



# THE HISTORICAL PATTERNS OF SALAFISM THEOLOGICAL TRANSMISSION FROM SAUDI ARABIA TO ASIAN COUNTRIES

\*<sup>1</sup>A. Jailani Che Abas & <sup>2</sup>Mohd Faizal Hasan

<sup>1,2</sup>. Institut Pendidikan guru Tengku Ampuan Afzan, Pahang, Malaysia

Article Info	ABSTRACT
<p><b>Article history:</b> Received: 3 Mar 2025 Revised: 24 April 2025 Accepted: 11 May 2025 Published: 1 June 2025</p>	<p>This study examines the multifaceted processes through which Salafi theological perspectives have been transmitted from Saudi Arabia to various Asian countries since the mid-twentieth century. Employing a historical and comparative approach, the research investigates the institutional mechanisms, transnational networks, and sociopolitical contexts that have facilitated this theological diffusion across Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Central Asia. The findings reveal that rather than representing a unidirectional flow of influence, Salafism's transmission to Asian contexts has involved complex processes of negotiation, adaptation, and contestation, resulting in diverse manifestations of "Asian Salafisms" that respond to local religious traditions and political environments while maintaining core theological principles. The study identifies four primary mechanisms of transmission: educational institutions and scholarship networks; financial networks and charitable organisations; migration and pilgrimage connections; and media and technological platforms. These mechanisms have enabled Salafi theology to establish significant footholds across Asia while simultaneously generating resistance from established religious authorities and state institutions in many contexts. The research contributes to understanding how transnational religious movements navigate diverse cultural landscapes in an era of globalization, highlighting the inseparability of theological transmission from material conditions, geopolitical considerations, and technological developments. These insights have significant implications for comprehending contemporary religious dynamics in Asia and beyond, particularly regarding questions of religious authority, authenticity, security concerns, and the impact of digital technologies on theological dissemination in the twenty-first century.</p>
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## Corresponding Author:

\*A.Jailani Che Abas

Institut Pendidikan guru Tengku Ampuan Afzan, Pahang, Malaysia

Email: a.jailani@ipgm.edu.my



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## INTRODUCTION

The transmission of Salafism from its modern nexus in Saudi Arabia to various Asian countries represents one of the most significant religious and ideological diffusions of the 20th and 21st centuries. Salafism, a revivalist movement within Sunni Islam that calls for a return to the practices of the earliest Muslims (the *salaf al-salih* or "pious predecessors"), has established profound influence across Asia through complex networks of education, finance, migration, and media. This essay examines the historical patterns through which Salafi theological concepts, interpretations, and practices have been transmitted from Saudi Arabia to Asian countries, considering the varied contexts of Southeast, South, and Central Asia, while analyzing the agents, institutions, and mechanisms that facilitated this transmission. The essay further explores how these theological transmissions have adapted to local contexts, creating distinctive manifestations of Salafism across the Asian landscape.

The geopolitical significance of this theological transmission cannot be overstated. Beginning in earnest during the 1960s and accelerating following the 1973 oil crisis, Saudi Arabia's religious diplomacy became a cornerstone of its foreign policy, particularly as the kingdom sought to counter rival ideological currents such as Arab nationalism, Iranian revolutionary Shi'ism, and various secular political movements (Hegghammer, 2010). The Cold War context provided additional impetus for Saudi religious outreach, as Western powers tacitly supported the propagation of conservative Islamic interpretations as a bulwark against communist influence in Muslim-majority regions of Asia (Commins, 2006). This confluence of religious mission and geopolitical strategy created a powerful vector for theological transmission that would reshape religious landscapes across Asia.

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### Historical Foundations of Modern Salafism in Saudi Arabia

Modern Salafism's association with Saudi Arabia stems primarily from the historical alliance between Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792) and Muhammad ibn Saud in 1744, which established a religious-political partnership that would eventually form the foundation of the Saudi state. Ibn Abd

al-Wahhab's puritanical reform movement, calling for a return to *tawhid* (divine oneness) and rejecting *bid'ah* (religious innovations), became the theological underpinning of Saudi political legitimacy. While scholars debate whether Wahhabism should be classified as a subset of Salafism or vice versa, the historical association between the Saudi state and this particular theological orientation created the conditions for Saudi Arabia to become a primary exporter of Salafi thought in the modern era (Commins, 2006).

