one's level of knowledge.² It would be easy to miss that brief statement and the great implications it carries for these Western Salafis.

Seeking knowledge is a religious imperative that Salafis approach with the utmost caution. One of the most critical steps of the process is choosing the right scholars to follow. Distinguishing between religious scholars and scholars in the academic sense, Salafis would not challenge the title of a scholar as it applies to a physics professor, but they fervently protect it in the sense of an Islamic religious scholar.

The Qur'an itself commands the believers to “ask the people of knowledge”³ when they need answers, but the long history of scholarly disagreement in Islam has complicated that seemingly straightforward command and advances in communication technologies have only

widened the array of scholarly opinions available. With so much confusion about the truth, to find a legitimate scholar is to find a safe path to the pure Islamic teachings. But if one must seek knowledge from the scholars, what does that mean for the Salafis in the West who recognize no scholars among them?

In the 1960s, Western Muslims began taking advantage of scholarships available for study at the Islamic University of Medina in Saudi Arabia. Since then, a steady stream of students has gone, studied with leading Salafi scholars, and come home to promulgate Salafi teachings. Why do none of those former students count as scholars? If they are not scholars, then what is the nature of their leadership role within their communities?

To answer these questions, this study looks closely at the predominantly African American Salafi community in Philadelphia. The arguments here contribute to growing bodies of literature on African American Muslims and on global Salafis. Relying on primary fieldwork from 2010 to 2013 and interviews as recent as 2020, I argue that this community's pattern of knowledge transmission perpetuates and even celebrates the continual reliance of Philadelphia's Salafis on scholars abroad.

After an explanation of the methodology and sources used, a brief historical overview gives a contextual frame. Next follows an exploration of the premodern and modern aspects of contemporary knowledge transmission among Salafis, emphasizing the continual renewal of local leaders' legitimacy through their ongoing relationships with senior scholars abroad. The final section unpacks the controversial discourse around the need for locally resident scholars.

Methodology and Sources

The growing body of scholarship on African American Muslim communities has seen excellent contributions in recent years. The works of Sherman Jackson,⁴ Richard B. Turner,⁵ Patrick D. Bowen,⁶ Amina McCloud,⁷ and Edward E. Curtis⁸ among others have added layers of thoughtful analysis to the scholarly community's understanding of the

long-standing and diverse roles that Islam has played in the Black community. These authors have largely situated their arguments within the context of an unfolding narrative of Black religion. This interpretive choice illumines how certain racial dynamics and identity formations recur across time and space, constituting a cultural, intellectual, and spiritual heritage common among groups with otherwise divergent approaches to belief and practice.

This study, while relying upon that crucial work, focuses instead on the position of a particular African American Muslim group with respect to a global Islamic movement, Salafism. Here, we examine how a predominantly Black community understands the place of its learned members in the international networks of Islamic knowledge exchange.

It was through participant observation research among African American Muslim communities in Philadelphia that I noticed the Salafis' unique relationship to Saudi scholars. Starting with interviews and mosque visits in January 2010, I eventually decided to focus on the Salafi community specifically. Virtually all of my contacts, regardless of their opinions on Salafism, agreed that it was the most rapidly growing Muslim group in the city.

Once I began seeking out Salafis, I found them everywhere: security guards at the University of Pennsylvania, employees at the grocery store, neighbors, men selling scented oils at the train station, and countless strangers walking by in distinctive Salafi garb. If I spent a single day in West Philadelphia without passing women wearing all-black from head to toe and men with untrimmed beards and full-length shirts (thobes), I cannot remember it. Many of the people I approached were willing to speak with me, and in some cases offered to accompany me to one of the several Salafi mosques around the city for a Friday sermon or a lecture event.

The ethnographic work ended when I left Philadelphia in May 2013, but the friendships and conversations persisted. Notes from occasional phone interviews and email updates peppered over the subsequent years slowly filled a folder in my laptop for some time in the future when I would be able to revisit the project more formally. The time finally came in early 2020 when a new contact offered to introduce me by phone to

several key individuals that I had never spoken with before. A flurry of interviews with both old and new contacts who are on the ground in Philadelphia now has helped to patch some of the gaps in my own ethnographic work, and has alerted me to things that have changed since my time in the city. Fortunately, the Salafi community's habits of streaming lectures, sermons, and classes online as well as its highly active social media accounts have enabled me to confirm and, in some cases, to question the assessment of those with whom I have spoken in recent months. This Salafi community has long had an active online presence, but in the era of the Covid-19 crisis, I was able to access virtually all the resources that those on the ground could access themselves.

When citing sources for Salafi religious positions, I have intentionally cited resources that are less formal and more accessible to the community. For instance, instead of citing the published books of Salafi scholars, I have preferred to cite YouTube videos that contain English translations of their recorded lectures. This is an intentional decision to highlight the sources that would be most accessible to Philadelphia's Salafis themselves. The point here is not to evaluate the formal scholarly production of the individuals in question, but rather to demonstrate how certain opinions influence the community in Philadelphia. Therefore, I have drawn from the resources freely available to the community through YouTube, Twitter, blogs, mosque websites, and other electronic media.

Salafis in Philadelphia

Philadelphia had been a stronghold for Black nationalism since the days of Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which gained members in the city after Garvey began speaking in churches in the summer of 1919.⁹ Although UNIA was never an Islamic organization, Garvey expressed sympathy for Muslims and contributed to the spread of "Islamophilic symbolism" throughout UNIA's vast networks.¹⁰ Patrick Bowen has thoroughly documented how subsequent movements capitalized on both those networks and the receptivity of urban African Americans to Black Nationalism and Islamic religious identity. The most famous groups to do so were the Moorish Science

Temple of America (MSTA) and the Nation of Islam (NOI). The MSTA and NOI as well as Ahmadiyya proselytizers taught that Islam was the original and authentic religion of Black peoples, and it is unsurprising that all three developed thriving branches in Philadelphia.¹¹

Most Muslims would consider the beliefs and practices of the MSTA, the NOI, and the Ahmadiyya to be heterodox, but teachings closer to the global Sunni mainstream also attracted African Americans from at least the 1930s.¹² Addeynu Allahe-Universal Arabic Association (AAUAA) opened a Philadelphia branch in 1942, and one of the converts it attracted was Nafea Muhaimin, founder of Masjid Quba, which his sons still run to this day at the intersection of 47th Street and Lancaster Avenue.¹³ For a long time, Sunni movements were marginal compared to their Black nationalist counterparts. Everything changed on February 25, 1975, when Elijah Muhammad, the Nation of Islam's leader, passed away. His son and successor, W.D. Mohammed, began to gradually transition his community into Sunnism and the Nation largely collapsed.¹⁴

