

## Türkiye'de Cihatçı Selefilik: Ebu Hanzala'nın İdeolojisi (Halis Bayancuk)

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### Öz

Bu çalışma, ideolojik hedeflere ulaşmak için silahlı mücadele de dahil olmak üzere aşırı ve sıklıkla şiddet içeren yaklaşımları savunan ve ana akım Selefi ilkelere sapan, erken dönem İslami uygulamalara ve yorumlarına bağlılığıyla karakterize edilen Selefi İslam içindeki Cihatçı Selefilik araştırılmaktadır. Selefilik üzerine önemli araştırmalar yapılmasına rağmen, Türkiye bağlamındaki araştırmalar oldukça sınırlıdır. Türkiye'de Selefi ideoloji 1980'lerde ortaya çıkmış, 11 Eylül'den sonra ivme kazanmış ve Suriye iç savaşı sırasında zirveye ulaşmıştır. Selefi ilkelere sıkı sıkıya bağlılığıyla bilinen Tevhid ve Sünnet Cemaati'nin kurucusu Halis Bayancuk'a (Ebu Hanzala) odaklanan bu çalışma, cihat ilkelere derinlemesine incelenmesiyle iç içe geçmiş ideolojisini titizlikle analiz etmektedir. Quintan Wiktorowicz'in çerçevesini kullanarak Selefilik, puristler, politicoslar ve cihatçılar olarak kategorize edilmektedir. Bu çalışma, döküman analizi kullanarak Türkiye'deki Selefi ideoloji içinde yer alan Cihatçı Selefilik hakkındaki nüansları ve içgörülerini ortaya çıkarmayı amaçlamaktadır. Ebu Hanzala'nın dini ve siyasi görüşlerini söylem analizi yöntemiyle inceleyen çalışma, Selefilik'in Türkiye'deki karmaşık yapısını ve sosyo-politik manzaradaki tezahürlerini ayrıntılı bir şekilde anlamayı amaçlamaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Din Sosyolojisi, Selefilik, Türkiye Selefilik, Cihat, Halis Bayancuk (Ebu Hanzala).

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## Jihadist Salafism in Türkiye: The Ideology of Abu Hanzala (Halis Bayancuk)

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### Abstract

This study examines Jihadist Salafism within the broader framework of Salafist Islam. Jihadist Salafism is defined by its strict adherence to early Islamic practices and interpretations, coupled with the advocacy of extreme and often violent methods, including armed struggle, to achieve ideological objectives. This approach diverges significantly from mainstream Salafist principles. Despite the extensive body of research on Salafism, its implications within the Turkish context remain underexplored. Salafist ideology in Türkiye emerged in the 1980s, gained momentum after 9/11, and reached its peak during the Syrian civil war. This study focuses on Halis Bayancuk, widely known as Abu Hanzala, a prominent figure in Turkish Salafism and the founder of the Tawhid and Sunnah Community. Abu Hanzala is recognized for his stringent adherence to Salafist doctrines and his interpretations of jihad. Using Quintan Wiktorowicz's typology, which classifies Salafists into three categories—purists, politicos, and jihadists—this research seeks to analyze Abu Hanzala's ideology in detail, with particular emphasis on his views regarding jihad. Through document analysis, the study investigates the development and application of Salafist ideology in Türkiye. In addition, discourse analysis explores Abu Hanzala's religious and political rhetoric, providing insights into the intricate dynamics of Salafism in Türkiye and its impact on the socio-political landscape.

**Keywords:** Sociology of Religion, Salafism, Turkish Salafism, Jihad, Abu Hanzala (Halis Bayancuk).

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## Introduction

Salafism is increasingly recognized as a significant sociological and theological phenomenon today. This diverse belief system strengthens from its internal variety and displays a dynamic structure. Salafism has evolved through a range of interpretations, from the teachings of Ahmad Ibn Hanbal (780–855) to those of Taqı al-Din Ahmad ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328) and from Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1792) to Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi (b. 1959). Its influence continues to expand in Türkiye and the broader Islamic world. Despite this growing impact, academic research on Salafism in Türkiye remains limited. Most existing studies focus primarily on jihadist Salafism, particularly regarding ISIS and its emergence during the Syrian civil war. Few investigations have explored other aspects of Salafism within Türkiye. Among these efforts, Hammond’s article is noteworthy for its attempt to examine purist Salafism among Turks.<sup>1</sup> However, it falls short of thoroughly addressing the role of Salafist preachers and does not provide a comprehensive interpretation of the phenomenon overall.

The emergence and rise of Salafism in Türkiye can be attributed to various factors, such as the relationship between the government of the Turkish Republic that was established after the military coup of September 12, 1980, and the role of the Saudi Arabian state-supported Muslim World League (MWL),<sup>2</sup> Additionally the influx of some Salafı scholars in Türkiye following the US-led Coalition Forces’ invasion of Iraq<sup>3</sup> along with the travel of some Turkish individuals to Muslim countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, or Syria to study under Salafı scholars. Other contributing factors to the entrenchment of Salafı thought in Türkiye include the translation of Salafı writings into Turkish;<sup>4</sup> the return of individuals who fought in war zones such as Afghanistan, Chechnya, Iraq, and Syria; the impact of the Arab Spring;<sup>5</sup> and the more widespread use of

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Hammond, “Salafı Thought in Turkish Public Discourse Since 1980”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49/3 (Ağustos 2017), 417-435.

<sup>2</sup> Uğur Mumcu, *Rabıta* (İstanbul: Uğur Mumcu Vakfı Yayınları, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Bekir Altun, *Selefilik-Vehhabilik ve Türkiye’deki Faaliyetleri* (İstanbul: İstanbul Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, Master’s, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Adem Özköse, “Türkiyeli Selefiler tekfir mi?”, *Tevhid Haber* (24 Temmuz 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Ruşen Çakır, “Yeni Selefilik tartışmasına devam”, *Haber, Gazetevatan* (20 Mart 2014); Ruşen Çakır, “Selefileri beklerken”, *rusencakir.com* (03 Kasım 2014); Francesco Cavatorta - Fabio Merone (ed.), *Salafism After the Arab Awakening: Contending with People’s Power* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017).

the internet and the influence of social media which have facilitated the dissemination of Salafi ideas.<sup>6</sup>

In Türkiye, there are now several Salafi groups and young Salafi preachers, now range from the most moderate to the most radical. Abu Hanzala (Halis Bayancuk), Murat Gezenler,<sup>7</sup> Abu Haris (Ramazan Oral),<sup>8</sup> Muhammed Ceyhan,<sup>9</sup> Abdulkadir Polat,<sup>10</sup> Abu Ubeyde (İlyas Aydın),<sup>11</sup> and Musa Olgaç<sup>12</sup> are just a few among them. In particular, Abu Hanzala, the founder of the Tawhid and Sunnah Community (Turkish: Tevhid ve Sünnet Cemaati), has significantly contributed to the institutionalization of Salafism in Türkiye and is among the most influential young Salafi preachers who ideologically nourish various groups of Salafism. The main characteristic of this particular Salafi group is its occasional emphasis on jihadist aspects, with a rigid takfiri<sup>13</sup> orientation. This group prioritizes political issues and adopts a structured approach. Their prominent leader, Abu Hanzala, has profoundly influenced the ideological framework of jihadist Salafism in Türkiye, particularly shaping the worldview of young individuals who have joined organizations like Al-Qaeda or ISIS or who have traveled to conflict zones for jihad. Many of those who sympathize with Al-Qaeda or who have journeyed from Türkiye to Syria to fight have been significantly impacted by Abu Hanzala's religious discourse.<sup>14</sup>

The framework utilized to analyze Abu Hanzala's religious, political, and jihadist discourse in this study is based on the classification proposed by Quintan Wiktorowicz. According to Wiktorowicz, Salafis can be categorized into three main groups: purists, politicians, and jihadists. Purists primarily focus on educational initiatives and personal purification, regarding politics as a deviation from their core beliefs. They emphasize the foundational principles of Salafi thought, distancing themselves from violence and positioning themselves

<sup>6</sup> Mehmet Aksürmeli, "The Proliferation of Non-Mainstream Islam on the Web: The Case of Turkish Preaching Videos on YouTube with Reference to the Videos of Ebu Hanzala", *İlahiyat Akademi* 5 (2017), 225-238.