The discovery of oil in Saudi Arabia in 1938 and the subsequent wealth accumulation gave the Saudi state unprecedented resources to propagate its religious vision internationally. The establishment of the Muslim World League in 1962 and other religious institutions marked a formal institutionalization of Saudi religious diplomacy, creating official channels for theological transmission abroad (Farquhar, 2017). This period coincided with Saudi Arabia's growing geopolitical importance during the Cold War, where religious diplomacy served as a counter to secular Arab nationalism and communism, receiving tacit support from Western powers (Hegghammer, 2010).

## **Mechanisms of Theological Transmission**

### **Educational Institutions and Scholarship Networks**

The establishment of Islamic universities in Saudi Arabia, particularly the Islamic University of Medina (founded in 1961), became a crucial mechanism for the global dissemination of Salafi theology. These institutions strategically offered scholarships to international students, particularly from Asian countries, creating a new generation of religious scholars trained in Salafi methodology who would return to their home countries as authorized religious leaders (Farquhar, 2017). Between 1961 and 2000, thousands of students from Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, India, and the Philippines received religious training in Saudi institutions, establishing transnational networks of Salafi knowledge transmission (Bano, 2018).

The international distribution of religious literature represents another significant vector of theological transmission. The King Fahd Complex for Printing the Holy Quran, established in 1984, has distributed millions of copies of the Quran worldwide, often accompanied by Salafi-oriented translations and commentaries (Iqbal, 2017). Saudi publishing houses have similarly produced and distributed books, pamphlets, and other religious materials promoting Salafi interpretations throughout Asia, often translated into local languages such as Urdu, Bahasa Indonesia, Malay, and various Central Asian languages (Hasan, 2009).

### **Financial Networks and Charitable Organizations**

Saudi charitable organizations, both governmental and non-governmental, have served as crucial conduits for theological transmission through their financial support of religious infrastructure development across Asia. Organizations such as the Muslim World League, Al-Haramain Foundation, and the International Islamic Relief Organization have funded the construction of mosques, madrasas, orphanages, and Islamic centers that often promote Salafi theological perspectives (Kovacs, 2015). The strategic location of these institutions, particularly in areas with limited state presence or in post-disaster reconstruction zones, has enhanced their influence in local communities (Bubalo and Fealy, 2005).

Direct financial support to local Salafi organizations, preachers, and educational initiatives has created dependency relationships that facilitate theological influence. Saudi funding often comes with explicit or implicit theological conditions, encouraging recipient organizations to adopt specific

interpretations or practices aligned with Salafi perspectives (Bano, 2018). This financial leverage has proven particularly effective in economically disadvantaged regions of Asia, where alternative sources of funding for religious activities are limited (Farquhar, 2017).

### **Migration and Pilgrimage Networks**

Labor migration from Asian countries to Saudi Arabia has created informal channels for theological transmission. Millions of workers from countries like Pakistan, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and the Philippines have been exposed to Saudi religious practices during their residence, often returning home with new religious perspectives and practices that they disseminate within their communities (Mandaville, 2007). This "lived transmission" of religious ideas through migration represents a less institutionalized but highly effective mechanism of theological influence.

The *Hajj* and *Umrah* pilgrimages have similarly functioned as opportunities for theological exposure and transmission. Many Asian Muslims encounter Salafi interpretations during their time in Mecca and Medina, through official religious guidance, literature distribution, and interactions with Saudi religious authorities (Bianchi, 2004). The symbolic authority of the holy cities enhances the legitimacy of these theological encounters, with many pilgrims viewing Saudi religious practices as more authentic due to their proximity to Islam's holiest sites (Iqbal, 2017).

### **Media and Technological Networks**

The development of satellite television, particularly Islamic channels like Iqraa TV (established in 1998), has enabled Saudi religious authorities to broadcast Salafi theological content directly to Asian audiences (Skovgaard-Petersen, 2018). These media platforms bypass traditional religious hierarchies, allowing Salafi interpretations to reach populations without the mediation of local religious authorities, effectively creating transnational religious public spheres (Mandaville, 2007).

The internet and social media have dramatically accelerated the transmission of Salafi theology in the 21st century. Websites, social media accounts, and mobile applications associated with Saudi religious institutions provide instant access to Salafi theological resources for Asian Muslims. This digital transmission of religious knowledge democratizes access while often circumventing traditional religious gatekeepers, allowing for direct engagement with Salafi theological sources (Bunt, 2018). The multilingual nature of many of these digital platforms enhances their accessibility across diverse Asian contexts (Zaman, 2018).

