

Framing Orthodoxy and Contesting Power: Al-Ahbash, Wahhabism, and the Transnational Struggle for Islamic Authority

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Abstract

Al-Ahbash, the movement that runs Lebanon's Association of Islamic Charitable Projects (AICP), is usually described either as a small Lebanese sect or as a Sufi-leaning "moderate" alternative to Salafism. This article reads its long quarrel with the Wahhabiyya differently: as a dispute over who may define Sunni orthodoxy. It asks how the movement frames orthodoxy, how it obtains legitimacy, and how it moves across borders. The study compares Lebanon, Ethiopia and Indonesia, with Malaysia as a contrasting case. It applies framing analysis and critical discourse analysis to al-Ahbash treatises, Salafi-Wahhabi counter-polemics, official rulings and secondary scholarship from 1983 to 2024, drawing on Gramsci's writing on intellectuals and hegemony, on boundary-making theory, and on debates about transnational Islam. Al-Ahbash uses takfir (declaring a Muslim an unbeliever) and tahdhir (religious warning) to turn the usual direction of theological exclusion against its Wahhabi rivals, and in doing so adopts much the same juristic vocabulary as they do. Its authority has been built together with states that want a manageable Islam, notably Lebanon under Syrian tutelage and Ethiopia in 2011–2012. These alliances opened doors but also provoked backlash and left the movement dependent on its patrons. Abroad, its Ash'ari-Shafi'i-Sufi message travels best where it echoes local tradition and worst where a state religious bureaucracy already claims that tradition as its own. The article proposes the term strategic traditionalism for this pattern. It shows that exclusionary boundary-making is not peculiar to puritan movements, and so adds to critical work on the politics of religious moderation and on state-managed Islam.

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Al-Ahbash, gerakan yang mengelola Jam'iyat al-Masyari' al-Khayriyya al-Islamiyya (Association of Islamic Charitable Projects/AICP) di Lebanon, umumnya digambarkan sebagai sekte kecil Lebanon atau sebagai alternatif "moderat" bercorak sufi terhadap Salafisme. Artikel ini membaca persetujuan panjang gerakan tersebut dengan kelompok Wahhabiyah dari sudut pandang yang berbeda, yakni sebagai perebutan otoritas untuk mendefinisikan ortodoksi Sunni. Artikel ini menelaah bagaimana gerakan tersebut membingkai ortodoksi, bagaimana ia memperoleh legitimasi, dan bagaimana ia bergerak melintasi batas negara. Kajian ini membandingkan Lebanon, Etiopia, dan Indonesia, dengan Malaysia sebagai kasus pembanding. Analisis pembedaan (framing analysis) dan analisis wacana kritis diterapkan pada risalah-risalah al-Ahbash, polemik tandingan kalangan Salafi-Wahabi, fatwa dan keputusan resmi, serta literatur sekunder dari tahun 1983 hingga 2024, dengan bertumpu pada pemikiran Gramsci tentang intelektual dan hegemoni, teori pembentukan batas (boundary-making), serta perdebatan mengenai Islam transnasional. Al-Ahbash menggunakan takfir (pengafiran sesama Muslim) dan tahdhir (peringatan keagamaan) untuk membalikkan arah lazim eksklusi teologis terhadap rival Wahabinya, dan dalam proses itu justru mengadopsi kosakata fikih yang hampir sama dengan yang mereka gunakan. Otoritas gerakan ini dibangun bersama negara-negara yang menginginkan Islam yang dapat dikendalikan, terutama Lebanon di bawah perwalian Suriah dan Etiopia pada 2011–2012. Aliansi-aliansi tersebut membuka akses, tetapi sekaligus memicu reaksi balik dan membuat gerakan ini bergantung pada para patronnya. Di luar Lebanon, pesan Asy'ari-Syafi'i-Sufi yang diusungnya paling mudah diterima di wilayah yang memiliki kesamaan dengan tradisi lokal, dan paling sulit diterima di wilayah yang birokrasi keagamaan negaranya telah lebih dahulu mengklaim tradisi tersebut sebagai miliknya. Artikel ini mengajukan istilah tradisionalisme strategis (strategic traditionalism) untuk menamai pola tersebut. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa pembentukan batas yang eksklusif bukanlah ciri khas gerakan puritan semata, sehingga memberikan kontribusi bagi kajian kritis mengenai politik moderasi beragama dan Islam yang dikelola negara.