<sup>7</sup> For his Youtube account, see "Şehadet Mektebi" (Erişim 20 Haziran 2023).

<sup>8</sup> For his Youtube account, see "Vasat Kitabevi" (Erişim 22 Temmuz 2024).

<sup>9</sup> For his Youtube account, see "Muhammed Ceyhan Hoca" (Erişim 22 Haziran 2023).

<sup>10</sup> For his Youtube account, see "Abdulkadir Polat" (Erişim 22 Haziran 2023).

<sup>11</sup> For his Youtube account, see "Ebu Ubeyde Hoca" (Erişim 23 Haziran 2023).

<sup>12</sup> For his Youtube account, see "Sosyal Davet" (Erişim 24 Temmuz 2023).

<sup>13</sup> Halil Aydınalp, "Çağdaş Kural Dışı Tekfirciliğin Yapısal Unsurları Üzerine Bir Model Denemesi-I", *Marmara Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 49/49 (2016), 168.

<sup>14</sup> Süleyman Erdem, *Cihatçılar El Kaide ve IŞİD'e Katılanların Hikayesi* (İstanbul: Yakın Plan Yayınları, 2016), 211-232; Doğu Eroğlu, *İşid Ağları Türkiye'de Radikalleşme, Örgütlenme, Lojistik* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2018), 256-268.

as pioneers dedicated to purifying Islam and maintaining the concept of tawhid—monotheism pure of what they see as idolatry and association of God with the creation—from corrupt influences and sinful innovations. From this standpoint, they believe that meaningful change will emerge gradually through the enlightenment of individuals.

Politically oriented Salafists, whom Wiktorowicz terms *politicos*, highlight the necessity of implementing the political dimensions of Salafi beliefs. They assert the importance of Allah's exclusive legislative rights, sovereignty, and the principle of divine governance. While purists eschew political violence and involvement, they claim to occupy a distinct realm compared to the broader world. *Politicos*, on the other hand, see it as their moral obligation to engage in political discourse and critique non-Islamic rulers and policies. They argue that preserving the purity of Islam depends on addressing political issues and assert that they possess a deeper understanding of contemporary affairs, which enables them to critique the prevailing regimes in their host countries robustly.

Jihadist Salafists, recognized for their militant approach, assert that the use of violence and revolutionary methods is essential for expressing their religious beliefs. They firmly maintain that true societal change can only be achieved through fervent jihadist actions. Although these groups share a fundamental doctrine, Wiktorowicz points out that they differ significantly in their interpretations of how religious practices should manifest in the modern world.<sup>15</sup>

The primary objective of this research is to examine the jihadist dimensions of the Salafi movement in Turkey by analyzing Abu Hanzala's religious beliefs. A qualitative approach has been chosen to investigate the underlying processes, aiming to reveal implicit sociological meanings and previously unheard perspectives. This study employs document analysis as its data collection method, utilizing a systematic approach to review and evaluate printed and electronic materials.<sup>16</sup>

In this study, the primary sources of information consist of texts authored by Abu Hanzala, complemented by secondary sources. Furthermore, the Tawhid and Sunnah Community, known for its effective use of digital media, disseminates numerous speeches and religious discussions by Abu Hanzala

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<sup>15</sup> Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29/3 (2005), 208-222.

<sup>16</sup> J. W. Heyink - Tj. Tymstra, "The Function of Qualitative Research", *Social Indicators Research* 29/3 (1993), 193; Paul Ten Have, *Understanding Qualitative Research and Ethnology* (London; Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2004), 4-5.

online. Consequently, this research has also incorporated videos from various digital platforms. The objective of this study is to examine the development of jihad-oriented Salafism in Türkiye and to clarify the theo-political identity of Jihadist Salafism.

This study uses document analysis as the data collection technique, which involves a systematic procedure to review and evaluate both printed and electronic materials. In this context, the primary sources of information utilized in this study are the texts authored by Abu Hanzala himself, followed by secondary sources. Additionally, the Tawhid and Sunnah Community, known for the effective use of digital media, share many of Abu Hanzala's speeches and religious discussions on the internet. Because of this, videos from digital platforms are also used here. This study aims to capture the formation process of jihad-oriented Salafism in Türkiye and reveal the theo-political identity of Jihadist Salafism.

## 1. An Overview of Salafism

Since the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers by the Al-Qaeda organization on September 11, 2001, questions about the nature of Salafism, its definition, and its origins have been central to ongoing debates. In Islamic history, the periods of the *Sahaba* (the companions of the Prophet Muhammad), the *Tabi'un* (the followers of the Sahaba), and the *Tabi'u't-Tabi'in* (the followers of the *Tabi'un*) hold significant importance. These first three generations of Muslims, representing the earliest years of Islam, were characterized by the emerging religion's foundational experiences and established what would be considered the "correct way of life" for future Muslims. Collectively, these periods are known as the era of the *Salaf-i Salihin* (pious predecessors) or the period that produced the Salafi *minhaj* (methodology, with emphasis on practicing Islam solely per the forms which are recorded in direct lineage from the Prophet and the first three generations of Muslims).<sup>17</sup> The individuals from this period are regarded with particular significance among Muslims, as they encapsulate the religion's foundational experience and serve as witnesses to the

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<sup>17</sup> John L. Esposito, "Contemporary Islam Reformation or Revolution?", *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 683; Hammond, "Salafi Thought in Turkish Public Discourse Since 1980", 418; Roel Meijer (ed.), *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 2; Oliver Scharbrodt, *Muhammad 'Abduh: Modern Islam and the Culture of Ambiguity* (London New York Oxford: I.B. Tauris, 2022), 177; Mehmet Zeki İřcan, *Selefilik: İslami K tenciliđin Tarihi Temelleri* (İstanbul: Kitap Yayınevi, 2024).

earthly manifestation of Allah’s Will.<sup>18</sup> Nearly all Muslims worldwide consider this period, the period of “*pious predecessors*” who experienced the establishment of the faith firsthand, the Companions, and the two generations that followed them, as the primary source of legitimate religious authority or religious legitimacy.<sup>19</sup>

It should be noted that the understanding of Salaf-i Salihin, which can be described as a common spirit and thought process among Muslims since the emergence of Islam, has not been transformed into a specific or established practical or doctrinal methodology.

For the most part, that description of the methodology of the pious predecessors remained a broad, encompassing framework that serves as a reference point for Muslims without adopting a fixed or rigid structure. This disputed hermeneutic is precisely why it isn't easy to talk or write about Salafism.