### **Regional Case Studies of Salafism's Transmission**

#### **Southeast Asia: Indonesia and Malaysia**

In Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim-majority country, Salafi theological transmission intensified in the post-Suharto era (after 1998) when greater religious freedom allowed for the establishment of explicitly Salafi organizations. *The Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Islam dan Arab* (LIPIA), a Saudi-funded educational institution established in Jakarta in 1980, has been particularly influential in training Indonesian scholars in Salafi methodology (Hasan, 2009). Notable Indonesian Salafi organisations like Wahdah Islamiyah and the Forum Komunikasi Ahlus Sunnah wal Jama'ah (FKAWJ) maintain strong connections with Saudi religious networks and have established extensive educational institutions throughout the archipelago (Bubalo and Fealy, 2005).

In Malaysia, Salafi influence emerged within the broader Islamic revival (*dakwah*) movement of the 1970s, often interacting complexly with state-sponsored Islamization policies. Organisations like *Pertubuhan Ahli Sunnah Malaysia* have advocated for Salafi theological perspectives while negotiating the officially Shafi'i legal framework of Malaysian Islam (Müller, 2014). Unlike in Indonesia, Malaysian Salafism has had to navigate a more restrictive religious-political environment where state religious authorities maintain significant control over Islamic discourse (Hamid, 2016).

### **South Asia: Pakistan and India**

In Pakistan, Salafi theological transmission has occurred against the backdrop of sectarian diversity and competition. The *Ahl-e-Hadith* movement, predating modern Saudi influence but theologically aligned with many Salafi positions, has received significant Saudi support for its educational institutions and publishing activities since the 1970s (Zaman, 2018). Saudi funding has strengthened *Ahl-e-Hadith* institutions like the *Jamia Salafiya* in Faisalabad while also influencing curriculum development in many Pakistani madrasas (Iqbal, 2017).

In India, with its Muslim minority population of over 200 million, Salafi theological transmission has faced distinctive challenges related to the minority status of Muslims and the country's secular constitutional framework. The *Ahl-e-Hadith* movement has historically maintained theological positions similar to Salafism, while organizations like the *Kerala Nadvathul Mujahideen* have received Saudi funding for educational and charitable activities (Ahmad, 2009). The influence of returning Indian migrant workers from Gulf countries has been particularly significant in coastal regions like Kerala and Gujarat, creating new channels for Salafi theological transmission (Osella and Osella, 2008).

### **Central Asia: Post-Soviet Contexts**

In the post-Soviet Central Asian republics, Salafi theological transmission emerged in the religious vacuum following the collapse of Soviet-enforced atheism. Saudi religious institutions actively engaged in the region through the distribution of religious literature, funding for mosque construction, and scholarship opportunities for Central Asian students (Montgomery and Heathershaw, 2016). However, the authoritarian governments of countries like Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan have often viewed Salafism with suspicion, implementing restrictive policies that have pushed Salafi networks underground in many contexts (Tucker, 2016).

### **Adaptation and Localization**

The transmission of Salafi theology from Saudi Arabia to Asian contexts has not been a simple process of replication but rather one of complex adaptation and negotiation. Local religious traditions, cultural practices, and political environments have significantly shaped how Salafi theological concepts are interpreted and implemented in different Asian contexts (Mandaville, 2007). This process of localization has produced multiple variants of "Asian Salafisms" that retain core theological principles while adapting to specific contextual requirements.

The relationship between Salafism and local Sufi traditions illustrates this adaptation process. In regions with strong Sufi heritage, such as parts of South and Central Asia, Salafi criticism of Sufi practices has often been moderated or strategically focused on specific practices rather than Sufism as a whole (Ahmad, 2009). In some cases, Salafi organisations have incorporated elements of local spiritual vocabulary while reinterpreting them within a Salafi theological framework, effectively creating hybrid religious formations (Bubalo and Fealy, 2005).

Political adaptation has similarly influenced the manifestation of Salafism across Asia. In countries with strong state control over religion, such as Malaysia or the Central Asian republics, Salafi organisations have often adopted politically quietist positions that emphasise personal piety and educational activities while avoiding confrontation with political authorities (Müller, 2014). Conversely, in contexts with weaker state institutions or ongoing conflicts, such as parts of Pakistan or the southern Philippines, some Salafi groups have developed more activist or even militant interpretations of their theological commitments (Montgomery and Heathershaw, 2016).

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The transmission of Salafi theological perspectives from Saudi Arabia to Asian contexts raises profound questions about religious authority, authenticity, and the relationship between theological ideas and material conditions in the contemporary Muslim world. Four key implications emerge from this analysis of historical patterns of transmission that warrant further discussion.