Keywords: Al-Ahbash; Governmental Islam; Religious Authority; Takfir; Transnational Islam; Religious Moderation; Wahhabism

Introduction

No single institution can now speak for Islam. Mass schooling, print and digital media, and migration have multiplied the people and bodies that claim religious authority, a development (P. Mandaville, 2007) describes as the pluralisation of authority and (Volpi & Turner, 2007) as the problem of making Islamic authority "matter". Wahhabi-Salafi actors have done well in this crowded field. Saudi universities, scholarships and missionary bodies

have given them a reach that few rivals can match (Farquhar, 2015). Their growth has also provoked a reaction from traditionalists who regard Ash'ari theology, the established law schools and Sufi devotion as the real core of Sunni Islam (Hasan, 2023; Zamhari, 2022).

Al-Ahbash is among the most combative of these traditionalist responses. Its founder, Shaykh 'Abdallah al-Harari, was a Shafi'i scholar from Harar in Ethiopia who made Beirut his home in 1950 (Al-Awsat, 2005; Nassif, 2001). His followers took over the AICP in 1983 (Nassif, 2001), and by the 1990s the movement had become a major force within Lebanon's Sunni community (Kabha & Erlich, 2006). Its teaching joins Ash'ari creed, Shafi'i law and Sufi practice (Hamzeh & Dekmejian, 1996). Through migration and missionary work it has since spread well beyond Lebanon, to Europe (Yarosh, 2019) and North America (Al-Awsat, 2005). The doctrine itself is shared by a large part of the Sunni world. What sets al-Ahbash apart is the zeal with which it guards that doctrine, above all against the Wahhabiyya.

The movement has not been ignored by scholars. (Hamzeh & Dekmejian, 1996) read it as a Sufi answer to political Islamism in Lebanon. (Kabha & Erlich, 2006) followed its doctrinal and political rivalry with the Wahhabiyya back to its Ethiopian roots. Specialists on Ethiopia have examined the government's contested partnership with the movement after 2011 (Abbink, 2014; Desplat et al., 2013). Three questions remain open. The conflict has mostly been treated as a theological quarrel or folded into security narratives, and less often as a struggle over how orthodoxy is framed, a struggle in which both sides use similar tools of exclusion. The movement's reliance on state patrons has been described country by country but seldom compared. Its presence in Southeast Asia, finally, is documented mainly in Malay and Indonesian sources (Nasir et al., 2013; Utomo, 2014).

The article therefore asks three questions. How does al-Ahbash construct and defend the boundaries of orthodoxy, in particular through *takfir* and *tahdhir*? How does it engage state institutions to secure religious legitimacy, and how does this compare with the strategies of its Wahhabi rivals? How

does it move through transnational religious fields while adjusting its message to different cultural and political settings?

Because the design is interpretive, the study works with three guiding propositions rather than hypotheses to be tested statistically. The first is that the movement's *takfir* functions less as a purely doctrinal judgement than as a framing device for building an exclusive Sunni identity against Wahhabi claims. The second is that its authority is produced jointly with states seeking a manageable form of Islam, an arrangement that brings access to institutions at the price of dependency. The third is that its expansion abroad rests less on a universal message than on how well its traditionalist idiom fits the religious field it enters.

The contribution is threefold. Empirically, the article places Lebanese, Ethiopian and Southeast Asian material in one comparative frame. Conceptually, it offers *strategic traditionalism* as a name for activism that combines doctrinal conservatism, alignment with the state and local adaptation. Theoretically, it shows that exclusionary boundary-making is not confined to puritan or militant movements, which unsettles the "moderate versus extremist" binary found in much policy and academic writing (Desplat et al., 2013; van Es et al., 2021). Section 2 reviews the literature and sets out the conceptual framework. Section 3 explains the method, Section 4 presents the findings, Section 5 discusses them, and Section 6 concludes.

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

Takfir, Tahdhir and the Boundaries of Orthodoxy

Takfir, the judgement that a professing Muslim has left the faith, has long marked the outer edge of the community. Recent scholarship ties it chiefly to Salafi-jihadi groups, for whom it provides doctrinal cover for violence against Muslim rulers and populations (Kadivar, 2020). In (Wiktorowicz, 2006) well-known typology, purists, politicians and jihadis share a creed but part ways over how to apply it, and disagreement over *takfir* is among the sharpest of these divisions. (Haykel, 2014) likewise places the policing of creed (*'aqida*) at

the centre of Salafi identity. Almost all of this work, however, treats *takfir* as something the puritan camp does.