The understanding of Salafism began to gain ideological meaning with the attacks of the Christian Crusaders from the West and the invasion of the pagan Mongols from the East. Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328), was an Islamic scholar- who witnessed the attacks coming from both the East and the West in the 13th century, and introduced a new methodology together with his student Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (1292–1350) to strengthen the faith of Muslims and ensure social cohesion.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, Ibn Taymiyya can be considered the original architect of the modern Salafî movement because the views of almost all Salafist movements in the fields of theology and law are based on his, and he is often referenced.<sup>21</sup>

Ibn Taymiyya, in his methodology, centered the following points while advocating the absolute distinction between the Creator and the created, adherence to divine revelation as a self-sufficient system, and a focus on the

<sup>18</sup> Mohamed Bin Ali, *The Roots Of Religious Extremism, Understanding The Salafî Doctrine Of Al-Wala’ Wal Bara’* (London: Imperial College Press, 2015), 42-43.

<sup>19</sup> Emad Hamdeh, *Salafism and Traditionalism: Scholarly Authority in Modern Islam* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 24-25.

<sup>20</sup> Walid Phares, *Future Jihad: Terrorist Strategies Against the West* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2006), 53; Bernard Haykel, “On the Nature of Salafî Thought and Action”, *Global Salafism: Islam’s New Religious Movement*, ed. Roel Meijer (Oxford University Press, 2014), 38; Ebû’l-Abbâs Takîyyüddîn Ahmed b. Abdülhalîm İbn Teymiyye, *Dekâiku’t-Tefsîr* (Dımaşk: Müessesetü Ulûmi’l-Kur’an, 1984), 2/473; Ebû’l-Abbâs Takîyyüddîn Ahmed b. Abdülhalîm İbn Teymiyye, *el-Fetâvâ el-Kübra* (Beyrut: Daru’l-Kütübi’l-İlmiyye, 1987), 6/472.

<sup>21</sup> Richard Gauvain, *Salafî Ritual Purity: In the Presence of God* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012), 6-7; İsmail Akkoyunlu, “İbn Teymiyye’de Selef ve Selefiyye Kavramları”, *Cumhuriyet İlahiyat Dergisi* 23/1 (2019), 545-562; İşcan, *Selefilik: İslami Köktencilğin Tarihi Temelleri*.

Sunnah as interpreted through the writings and actions of the Pious Predecessors:<sup>22</sup>

- The rapid spread of the Islamic state during the time of the Prophet resulted from the perspective of the pious predecessors, the Salafis, who understood and followed the correct way of life. Behind this success lay the formula of the *Salaf-i Salihin*. Therefore, the right path and method that Muslims should follow are the path and the method of the *Salaf-us Salihin*. The manifestation of divine guidance is possible through literal adherence to Islam. Muslims should strictly apply all commandments and legal prohibitions found in the Quran and Hadith, as implemented and understood as Sharia by the Pious Predecessors. Any discrepancy in this regard may hinder the fulfillment of the divine mission.
- Muslims must adhere strictly and literally to the teachings of Allah and His messenger. However, merely becoming Muslim and adhering to the five pillars of Islam is not sufficient to gain the approval of the Creator and maintain an Islamic state. It is essential to follow the path of the pious predecessors, the *Salaf-i Salihin*. Those who do not follow the way of the Salafis are considered disbelievers, apostates, or deviants.

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Peace cannot be made with infidels; it is impossible to make peace with them or to live in peace.<sup>23</sup> Thus, the fundamental purpose of the Salafi movement, under the leadership of Ibn Taymiyya, was to make Islam a dynamic force.<sup>24</sup> According to him, the weakening of the Islamic world and its inability to respond to attacks was due to deviating from Islam and indulging in sinful innovations.

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<sup>22</sup> James Pavlin, "Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328)", *Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World* (United States: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004), 338.

<sup>23</sup> Phares, *Future Jihad: Terrorist Strategies Against the West*, 53-54.

<sup>24</sup> John O. Voll, "Salafiyye", *Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World*, ed. Richard C. Martin (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2003), 609.



With Ibn Taymiyya, the Salafi understanding began to take shape as a puritanical movement calling for a return to the time of the Prophet Muhammad and the first three generations of Muslims, known as the *Salaf-us-Salihin*. Salafism advocates a return to the original Islamic beliefs and practices as the sole basis for Shariah or law. According to this perspective, the only legitimate sources of Islam are the Quran, the sayings of the Prophet (Hadith), and the practices of the Salaf-us-Salihin. From this period onwards, those who identified themselves as Salafis started to consider it illegitimate to refer to Islamic sources from outside of this era. They even began to perceive practices arising after the first three generations of Islam as innovations (*bid'a*) or sinful changes.<sup>25</sup> In the context of Salafism, Ibn Taymiyya not only established a new methodology but also created a general framework to which all subsequent Salafi groups would refer concerning issues such as jihad or takfir. Thus, the terms “Salaf-us-Salihin” and “Salafi movement” began to diverge.<sup>26</sup>

The 18th and 19th centuries were important milestones in the historical context of Salafism. Until the 18th century, the term “Salafi Salihin” referred to the “*correct way of life*” or a source of inspiration for all Muslims. Subsequently, it started to acquire a specific meaning and be understood as the path and method of those who identified themselves as Salafi. It should also be emphasized that, behind this differentiation, a sense of underdevelopment and inertia prevailed in the Islamic world. During this period, reformist thinkers, self-identified as Salafi or following the methodology of the Pious Predecessors, emerged declaring their intention to rescue the Islamic world from its adverse conditions. Among these thinkers were key figures such as Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, and Rashid Rida. Their views were greatly influenced by the ideas of Ibn Taymiyya and his student Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya. Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, in particular, had a decisive impact on the formation of 18th century Salafi thought and the shaping of the Salafism of future generations.<sup>27</sup> The historical trajectory of Salafi thought shifted in a different direction with the efforts of thinkers like al-Afghani, Abduh, and Rida.

<sup>25</sup> Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, *Incitement: Anwar al-Awlaki's Western Jihad* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2020), 13.

<sup>26</sup> Akkoyunlu, “İbn Teymiyye'de Selef ve Selefiyye Kavramları”. Mohammad Abu Rumman, *I am a Salafi. A study of the Actual and Imagined Identities of Salafis* (Amman: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Jordan & Iraq, 2014), 57; Henri Lauzière, “The Construction of Salafiyya: Reconsidering Salafism From the Perspective of Conceptual History”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42/3 (Ağustos 2010), 371-373.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Cook, “Muhammed b. Abdülvehhab”, *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi*, ed. Komisyon (Ankara: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 2020), 30/490.

They shared a common characteristic of attempting to understand Islam through the methodology of Salafism to capture the purity they believed existed in Islam's early period. The path to and method for salvation for the Islamic world, they held, lay in reforming Islam by purging it of innovations and superstitions, rejecting blind imitation, and returning to its sources.<sup>28</sup> According to Lauzière, the reason for preferring this method was the desire to gain the support of the people and establish grounds for legitimacy by benefiting from the legitimacy of Islam's early period.<sup>29</sup>

By the 19th century, Salafi thought began to exhibit significant differentiation. During this period, five core principles emerged as defining characteristics of Salafism: 1. A clear opposition to Sufism. 2. The rejection of Sunni theological schools such as Ash'ariyya and Maturidiyya, regarded as theological innovations (*bid'a*). 3. A strong emphasis on the belief that faith is inherently connected to deeds (*ameli iman*). 4. The adoption of a threefold concept of tawhid, which signifies the oneness of God. 5. A distinction between "acts of polytheism" (*ameli shirk*) and "acts of disbelief" (*ameli kufr*). These principles collectively shaped the evolving understanding of Salafism during this era.<sup>30</sup> Thus, Salafi's thought, which began with Ibn Taymiyya and continued with Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, reached a new stage. By the 20th century, the Salafi movement had evolved to span a wide spectrum, ranging from the most moderate to the most radical positions. However, in this process, jihadist Salafi groups, prioritizing conflict and war in their beliefs, established intellectual hegemony over the broader Salafi community.