### Restructuring of Religious Authority

The Salafi emphasis on direct engagement with foundational texts, bypassing centuries of interpretive tradition, has fundamentally challenged established structures of religious authority across Asia. Traditional religious elites, whether Sufi sheikhs, hereditary scholars, or state-sanctioned ulama, have faced unprecedented competition from a new class of religious leaders whose authority derives from their Salafi credentials and often their Saudi educational pedigree (Zaman, 2018). This restructuring of religious authority has created new fault lines in Muslim communities, where competing claims to authentic Islamic interpretation clash in public discourses, educational institutions, and religious practice. The contestation of religious authority is particularly evident in Southeast Asia, where established religious hierarchies tied to indigenous cultural traditions have been challenged by Salafi-influenced movements questioning traditional practices and interpretations. In Malaysia, for instance, the state-sanctioned religious bureaucracy has often found itself at odds with Salafi-influenced groups that question the legitimacy of practices deemed culturally authentic but religiously questionable from a Salafi perspective (Hamid, 2016). This tension between different sources of religious authority traditional, state-sanctioned, and Salafi creates complex dynamics of religious competition and negotiation.

### Globalisation and Religious Authenticity

The transnational circulation of Salafi theological perspectives has complicated notions of religious authenticity in Asian Muslim communities. The perceived connection between Saudi Arabia and Islamic authenticity, due to its role as the birthplace of Islam and custodian of the holy sites, has lent Salafi interpretations a powerful claim to religious legitimacy in many Asian contexts (Bianchi, 2004). This has created situations where "foreign" religious interpretations are sometimes perceived as more authentic than "local" traditions, inverting conventional understandings of the relationship between religion and cultural rootedness. This dynamic is particularly evident in debates over religious practice in countries like Indonesia, where Salafi critiques of traditional rituals and celebrations have been framed as a return to authentic Islam rather than as foreign impositions (Hasan, 2009). The success of these authenticity claims varies significantly across contexts, often depending on local historical associations with particular Islamic interpretive traditions and the strength of existing religious institutions. In regions with strong historical ties to other Islamic centers, such as parts of South Asia historically connected to Central Asian and Persian Islamic traditions, Saudi-oriented Salafi claims to unique authenticity have often faced stronger resistance (Ahmad, 2009).

## **The Materiality of Theological Transmission**

The historical patterns examined in this essay demonstrate conclusively that theological transmission cannot be understood apart from the material conditions that facilitate it. The role of Saudi financial resources in establishing educational institutions, funding publications, building mosques, and supporting charitable organisations across Asia reveals how theological influence is inseparable from economic power (Farquhar, 2017). This material dimension of theological transmission raises important questions about the relationship between economic dependency and religious influence in contexts where local religious institutions lack comparable financial resources. The material conditions of theological transmission also include technological infrastructure, from printing presses to satellite television networks to internet connectivity. The dramatic acceleration of Salafi theological transmission in the digital age illustrates how changes in communication technology can transform the dynamics of religious influence (Bunt, 2018). Digital platforms have democratized access to Salafi theological resources while simultaneously allowing for new forms of monitoring and control, creating complex dynamics of religious influence that defy simple narratives of either unrestricted diffusion or total surveillance.

## **Security Implications and State Responses**

The transmission of Salafi theology has generated varied security concerns and state responses across Asia. While the vast majority of Salafi groups remain non-violent and politically quietist, the emergence of militant interpretations in some contexts has led many Asian governments to view Salafi theological transmission with suspicion (Wiktorowicz, 2006). This security framing has resulted in restrictive policies in countries like Uzbekistan, Malaysia, and China, where distinctions between different Salafi orientations are often collapsed in the name of security concerns. These state responses have pushed many Salafi networks underground or into more coded expressions of their theological orientations, creating complex dynamics of public/private religious expression. In some contexts, state restrictions have inadvertently enhanced the appeal of Salafi perspectives, particularly among younger generations seeking religious alternatives to state-sanctioned interpretations perceived as compromised or corrupted (Montgomery & Heathershaw, 2016). The balancing act between security concerns and religious freedom represents one of the most challenging dimensions of the Salafi presence in many Asian contexts.