The sociology of boundaries helps widen the view. Lamont & Molnár (2002) separate symbolic boundaries, the distinctions people use to sort others and their practices, from the social boundaries that appear once those distinctions are institutionalised. Wimmer (2008) lists the strategies actors use to redraw boundaries, among them expansion, contraction and normative inversion, in which a group that has been ranked low reverses the moral order applied to it. From this angle, the dispute between al-Ahbash and the Wahhabiyya is a contest in which each side tries to place the other outside *ahl al-sunna wa-l-jama'a*. Kabha & Erlich (2006) note that the polemics run in both directions. How a movement that calls itself moderate comes to use the same instruments of exclusion as its opponents has received far less attention, and this is the first concern of the present study.

States, Intellectuals and the Making of a Manageable Islam

Gramsci's (2020) account of hegemony is useful for thinking about how states and religious actors build authority together. For Gramsci, hegemony rests on consent backed by coercion and is maintained by intellectuals who shape the "common sense" of a social order. He distinguished *organic* intellectuals, who grow with a rising social group and give voice to its outlook, from *traditional* intellectuals such as clergy, who claim to stand above class interests yet are often drawn into ruling blocs (Fulton, 1987). Forlenza (2021) points out that Gramsci developed hegemony, organic intellectuals and common sense largely through his reflections on religion, which makes these concepts a natural fit for the study of religious authority.

States across the Muslim world have cultivated favoured religious partners to produce what Desplat et al. (2013) calls "governmental Islam". In Egypt, the al-Sisi government has tried to bring al-Azhar under tighter political control (Bano & Benadi, 2018; Mohiuddin, 2022). Morocco has promoted an official Islam of Maliki law, Ash'ari theology and Sufism as a bulwark against Salafism; Faitour (2024) argues that the state backs whichever form of Islam

suits its leadership rather than Sufism as such. Social movement research makes a related point: Islamic movements succeed by exploiting political opportunities, not by the force of ideas alone (Wiktorowicz, 2004). In Lebanon, al-Ahbash grew in a sectarian system whose Sunni establishment had been weakened by civil war, and after 1990 it enjoyed close relations with Syria, which favoured opponents of Sunni Islamism (Al-Awsat, 2005; Nassif, 2001). Less is known about how such alignment shapes the *content* of traditionalist claims to orthodoxy, or about the weaknesses it creates.

Transnational Islam, Localisation and the Politics of Moderation

Roy (2004) argues that globalisation produces a “deculturated” Islam, cut loose from particular societies, of which neo-fundamentalist Salafism is the clearest example. Others stress that Muslim networks remain shaped by regional histories and political conditions (P. Mandaville, 2007; P. G. Mandaville, 2007), and that new media keep redistributing the ability to speak with authority (Turner, 2007). The Saudi model of expansion, in which institutions such as the Islamic University of Medina turn oil wealth into “spiritual capital”, is well documented (Farquhar, 2015). For Indonesia, researchers have traced the growth of Salafi networks and their Arab-oriented piety (Hasan, 2023; Wahib, 2017) as well as traditionalist efforts to defend local practice against Salafi criticism (Zamhari, 2022). Traditionalist movements that are themselves transnational have attracted much less interest.

All of this bears on the politics of moderation. Desplat et al. (2013) shows how the language of “moderates” and “extremists” was taken up by the Ethiopian state, and van Es et al. (2021) call for moving beyond the radical-moderate frame altogether, treating moderation as a political category rather than a fixed property of doctrines. Writing on Ethiopia, Østebø & Shemsedin (2017) dispute the claim that the country’s Islam has radicalised. Studies of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) find a gap between pluralist theology among the leadership and hostility towards religious minorities at the grassroots (Arifianto, 2017; Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2020). Al-Ahbash, which calls itself

moderate while speaking the language of exclusion, sits squarely within these debates.

Conceptual Framework: Strategic Traditionalism

Drawing these strands together, the article defines *strategic traditionalism* as religious activism that uses a classical doctrinal heritage not only to preserve it but to compete for authority. It does so in three ways: by casting rivals as deviant through boundary-making devices, by aligning with state projects that seek a manageable Islam, and by adapting its message to local religious fields in which that heritage resonates. Framing theory links the three. Benford & Snow (2000) distinguish *diagnostic* framing, which names a problem and assigns blame; *prognostic* framing, which proposes a remedy; and *motivational* framing, which gives reasons to act. They also discuss *frame resonance*, the extent to which a frame appears credible and relevant to its audience. Table 1 shows how these ideas are put to work.