Salafi thought has its roots in the works of Ibn Taymiyya and was further developed by Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab. By the 20th century, the Salafi movement entered a new stage marked by significant diversification, featuring various interpretations ranging from moderate to radical. During this time, jihadist Salafi groups—who emphasize conflict and warfare as central tenets of their ideology—attained intellectual dominance within the broader Salafi community. While Salafis differ in their understanding, practice, and application of religious principles, they are united by a shared belief system. This system revolves around five fundamental concepts: *tawhid* (the oneness of Allah), *aqida* (creed), *takfir* (ex-communication), *jihad* (struggle), and *wala'-wal-bara'*

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<sup>28</sup> Scharbrodt, *Muhammad 'Abduh: Modern Islam and the Culture of Ambiguity*, 177.

<sup>29</sup> Lauzière, "The Construction of Salafiyya: Reconsidering Salafism From the Perspective of Conceptual History", 370.

<sup>30</sup> Hilmi Demir, "Selef mi Seleflik mi?", *Türkiye Gazetesi* (19 Eylül 2020).

(loyalty and disavowal).<sup>31</sup> Salafism encompasses a shared set of foundational beliefs; however, interpretations and applications of these principles can vary in the contemporary context. This diversity enables the classification of Salafis into three distinct groups: purists, politicians, and jihadists. As a result, a range of Salafi preachers and organizations is present in Türkiye. A recent report from Türkiye's National Intelligence Organization (MİT) estimates that there are between 10,000 and 20,000 radical Salafis within the country..<sup>32</sup> However, due to their closed and secretive socio-religious structures, it is difficult to know their exact numbers. One of the major Salafi groups operating in Türkiye today is the Tawhid and Sunnah Community, which was founded by Halis Bayancuk.

## 2. Abu Hanzala's Life

The biographical narrative of a political movement's leader serves as a compelling initiatory juncture for elucidating the broader narrative of the movement.<sup>33</sup> Halis Bayancuk, originally from Bingöl, was born in 1984 as the son of a Kurdish father who was a member of the militant, Islamist, and Sunni religious group<sup>34</sup> known as Kurdish Hizballah, which mainly operates in the eastern and southeastern regions of Türkiye and consists primarily of Kurds. Abu Hanzala's father, Hacı Bayancuk, known as "Hafız," was convicted for his activities with Kurdish Hizballah and released in 2016. Hacı Bayancuk was not a mere ordinary member of this Hizballah organization; he was noted to be a part of the political wing of the group and considered one of the potential candidates for leadership after the death of Kurdish Hizballah's leader, Hüseyin Veliöğlü.

Hizballah was established in 1979 by Veliöğlü to overthrow the Republic of Turkey's regime through armed struggle and establish a state governed by Islamic Sharia in its place. Operating predominantly in the Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia regions, where Kurds were densely populated, and state oppression was more acutely felt, from 1979 until 2000, Hizballah fell silent for a period following the assassination of its leader Veliöğlü on January 17, 2000. The organization concluded its armed activities in 2003 due to the majority of its leadership either dying or being imprisoned. From this point onwards, Hizballah initiated activities in the legal sphere and, on September 16, 2004,

<sup>31</sup> Jarret M. Brachman, *Global Jihadism: Theory and Practice* (London; New York: Routledge, 2008), 22-49.

<sup>32</sup> İsmail Saymaz, "MİT'in Selefi Raporu", *Sözcü Gazetesi* (Erişim 05 Kasım 2022).

<sup>33</sup> Mehmet Kurt, *Kurdish Hizballah in Turkey: Islamism, Violence and the State* (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 16.

<sup>34</sup> Senem Aydın - Ruşen Çakır, "Turkey: A sustainable Case of de-Radicalisation?", *Islamist Radicalisation The Challenge For Euro Mediterranean Relations* (Brussels: Centre for European Policy Studies, 2009), 101.

established an association named “Mustazaflarla Dayanışma Derneği” (Association for Solidarity with the Oppressed), abbreviated as Mustazaf-Der headquartered in Diyarbakır. This association was closed by the Supreme Court on March 29, 2012, because it operated in line with the objectives of the Hizballah organization. Subsequently, to continue its association activities, Hizballah established an organization called “İnsan Haklarını Koruma, Gençlik, Eğitim, Kültür ve Dayanışma Derneği” (Association for the Protection of Human Rights, Youth, Education, Culture, and Solidarity), abbreviated as Mustazaflar Cemiyeti, based in Batman. By the year 2013, Hizballah had transitioned into the political arena and founded the Free Cause Party, abbreviated as HÜDAPAR. Having entered the political sphere, Hizballah continues its propaganda activities effectively using written and visual media outlets both domestically and internationally.<sup>35</sup>

The idea of opposition to the state within the Hezbollah organization has existed to some extent since its establishment, supported by Salafî arguments and Ikhwanist. Functioning within a state governed by a regime deemed as ‘taught,’ thereby categorizing Turkey as dar al-harb, persistent debates have ensued regarding matters such as the feasibility of conducting congregational Friday prayers in Turkey and the question of whether taxes should be remitted to the Turkish state.<sup>36</sup>

From the moment of his birth, Abu Hanzala was brought up within Kurdish Hizballah, one of Türkiye’s enigmatic radical organizations. During his formative years in middle school, Abu Hanzala engaged in religious education programs conducted in mosques known to be affiliated with or influenced by Hizballah. These programs played a significant role in shaping his early religious upbringing. He completed his middle school and high school education “in the schools of the Republic of Türkiye, which are the ‘modern temples of Taghut servitude,’ like every person living in the Taghut system and not sensitive to this issue,” in his own words. During those middle and high school years, Abu Hanzala became affiliated with the Hizbullah organization under his father's influence and received religious instruction from the group’s mentors. He completed his education at Diyarbakır Imam Hatip High School.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Ahmet Aktaş, “Türkiye Hizbullahının Siyasal Dönüşümü”, *Şırnak Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 28, (2022); Suleyman Ozeren - Cécile Van De Voorde, “Turkish Hizballah: A Case Study of Radical Terrorism”, *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice* 30/1 (01 Mart 2006), 81-85; Kurt, *Kurdish Hizbullah in Turkey*.

<sup>36</sup> Kurt, *Kurdish Hizbullah in Turkey*, 41.

<sup>37</sup> Ebu Hanzala, “Cezaevi Röportajı”, *Tevhid Dergisi Cezaevi Özel Sayısı* (Ocak 2015), 7.

