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Purist Salafism in France

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Salafis are usually qualified as revolutionary or reformist Muslims mainly interested in gaining primacy around the world and overthrowing perfidious regimes which have betrayed the cause of Islam. However, this image covers only one aspect of Salafism, that of the Jihadi Salafis, who present themselves as partisans of using political violence and combating corrupt Muslim leaders. External to Jihadi Salafism is a quietist Salafism, that of the so-called purists. Whereas both types of Salafis reject

Western society, purist Salafis, unlike Jihadi Salafis, do not strive to destroy it. Neither do purist Salafis in Muslim countries put up resistance against the government, even if they find it insufficiently Islamic.

Whereas the purist view is built around non-political opinions, revolutionary Salafis think that Muslims have a political obligation to establish a strict Islamic society rid of apostate leaders and to Islamize the

state and its institutions. Therefore Jihadis target Muslim leaders, charged with trampling Islamic laws underfoot because of their cooperation with the United States and their negligence of “their brothers” in Palestine, Afghanistan or Iraq. But according to the purist Salafis, human beings are created for a strict religious purpose: obeying Allah and following His moral and judicial commands. Purists promote a strict religious view focusing on the duty to worship Allah who prescribes them obedience to political chiefs so as to prevent Muslim communities from *fitna* (chaos and anarchy).¹

Purist Islam

For a decade and a half in France, in some suburban areas close to Paris,² Lille-Roubaix,³ and Lyon,⁴ purist Salafism has become a significant social reality within Muslim communities. With about 5,000 people said to be purist Salafis in France according to Intelligence Services, this current is growing in areas traditionally known to shelter many Muslim families coming mainly from migratory flows after the 1950s-1960s. Generally,

they are young people and many of them come from Algerian families. However, converted people are overrepresented within Salafi groups. Within French Muslim communities, converts do not constitute more than three or four percent whereas they stand for almost twenty to twenty-five percent of the Salafis that I have met through my work. They mainly attribute their decision to take up the *Minhaj Salafi* (Path of the Virtuous Ancestors) to the influence of friends who had entered Salafi groups.

Cultivating a way of life based on the search for purity, Salafis usually opt for a strict break with what they think of as causing their perdition. Practising moral codes which they identify as coming straight from the *salaf* (the ancestors of early Islam)—thus the best and purest Muslims ever—they claim for themselves legitimacy and superiority. Salafis claim to be the only Muslims who know the true sense of *tawhid* (oneness of God) as opposed to other currents such as the Muslim Brothers whom they accuse of being too far from a true knowledge of the sources.

Moreover, Salafis think they are closer to Islamic authenticity and truth because their methodology is based on the primacy of orthodox scholars. They appeal to Salafi scholars—teaching mainly in Saudi

Although Islam in France is composed of currents found in Muslim societies around the world, France is currently primarily affected by the assertion of purist Salafis, whose main concern is to bring Muslim believers back to the path of Islamic orthodoxy. Purist Salafi Muslims strictly differentiate themselves from non-Muslims and Muslims alike. They emphasize a break with society in order to return to Islam practiced in its “original” form, but their purist Salafism nonetheless retains some trappings of the modernity it shuns.

Arabia—for religious rulings because they have mastered Islamic learning and answer any question supporting it with proof. Put differently, Salafi Islam presents itself as rational compared to “passionate Islam.” Such was the claim made by a young Salafi to distinguish “his” Islam from *l’Islam de France* represented by famous figures such as Tariq Ramadan. Legitimacy based on the expertise of judicial norms seems to be the key to understanding the feeling of Islamic superiority associated with

Salafi Islam. In France, where Islam is a much stigmatized religion, it can be easily understood why some people overturn this stigma by insisting on their exceptional predestination. The *Minhaj Salafi* as it is understood in France grants answers to young people facing anomie and trying to position themselves within the French context.