The crisis that ensued after the fall of the NOI prompted many African American Muslim converts to seek new sources of Islamic knowledge. Likewise, the influx of immigrant Muslims after the 1965 removal of racial quotas for immigration led to greater exposure to Islamic practices from historically Muslim nations in Asia and Africa.¹⁵ At the same time, Saudi Arabia was eagerly seeking applicants from around the world to come and study at its recently founded Islamic University of Medina (IUM) (est. 1961).¹⁶ The availability of full scholarships for Muslim men to study in the cradle of Islam during a time of heightened interest in religious knowledge led to a stream of African Americans travelling to the Kingdom for study at the preeminent stronghold of global Salafism. Those students began to bring Salafism home with them, and it quickly gained a foothold in Philadelphia. The fact that IUM was and is an all-male university has meant that despite the crucial role they play in their communities, women have largely remained on the margins of networks of knowledge transmission between Saudi scholars and the local community.¹⁷

Salafism remains a contested term in both academic and Islamic circles, but a few words here will clarify the way in which I use the term

in the argument at hand. Henri Lauzière has argued that to be a Salafi has historically meant to ascribe to neo-Hanbali theology as espoused by Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328).¹⁸ This theological definition is necessary but insufficient to articulate what people in Philadelphia mean when they identify as Salafis. For them, Salafism is not just a creed but a methodology, *manhaj*, encompassing all aspects of life.¹⁹ Quintan Wiktorowicz's division of Salafis into purists, politicians, and jihadists called attention to real differences in *manhaj* among communities that espouse Salafi theology in the general neo-Hanbali sense.²⁰ While useful for taxonomy, a perhaps unintended side effect of these categories is that they reinforce the idea that differences in *manhaj* are somehow divorced from and secondary to purity of creed. Salafis in Philadelphia categorically refuse to consider either jihadists or politicians/activists as Salafis. Furthermore, they rightfully emphasize the real dangers of collapsing the differences between themselves and violent radicals.²¹ Therefore, in keeping with the use of the community itself, I will use "Salafi" only in reference to apolitical "purists."

When it comes to self-identification, many individuals and groups that academics and analysts identify as Salafi would not use the label for themselves. This is understandable, since opinions on the advisability of explicit affiliation with "Salafiyya" vary across groups with otherwise similar beliefs and practices.²² Here, however, the group I am considering explicitly calls itself Salafi and responds swiftly to claimants to Salafism who contradict what they consider to be its essential components.

Scholars have labeled Salafis in Philadelphia and like-minded communities around the globe as "Madkhalīs."²³ This derogatory term, flatly rejected by those whom it should describe, implies that their distinguishing characteristic is affiliation with Saudi scholar Rabīʿ al-Madkhalī. I do not wish to downplay al-Madkhalī's unique position of influence, nor do I deny that the term, however problematic, describes a meaningfully distinct group. However, we must acknowledge that al-Madkhalī is not the primary reference point for the people who should count as "Madkhalīs". If we examine the books that Philadelphia's Salafis use in their study circles, the rulings they share on social media, or the opinions they mention during lectures, other contemporary scholars such as

Sāliḥ ibn Fawzān al-Fawzān and ‘Ubayd ibn ‘Abd Allāh al-Jābirī appear as frequently or more frequently than al-Madkhalī. Furthermore, the idea that al-Madkhalī holds the final say on issues of boundary policing is complicated by the fact that al-Madkhalī himself has felt it necessary to secure the support of other senior scholars before publishing controversial refutations.²⁴ While the term “Madkhalī” may carry some value for the purposes of taxonomy, I find its misleading implications and its distastefulness to these Salafis themselves convincing enough reasons to leave it aside.

I will instead speak of global Salafi communities like those in Philadelphia as “Salafi affiliates” to emphasize their distinctive patterns of concern with explicit affiliation and statements of loyalty. Seeing Salafism as something of a protected label, they worry that false claimants present real harm to the community. One can imagine the dangers that would ensue if unsafe food products could claim US Food and Drug Administration approval with impunity. Consumers could expose themselves to dangers they are unequipped to detect or respond to. From a similar logic, Salafi affiliates insist on exposing misleading claimants to Salafism lest the seeds of impermissible political activism or extremist violence take root. They feel that they protect the community by publicly dissociating from individuals with deviant views and affiliations. Others have interpreted this behavior differently, as we will see below.

Salafi affiliates in Philadelphia take pride in the purity of their form of Islam, one that relies upon the Qur’an, the prophetic Sunna, and the understanding of the Qur’an and Sunna that the Pious Predecessors (the Salaf) articulated. Other key markers include rejection of speculative theology, *‘ilm al-kalām*; highly conservative approaches to social issues including gender roles; and distinctive attire. Additional elements of their methodology most relevant for this study include the obligation to continually seek knowledge and reliance upon a certain set of Saudi-based scholars for that knowledge. The Philadelphia Salafi affiliate community is one of a growing number of international Salafi communities intimately linked to the Islamic University of Medina.²⁵

The few sources that exist on the history of Salafism in America primarily tell a story of steady growth throughout the 1980s, rapid

expansion in the 1990s, and sharp decline in the early 2000s. Focused on urban centers throughout New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, Umar Lee's account of the history as he lived it²⁶ and Shadee Elmasry's research on Salafism's beginnings²⁷ are valuable contributions to the literature, but they share the same limitation. Both Lee and Elmasry interpreted the collapse of a Salafi stronghold in East Orange, New Jersey to signal the decline of Salafism in America altogether. They have argued that a cult-like obsession with purifying the ranks irreparably damaged the national Salafi community and its organizations, including the Qur'an and Sunnah Society (QSS). Instead of protecting the community from corrupt beliefs, Lee experienced the insistence on boycotting "deviants" as an inquisition. Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens went so far as to conclude:

While the quietist Salafi movement and the communities it spawned still exist today, it never recovered from the acrimony and splits that came to define QSS and its leaders. Among observers and the few scholars who have studied this topic, many consider it to be largely irrelevant.²⁸

Without undermining Lee's interpretation or Elmasry's description of the events of the late 1990s and early 2000s, I disagree that a state of decline or irrelevance has persisted. After the turbulence in East Orange, Philadelphia's Germantown Masjid quickly rose as the region's new Salafi hub. Masjid As-Sunnah An-Nabawiyyah, known to all as the Germantown Masjid, was not always Salafi. Its establishment predated the great expansion of Salafism in the late 1990s, but when Salafis took control of the administration in 1998, it became Philadelphia's first major Salafi affiliate mosque and remains the largest by a significant margin.

Leaders at the Germantown Masjid estimate that their mosque attracts somewhere between 800 and 1200 worshippers on any given week.²⁹ Although I have yet to find reliable statistics for mosque attendance in Philadelphia, by the estimates of interviewees and from my personal experience this is likely the largest regular crowd at any mosque in the city.³⁰ Philadelphia's Salafi affiliate mosques have years of experience

broadcasting sermons and classes online for the benefit of those who are unable to attend in person, and were therefore able to quickly adapt when the Covid-19 crisis required all activities to move to internet platforms. Ramadan 2020 live lessons regularly saw 1500 devices tuning in, each of which could represent an individual or an entire family. As for holy days and special celebrations, the numbers are even larger. The Eid prayer of 2019 took place in Chalmers Park, which the administration had reserved for the occasion. Video footage pans over a truly enormous crowd, one that the community estimates reached well over ten thousand. Although less reliable as an indicator of local influence, the Germantown Masjid's Twitter page currently has over thirty thousand followers.³¹

With decades of history; thousands of followers; a full-time school; and the myriad centers, bookstores, restaurants, and small business in the area run by and for Salafis, the reality is that Salafi affiliates are not an isolated, cult-like group facing imminent decline, nor is Salafism a passing trend. Rather, it is an enduring movement with roots that grow deeper every day. Over the past twenty years, Philadelphia's Salafi affiliates have seen mosque openings and expansions, not closures.³² Decline does not appear on the horizon.