Abu Hanzala's intellectual world was influenced by several figures, one of whom was Mehmet Göktaş<sup>38</sup> from Kayseri, who shared an understanding of religion similar to that of Hizbullah. Because of his father's position within the Kurdish Hizbullah organization, Abu Hanzala's family had to constantly change cities, at one point moving to Kayseri, where Abu Hanzala would receive religious education from Göktaş. Again, in Abu Hanzala's own words:

“Due to my father being sought after, we had to constantly change cities. While in Kayseri, I met Mehmed Göktaş Hodja, a renowned scholar there. During my time there, I requested to receive lessons from Hodja... He was very helpful to me in this regard... We constantly prayed for him.”<sup>39</sup>

Göktaş, who was once close to Hizbullah and also served as the editor-in-chief of the *Doğruhaber Gazetesi* newspaper, continues to write religious articles and books.<sup>40</sup>

Another influential figure in Abu Hanzala's intellectual world was Molla Enver Kılıçarslan. Kılıçarslan, who hails from Diyarbakır and holds the position of General Chairman in the Union of Scholars and Madrasahs (Turkish: Alimler ve Medreseler Birliği), is also counted among the instructors of Hizbullah. During this period, Abu Hanzala, who had been forced to move to Istanbul, took lessons from Molla Enver, who lived in the same apartment building. In his own words, Abu Hanzala said:

“I stayed in Istanbul for about a year. We were neighbors with a well-known religious scholar from the East in the apartment building in which we stayed. Due to the increasing pressure on the Islamic community and the fact that most of the people we lived with were wanted, we were constantly confined within four walls. During this time, I took lessons from Molla Enver.” Kılıçarslan had a prominent position among the influential instructors of Abu Hanzala concerning Islamic methodology. Furthermore, he demonstrated comprehensive knowledge regarding the writings and ideas of Said Nursi, which hold a significant place among the foundational reference texts of Hizbullah.<sup>41</sup> After leaving Istanbul, Abu Hanzala returned to Diyarbakır, where he began receiving lessons from a teacher who had graduated from Tillo Madrasah, one of the renowned madrasahs in the eastern region of Türkiye, and was affiliated with the Nur Community. He also extensively studied the *Risale-i Nur*, a collection of

<sup>38</sup> For his Twitter account, see “Mehmet Göktaş (@goktasmehmet) / X”, *X (formerly Twitter)* (Erişim 22 Temmuz 2023).

<sup>39</sup> Hanzala, “Cezaevi Röportajı”, 7.

<sup>40</sup> Haber Merkezi, “Mehmed Göktaş: Hizbullah Camiasının Temsil Edilmediği Hiçbir Çözüm Süreci, Hiçbir Anlaşma Geçerli Değildir”, *İslami Analiz* (Ekim 2014).

<sup>41</sup> Kurt, *Kurdish Hizbullah in Turkey*, 17.

writings of Said Nursi.<sup>42</sup> During this period, he also read the tafsir “Fi Zilal’il Qur’an” by Sayyid Qutb, who was greatly influenced by the ideas of Ibn Taymiyya and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab.<sup>43</sup> Growing up in the atmosphere of Hizballah’s radical Islamist interpretation of Islam, Abu Hanzala began to radicalize and adopt Salafist beliefs from this period onwards.<sup>44</sup>

Musa Olgaç, also known as Musa Abu Cafer, is recognized as another influential figure in the intellectual world of Abu Hanzala. He was born on May 10, 1974, and is originally from Mardin. In 1992, Olgaç traveled to Damascus, where he received three years of religious education at El-Furkan Madrasah. Later, he went to Egypt and enrolled in the Faculty of Sharia at Al-Azhar University, completing a four-year course of study and obtaining his degree. However, he encountered legal issues in Egypt, leading to his arrest and subsequent deportation to Türkiye. Upon returning to Türkiye, he was briefly involved in missionary activities. In 2011, Olgaç traveled to Afghanistan and participated in the “jihad” there. He spent approximately two and a half years in Afghanistan before traveling to Syria and joining Al-Qaeda.<sup>45</sup> His intellectual impact on Abu Hanzala’s thinking is significant, and his life trajectory reflects his involvement in various religious and political contexts in different countries. Olgaç, who is wanted in Türkiye due to his opposition to Atatürk, the Republic, and secularism, had a close relationship with Abu Hanzala during his time in Egypt.<sup>46</sup> However, their ideologies diverged later on, and Olgaç criticized Abu Hanzala for his “radical” and “takfiri” views. He is one of the instructors of the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham organization and currently continues his religious activities in the Idlib region of Syria.

Abu Hanzala completed his high school education in Türkiye and then, following the guidance of his father, he went to Egypt to further his knowledge and expertise in the field of religion. He registered at Al-Azhar University but later decided not to complete his education there. Specifically, Abu Hanzala withdrew from Al-Azhar University due to his belief that it was under the control of “taghut,” or tyrannical powers, and supervised by scholars approved by the taghut. Instead, he participated in activities at Salafi-oriented mosques in Egypt,

<sup>42</sup> Hanzala, “Cezaevi Röportajı”, 8.

<sup>43</sup> Wiktorowicz, “Anatomy of the Salafi Movement”, 222.

<sup>44</sup> Hanzala, “Cezaevi Röportajı”, 9.

<sup>45</sup> Abdussamed Dağül, “Duyuru - Abdussamed Dağül, Gündemle Alakalı Musa Hoca ile Röportajı” (21 Haziran 2023).

<sup>46</sup> Haber Merkezi, “Atatürk ve cumhuriyeti hedef alan Musa Ebu Cafer, İçişleri Bakanlığı’nın terör listesinde El Kaide üyesi olarak aranıyor”, Haber, *T24* (12 Şubat 2022); Onur Güler, *Ortadoğu’yu Savunmak yahut Işid/Daeş Hukuku* (İstanbul: Step Ajans, 2021), 85.

remaining in the country for approximately 4 years and 8 months. During this time, he had contact with various Salafi groups operating in Egypt, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Takfir wal-Hijra. He resided in the same neighborhood as people coming from Azerbaijan and Dagestan, and he engaged in activities with close-knit Salafi groups associated with them.<sup>47</sup>

Abu Hanzala's intellectual journey reflects a trajectory influenced by a radical Islamist mindset. Having been exposed to such an environment in his formative years, he pursued further religious education in Egypt, where he encountered and embraced Salafi ideology. This alignment with Salafi's principles led him to become more deeply involved with Salafi-oriented activities and communities. However, it is worth noting that Abu Hanzala also faced challenges and tensions with Salafi groups that maintained close ties to Saudi Arabia, possibly due to differences in interpretations or approaches within the Salafi movement. Further research and analysis are required to gain a comprehensive understanding of the specific dynamics and reasons behind these encounters. During his time in Egypt, Abu Hanzala engaged in the dissemination of selected passages from the work titled "*The Mainstay on Preparing Provisions for Jihad*" ('Umda (al-) fi i`dad al-'udda li'l-jihad fi sabil Allah ta'ala) written by Abd al-Qadir bin Abd al-Aziz, a prominent founding member of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad led by Ayman al-Zawahiri. This activity brought him into conflict with Salafi groups with close ties to Saudi Arabia, who accused him of adopting "Kharijite" and excommunication/takfiri stances. As a consequence, he faced multiple complaints at different points in time. In 2006, Abu Hanzala returned to Türkiye, and due to the complaints and legal issues he faced, he did not return to the countries he had previously resided in.<sup>48</sup>

In 2007, Abu Hanzala began his Salafi missionary activities in the Bayrampaşa district of Istanbul, Türkiye. He referred to the mosques affiliated with the Republic of Türkiye as Masjid al-Dirar, or Mosques of Dissent,<sup>49</sup> and expanded his activities by opening offices under the name "Tawhid Mosques" in different cities across Türkiye, including Istanbul, Bursa, and Van. Through these offices, he propagated his radical, takfiri, and political Salafi interpretation of Islam and aimed to establish his congregation.

The first time Abu Hanzala's name was heard among the Turkish public was when he was accused of being the "*leader of al-Qaeda in Türkiye*" and subsequently arrested. In 2008, 2011, and 2014, Abu Hanzala was arrested and

<sup>47</sup> "Ebu Hanzala (Hâlis Bayancuk) ile Röportaj | Furkân bin Abdullah [2013]", haz. Dâru'l Hilâfeti'l Aliyye Medresesi.

<sup>48</sup> "Ebu Hanzala (Hâlis Bayancuk) ile Röportaj | Furkân bin Abdullah [2013]".