Breaking with society

When we observe “the Salafi way of life” from the period of its emergence we see that from their clothing to their cultural habits everything is related to the desire to break with the surrounding society. For instance, whereas many young Muslims (many young people living in the suburbs, actually) prefer wearing suits because of their professional life or others wear sporting caps, Salafis wear the *qamis*, a long tunic over loose pants, their heads are covered by a *taqiyya*, and they wear *izhar* (shorter pants that end before the ankles). Their dress aims at stating at an immediate glance that they do not belong to modern times.

Before conversion many Salafis lived an un-Islamic life including the consumption of alcohol and sexual promiscuity, after which they started looking for an ideal provided by Islamic purity. Maybe for this reason they act as if they do not want to stay connected with their former environment. This can also be an explanation for their refusal to participate in politics within French society. For example, almost all the purist Salafis I met claimed they do not vote on religious grounds. However, it turned out that most of them have never voted for their whole life, even before becoming Salafis. Consequently, this can explain Salafis’ weak involvement in political issues.

Moreover, since purist Salafis do not identify with French social customs, and more generally with Western moral codes, they tend to leave France to join Muslim countries where they believe they will be able to practise true Islam and experience real religious freedom. They call this a *hijra* (salutary migration), or a “return to the lands of origins” (from where their parents should never have left). However, though until a few years ago, main destinations were the countries of their parents, currently, through a process of “globalization of *hijra*” new geographical targets such as Dubai or Abu Dhabi can be mentioned.

Whereas France stops being their country and they get a new identity based strictly on a religious feeling of belongingness, it must be stressed that the *hijra* made by French Salafis obeys a Western logic. For example, they are attracted by modern and dynamic trading cities which enable them to set up businesses and become wealthy. Instead of reaffirming their parental culture by returning to Algeria or Morocco for instance, they are more akin to the globalized youth involved in computer or electronic goods businesses who travel frequently between Europe and the Gulf so as to advance their personal situations. By learning foreign languages (mostly English) and connecting to new ways of lives, they improve their cultural skills and their knowledge of the world.

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Intra-religious competition

Salafi imams play hardly any role in the turn to Salafism in France. Most of the time, when we study the Salafis' trajectories, we are led to traces of the Tablighi Jamaat, or more rarely, instances of attending conferences of the Muslim Brotherhood. They come to the *da'wa salafiyya* (Salafi mission) through their disappointment with these forms of Islam which they later see as "false." Salafis justify their negative view of the Muslim "other" by referring to the magical elements they find in Tablighi Islam or the Muslim Brotherhood's taste for accommodation and politics. For example, they call the Islam of Muslim Brotherhood "Islam light" and claim that the *ikhwan muslimin* (Muslim Brothers) are, in fact, *ikhwan muflessin* (Corrupt Brothers) who have given too much value to politics. Purists level similar criticism at Jihadis, adding political violence to the list.

Purist Salafi groups in main suburban areas in France consider themselves the cream of Islam. They feel they do not belong to oppressed social classes because they have joined a kind of sacred caste that is the elite of society. Allah chose them to be the *taifa al-mansura* (victorious branch) and the *farqat al-najiya* (saved group), in reference to the famous and much debated hadith that Muslims will divide into seventy three factions all of which will end in hell except for the one Allah saves because it had stayed faithful in the face of temptations. Many Salafis think they form that only group destined for eternal salvation, because they have resisted the allure of "new" gods such as money, democracy, or secularism. Having been saved, they have to be grateful toward Allah and obey His Laws. This exclusive feeling is very different from Muslim currents such as the Muslim Brotherhood which insists on the need to unify Muslims and to come to an agreement with all of them so that Islam and Muslims restore their glory.

On a cultural and social level, purist Salafism can be defined as an attempt to rationalize time and space. Life, work, and education are fields for religious investment. However, there is a real contradiction in French Salafis' way of life and their desire to be recognized as the possessors of Islamic truth. While Salafis intend to live apart from the rest of the society on religious grounds they are also involved in a competition with other Muslims. The Islamic field in France can thus be described as a market within which each "firm"; each Muslim current, emphasizes comparative advantages to win "religious market shares."