Salafis Seeking Knowledge: Turning to the (Senior) Scholars

Intensive study sessions at the Germantown Masjid always attracted a crowd, especially when the events featured a senior scholar from Saudi Arabia speaking directly with the community. At the appointed time, instructors would wrap up their own lessons and the speakers would begin to broadcast a man's voice speaking in rapid Arabic, crackling from the combined distortion of the phone and the speaker itself. From time to time the voice would pause, allowing our instructor to translate what he had said into English. Before and after, women sitting around me would comment to one another, their voices filled with awe and gratitude, about how fortunate we were to be taking knowledge from the scholars themselves.

The general Islamic imperative to seek knowledge transcends sectarian lines, but Salafis approach this obligation with special fervor. First and foremost, this means regular study of Islamic source texts, the

Qur'an and the Prophetic Sunna. Beyond that, Salafism requires that its adherents achieve *the* understanding of those texts that the Salaf, the Pious Predecessors, espoused. The methodology for determining the understanding of the Salaf on any given issue of theology, jurisprudence, or ritual practice is complex and requires proficiency in Arabic as well as familiarity with a broad array of texts. Just as crucially, it requires study under the tutelage of recognized scholars who alone can guide a student on his or her journey toward the truth.³³

Salafi affiliates look to a contemporary pool of senior scholars, *kibār al-‘ulamā’*, as the top religious authorities of our times. That pool is a small group of men who necessarily agree on major questions of belief and practice. They may disagree over whether the face veil is obligatory or simply recommended, but their creed is one. These globally renowned individuals are almost invariably tied to the official Saudi religious establishment in one way or another, most frequently as professors or graduates of the Islamic University of Medina (est. 1961).

At the turn of the 21st century, that select group of senior scholars lost several of its most illustrious members: Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī (1914-1999), ‘Abd al-‘Azīz ibn Bāz (1910-1999), Muḥammad ibn Ṣāliḥ al-‘Uthaymīn (1925-2001), and Muqbil ibn Hādī al-Wādī‘ī (1933-2001). Their opinions remain extremely influential among Salafis worldwide, and the Salafis in Philadelphia are by no means unique in their reverence for them and their works.

As for these deceased scholars' colleagues and collaborators, many are still active, and some have risen to prominence in the twenty-first century. Some of the most renowned among Philadelphia's Salafis are: Rabī‘ ibn Hādī al-Madkhalī, Sāliḥ ibn Fawzān al-Fawzān, ‘Abd al-Muḥsin al-‘Abbād, and ‘Ubayd ibn ‘Abd Allāh al-Jābirī. Of these scholars, al-Fawzān is the one who can most closely compare to al-‘Uthaymīn and Ibn Bāz with respect to domestic and global influence. He has been a member of Saudi Arabia's leading organization of religious leaders, the Council of Senior Scholars, since its establishment in 1971. He served on that council in the company of Ibn Bāz and al-‘Uthaymīn. As for al-Madkhalī, al-‘Abbād, and al-Jābirī, their influence is undeniably significant, though not as broad as that of al-Fawzān. None serve as members of the Council, meaning that legally

they cannot issue public fatwas in Saudi Arabia.³⁴ Their opinions hold less weight within Saudi Arabia than among Salafi affiliates in European and American cities where their students lead local mosques. Despite the controversy that surrounds them, they are undeniably important in the constellation of global Salafi scholars. In particular, Rabi^c al-Madkhali has had tremendous influence in Philadelphia. His ongoing relationships with local leaders and his personal involvement in issues of local importance have enhanced his impact in regions around the world.³⁵

These senior scholars constitute Salafism's global elite. But what about those who are simply scholars? Salafis do distinguish between senior and non-senior scholars, but they hold extremely high standards for qualification such that no one in the West would qualify even as a non-senior scholar. In Arabic, the term *'ālim* can be used generally to encompass a range of learned people who may or may not qualify for more technical titles such as *muftī*, *faqīh*, or *mujtahid*. For this community, however, the definition of a scholar is someone who serves as a "reference point for the whole of the Muslim nation."³⁶ Understanding this helps to clarify what Hassan Abdi, the current imam of the Germantown Masjid, meant when he said that there are no scholars in the West. He did not mean that there are no learned Muslims, but that no one in the West is an international reference point for all (Salafi affiliate) Muslims.

Beyond Salafi affiliate communities, it is not controversial to state that there are scholars in the West. Major American Muslim organizations such as the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) and the Assembly of Muslim Jurists of America (AMJA) unreservedly recognize many US-based scholars. Salafi affiliate perceptions of scholars and scholarship are markedly different from other Western Muslim groups, even those with similar theological outlooks. As for how and why this perspective on scholarship has taken hold among Philadelphia's Salafis, we must first consider how patterns of knowledge transmission have changed over time.

How to Seek Knowledge

For Salafis, the question of *how* one acquires knowledge is essential. It is usually impossible to be an autodidact scholar in Salafi communities.³⁷

Leaders encourage the individual study of important texts, but clarify that the *‘ulamā’* are the true source of knowledge. Imam Hassan Abdi of the Germantown Masjid once delivered a lecture explaining this point with reference to a statement of al-Fawzān:

You have to seek knowledge. At the same time, how do we go about seeking knowledge? It’s not just about opening a book...or... opening up and looking on google, because you don’t know what you are going to come across. That is not the *ṭarīqa* [way] that you seek knowledge. Al-Shaykh al-Fawzān said a person must seek knowledge. He must gain understanding in the religion, and he must take knowledge from the scholars...Sole reliance on books, no. Rather, he must take knowledge from its people.³⁸

Salafi affiliates share this important aspect of their epistemology with the vast majority of modern and pre-modern Islamic traditions. The authentic transmission of knowledge takes place through an *isnād*, a chain linking the scholars to their teachers, to the teachers of their teachers, and to all of the individuals through whom the knowledge has passed, all the way back to the original source. The original source may be the Prophet himself, one of his companions, or a scholar who authored an important work. To read or even memorize the works of al-Madkhālī independently is not the same as being his student. One must sit with the scholars as they teach, hearing their voices, asking them questions, studying key texts under their tutelage.