<sup>49</sup> "Ebu hanzala Mescidi Dirar", haz. muaz036.

sent to prison. He spent a total of 4 years in prison in that period, serving 13 months after the first arrest, two years after the second, and 10 months after the third before being released.<sup>50</sup>

After 2014, allegations emerged that Abu Hanzala had become the leader of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Türkiye. As a result, he was taken into custody again on July 23, 2015, as part of an operation against ISIS, and subsequently arrested. However, he was released on March 24, 2016. He was arrested for the fifth time on August 26, 2016, and later released. On March 8, 2017, due to the cancelation of a panel organized in Ankara by the governorship in which he was supposed to participate as a speaker, Abu Hanzala accused governorship employees of being “polytheists” and threatened public employees, stating: “*We will not stand idle either.*” As a result of this threat, he was arrested for the sixth time.<sup>51</sup> On May 30, 2017, he was arrested for the seventh time, accused of being a senior executive of ISIS, and on June 7, 2017, he was arrested again. He has been frequently tried with demands for life imprisonment. In a trial on April 9, 2020, he was granted release; however, before he left the prison, a new arrest warrant was issued, and he was arrested again. After spending approximately 3 years in prison, he was released on July 10, 2023.

Abu Hanzala gained significant public attention in 2015 when he led the Eid al-Fitr prayer at the Ömerli Dam location in the Çekmeköy district of Istanbul. Starting in 2014, Salafi groups in Türkiye had begun to gather on the occasion of Eid al-Fitr prayers and express their views through the sermons they delivered. In 2014, the Eid al-Fitr prayer led by Mustafa Yağbasa,<sup>52</sup> one of the prominent preachers of Salafi thought in Türkiye, was perceived by the public as a “*call for jihad*” by Salafi organizations.<sup>53</sup> In 2015, Abu Hanzala led the Eid al-Fitr prayer. Self-described as an “*Islamic Inviter,*” Abu Hanzala said in his speech during the prayer that the Republic of Türkiye had a polytheistic system and, therefore, should be considered a “*taghut*” entity. He further stated: “You say, ‘We educate children to be secular, democratic, and loyal to the Constitution.’ We, on the other hand, consider this as disbelief, and idolatry, and for this reason, we do not send our children to your schools.” He further added:

<sup>50</sup> Doğu Eroğlu, “‘Ebu Hanzala’: İŞİD’in ‘Türkiye emiri’ değil, vaizlerin en etkilisi”, (11 Kasım 2017).

<sup>51</sup> Helin Şahin, “‘Ebu Hanzala’ kod adlı Halis Bayuncuk gözaltına alındı”, (08 Mart 2017).

<sup>52</sup> For his Twitter account, see “Mustafa Yağbasa (@MustafaYagbasa) / X”, X (formerly Twitter) (Erişim 22 Ağustos 2023).

<sup>53</sup> Sema Kızıllarlan, “Yedi Yıl Sonra Ömerli hutbesi: Cihat Çağrısı Var mı, Yok mu?”, *Medyascope*, 23 Kasım 2021.



“Believers fight in the way of Allah, while unbelievers fight for taghut. After calling you ‘taghut,’ we will not come and serve in the military for you.” He further expressed his political stance by saying: “We do not vote, because the right to govern belongs to the Creator. You are pitiful beings who dispute with the Creator about governing.” In this way, he shared his political views with other Salafi groups and the Turkish public.<sup>54</sup>

Abu Hanzala founded the Tawhid and Sunnah Community in different cities, which seeks to recruit new members through the monthly publication of “Tawhid Magazine” and the aforementioned “Tawhid Mosques.” It is among Türkiye’s most influential and well-organized Salafi groups. The community continues to propagate its politically oriented Salafi interpretation of religion through video recordings published on the internet and street interviews.<sup>55</sup> We will address the issue of how to classify Abu Hanzala’s Salafism within the framework of concepts such as jihad.

### 3. Abu Hanzala’s Jihadist İdeology

One of the most debated concepts of the modern world is jihad. “Jihad” has a general and comprehensive meaning, including learning and living according to religious commandments, teaching others, enjoining good and forbidding evil, spreading Islam, and engaging in self-defense and resistance against external enemies; it possesses meanings such as working, making an effort, and struggling.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, the concept of jihad, being variable and thus ambiguous, has been a subject of discussion regarding against whom it should be directed, how it should be carried out, and when it is appropriate.<sup>57</sup> The popularity and politicization of jihad gained particular significance with the emergence of the Soviet-Afghan War, in the context of establishing an Islamic state or Caliphate.<sup>58</sup> This conflict became a turning point for perceptions of jihad. Within the framework of the Salafi movement, the essence of Islam is believed to revolve around faith and the act of jihad. According to this perspective, after embracing the faith, one’s duty is to engage in a sacred war against the enemy.

<sup>54</sup> Haber Merkezi, “‘Ömerli’de İŞİD’den bayram namazı’ iddiası!”, [www.haberturk.com](http://www.haberturk.com) (19 Temmuz 2015).

<sup>55</sup> Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, *Dini Sosyal Teşekküller, Geleneksel Dini-Kültürel Oluşumlar ve Yeni Dini Oluşumlar*, Gizli (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, ts.) (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı).

<sup>56</sup> Ahmet Özel, “Cihad”, *İslam Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 1993), 7/527.

<sup>57</sup> Glenn E. Robinson, *Global Jihad: A Brief History* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2020), 31-32.

<sup>58</sup> Wiktorowicz, “Anatomy of the Salafi Movement”, 235.

The purpose of jihad in this context is to defend Islam and spread it among different communities.<sup>59</sup>

According to Abu Hanzala, who emphasizes that it is the Salafis who are raising the banner of faith and jihad around the world,<sup>60</sup> jihad is the pinnacle of Islam.<sup>61</sup> In fact, those who fight in zones of jihad are considered to have achieved religious salvation; they are referred to as the “Victorious Sect” (Taifetul Mansura), a group that has attained victory in the eyes of Allah.<sup>62</sup> It is worth noting that Abu Hanzala gained particular recognition among Turkish Salafis primarily through his online videos, especially his “Taifetul Mansura” series, which he produced while he was a student in Egypt. In these videos, Abu Hanzala explains his fundamental beliefs, creed, methodology, and understanding of jihad in detail.<sup>63</sup>

In the rhetoric of Abu Hanzala, “jihad” is used in the sense of inviting people to the Quran, disciplining oneself, and engaging in physical, verbal, and financial struggles against disbelievers.<sup>64</sup> However, the striking detail here is that jihad, according to him, also includes the rejection of coexistence with disbelievers or apostates and the elimination of their right to life.<sup>65</sup> In this context, he interprets the Quran as censuring or even forbidding coexistence with the “other” or “those different from us.” According to him, the Quran does not use compromising language. The Quran has come to inspire jihad, warning and awakening people, holding people accountable, breaking idols, exposing frauds, and threatening religious and political authorities other than Allah.<sup>66</sup> By his understanding, there are three stages of struggle: invitation, preparation, and jihad. Once a person completes the preparation stage, it becomes obligatory to engage in jihad against animate or inanimate taghut.<sup>67</sup> However, questions remain regarding when and how actions of jihad should be implemented.

<sup>59</sup> Shiraz Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 39.

<sup>60</sup> Ebu Hanzala, “Malum Olan Meçhul: Tevhid ve Cihad Ehli Selefiler” 13 (Şubat 2013), 14.

<sup>61</sup> Halis Bayancuk, *Tevhid İnançını İnşa Eden Kavramlar* (İstanbul: Tevhid Basım Yayın, 2022), 547; Ebu Hanzala, *Güncel İtikat Meseleleri* (İstanbul: Furkan Basım Yayın, 2013), 231; Ebu Hanzala, *Müslümanların Birbirlerine Karşı Sorumlulukları* (Furkan Basım Yayın, 2014), 284.