Table 1. Analytical framework of strategic traditionalism

Dimension	Guiding concepts	Analytical indicators	Principal data
Boundary-making (RQ1)	Symbolic boundaries; normative inversion (Lamont & Molnár, 2002; Wimmer, 2008); diagnostic, prognostic and motivational framing (Benford & Snow, 2000)	Labels applied to rivals (e.g., <i>mujassima</i> , <i>khawarij</i>); rules for <i>takfir al-mu'ayyan</i> ; prescribed remedies; calls to <i>tahdhir</i>	Al-Ahbash treatises; Salafi-Wahhabi texts; official rulings
State alignment (RQ2)	Hegemony; consent and coercion; organic and traditional intellectuals (Fulton, 1987; Gramsci, 2020); governmental Islam (Desplat et al., 2013)	Access to mosques, schools, media and official councils; state endorsement; backlash and repression	Secondary scholarship; monitoring reports; press
Localisation	Frame resonance	Appeals to local	Country studies;

Dimension	Guiding concepts	Analytical indicators	Principal data
(RQ3)	(Benford & Snow, 2000); contextualised transnationalism (P. G. Mandaville, 2007); deculturation (Roy, 2004)	heritage and lineage; ties with local traditionalist bodies; reactions of local authorities	translated and online material; fatwas

Source: Author's elaboration.

Methods

Research Design

The study uses a qualitative, interpretive and comparative case design. It does not test causal hypotheses; it asks how meaning, identity and legitimacy are built in polemical writing and how these constructions interact with their political settings. Two techniques are combined. Framing analysis identifies how actors define problems, prescribe remedies and call for action (Benford & Snow, 2000). Critical discourse analysis places the texts within the power relations that make them possible and limit them.

Case Selection

Three main cases were chosen on a diverse-case logic, each showing a different relationship between al-Ahbash, the state and the local religious field. Lebanon is where the movement was founded and where it became institutionally established under Syrian influence. Ethiopia combines a claim to heritage, through al-Harari's Harari origins, with direct state partnership after 2011. Indonesia offers a large traditionalist Sunni milieu, dominated by NU, in which the movement's doctrine finds obvious affinities. Malaysia is added as a contrasting case: its state religious authorities also claim the Ash'ari-Shafi'i heritage and have ruled against the movement (Jabatan Mufti Negeri Perlis, 2016; Nasir et al., 2013). Comparing these settings shows how similar doctrinal claims lead to different outcomes under different political arrangements.

Table 2. Composition of the data corpus

Category	Description	Examples (see References)
A. Al-Ahbash doctrinal and polemical works	Creedal commentaries, short creed manuals, polemical treatises and institutional histories, mostly published by Dar al-Mashari' (Beirut)	Al-Ḥabashī (1996, 1997, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2010, 2013); Al-Ḥusaynī (2012); Jam'īyyat al-Mashārī' al-Khayriyyah al-Islāmiyyah (1998)
B. Salafi-Wahhabi and critical texts	Creedal works, treatises on the conditions of <i>takfir</i> , and polemics against al-Ahbash	Bāshmil (1978); Al-Jibrīn (2004); Al-Rāshid (2004); Al-Ghāmidī (1992); (Markaz al-Nasr li Ahl al-Sunnah wal-Jamaah, n.d.); As-Suhaimi (2007); Lembaga Pengkajian dan Penelitian WAMY (2002); Waskito (2011)
C. Official rulings and intermediate works	State fatwas and works by scholars reflecting on Salafism, <i>takfir</i> and intra-Sunni disagreement	Jabatan Mufti Negeri Perlis (2016); Al-Būṭī (1988, 2005); 'Imārah (2009); Kāmil (2010); Al-Maghribī (1994); Al-Saqqāf (2002); Imron R. (2014); Azhar (2022); Rabbani (2017)
D. Press, monitoring and digital sources	News reports, monitoring reports, websites and online sermons	Nassif (2001); Asharq Al-Awsat (2005); United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (2013); Pierret (2005); Bunt (2003); Iqbal (2017)
E. Secondary scholarship	Peer-reviewed work on al-Ahbash, Salafism, state–religion relations and moderation	See Sections 2 and 4

Source: Author's compilation

Data Corpus

No human participants were involved. The data are publicly available texts chosen by purposive sampling on two criteria: relevance to at least one

of the three analytical dimensions, and authorship by, or direct engagement with, al-Ahbash or its Wahhabi-Salafi opponents. The period runs from 1983, when al-Ahbash took control of the AICP, to 2024. Material was read in Arabic, English, Indonesian and Malay. Table 2 summarises the corpus.