In his book on Islamic education in Medieval Cairo, Jonathan Berkey argued, “The personal connection—the educational role model relying not simply on close study of a text, but on intensive, personal interaction with a shaykh—has always been central to Islamic education...”³⁹ When personal relationships are the crucial factor, institutions remain secondary in the process of knowledge transmission. The *madrasa* (school) of the premodern Islamic world did offer advantages to those who affiliated more formally, such as salaries for scholars and stipends and living quarters for students. Nevertheless, even after the proliferation of *madrasas*, scholars continued to teach in a variety of non-*madrasa* spaces including

mosques and private homes. For aspiring students of knowledge, the ‘*ulamā*’ were remarkably accessible. Berkey has noted:

Islamic higher education, in late medieval Egypt as in other periods, rested entirely on the character of the relationship a student maintained with his teachers, and not on the reputation of any institution...nothing like a degree system formally attached to particular institutions of learning was ever established...the inner dynamic of Islamic educational traditions, which had their origins in the earliest decades of the accumulation and transmission of Muslim learning, triumphed over the temporary attempt to channel instruction into particular institutions.⁴⁰

This “inner dynamic” that depends upon relationships persists in contemporary Salafī practices of seeking and transmitting knowledge. Despite IUM’s prominence, leading scholars who teach within its walls also lead informal study circles and teach lessons in mosques outside of the university setting. Virtually any determined individual who can get to Saudi Arabia can study with leading scholars without formal enrollment. The remarkable accessibility of knowledge in the contemporary Salafī context parallels premodern dynamics throughout the Islamic world. Even students who have graduated from IUM emphasize the benefit of attending scholars’ lessons outside of the formal university context.⁴¹

The institutional structure and the granting of degrees, of course, have evolved. In premodern times, when there were no degrees as such, students would collect *ijāzas*. An *ijāza* from a scholar certified that the student had studied a particular text with him (or, occasionally, her) and qualified that student to teach the text. Unlike a degree, which affirms one’s fulfilment of requirements related both to the granting institution and to the field of specialization, *ijāzas* affirmed the personal relationship between a scholar and a student and the satisfactory completion of a specific text.

Today, IUM does grant formal degrees in accordance with the Western university model, but its status as perhaps the most important Salafī educational institution in modern history is really about its

scholars. Those scholars affirm that receiving a degree from IUM, or any other institution, cannot alone attest to the soundness of a person's knowledge. Ibn Bāz, who served as the president of IUM before becoming the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, once stated, "Many people are lax in this affair. So, they become judges and teachers and they do not know the Salafi creed... They become doctors (PhD) and they are oblivious as it relates to matters of creed."⁴² Likewise al-Fawzān has stated, "Not all who got diplomas, graduated from colleges, memorized hadiths and verses and read books are *fuqahā'*... There are many who read but the *fuqahā'* are few."⁴³

Ongoing Relationships

The principle is clear, but shouldn't there naturally be a large overlap between graduates of the Islamic University of Medina and those of sound knowledge? Why repeatedly de-emphasize the importance of degrees? Perhaps one reason is the rather frequent souring of the relationships between scholars and IUM graduates.

A number of IUM graduates who have had varying degrees of influence in Philadelphia's Salafi community including Abu Muslimah (BA), Tahir Wyatt (BA, MA, PhD), Shadeed Muhammad (BA), and Mufti Muhammad Munir (BA, MA), have all had public fallouts with scholars based in Saudi Arabia.⁴⁴ Beyond Philadelphia, some of the most famous IUM graduates worldwide such as Bilal Philips and Yasir Qadhi have also fallen out of the good graces of the Saudi elite.⁴⁵ Although all of these individuals spent years studying with the right scholars, Philadelphia's Salafi affiliate community regards none of them as trustworthy sources of knowledge.⁴⁶ They do not lecture, teach, or even pray in mosques like the Germantown Masjid. Instead, they lead prayers, teach lessons, and serve on administrative bodies of organizations beyond the Salafi affiliate networks. Receiving scholarships from IUM, completing undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, and even studying in close contact with senior scholars could not preserve their credibility once the relationships fell apart.

What is clear from the example of these graduates is the extent to which credibility rests upon not only a personal relationship, but the continual

approval of those scholars. Presumably this could not have been the case for premodern Muslim communities. In the premodern world, students who travelled long distances to study with leading scholars in Cairo, Damascus, or the Hijaz would have had little means for ongoing communication with those scholars after returning to their home regions. Many would have traveled, studied, built relationships, received a number of *ijāzas*, and then returned home to serve as scholars themselves, transmitting the knowledge they gained from their instructors abroad. There may have been some exchanges of letters and some news would have travelled back and forth with new waves of students, but the scholars would have been largely unable to scrutinize the behavior, the statements, and the decisions of their former pupils once the period of direct instruction had ended.

From the 1990s up until the past few years, the senior scholars were just a phone call or a WhatsApp message away.⁴⁷ Regular communication prompted those scholars to constantly evaluate the decisions and opinions of local leaders. Opportunities for disagreement to arise increased exponentially.

As for those local Salafi leaders who have maintained positive relationships with senior scholars, they hold a range of degrees, with some holding no degrees at all. Anwar Wright, a close collaborator of Hassan Abdi and a teacher at the Germantown Masjid holds a BA from the College of Hadith at IUM. Jameel Finch graduated with a BA from Umm al-Qura in Mecca. Hassan Abdi holds a Master of Pharmacy, but no degrees in Islamic Studies. Never having enrolled at IUM, he studied for four years at Muqbil al-Wādiʿī's center in Yemen and eventually spent approximately six months attending study circles and lessons in Medina.⁴⁸ His is an excellent example of how one can become close to senior scholars outside of the formal university context. Other influential Salafi leaders in Philadelphia such as Dawood Adib spent some time at IUM, but never graduated. Abū Muḥammad al-Maghribī, who served as the imam of Masjid Rahmah in Newark, New Jersey, never enrolled in a formal study program with scholars at all. Al-Maghribī does, however, have a strong personal relationship with al-Madkhalī, who has praised him on several occasions. The late Abu Uways, who was the imam of Masjid Rahmah before al-Maghribi, had studied at IUM but did

not complete a degree. In addition to their individual qualifications, religious, charismatic, or otherwise, personal connections to senior scholars helped these individuals become influential among Salafi affiliates in Philadelphia and in closely related communities in New Jersey even without degrees from Islamic universities.

A degree can only guarantee one's potential. With a degree, one has demonstrated the ability to master certain concepts, memorize certain facts, and perform certain tasks. It cannot, however, ensure that the degree holder will uphold Salafi values or teach the pure, unadulterated truth. The logic that drives notions of legitimacy for Salafi affiliates is that affirmation from senior scholars renowned globally for their dedication to the Salafi methodology is a far stronger indication that an individual is operating on the straight path. For the Salafi affiliate community, then, a recent statement of praise from al-Madkhalī matters in a way that a PhD, even a PhD from the Islamic University in Medina, never could. Likewise, if a scholar finds compelling evidence for condemnation or warning, his statement to that effect can nullify the value of whatever formal qualifications one may have accrued.