<sup>62</sup> Ebu Hanzala, *Tüm Rasullerin Ortak Daveti* (İstanbul: Furkan Basım Yayın, 2013), 24.

<sup>63</sup> Ebu Hanzala, “Taifetu’l Mansura - Tevhid Dersleri”, *Din* (Erişim 18 Haziran 2023).

<sup>64</sup> Halis Bayancuk, *Lailaheillallah* (İstanbul: Tevhid Basım Yayın, ts.), 99.

<sup>65</sup> Ebu Hanzala, *Akaid Dersleri* (İstanbul: Furkan Basım Yayın, 2016), 96.

<sup>66</sup> Bayancuk, *Tevhid İnançını İnşa Eden Kavramlar*, 47.

<sup>67</sup> Hanzala, *Akaid Dersleri*, 40-96.

One of the most significant debates among Salafis in Türkiye in the context of jihad is the stance towards ISIS, which emerged with the onset of the Syrian civil war in 2011. The issue of whether to support or oppose ISIS has become a major concern for Salafis operating in Türkiye, and this discussion has also helped to clarify the distinction between jihadist Salafis and politico Salafis. Salafi preachers such as İlyas Aydın have advocated for supporting ISIS, and Aydın, despite having an arrest warrant issued by the Republic of Türkiye, did not hesitate to support ISIS himself.<sup>68</sup>

It remains unclear whether Abu Hanzala provided support for active participation in the Syrian civil war with the aim of jihad, whether he recruited militants with radical religious teachings for groups such as ISIS, and whether he viewed Syria as a battlefield for jihad. First of all, like all Salafi leaders, Abu Hanzala emphasizes his commitment to the principle of jihad. However, he has opposed active participation in the Syrian civil war with the goal of jihad, stating that the invitation and preparation stages have not yet been completed in Türkiye. Abu Hanzala's refusal to support ISIS is also due to the uncertainty surrounding that organization's creed and methodology. However, he consistently advocates for jihad as a principle and emphasizes in many of his writings and speeches that the fundamental characteristics of Salafis are tawhid and jihad. He has not hesitated to provide "verbal" and "spiritual support" to jihadist organizations in different parts of the world. This has occasionally led to him being interpreted as a jihadist Salafi. For instance, in one of his writings, he states:

"Many mujahideen in various jihad zones continue their struggle without significant financial resources, high-tech weaponry, or adequate ammunition... Despite being faced with the massive armies of some states idolized and considered superpowers by many, the mujahideen have minimal resources and inadequate weapons. Despite this seemingly impossible situation, Muslims are witnessing successes in many places."<sup>69</sup>

Another reason for Abu Hanzala being classified as a jihadist Salafi is his interpretation of the Syrian civil war as a war of creed and his references to the ISIS militants fighting in Syria as "*Muslims*." For example, he has stated that "we need to declare our position; this war is a war of creed (faith) or an ideological battle" and that "many Muslims may not have any connection with ISIS. However, they are our Muslim brothers, and we consider any attack against them as an attack against us. We know that terms like 'takfirism' and 'Kharijism' are targeting our creed. All

<sup>68</sup> Fehim Taştekin, "Türkiye'den IŞİD'e Katılan İlyas Aydın: İstihbarat Servislerinin Gayrimeşru Çocuklarıyız", *BBC News Türkçe* (Ağustos 2019).

<sup>69</sup> Hanzala, *Müslümanların Birbirlerine Karşı Sorumlulukları*, 52.

Muslims should support them. If some are helping the opposing side, they should stop their support. Those who witness people going to the opposing side should prevent them. In this situation, we need to declare our position. I, first bearing witness to Allah, then bearing witness on behalf of all Muslims, and also bearing witness to history, say that I *believe* this war is a war of creed. I am with my brothers with my prayers and support... This issue is a matter of creed.”<sup>70</sup>

At the beginning of the war, Abu Hanzala occasionally showed sympathy with ISIS, but he was also against his members joining that group. In 2014, he wrote an article about the events in Syria in which he described ISIS as a “Muslim group”; he did not view it as entirely legitimate to fight against them. In an editorial published in the “Tawhid Magazine,” this situation was explained as follows:

“The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham cannot be exempt from criticism, nor is it an assembly of angels. In particular, their aggressive stance, detached approach from the groups on the ground, and other factors do not justify declaring any Muslim group more dangerous than Assad and attacking them with a single hand. As Tawhid Magazine, we criticize and continue to criticize the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham for their harsh stance, their attempts to declare a Caliphate, and their coercion of other groups to pledge allegiance to them, as well as their lack of a clear creed and methodology, which opens the door to different interpretations. However, none of these reasons can justify fighting against a Muslim group.”<sup>71</sup>

Thus, Abu Hanzala initially approached ISIS with sympathy at the beginning of the internal conflict in Syria, but later started to distance himself and even urged those who supported ISIS not to attend their gatherings. A certain level of divergence occurred. The reasons for this divergence require further research. Personal experiences and events can also influence such divisions.

In addition, Abu Hanzala criticizes the jihadist Salafi groups in Syria. As a result, the Tawhid and Sunnah Community has felt the need to clarify that it is not opposed to jihad; rather, it simply distances itself from jihadist groups with different beliefs and methods:

“Jihad, like prayers, almsgiving, fasting, and other well-known obligations, is one of Allah’s obligations upon the believers. Our disapproval of the beliefs and

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<sup>70</sup> Güler, *Ortadoğu’yu Savunmak yahut Işid/Daeş Hukuku*, 95-96; Sema Kızırlarlan, “Tevhid ve Sünnet Cemaati Geçmişini Yok Etmeye Devam Ediyor (3): Ebu Hanzala’nın ‘İŞİD’e Karşı Savaşanlar Kâfirdir’ Deddiği Video Her Yerden Kaldırıldı”, Haber, *Medyascope* (22 Mart 2022).

<sup>71</sup> Başyazı, “Suriye’de Yaşananların Değerlendirilmesi”, *Tevhid Dergisi* 30 (Temmuz 2014), 15.

methodologies of jihadist groups is a stance directed towards those groups, not against the concept of jihad itself. We believe that considering our criticism of jihadist groups as being anti-jihad reflects a diseased mentality.”<sup>72</sup>

However, there are also claims that the Tawhid and Sunnah Community actively participated in the Syrian civil war, provided support to certain radical groups in Syria, and recruited militants for those groups.<sup>73</sup> The Tawhid and Sunnah Community vehemently rejects such allegations. It cannot be denied that these claims have arisen due to Abu Hanzala’s conflicting statements at different times regarding the Syrian Civil War and ISIS. Furthermore, the fact that many individuals who sympathize with Abu Hanzala’s radical religious rhetoric have actively participated in the war with the goal of jihad further deepens the suspicions surrounding him.<sup>74</sup>

When Abu Hanzala’s views on tawhid, al-wala wa’l-bara, takfir, and jihad are evaluated as a whole, it can be stated that he aligns with the jihadi-Salafi ideology. The fundamental factor distinguishing a Salafi and categorizing them within the jihadi-Salafi framework is their emphasis on jihad as a central element of their theory and their direct or indirect support for jihadi groups in conflict zones. Specifically, his labeling of all rulers and the majority of the population as polytheists, as well as his characterization of schools affiliated with the Ministry of National Education as “Modern temples of servitude to taghuts”, are key elements that make his inclusion in the jihadi-Salafi category more evident. At the beginning of the Syrian Civil War, Ebu Hanzala made efforts to organize Salafi groups in Türkiye and, during this period, expressed statements in support of jihadi-Salafi organizations such as ISIS. A significant portion of the radical or jihadi-Salafi circles in Turkey have been influenced by his rhetoric. However, negative developments during the Syrian Civil War appear to have significantly impacted Ebu Hanzala’s approach to the war and his support for jihadi organizations. In the early stages of the war, Abu Hanzala engaged in organizational activities among Salafis in Turkey. Unlike many other Salafi preachers and groups, he did not actively encourage his followers to participate in the Syrian conflict; on the contrary, he sought to dissuade them from joining the battlefield. Nonetheless, it is evident that some Salafi groups involved in the conflict were influenced by his jihadi rhetoric. During this period, Ebu Hanzala occasionally expressed support for jihadi-Salafi groups like ISIS and

<sup>72</sup> Tevhid Dergisi, *Biz Kimiz ve Ne İstiyoruz?* (İstanbul: Furkan Basım Yayın, 2016), 76.