Analytical Procedure

The analysis had four stages. All texts were first read in full and coded inductively for recurring themes. They were then recoded with a codebook based on Table 1, covering diagnostic, prognostic and motivational frames, boundary strategies, and references to state actors and local traditions. Close attention was paid to intertextuality, that is, to the ways in which al-Ahbash texts answer particular Wahhabi arguments and the reverse. In the third stage the coded material was read against country-level scholarship so that discursive patterns could be linked to political conditions. Finally, the cases were compared along the three dimensions. Coding stopped once further texts produced no new codes within the existing categories, a point of theoretical sufficiency suited to document-based research.

Trustworthiness, Reflexivity and Ethics

Both parties to the dispute write as partisans. Factual claims taken from polemical texts were therefore accepted only when confirmed by independent scholarship, official documents or sources from the opposing side. Comparing actor types (Categories A–C) and source types (Categories D–E) reduced the risk of reproducing either side’s account. Interpretations were also checked against readings by scholars writing from outside the traditionalist Sunni milieu, so as to limit the influence of the researcher’s own position on the analysis. Because the study relies only on publicly available documents and involves no human participants, formal ethical approval was not required.

Results

The findings fall under the three research questions: the framing of orthodoxy through *takfir* and *tahdhir*; the joint production of legitimacy with states; and the localisation of a traditionalist idiom across countries, together with its limits.

Framing Orthodoxy: Takfir and Tahdhir as Boundary Work

The central charge in al-Ahbash literature is that the Wahhabiyya has abandoned Sunni creed by ascribing bodily attributes to God (*tajsim, tashbih*). The charge reaches back past contemporary Salafis to their intellectual ancestry. Al-Harari's *Al-Maqālāt al-Sunniyyah fī Kashf Ḍalālāt Aḥmad ibn Taymiyyah* (Al-Ḥabashī, 2007), whose title promises to “expose the errors of Ibn Taymiyya”, takes aim at the fourteenth-century Hanbali scholar whom Salafis treat as a leading authority. Placing the error at the source makes the whole Wahhabi tradition illegitimate, not merely wrong on particular points. The movement also lays claim to texts that all Sunnis share. Its commentary on the *‘Aqida Tahawiyya* (Al-Ḥabashī, 1997), a creed accepted across the Sunni schools, presents al-Ahbash as the faithful keeper of a common inheritance that the Wahhabiyya is said to have betrayed.

The remedy offered is a return to Ash‘ari (and Maturidi) creed, adherence to the four Sunni law schools, and Sufi devotion. The programme is set out in compact manuals such as *Al-Sirat al-Mustaqim* (Al-Ḥabashī, 2010) and the later commentary on it (Al-Ḥabashī, 2013). The emphasis on short, teachable texts fits the movement’s heavy investment in schools, study circles and publishing.

The reason given for action is the religious duty to warn the community against error. Titles such as *Al-Taḥdhīr al-Shar‘ī al-Wājib* (“The obligatory religious warning”) (Al-Ḥabashī, 2009) and *Risālat al-Taḥdhīr min al-Firaq al-Thalāth* (“Treatise of warning against the three sects”) (Al-Ḥabashī, 2005) present polemic as an obligation rather than a matter of choice. Its main targets are the Wahhabiyya and Islamist currents inspired by Ibn Taymiyya and Sayyid Qutb (Kabha & Erlich, 2006; Nassif, 2001). The duty extends to named individuals. In a circular reproduced in Desplat et al. (2013). al-Harari

warned the Muslims of Harar, and of Ethiopia as a whole, against a local scholar, Shaykh Yusuf ‘Abd al-Rahman. The circular portrays him as a man who learned Wahhabi doctrine in Medina, returned with Wahhabi money to spread it, served Emperor Haile Selassie in exchange for land, fled back to the Wahhabis when the Derg took power, and came home again with their funds.

All three framing tasks are compressed into this one warning. Doctrinal error is tied to foreign money and political opportunism, so that the rival scholar appears heretical, venal and alien to Harar at once. The author of the warning, himself a Harari, speaks with the authority of a local.