Local Leadership: Shaykh, not Scholar

Knowing that Salafi affiliates restrict the label of scholar to “reference point[s] for the whole of the Muslim nation,” it is not entirely surprising that even those who have studied with senior scholars for years *and* maintain good relationships with them are still not considered scholars within their communities. Despite the waves of Western students traveling to Medina on IUM scholarships since the 1960s, the scholars that matter in the Philadelphia context have not recognized a single Western graduate as having achieved that rank.

The cycle of knowledge transmission for Westerners remains incomplete for the time being. The scholars transmit knowledge to their students, but none of those students have yet become scholars. Instead, they maintain a status in-between that of scholar and lay believer, that of the shaykh. During my time in Philadelphia from 2010-2013, Salafis were not even using the term ‘shaykh’ for local leaders, calling them simply

“students of knowledge” as long as they were studying with a recognized scholar. It was in subsequent years that Salafis began to accept the term “shaykh” for the most learned local leaders.

Among American Salafis, ‘shaykh’ is a loose term which one may use for a teacher who possesses some knowledge regardless of his status as a scholar. Maktabah Ibn Uthaymeen, a well-regarded Salafi affiliate website that has been active since 2006, recently shared a document explaining why the term shaykh is an appropriate title for local Salafi leaders. In it, the following points appear:

- 1 A Shaykh is someone recognized in a particular land for their Islamic knowledge
- 2 Our teachers are graduates of the Islamic University or have studied with the scholars of this era
- 3 Some have been teaching for decades, and are grandparents
- 4 Many of our teachers are referred to as Shaykhs by the senior scholars of this time...
- 5 Various lands have their Mashayikh, and this title is not only applied to a particular race...
- 6 Calling someone a Shaykh does not equate to being a scholar, who is a reference point for the whole of the Muslim nation.
- 7 Alhamdu lillah our teachers continue to connect us to the elder scholars like Sh Fawzān, Sh Rabī, Sh Abdul Muhsin, Sh Abdul Aziz Āl [al-]Shaykh, Sh Ubaid, Sh Ali Nasir and others...⁴⁹

Physical distance, language barriers, time constraints, and an abundance of other obstacles make it impossible for most Salafis outside of Saudi Arabia to study directly at the feet of those they view as the leading religious authorities. Likewise, we have seen that simply studying books independently cannot make someone a scholar for Salafi affiliates. This does not mean, however, that Western Salafi affiliates are doomed to failure in their obligation to seek knowledge. Instead, those individuals among them who have studied abroad can teach their communities and serve as a continual connection between the local believers and those senior scholars. Who better to communicate the opinions and explain the

proofs of the scholars than those who have spent years in their presence? The job of local leaders is to continually connect their communities to the scholars abroad, not to become scholars in their own right.

The chain of knowledge transmission remains incomplete. Under ideal circumstances, those who study with scholars eventually become scholars themselves, and can then return home to raise up a new generation of scholars in their own localities. Thus far, no Western Salafi affiliates have gained recognition as scholars, and so new seekers of knowledge must still seek knowledge from the scholars abroad. The local shaykhs serve as bridges to those scholars, but not as people of knowledge in their own right.

The Pushback: Need for Local Scholars?

Is this obstacle temporary, or somehow unsurmountable? The need of local communities for their own scholars is a subject of much controversy among former students of IUM. Because Salafi affiliates do not recognize any *'ulamā'* currently living in the West, there is no option of turning to local scholars now. They acknowledge that the presence of local scholars would theoretically benefit the community, but argue that no local leaders meet the standards for true scholarship. The local shaykhs can handle a range of everyday issues for their constituents, and when required, senior scholars can give appropriate fatwas to any Muslim in the world, because the religiously permissible and impermissible are the same in any place.⁵⁰

Therefore, the issue of having local scholars is not one of immediate urgency for Salafi affiliates. In the past, Muslims necessarily relied on the most knowledgeable person available to give advice and issue rulings. Today, why turn to the most learned person in your neighborhood when more qualified scholars are accessible?

The IUM graduate who most famously and emphatically contradicts this stance is Yasir Qadhi, who no longer considers himself a Salafi. He spent nine years in Saudi Arabia, graduating with a BA and MA. Upon returning to the United States, he completed a PhD in theology at Yale University and gained a tremendous following. With over 450,000 subscribers to his YouTube channel and over 570,000 followers on Twitter,

his statements and sermons are highly influential. A key collaborator of ALMaghrib Institute since its foundation in 2001, he has repeatedly stressed the need for Western communities to rely upon scholars living in their own regions. Qadhi disagrees with both the assertion that there are no scholars in the West and the idea that scholars abroad can adequately evaluate local contexts. Qadhi explained his position in a lecture at East London Mosque:

The scholars are the inheritors of the prophets, and anybody who disparages scholars disparages Islam...However...ask scholars who are aware of your situation. That is very different than saying don't ask scholars. Ask '*ulamā*' who understand your needs, your dynamics...Ibn al-Qayyim himself said that half of fiqh is understanding the context of the fatwa...yes, there are differences in the minutiae of fiqh from culture to culture and land to land...I'm not saying the haram and halal changes. I'm saying the finer details change.⁵¹

In Philadelphia, Tahir Wyatt has also challenged the constant reliance of Western Muslim communities on senior scholars abroad, wondering if there is “a degree of self-hate” involved in the refusal to recognize local scholars. While he and Qadhi disagree on other issues, their views on the need for local scholarship are similar. As the first Western Muslim to have received a PhD from IUM, as well as the first Westerner approved by Saudi administration to teach in the Prophet's own masjid in Medina, Wyatt is uniquely positioned to comment on this question.⁵²

Every other country has their own scholars. They may not be on the level of the scholars here [in Saudi Arabia] who have dedicated their entire lives to the study of Islam, but if you go to Nigeria, there are scholars. If you go to Senegal, there are scholars...and so on and so forth...We have gotten to the point that we can't even recognize our own scholarship—that there may, perhaps, be people in the United States of America who can answer a large amount of the questions that we have.⁵³

What is important here is not only the difference in perspective on whether or not there are Muslims in the West who qualify as scholars, but the evaluation of the current situation and goals for the future. For Yasir Qadhi, a large part of his personal project is to help to raise up a cadre of qualified scholars trained in both the Islamic sciences and Western academic methods who can serve their local communities. Tahir Wyatt emphasizes that not only do Western *‘ulamā’* already exist, but that reliance upon local *‘ulamā’* is the natural and ideal way for any Muslim community across the world to operate.

As for the senior Saudi scholars and their local collaborators in Philadelphia, they often indicate that global reliance upon Saudi-based scholars is natural. Anwar Wright has stated that it is unsurprising that the majority of senior scholars today are in Saudi Arabia, the land blessed with revelation. He further explained that part of the reason for the lack of Western scholars is simply practical. Many of the Westerners who go to study abroad are converts. Islamic education begins later in their lives. By the time they get to Medina, they still have to spend two or three years just to master Arabic. Still, he emphasized:

It’s not that a person from the West cannot reach that level, perhaps they can, no one has ever denied that...There are people who are learned, who have gained a great amount of knowledge, but as for being *‘ulamā’*, being people who are referred to in matters of crisis that concern the whole of the umma, we have no one like that. That’s why we refer to those senior scholars.⁵⁴

For the Salafi affiliates, then, there is no pressing need for scholars in the West as long as Muslims can access senior scholars abroad for the issues of importance. They hold that what the communities need most is a continual connection to the scholars through learned individuals who have ongoing personal relationships with them.

