

A Statement about Salafi Websites, Digital Content and Re-Orienting Access Points

Bismillāh, wal-Ḥamdulillāh:

By the grace and bounty of Allāh, there now exists a large network of Salafī websites in the English language run by students of knowledge, mosques and centres. Huge amounts of time, effort and resources have been and continue to be expended in publishing original articles, translations, e-books and audio and video recordings – (much of which comprises refutations against the ideology of extremism and terrorism). In addition, there are many social media accounts which are run by the Salafī mosques and centres which notify subscribers of all the latest content and keep them up to date with the guidance, advice, admonitions, directions and warnings of the scholars. These students of knowledge and centres work closely with each other, advising and aiding one another, in close communication and cooperation. Some of these websites have had a presence since the mid-1990s, are well known to people all across the world, and have an established online community.

On occasions during those 20 years, there have been numerous instances of blatant theft of content—with removal of all credentials—by the innovators wishing to use that content to generate their own audiences and to deceive these audiences into believing they are upon the way of the Salaf. It is known and recognised that Salafīs produce quality content in various fields of knowledge, especially in creed and refuting the opposers. The Innovators, deviants and hizbīs find utility in content whose subject matter is outside the topic of their own deviation. This content has been stolen and used by them to present themselves as conveyers of authentic, reliable information. However, these instances were sporadic, not organised and systematic.

Over the past five to eight years, the dynamics of the Internet have changed; consumers have become producers (“prosumers”), the audience has become the host in the emerging Web 2.0 era. The Internet now invites interactivity at every juncture, encouraging its users to type, record and publish. With the advent of this technology, and in particular social media, numerous opportunists appeared attempting to create their own social-network infused online communities, utilising today’s technologies like a ‘digital minbar’. They have grown their social networks by what essentially amounts to stealing both **content** and **traffic** in a pre-calculated, systematic, organised way, attempting to re-centre the sources of accessing knowledge. Their operation is founded primarily on the belief that content-producers of Islāmic materials do not have any rights to dictate how the content they generate—which involves time, effort and resources—is used. Working diligently over many years, they have taken this content without permission, and using technical skills, manoeuvred themselves into a position whereby if a person wants to access content from any of the original Salafi websites,

they will end up on these other website platforms first, completely bypassing the original content producers (as a simple google search can attest to). The owners of these websites, operating largely as isolated individuals, then encourage—by design—their followers to **promote only their own website links** through various social sharing options and not the original links on the content-producing website. The intended result of this is that a network of links will be created on social media and news sharing websites **to their own website** and not to the original content producing site. As a result, their personal names are promoted instead of the actual content producers. All of this is by design and intent and is not accidental. The goal is to position themselves as a portal, one layer above the source website(s), to funnel all traffic to themselves, and build their own huge, private, social network. It is a race-to-the-top, quantitative approach to content duplication and promotion, rooted in being the most popular in social media.

In contrast, the Salafī da‘wah, online, has traditionally been premised on a qualitative, careful approach, promoting information (i.e. knowledge) on the basis of need, prioritising the senior scholars and highlighting the most important issues, with numerous layers of peer review, under the direct guidance of the scholars of Islām and competent students of knowledge. This Salafī approach rooted in academic integrity and scholarly insight is unattainable through sites that partake in a copy-and-paste “100-metre dash”.

To help explain what is going on, an analogy will be given. Lets say there are three Salafi mosques, two centres and two students of knowledge in a city. They produce printed articles and allow people to enter the mosque, centre or home, make a photocopy and take them to read benefit from. The people like what they read and come back for more. Further, they develop a connection with the trusted, competent and known people who provide this benefit. Lets say this has been taking place for 10-15 years.

Along comes a person, lets say Zayd, and opens his own building. He then goes to those mosques, centres and students of knowledge and, without permission, takes every last bit of content ever produced and photocopies it all. He believes those content producers have no right to dictate how their content is to be used. He then slowly starts building an audience on the basis of this content. People now come to his building and whenever they photocopy the content and take it away to read, they are told, “Hey can you tell others to come to **this building**”, and he gives them cards and slips which contain the address of his building. At the top and bottom of every article that is copied, he puts his own address and includes an encouragement for people to visit his building. Then he starts placing ads and notices in local newspapers directing people to his building and asking others to direct people to his building.