Table 3. Framing of orthodoxy by al-Ahbash and counter-framing by its opponents

Framing task	Al-Ahbash framing	Counter-framing by Salafi-Wahhabi and official actors
Diagnostic (who has deviated?)	Wahhabis as anthropomorphists (<i>mujassima, mushabbiha</i>); Ibn Taymiyya as the source of error; Wahhabism as foreign and money-driven	Al-Ahbash as a deviant sect given to excessive <i>takfir</i> ; compared to the Kharijites (Dar al-Fatwa, Lebanon; Perlis Fatwa Committee, Malaysia)
Prognostic (what is the remedy?)	Return to Ash‘ari-Maturidi creed, the four law schools and Sufism, taught through short manuals	Return to the creed of the <i>salaf</i> and purification of practice from innovation
Motivational (why act?)	Duty of <i>tahdhir</i> ; warnings against named scholars	Duty to warn against innovators and to defend <i>tawhid</i>
Boundary strategy (Wimmer, 2008)	Normative inversion: the self-declared heirs of the <i>salaf</i> are cast as outsiders	Contraction: orthodoxy confined to the <i>salaf</i> method, or to the state-defined <i>Aswaja</i>

Source: Author’s analysis of corpus Categories A–C.

Both camps have developed juristic vocabularies for declaring specific individuals unbelievers (*takfir al-mu‘ayyan*). On the al-Ahbash side, Dar al-Mashari’ has published a treatise devoted to the rules (*dawabit*) of such

judgements (Al-Ḥusaynī, 2012). Salafi authors have produced parallel treatises that set out the conditions and impediments of *takfir* according to Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab (Al-Jibrīn, 2004; Al-Rāshid, 2004). Opponents, in turn, accuse al-Ahbash of exactly the excess it condemns. Lebanon’s Dar al-Fatwa likened the movement to the Kharijites and accused it of pronouncing *takfir* without regard to the rules (Al-Awsat, 2005). In 2016 the Perlis State Fatwa Committee in Malaysia declared the group “extreme, deviant and misleading”, citing its excessive readiness to declare other Muslims apostates, including Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn al-Qayyim and Yusuf al-Qaradawi (Jabatan Mufti Negeri Perlis, 2016). Each side thus uses the boundary-making repertoire it denounces in the other. Table 3 summarises these frames.

Building Legitimacy with the State

Al-Ahbash grew during and after the civil war, when the Sunni religious establishment was weak and Islamist movements were competing to fill the gap. In the 1990s it kept close ties with the Syrian government, which saw it as a means of countering Sunni fundamentalism (Nassif, 2001), and in 1992 its candidate, Adnan Trabulsi, won a seat in parliament (Al-Awsat, 2005). Presenting itself as a loyal and moderate Sunni alternative to both the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi militancy, it suited a Lebanese-Syrian order intent on containing Sunni political mobilisation. The price was high. In August 1995 its leader, Shaykh Nizar al-Halabi, was assassinated by members of ‘Usbat al-Ansar (Nassif, 2001), a reminder that the doctrinal contest was part of a violent struggle over the Sunni religious field. The withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon in 2005 removed the protection under which the movement had grown, which shows how contingent authority built on a patron can be.

Ethiopia shows both the rewards and the risks of state alignment most clearly. Religious identity there had become more assertive and more openly contested in public life since the 1990s (Abbink, 2011). Between July and December 2011, the Ministry of Federal Affairs and the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (*Majlis*) organised compulsory, state-funded training

for imams and Islamic school staff. Participants reported that the sessions were led by al-Ahbash clerics from Lebanon and promoted the movement's teaching, a claim officials denied (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2013). Desplat et al. (2013) identifies the government's cooperation with al-Ahbash as the core of a shift from containing Islam to producing a state-sanctioned "governmental Islam". Al-Harari's Harari origins made it possible to present the movement as Ethiopian rather than foreign. The initiative nonetheless triggered a broad protest movement, *Dimtsachin Yisema* ("Let our voice be heard"), whose supporters called on the state to stop interfering in Muslim affairs (Abbink, 2014). In July 2012 most members of the protesters' arbitration committee were arrested, and several were later charged under the anti-terrorism law (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2013). Its conclude that the project backfired. Read through Gramsci, the attempt to turn al-Ahbash into the organic intellectuals of a state religious project failed to win consent and could be sustained only by coercion.