The Result: Mutually-Reinforcing Authenticity

The Saudi-based scholars and the local leaders in Philadelphia are training local shaykhs and students of knowledge to help advance the

community's access to authentic Islamic teachings. They disagree with graduates like Tahir Wyatt and Yasir Qadhi about what constitutes a scholar, but they recognize the crucial role that local human resources play in the healthy functioning of communities and in proselytization. The Islamic University of Medina itself was founded on the premise that training a cadre of international representatives would best enable Salafism to thrive abroad. There was no parallel campaign of similar size or scope to send Saudi *'ulamā'* to settle abroad and set up Salafi mosques. Those behind the establishment of IUM recognized the potency of empowering Muslims from all over the world to champion the call to Salafism in their own regions.⁵⁵

The fact that local shaykhs do not consider themselves scholars in no way translates to a lack of agency. Both senior scholars and local shaykhs perpetuate this culture of knowledge transmission that increases the standing of all parties.

The scholar's reputation grows when international students come to study with him, just as it grows when those students return home and call their communities to follow that scholar's opinions. Crucially, the students are able to translate the scholar's opinions into linguistically fluent and culturally relevant versions for audiences in their regions of origin, a feat the scholar could never achieve on his own. As for the student, his (or occasionally her) primary qualification for leading and teaching back at home is precisely the experience of having sat at the feet of authorities abroad. The more that local constituents value those scholars, the more they value their shaykhs' having studied with them.

It is this process of mutually-reinforcing authenticity that enables teachers and students to both transmit knowledge and to construct scholarly lineages and reputations. The local leaders call their followers to turn toward a select set of scholars for guidance, and those scholars in turn recommend that the believers place their trust in the local leaders.

In Philadelphia, a qualified Salafi leader must belong to one of these lineages. The absence of a personal relationship with at least one senior scholar would mean a lack of direct access to authentic knowledge. He who cannot access the knowledge cannot share it with others. It is logical, then, that when we examine the content of local Salafi leaders'

sermons, their published material, and their social media postings, we immediately notice the high frequency of citations. Often, their works are essentially compilations of the opinions of senior scholars.⁵⁶

Imam Hassan Abdi, who leads the Germantown Masjid, has direct connections to both al-Wādi‘ī and al-Madkhali. Born in Cardiff, Wales, Abdi’s mixed heritage includes Irish, Somali and Yemeni ancestry. His Somali paternal grandfather is the reason that most call him Hassan al-Somali. After one year at Kings College London, he left to pursue Arabic and Islamic studies at al-Wādi‘ī’s center in Yemen from 1997 to 2001. Later, he spent six months of informal study in Medina with scholars including Rabī‘ al-Madkhali. Beyond the lessons in jurisprudence, creed, hadith, etc. that he completed with them, these scholars’ approval of him *as a person*, as an individual of sound faith, made him a candidate for leadership. When he married a woman from Philadelphia in 2002, he soon began teaching courses on occasion in Philadelphia’s Salafi circles, and became the Imam of the Germantown Masjid around 2015.

When Abdi and his colleague, Abu Muhammad al-Maghribi, organized a seminar on the foundations of the Sunna, al-Madkhali addressed these words of encouragement to the community:

It has reached me from those beloved to me that Shaykh Abu Muhammad and Shaykh Hassan Somali—may Allah grant them success—will establish a seminar based on the Book of Allah, the Sunnah of the Messenger of Allah and the methodology of the righteous Salaf. May Allah bless you...I thank these two shaykhs who are establishing this beneficial—by the Will of Allah—seminar...⁵⁷

Saudi scholars re-affirm their approval of select former students as trusted sources of knowledge, and their former students thereby retain their standing as the local shaykhs of their home regions. These local shaykhs then further bolster the weight of these scholars by using their platform to promote a culture of continual reliance upon them.

During the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis, Muslims around the world were asking whether one should perform the Friday congregational

prayer at home while mosques remained closed. Hassan Abdi released a two-page statement explaining the impermissibility of praying the *jum‘a* prayer at home. This document cites “position[s] of the senior scholars,” specifically Saudi Arabia’s Permanent Committee for Scholarly Research and Iftā’, the elite sub-group of the Council of Senior Scholars led by the nation’s Grand Mufti, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Āl al-Shaykh.⁵⁸

This format repeats itself in countless Salafi publications that aim to communicate the appropriate Islamic stance on a given issue. In the wake of the brutal killing of George Floyd and the subsequent protests, Salafis in Philadelphia have released a stream of statements, articles, and sermons on racism. Abdi has contributed to that stream, as has his close colleague Anwar Wright, a Philadelphia native. In a recent paper, “Islam’s Position on Oppression, Racism, and Police Brutality,” Wright marshals the words of al-‘Uthaymīn, Ibn Bāz, al-Fawzān, and others to speak directly to the issues most immediately relevant in the lives of African Americans in Philadelphia. He emphasizes, “Safety and blessings are in adherence to what the senior scholars have said in these very important issues.”⁵⁹

The ultimate sources of knowledge are the Qur’an and the Sunna, but individual Salafis inevitably falter in their struggle to understand those source texts. It is necessary to turn toward the scholars for guidance. The Salafi affiliate leadership in Philadelphia serves as a constant, living connection between those senior scholars abroad and their local congregations. They relay the opinions of those scholars, translating them into English, summarizing them as necessary, and crafting culturally relevant messages that address the realities their constituents face.

Conclusion

Seeking knowledge is one crucial aspect of a pious life for Salafis in Philadelphia. Since the 1960s, scholarships for study in Saudi Arabia, especially at the Islamic University of Medina, have enabled growing numbers of African Americans to study in the Kingdom, and then return home to promulgate the Salafi creed.

In keeping with premodern patterns of knowledge transmission in the Islamic world, contemporary Salafi affiliates value personal connections

to recognized scholars above all else. It is by sitting at the feet of the scholars, studying texts with them, and receiving their endorsement that one gains recognition. Independent study is not enough. Modern Islamic universities in Saudi Arabia grant degrees, but those degrees hold far less weight than scholars' affirmation of an individual's merit. For this reason, Salafi leaders in Philadelphia may or may not possess degrees, but they can invariably claim relationships to scholars abroad.

However, an element of this pattern of knowledge transmission is undeniably modern. In the past, it was impractical if not impossible to rely on scholars living far away. When they came back, those who studied abroad had to become the scholars for their home regions. Now, advances in communication technology allow Salafis in Philadelphia to instantly reach Saudi scholars for guidance. This has facilitated the development of a system of knowledge transmission whereby local leaders in Philadelphia serve not as scholars in their own right, but as bridges connecting their communities to the scholars abroad.