<sup>73</sup> Eroğlu, *Işid Ağları Türkiye’de Radikalleşme, Örgütlenme, Lojistik*; International Crisis Group, *Calibrating the Response Turkey’s ISIS Returnees* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 29 Haziran 2020), 7-8.

<sup>74</sup> İsmail Saymaz, *Türkiye’de İŞİD* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2017).

demonstrated a protective attitude towards them. However, there are also signs that Ebu Hanzala has begun to distance himself from the jihadi-Salafi line. While he continues to emphasize jihad as a fundamental principle and a significant duty for Muslims, his actions occasionally suggest a departure from the strict jihadi-Salafi approach. This has sparked discussions about whether he is evolving towards a position distinct from jihadi-Salafism. Nevertheless, based on current evidence, it would be premature to declare a definitive transformation in his ideological stance. In conclusion, Ebu Hanzala's rhetoric and actions indicate that he continues to maintain his connection with jihadi-Salafi ideology. However, his stance during the Syrian Civil War suggests that this connection has acquired a certain flexibility and that his relationship with the jihadi-Salafi framework may be subject to further evolution over time. This situation necessitates more comprehensive studies to determine the future trajectory of his ideological position.

## Conclusion

This study has focused on understanding the emergence of jihadist Salafism in Türkiye, particularly in the context of Abu Hanzala. The research explored the factors that have shaped Abu Hanzala's thought processes and led him to develop an eclectic mindset while adhering firmly to Salafi's principles. It has been seen that the formation of his worldview has been influenced not only by Salafi literature and the existing political and religious atmosphere but also by other significant factors such as his past affiliation with Hizbullah, his experiences in Egypt, and the pressures he has faced in Türkiye. These factors have also played pivotal roles in his journey towards jihadist Salafism.

Abu Hanzala was born in a region historically rooted in Salafism and heavily influenced by Ibn Taymiyyah. Although the jihadi Salafi movement, which we began discussing more frequently in the early 2000s, is relatively new in Turkey, Salafi thought has deep historical roots in this region. Ibn Taymiyyah, considered the father of Salafism, was born in Harran in 1263, five years after the fall of Baghdad and the de facto end of the Abbasid Caliphate. At the age of six, he moved to Damascus to escape persecution by Mongol armies. Ibn Taymiyyah emphasized tawhid and jihad, the struggle against infidels. His books were still found in the mosques and libraries of Damascus as late as the 19th century. As Weismann points out<sup>75</sup>, Salafi thought reemerged in the Damascus region starting in 1880. The re-emergence of Salafism in this area during the late Ottoman period was influenced by reformists in Ottoman Damascus such as

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<sup>75</sup> Itzhak Weismann, *Taste of Modernity: Sufism, Salafiyya, and Arabism in Late Ottoman Damascus* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 264-305.

Abdurrezzak al-Bitar (1837-1916) or Jamal al-Din al-Qasimi (1866-1914), who were driven by their resentment toward Sunni scholars and Sufi sheikhs who served as a bridge between the state and the populace. The alliance established between the Ottoman state and the Sufi structures that formed part of popular Islam disturbed the reformists of that period and pushed them towards new ideological explorations. Salafî thought was adopted anew as a product of these explorations and as a theological expression of dissatisfaction with the Ottoman state. The historical backdrop outlined by Weismann also explains why highly radical Islamist groups, such as Turkish Hezbollah or jihadi Salafis, predominantly emerged in this region. The emergence of Abu Hanzala aligns with the perspective Weismann has presented. The findings of this study provide important insight into the origins of Abu Hanzala's ideas and the dynamics of jihadist Salafism in Türkiye. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of the core dynamics of the jihadist Salafist movement in Türkiye and sheds light on the process of its formation. Additionally, this analysis may offer valuable guidance for efforts to understand similar contexts involving other jihadist Salafî figures and groups.

Like many other Salafî preachers, Abu Hanzala, who adheres strictly to the purist Salafî understanding and literature, is reinterpreting the fundamental principles of Salafism with jihadist consciousness. Similar to Wagemakers' analysis of Al-Maqdisi,<sup>76</sup> Abu Hanzala is expanding the scope of Salafî principles by adapting them to the political and social sphere, thus transforming them into a highly jihadist ideology. In this context, jihadist Salafism reinforces itself through its stance on political issues such as democracy, secularism, and parliamentary systems.

Debates on implementing Salafî principles in Türkiye's social and political life have led to divisions among Salafî groups. Despite sharing the same fundamental principles, Salafis diverge in their religious interpretations and approaches to political issues. For instance, some Salafî groups in Türkiye consider voting for the Justice and Development Party, whose supporters are largely Muslims, to be a legitimate duty, while others interpret it as associating partners with Allah (shirk) and even declare those who vote to be non-believers (takfir). These different religious interpretations can also be observed in the context of principles such as jihad.

Abu Hanzala regards Turkish society as polytheistic. For the time being, he aims to transform society not through armed jihad but rather through political changes that will occur through processes of invitation. He thinks that the

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<sup>76</sup> Joas Wagemakers, "A Purist Jihadi-Salafi: The Ideology of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 36/2 (2009), 296.

conditions for jihad have not yet been met. In this way, he strives to build a community around his Salafi interpretation while also creating a sense of separation from mainstream society. He seeks to isolate and distinguish his community members from the larger society.

Wiktorowicz's theory offers a relevant starting point to understand Salafism in Türkiye; however, categorizing and interpreting all Salafi groups based solely on this threefold distinction would be challenging. This difficulty is due to the significant diversity and variation among Salafi groups in Türkiye. Therefore, conducting fieldwork and in-depth research would help address the need for new definitions and classifications to better comprehend the different facets of Salafism in the country. Furthermore, to better understand and interpret Salafi groups in Türkiye, a more flexible and inclusive approach may be required, acknowledging the diverse characteristics and degrees of differences among these groups. This is crucial to gain a comprehensive understanding of various aspects of the Salafi movement and their implications in Türkiye.

Various Salafi preachers and groups are operating in different fields in Türkiye, ranging from the most moderate to the most radical. Detailed studies involving field research are needed to examine them closely. In particular, ideologically oriented groups or Salafi preachers who have continued their practices under different names after the defeat of ISIS in Iraq and Syria should be subjects of academic research. This type of research would help us better understand the diversity, transformations, and interactions within the Salafi movement in Türkiye. Such studies could also contribute to areas of security and policy, including counterterrorism and the prevention of radicalization. Academic research in this regard could serve as an important tool for comprehending the motivations, strategies, and social impacts of these groups, which currently influence different segments of society.



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