In Southeast Asia, al-Ahbash has had no comparable state patron. In Indonesia the state deals with Islam largely through mass organisations, above all NU and Muhammadiyah, which leaves little room for a foreign movement to become a privileged partner. In Malaysia, religious authority lies with state religious bureaucracies that themselves claim the Ash'ari-Shafi'i heritage, and at least one of them has formally classified the movement as deviant (Jabatan Mufti Negeri Perlis, 2016). These cases suggest that alignment with the state is open to al-Ahbash only where the state lacks a domestic traditionalist partner, or wishes to bypass one. Table 4 compares the four settings.

Table 4. Comparative configuration of al-Ahbash's legitimacy across cases

Dimension	Lebanon	Ethiopia	Indonesia	Malaysia (contrast)
Relationship with the state	Close ties with Syria in the	State-funded training via the	No privileged partnership;	Classified as deviant by a

Dimension	Lebanon	Ethiopia	Indonesia	Malaysia (contrast)
	1990s; parliamentary seat (1992)	<i>Majlis</i> (2011)	mediated by mass organisations	state fatwa committee (2016)
Main source of legitimacy	Political patronage; control of the AICP	Harari lineage; state endorsement	Doctrinal affinity with <i>Aswaja</i>	Limited; competes with state-defined <i>Aswaja</i>
Main rivals	Islamist and Salafi groups; Dar al-Fatwa	Salafi and reformist currents; protest movement	Salafi networks; established traditionalist bodies	State religious bureaucracy; Salafi actors
Outcome and vulnerability	Rapid growth, exposure after 2005	Mass protest; association with repression	Presence not systematically documented	Marginalisation

Source: Author's analysis based on Hamzeh & Dekmejian (1996), Nassif (2001), Al-Awsat (2005), United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (2013), Desplat et al. (2013), Abbink (2014), and Jabatan Mufti Negeri Perlis (2016).

Travelling Traditionalism: Localisation and Its Limits

Wahhabi expansion depends heavily on Gulf-funded institutions, scholarships and the circulation of graduates (Farquhar, 2015). Al-Ahbash travels by other means. Yarosh (2019) shows that it spread through migration, missionary work and conversion, and that in Western settings its discourse, practice and institutions were reshaped by the host society. He also distinguishes the founding charisma of the shaykh from a locally constructed charisma negotiated between each community and its leader. Localisation, in other words, is built into the way the network reproduces itself.

In Ethiopia, localisation took the form of an appeal to lineage. Al-Harari came from Harar, a historic centre of Islamic learning, and this allowed the movement to present itself as Ethiopia's own Sunni tradition standing against an imported Wahhabism (Kabha & Erlich, 2006). The 2011 training

programme undercut that claim. Because the teaching arrived through compulsory state courses reportedly led by clerics from Beirut (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2013), many Muslims experienced it as an imposition from above, and protesters demanded an end to state interference in their religious life (Abbink, 2014). State endorsement, the Ethiopian case suggests, cannot create frame resonance; it may destroy it by compromising the messenger's independence.

In Indonesia, the movement's Ash'ari-Shafi'i-Sufi idiom is close to the *Ahl al-Sunna wa-l-Jama'a* (*Aswaja*) identity promoted by NU. The spread of Salafi networks and their puritan, Arab-oriented piety (Hasan, 2023; Wahib, 2017) has created demand among traditionalist Muslims for arguments in defence of local practice. Much of that demand is met by Indonesian actors, such as the Hadrami-led *majlis taklim* studied by Zamhari (2022). Al-Ahbash writing, which supplies ready arguments against Ibn Taymiyya and against Salafi criticism of practices such as *tawassul* and *mawlid*, may circulate in this setting as one resource among several. Whether it has gained an organised following of its own in Indonesia is not established in the available literature. The comparison therefore treats Indonesia as a case of doctrinal affinity without state sponsorship, and the question of grassroots uptake is left to future fieldwork.

Malaysia clarifies the conditions under which localisation succeeds. Where a state religious bureaucracy claims the right to define *Aswaja*, the movement's claim to represent the same heritage becomes a challenge to that authority rather than a resource for it. The Perlis ruling turns the movement's own weapon against it, condemning al-Ahbash for the very excess of *takfir* that it had directed at others (Jabatan Mufti Negeri Perlis, 2016). Doctrinal resonance is therefore necessary but not sufficient; what also matters is how religious authority is organised in the host society.