Depending on who you ask, this is either a tremendous blessing or a crippling problem. For those who feel that reliance upon local scholars is natural for Muslim communities, this system tragically prevents recognition of the scholarship of its own people and instead relies on individuals abroad who—whatever their scholarly credentials—are out of touch with the local reality. The Salafi affiliates themselves celebrate and insist upon this ongoing reliance on scholars abroad because it guarantees the purity of the knowledge reaching them. If a local leader strays from the pure teachings of Salafism in word or in action, news will reach the scholars and they will advise him. If necessary, the scholars will revoke their endorsement. The scholars' ongoing scrutiny of those who once sat with them is either a mechanism ensuring religious authenticity or a blow to community stability and self-reliance. Regardless, what is clear is that Salafis in Philadelphia recognize no local scholars and see no immediate need to have them.

Finally, lest one assume that these local leaders do not exercise agency in this process, both the scholars abroad and the local leaders actively sustain this system which reinforces the authenticity of all involved. Saudi-based scholars gain authority and international influence when

lay believers in Philadelphia rely upon their opinions and rulings. Local leaders are essential agents in this process, assuring their audiences that these particular scholars and their methodologies are legitimate. The local leaders in turn gain authenticity when the scholars endorse them as knowledgeable and reliable individuals. This system of mutually-reinforcing authenticity sustains the process of knowledge-seeking for Salafi affiliates in Philadelphia today.

Endnotes

- 1 Umar Lee has spoken of the importance that this position held in his memoir, "The Rise and Fall of the 'Salafi Dawah' in the US." The initial series of blog posts have since been removed from www.umarlee.com, but the text was released in book form on Amazon.com as *The Rise and Fall of the Salafi Dawah in America: a memoir by Umar Lee*, 2014, <https://www.amazon.com/Rise-Fall-Salafi-Dawah-America-ebook/dp/B00I1AEYL2>.
- 2 DawahSalafiyyah, "Everybody Wants To Be A Shaykh In The West – Hasaan as Somaalee." YouTube, April 17, 2012. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ZC9ay-qCdbQ&feature=emb_title, accessed November 25, 2020.
- 3 Qur'an 16:43.
- 4 Sherman A. Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking Toward the Third Resurrection* (Oxford University Press, 2005); *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering* (Oxford University Press, 2009).
- 5 Richard Brent Turner, *Islam in the African-American Experience* (Indiana University Press, 2003).
- 6 Patrick D. Bowen, *A History of Conversion to Islam in the United States, Volume 2: The African American Islamic Renaissance, 1920-1975* (Brill, 2017).
- 7 Aminah Beverly McCloud, *African American Islam* (Routledge, 2014).
- 8 Edward E. Curtis IV, *Islam in Black America: Identity, Liberation, and Difference in African-American Islamic Thought* (SUNY Press, 2012).
- 9 Bowen, *A History of Conversion*, 86.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 97.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 223, 224, 333-5.
- 12 McCloud, *African American Islam*, 21-24.
- 13 Susan Frith, "Music Lessons," *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, Nov/Dec 2006, <https://www.upenn.edu/gazette/1106/feature1.html>. Accessed June 19, 2021.
- 14 The Nation of Islam has survived as an independent organization under the leadership of Louis Farrakhan, but never regained the prominence it held under Elijah Muhammad. As for the majority that remained loyal to WD Mohammed, their transition into Sunnism has been a complex process of re-interpreting both their own history and their relationship to historical Islam. Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican*, 49-50.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 3-6.
- 16 For a history of IUM, see Michael Farquhar, *Circuits of Faith: Migration, Education, and the Wahhabi Mission* (Stanford University Press, 2016).
- 17 Some women have, however, gone abroad and completed Islamic studies degrees. One woman based in Philadelphia completed her studies with her husband in Saudi Arabia.

- 18 Henri Lauzière, *The Making of Salafism: Islamic Reform in the Twentieth Century* (Columbia University Press, 2015).
- 19 Danny Salgado, Jr. has written in greater detail about the differences between Salafism as a creed, a *da'wah*, and a *manhaj* and their significance in the African American context. "The Formative Years of *al-Da'wa al-Salafiyya* among African Americans (1975-2006) and the Ongoing Quest for Authenticity," MA thesis, Hartford Seminary, April 2020.
- 20 Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, no. 3 (2006): 207-239.
- 21 Anabel Inge has also spoken about this concern among Salafis in the UK: *The Making of a Salafi Muslim Woman: Paths to Conversion* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 10-11. Likewise, experts on American policy are perpetually concerned with the question of whether or not purist Salafis are at risk of radicalization. See Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, "Salafism in America: History, Evolution, Radicalization" (The George Washington University, 2018), <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zax-dzs2191/f/Salafism%20in%20America.pdf>.
- 22 Meleagrou-Hitchens, for instance, acknowledges this in his study, "Salafism in America," 16, 32, 54-55.
- 23 For examples of documents that discuss "Madkhalis", see Zoltan Pall, "Kuwaiti Salafism and its Growing Influence in the Levant," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, May 7, 2014; Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, "Salafism in America," <https://carnegieendowment.org/2014/05/07/kuwaiti-salafism-and-its-growing-influence-in-levant-pub-55520>, accessed December 14, 2020; Frederic Wehrey and Anouar Boukhars, *Salafism in the Maghreb: Politics, Piety, and Militancy* (Oxford University Press, 2019).
- 24 Roel Meijer, "Politicising *al-Jarḥ wa-l-Ta'dil*: Rabi' b. Hādī al-Madkhalī and the Transnational Battle for Religious Authority," in *The Transmission and Dynamics of the Textual Sources of Islam: Essays in Honour of Harald Motzki*, ed. Nicolet Boekhoff-van der Voort, Kees Versteegh & Joas Wagemakers (Brill, 2011), 380-381.
- 25 For more information on the role of the Islamic University in the establishment of international Salafi communities, see Roel Meijer, *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement* (Oxford University Press, 2013). For information about the connections between British Salafis and IUM, see Inge, *The Making of a Salafi Muslim Woman*, 27-37, 111-115, 230.
- 26 Umar Lee, "The Rise and Fall of the 'Salafi Dawah' in the US"
- 27 Shadee Elmasry, "The Salafis in America: The Rise, Decline and Prospects for a Sunni Muslim Movement among African-Americans," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 30, no. 2 (2010): 217-236.
- 28 Meleagrou-Hitchens, "Salafism in America," 56.
- 29 Maleka Fruean, "Germantown Neighbors: Imam Hassan Abdi and the Germantown Masjid," *Germantown Info Hub*, April 9, 2019; accessed November 22, 2020.