## **Conclusion and Future Trajectories**

The historical patterns of Salafism's theological transmission from Saudi Arabia to Asian countries reveal a complex interplay of institutional, financial, migratory, and technological networks that have facilitated the global circulation of religious ideas. Rather than representing a unidirectional flow of influence, this transmission has involved strategic adaptation, local contestation, and the emergence of distinctive manifestations of Salafi thought across diverse Asian contexts. Four key conclusions can be drawn from this analysis: First, the transmission of Salafi theology has not merely reproduced Saudi religious perspectives but has generated new, hybrid forms of religious thought and practice that respond to local conditions while maintaining core Salafi principles. The diversity of "Asian Salafisms" demonstrates the creative agency of local religious actors in processes of theological reception and adaptation. This suggests that religious transmission should be understood as a process of negotiation rather than imposition, even when significant power asymmetries exist between the sources and recipients of religious ideas.

Second, the political implications of Salafi theological transmission have varied dramatically across Asian contexts, defying simplistic correlations between theological orientation and political

behaviour. While some Salafi groups have developed activist or militant interpretations, particularly in conflict zones, others have maintained strictly quietist positions focused on personal piety and educational activities. This variation cautions against securitized approaches that fail to distinguish between different manifestations of Salafi thought and practice.

Third, the digital revolution has fundamentally transformed patterns of theological transmission, creating decentralized networks of religious influence that bypass traditional gatekeepers and state controls. As internet penetration continues to expand across Asia, these digital pathways of theological transmission are likely to become increasingly significant, challenging both state regulatory capacities and traditional religious authorities. This technological dimension represents perhaps the most dynamic aspect of contemporary theological transmission.

Finally, the story of Salafism's transmission to Asian contexts demonstrates the continued vitality of transnational religious movements in an age often characterized by secular assumptions. Despite predictions of religious decline in the face of modernization, the robust expansion of Salafi networks across Asia suggests that religious commitments remain powerful motivators of individual and collective action. The future trajectories of these networks will be shaped by ongoing contestations over religious authority, authenticity, and the relationship between theology and politics across diverse Asian contexts.

As these networks continue to evolve in the digital age, the patterns of theological transmission are becoming increasingly decentralized, allowing for new forms of religious authority and community to emerge within the broader Salafi movement. Understanding these patterns of transmission provides crucial insights into the changing landscape of global Islam and the complex relationship between religious ideas and the material conditions that facilitate their circulation. The study of Salafism's transmission from Saudi Arabia to Asia thus offers a window into broader processes of religious globalization, demonstrating how theological concepts travel across geographical, cultural, and political boundaries while simultaneously being transformed by the journey itself.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

This examination of the historical patterns of Salafism's theological transmission from Saudi Arabia to Asian countries highlights several promising avenues for future research:

**Generational Dynamics:** Further research should examine the generational dynamics of Salafi adherence in Asian contexts, exploring how younger generations receive, interpret, and sometimes transform Salafi theological perspectives in response to contemporary challenges. The digital native generation's engagement with Salafi thought may differ significantly from earlier patterns of theological reception and merits specific investigation.

**Women's Roles:** The gendered dimensions of Salafi theological transmission remain understudied. Research exploring women's roles in transmitting, interpreting, and sometimes contesting Salafi theological perspectives could provide important insights into how gender shapes processes of religious transmission and adaptation across different Asian contexts.

**Digital Ethnography:** As digital platforms become increasingly central to theological transmission, research methodologies adapted to these virtual spaces are essential. Digital ethnography of Salafi online communities, educational platforms, and social media networks could reveal emerging patterns of theological discourse that may not be visible through traditional research approaches.

**Comparative Studies:** Systematic comparisons between Salafi theological transmission and other transnational religious movements could yield valuable insights into broader patterns of religious globalisation. Comparative studies might examine how different theological orientations interact with similar mechanisms of transmission, from educational institutions to digital media.

**Economic Development Impacts:** Further research should investigate the relationship between Salafi theological orientations and economic development in Asian contexts. How do Salafi perspectives on financial practices, education, and social welfare interact with broader developmental trajectories in different Asian societies?

**Decolonial Perspectives:** Future research should engage more deeply with decolonial perspectives that interrogate the power dynamics implicit in processes of theological transmission from centers like Saudi Arabia to diverse Asian peripheries. Such approaches might reveal how colonial and post-colonial contexts have shaped both the reception and resistance to Salafi theological perspectives across Asia.

**Theological Evolution:** Longitudinal studies of how Salafi theological perspectives evolve in specific Asian contexts could reveal important patterns of adaptation and indigenisation. How do initially "foreign" theological ideas become naturalised within local religious discourses, and what factors influence their theological evolution?

These research directions would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the complex processes through which theological ideas cross geographical, cultural, and political boundaries in the contemporary world.

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