Discussion

Beyond the Moderate–Extremist Binary

Kabha & Erlich (2006) observed that al-Ahbash polemics resemble those of its Wahhabi rivals. The present findings suggest that the resemblance is structural rather than incidental. Both camps use the juristic tools of *takfir al-mu'ayyan*; they differ over whom to apply them to. In Wimmer's (2008) terms, al-Ahbash practises normative inversion, recasting those who claim to be heirs of the *salaf* as the real outsiders. Its opponents answer in kind, as the Lebanese Dar al-Fatwa and the Perlis fatwa show. This weakens the assumption, present in many readings of Roy (2004) and in policy discourse, that traditionalist Islam is tolerant by nature and puritan Islam exclusionary by nature. It is consistent with evidence that organisations committed to pluralism at the top may tolerate exclusion lower down (Arifianto, 2017; Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2020). "Moderation", as van Es et al. (2021) argue, is better treated as a political category whose content is negotiated between religious actors and states than as a fixed feature of any doctrine.

Organic to Whom? Rethinking Gramsci in the Study of Religious Authority

The second finding calls for a more careful use of Gramsci. Al-Ahbash scholars are not organic intellectuals in his strict sense, because they do not speak for a rising subaltern class. They are closer to traditional intellectuals, custodians of an inherited religious tradition, who become *organic to a state's hegemonic project* when a regime wants a manageable Islam (Forlenza, 2021; Fulton, 1987). The pattern resembles the regulation of al-Azhar in Egypt (Bano & Benadi, 2018; Mohiuddin, 2022) and Morocco's promotion of Sufism (Faitour, 2024). Ethiopia shows that such arrangements remain hegemonic only while they command consent. Once consent is withdrawn, as in 2011–2012, the state turns to coercion and its religious partner is tainted by association. The Saudi-Wahhabi nexus projects influence through durable transnational institutions (Farquhar, 2015). Al-Ahbash, by contrast, depends on national alliances that shift with changes of regime, as its position in Lebanon after 2005 illustrates. Its closeness to the state is at once its main strength and its main weakness.

Localisation and the Limits of Deculturation

The third finding qualifies Roy's (2004) thesis of a deculturated global Islam. Al-Ahbash does not erase local identities; it tries to inhabit them by presenting its traditionalism as each locality's authentic heritage, a form of what might be called contextualised transnationalism (Mandaville, 2007a). Its non-Arab, Harari lineage also offers an alternative to Gulf-centred models of religious authority (Kabha & Erlich, 2006). The comparison shows, however, that localisation is neither automatic nor uniformly successful. It works where the traditionalist idiom resonates and no domestic actor holds a monopoly over it, as in diaspora settings and, to a limited extent, in Indonesia. It fails where state backing undermines the messenger's independence, as in Ethiopia, or where a state bureaucracy claims the same heritage, as in Malaysia. Transnational success depends on how frame resonance interacts with the political organisation of the host religious field.

Implications

The findings matter beyond the case of al-Ahbash. States that promote "religious moderation", including Indonesia through its *moderasi beragama* programme, would do well to judge prospective religious partners by how they actually treat other Muslims, not only by doctrinal affiliation or opposition to Salafism. For scholars, the case is a caution against treating traditionalist movements as natural allies of pluralism, and an invitation to look closely at the exclusionary repertoires available within any claim to orthodoxy.

Conclusion

This article has treated the conflict between al-Ahbash and the Wahhabiyya as a struggle over the authority to define Sunni orthodoxy. Al-

Ahbash frames orthodoxy through *takfir* and *tahdhir* in ways that mirror its rivals; it builds legitimacy together with states that want a manageable Islam; and it spreads abroad by localising a traditionalist idiom whose appeal depends on how religious authority is organised in each setting. The term *strategic traditionalism* captures this combination. It also questions the common assumption that traditionalism means moderation and that moderation means inclusiveness.

The study has limits. It relies on written and secondary sources, which say little about internal debate or grassroots reception. Polemical texts on both sides are partisan and had to be checked against other evidence. The depth of evidence also varies between cases, and the Indonesian case in particular needs fuller documentation. Future work could combine document analysis with fieldwork and interviews, follow the movement's digital activity and its appeal to young people, compare it with other traditionalist actors such as NU and the Barelwi movement, and examine how it is received among Muslim minorities in Western countries, including Australia, where identity politics and Islamophobia shape how Muslims present themselves.

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