This, whilst keeping in mind all along that this person has no connection to the scholars, is not known for seeking knowledge, and is unaware of what takes place in the field of da'wah, and occasionally copies content of those who have been warned against by those Salafī mosques, centres and students of knowledge. Further, he has offered no content or anything original of his own. Yet he wants to ensure that **everybody goes to his building** for the content and not to the original content producers from whom the content was lifted who are in the same town and in close proximity.¹ Further, this individual has never been known to turn up to a single lesson, lecture or seminar at any of those mosques or centres, only adding further curiosity about the nature of these activities. As a result of his behaviour, the connection is gradually broken from the mosques, centres and students of knowledge in the city and the centre for knowledge distribution becomes Zayd, who has now built a thriving social network in his building thanks to the efforts of others.

Most people who are not technically minded will not be able to translate this technical operation into readily observable behaviour in real life—as per the analogy given—and will fail to see the harms brought by this type of activity. It makes no sense for Zayd in our analogy to go and **take the biscuit** from those mosques, centres and students, place the biscuit in his own building, and then insist that people promote only his building from which the biscuit can be continually taken on a grand scale. A consequence of this is that the opposers, enemies of the Salafīs, knowing that Salafīs produce quality materials on their websites, are happy because they are able to bypass the Salafī websites and go instead to third parties and promote the sites of these third parties instead, as means of accessing or directing others to the content.

When these activities began to be highlighted, counter-arguments were presented. For example, that the aim of these actors is only to bring more traffic to the Salafī mosques and centres and that such actors have benefited lots of people due to their skills in search marketing and driving traffic to beneficial content. This answer is suspect and would only confuse a person who is not technically minded and does not understand the workings of the Internet and issues related to marketing and Search Engine Optimisation (SEO). The behaviour manifested by such people, various statements that have been made by them, as well as a technical analysis of their online operation reveals a different picture altogether. Firstly, the sole aim of their activities is to draw people away from the websites of those mosques and centres and use the tools of digital marketing to draw audiences to themselves, and to their own platforms, to keep them there to benefit from content that was never produced by them in the first place, but which was copied and hosted on their own platforms. Thereafter, it is to promote their own names and to build social network empires that can later be harnessed for

¹ The internet essentially represents a close-knit global community and hence the issues of distance do not apply.

whatever objectives they have in mind in the long term. Further, many of those original content producing websites have a long, established history and are already known to many people across the world, they do not need third-parties to interfere and come in between them and their audiences.

The clear proof that such people are only interested in drawing people to themselves is to look at their **social media accounts**. One can clearly observe how they encourage their visitors to promote only their website pages through which the content is accessed (after being copied and pasted or uploaded if a media file). These platforms serve as unnecessary gateways to access the content. In contrast, when you look at everyone else and their social media activities, they will promote the **original link** on the **original website** where the **original content** was published. Why would a person want to access an article or digital media on Zayd's blog, or be referred via his blog, when a person can just access it at the original location (through a direct link on social media) and be saved the unnecessary, intermediate step? The social media activities of these players gives the game away clearly.

In 2014, a large number of Salafī mosques and centres issued a statement² making it clear that they do not allow organised, wholesale, large-scale copying of their content as a means of creating competing platforms and then implementing strategies to limit all traffic to those platforms only. Unfortunately, that advice was not heeded, and those who fell into this continued in these same activities, the broader, wider objective still being to create their own social media empires from the hard work and effort of others.³

For this reason, we advise people to be aware of how knowledge is conveyed online and through whom and through what platforms, and to beware of the opportunists who use the content of others to set up competing platforms whose aim is to attract established or potential audiences away from the content producer(s) to their own platforms. In this regard, they are seeking to re-centre the sources of authentic knowledge of the Salafī creed and methodology, moving them away from Salafi mosques, centres and qualified and competent students of knowledge, writers and translators, mixing and matching quality works and known authors with those who are less known and less