- 30 There are mosques with larger buildings that can accommodate more worshippers, but the Germantown Masjid is the only one that filled to overflow on every occasion that I visited it.
- 31 @GtownMasjid, accessed June 7, 2022, <https://twitter.com/GtownMasjid>.
- 32 The Germantown Masjid, for instance, purchased additional properties in its immediate vicinity in 2017, 2018, and 2019. Masjid Bin Baz, closely affiliated with the Germantown Masjid, opened its doors in South Philadelphia in 2013.
- 33 Meijer, “Politicising *al-Jarḥ wa-l-Ta’dil*,” 378.
- 34 The Royal Decree that established this limitation in 2010 applies only to public fatwas, and in no way prevents these scholars from privately issuing advice or opinions to individuals. “Saudi King Limits Clerics Allowed to Issue Fatwas: King Abdullah Bids to Organize Religious Edicts,” *Al Arabiya*, August 12, 2010, <https://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2010/08/12/116450.html>; accessed November 24, 2020.
- 35 Meijer, “Politicising *al-Jarḥ wa-l-Ta’dil*,” 377-382.
- 36 During an interview, a Salafi leader sent me a link to a blog post entitled, “Why do we refer to our teacher as Shaykh,” which he identified as a useful pronouncement on titles for local leaders. In the nine-point explanation, the sixth point explicitly clarifies that, unlike a shaykh, a scholar is “a reference point for the whole of the Muslim nation.” Maktabah Ibn Uthaymeen, June 7, 2020, <https://maktabahuthaymeen.wordpress.com/category/benefits/page/2/>. Accessed November 24, 2020.
- 37 There is some scholarly disagreement on this point. Emad Hamdeh has described Salafis as ‘anti-clericalist’. See his article “Shaykh Google as *Hāfiẓ al-‘Aṣr*: The Internet, Traditional ‘Ulamā’, and Self Learning,” *American Journal of Islam and Society* 37, nos. 1-2 (2020): 70, 83. However, I agree with Roel Meijer, who describes Saudi establishment Salafism as fundamentally committed to the idea that the scholars alone possess and can pass on true knowledge of the texts. Meijer, “Politicising *al-Jarḥ wa-l-Ta’dil*,” 378.
- 38 TROID, “Knowledge Is To Be Taken from the ‘Ulamā’ Not from the Ignorant Ones,” YouTube, April 27, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=4&v=5b-hosZaKgv0&feature=emb_title; accessed November 29, 2020.
- 39 Jonathan Berkey. *The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo: A Social History of Islamic Education* (Princeton University Press, 1992), 21.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 22.
- 41 Interview with Anwar Wright, May 26, 2020.
- 42 A Twitter page managed in the name of Ibn Bāz posted this quotation, which was then translated and shared by Hikmah Publications, run by Imam Hassan Abdi of the Germantown Masjid. See June 12, 2020. 6:08 PM. <https://twitter.com/hikmahpubs/status/1271459399949836288>.
- 43 *Fuqahā’* (s. *faqīh*) indicates those jurists qualified to pronounce on questions of Islamic law. This quotation was taken from a recording of a lecture from al-Fawẓān:

SalafiDawahNZ. "Not Everyone Who Graduates From An Islamic University Is A Scholar." YouTube, August 26, 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HK-WEdH-MKc4>; accessed August 2, 2020.

- 44 Not all of these individuals are originally from Philadelphia. Abu Muslimah and Shadeed Muhamad are from New Jersey. All of them, however, have either served as imams in Philadelphia or were influential in Salafi circles in Philadelphia at one time.
- 45 For more information on Bilal Philips and the reasons behind his disagreements with certain Saudi scholars such as 'Ubayd al-Jābirī, see Abu Khadeejah, "Errors in Usool of Bilal Philips," posted 11 July 2002, accessed September 5, 2021. <http://www.salafitalk.net/st/viewmessages.cfm?Forum=6&Topic=562>. Yasir Qadhi himself outlines his disagreements with Rabī' al-Madkhalī and the methodology that he represents in his article "On Salafi Islam," *MuslimMatters.org*, published 22 April 2014. <https://muslimmatters.org/2014/04/22/on-salafi-islam-dr-yasir-qadhi/>.
- 46 Although lay believers sometimes indicate that they do not personally have a problem with these individuals, the official position of the Salafi affiliate mosques and their leaders stands in clear rejection of these individuals as deviant in religious matters.
- 47 This was true for many years, and this article documents the trends of ongoing communication that persisted until the second half of the 2010s. However, interviewees have affirmed that most recently, at the end of the 2010s and in the early 2020s, actual direct contact with senior scholars is on the decline. With Rabī' al-Madkhalī in his nineties and other senior scholars increasingly busy or elderly, there is less open communication with former students in Philadelphia.
- 48 Interview with Hassan Abdi, May 15, 2020.
- 49 "Why do we refer to our teacher as Shaykh," Maktabah Ibn Uthaymeen.
- 50 Al-Fawzān expressed this opinion in a response to a question about Yasir Qadhi: TROID, "Yasir Qadhi: Do Not Outsource Scholarship – Insource It! Shaykh Fawzaan Answers," YouTube, January 25, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SV_kh8e-Hskw; accessed August 4, 2020.
- 51 Yasir Qadhi, "Separating from the Scholars of Islam? ~ Dr. Yasir Qadhi," YouTube, March 27, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sHzk_GXVMhU; accessed August 4, 2020.
- 52 Numerous interviewees confirmed this information, although I have not seen explicit documentation.
- 53 Ali Dawah, "WHO DECIDES WHOS A SCHOLAR? SH TAHIR WYATT," YouTube, August 9, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=73sP582ZS-U>; accessed November 25, 2020.
- 54 Interview with Anwar Wright, May 27, 2020.
- 55 Farquhar, *Circuits of Faith*, 50-65.

-
- 56 Muhammad Qasim Zaman has noted a related trend at Islamic universities in Saudi Arabia, where “numerous master’s theses and Ph.D. dissertations take the form of annotated editions of medieval collections of hadith and works of law.” “Epilogue: Competing Conceptions of Religious Education,” in *Schooling Islam: The Culture and Politics of Modern Muslim Education*, edited by Robert W. Hefner and Muhammad Qasim Zaman (Princeton University Press, 2007), 257-58. For modern Salafis, the point is to communicate pieces of knowledge validated by the reputations of those who first articulated them, not to engage in personal interpretation.
- 57 “Word of Encouragement Allamah Rabi Ibn Hadi – Usool Sunnah 2018,” Germantown Masjid, December 25, 2018, <https://germantownmasjid.com/word-of-encouragement-allamah-rabi-ibn-hadi-usool-sunnah-2018/>; accessed November 28, 2020.
- 58 Hassan Abdi, “It Is Not Allowed to Perform the Jum’ah Prayer at Home: Coronavirus 2020,” Germantown Masjid, March 26, 2020, <https://twitter.com/GtownMasjid/status/1243222616309223426>; accessed November 25, 2020.
- 59 Anwar Wright, “Islam’s Position on Oppression, Racism, and Police Brutality,” Germantown Masjid, June 7, 2020, <https://twitter.com/GtownMasjid/status/1270044740675932160>; accessed November 25, 2020, p. 12.