² <http://www.salafitalk.com/threads/1946>

³ The statement and guidelines published on SalafiTalk.Com in July 2014 were **not intended for** and **not directed at** those involved in the type of activity being alluded to here. But only for people who run small-scale personal blogs or social media accounts and who wish to direct others to websites of original content producers. The statement was intended to make clear that wholesale copying or building large networks off the efforts of others and then using seo techniques to funnel all traffic to those networks only is not welcomed by those centres, mosques and individual students.

qualified, and drawing people to themselves, wanting their own names to be promoted. In all of this, there is long term harm, as is clear.

The Salafī da‘wah, as it is administered in the mosques and centres with care and clarity by those who are capable and qualified, must have a similar approach online, towards building digital libraries of quality materials, of which the custodians should be qualified for the responsibility. In a time where the demarcation point between physical and digital is becoming more obscure, the artificial ‘realism’ of a salafī digital community can be manufactured, such that if a single person promotes enough people, enough sources, enough content, he can manufacture popularity, invent a voice, essentially become a platform. This complex did not exist in the early days of Salafī da‘wah online. Thus, just as we guard our centres and pulpits from unqualified voices, and self-appointed, unqualified guardians and distributors of content, we must understand the cultural shift that the digital world has brought, and with it, those who wish to grab the digital microphone and stand upon the digital minbar and essentially call to themselves using the hard work and efforts of others.

In light of the above, all of the following mosques, centres and students of knowledge request that: Every piece of content (article, PDF, e-book, audio, video) that has been used as part of this type of activity, whether copied, pasted and republished, or re-hosted, or used as part of an organised, systematic, tagging and link-baiting exercise, to be immediately removed. We do not allow our content to be abused in this way. As for the normal, routine sharing and promotion of knowledge, by linking directly to the source location and sending traffic directly to it—without the creation of multiple, unnecessary doorways, gateways and layers—then this of course is commended and encouraged. We do not wish to inhibit the spread of knowledge in any way, but we do not allow this large-scale, organised, calculated, abusive activity.

Finally, we repeat the same advice that was give in August 2014 to such people. Instead of wasting enormous amounts of time copying, pasting, tagging and link-baiting, fear Allāh and save yourselves and your families from a fire whose fuel is men and stones. You have responsibilities towards yourselves and your families in terms of learning and removing ignorance from yourselves. Your activities do not add anything valuable in reality and we fear that Shayṭān has deceived you into wasting your time, away from more important and dire issues that need addressing in your lives and the lives of your families. You need to learn Arabic, attend the lessons of the scholars and if you are unable, the students of knowledge. Acquire knowledge through its routes and benefit yourselves and your families. If you have any sense, you will acknowledge that this is sound, beneficial advice, and take steps to act upon it.

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List of Mosques, Centres, Authors and Translators

Mosques and Centres

- Salafi Masjid and Salafi Publications
Salaf.Com network of 30+ sites
- Masjid al-Furqan and TROID (Canada)
Troid.Ca and sister sites
- Masjid al-Sunnah and al-Baseerah
(Bradford). AlBaseerah.Com and
sister sites.
- Markaz Salafi (Manchester)
SalafiCentre.Com,
LearnAboutIslam.Co.Uk
- Masjid Ibn Baz and al-Athariyyah
(London)
AlAthariyyah.Com and sister sites.
Markaz Muaadh bin Jabal (Slough)
MarkazMuaadh.Com
- Dar us-Sunnah (London)
DuSunnah.Com
- Sunnah Publishing (Michigan)
SunnahPublishing.Net
- Masjid ad-Da'wah ilat-Tawheed
(Baltimore) TawheedFirst.com
- Masjid Muḥammad bin 'Abd al-
Wahhāb
- Masjid as-Sunnah an-Nabawiyyah
(Phil.)
GermanTownMasjid.Com
- Masjid Raḥmah (New Jersey)
- Masjid Tawheed wa Sunnah
(Durham, USA) Mtws.org
- Bakkah.Net and sister sites.
- Masjid al-Huda (Bolton)
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