Salafis emphasize authenticity as opposed to, for instance, Muslim Brotherhood's Islam as seen in the Union des Organisations Islamiques de France (UIOF), which prioritizes the need for a contextualized Islam that will allow one to be fully Muslim and fully citizen at the same time. Understandably, purist Salafism is overwhelmingly popular for a majority of young Muslims who do not succeed at school and are above all mistrustful of the surrounding society. Muslim youth who are attracted by the message of UIOF for example are seeking social enhancement which leads them to look for a religious discourse that legitimizes their choices. In other words, contextualizing Islam does not lead to integration but integration leads to reformulating religious imperatives.

Negotiated identities

Escaping professional careers that might corrupt them, Salafis are often led to establish their own businesses such as fast-food restaurants, phone shops, Internet cafes, and bookshops. Ironically, many Salafi entrepreneurs reach social positions thanks to their successful businesses. Attributing their social ascension to the correctness of their religious orientation they take their worldly success as a further sign of their religious superiority. Briefly, many Salafis change from a "down and outs" state to a "chosen ones" state and they see Islam as the cause of their progress: true Islam has empowered them.

Furthermore, instead of keeping Salafis separate from the rest of the non-Muslim community, this counterculture contributes to a kind of integration between Salafis and others. This integration is based on purist Salafi wishes to hold on to many attractive features of Western



Family attending a rally against laïcité, Paris

PHOTO BY JOEL ROBINE / © AFP, 2004

modernity such as its business spirit or consumer culture. Thus purist Salafism engenders a "negotiated identity" which allows its adherents to appear as more honourable believers while retaining the undeniable advantages that French nationality provides. They do not consider themselves as citizens but as people whose bond with the state is not allegiance but utility. Though they abstain from political participation in a non-Islamic state, Salafis have no scruples in taking welfare from that very state. No Salafi has ever admitted that accepting welfare is prohibited and none of the several Salafi websites I have seen discuss the prohibition of receiving social help from the non-Muslim state.

French purist Salafism appears to be a manifestation of post-Islamism since it can be defined as the plan to foster Islamic militancy without using real political means as creating parties or involvement in elections and political campaigns. Its main characteristic is the will to "re-Islamize" Muslims by reinvesting in the "core business" of Islam, namely *tawhid*, worship, and spirituality. In their view, Islamists have not been of real service to the ummah since their actions have only created *fitna*. Contrary to Islamists who generally want to get political power either violently or legally, purist Salafi thinking insists on using non-political methods.

The purists focus on purely religious elements such as faith and adoration. Society has to be "re-Islamized" by means of preaching and providing "a good model." The institutions however have to be Islamized through inspired scholars who are able to reform the state thanks to their religious knowledge. "Ordinary" believers have to stay away from these struggles and focus on preaching, worshipping, and deepening their knowledge of religion, because they can easily lose their self-control.

No longer down and outs, purist Salafis set up some kind of new "bourgeoisie" whose goal is to maintain a "top culture" which will reach any Muslim or even any person on earth. Purist Salafis believe they form the *avant garde* and will become moral models for anyone. They are to be the followed ones and not the followers. Thus, it seems justified to speak of purist Salafism in France as a religious answer to social, symbolic, and cultural feelings of domination that are widespread among Muslim populations. This discourse of true Islam can be used to reformulate power relations to the advantage of the dominated.

Notes

1. During French elections, Salafis reprimanded Muslims planning to vote. Quarrels erupted in mosques between elderly Muslims who urged the young to vote, and Salafis, who declared that it was illicit to take part in non-Islamic institutions. I witnessed an old man quoting Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi as allowing political participation, after which a Salafi retorted that Salafis did not heed deviant scholars.
2. In Les Mureaux, Stains, Argenteuil, Nanterre, and Épinay-sur-Seine.
3. In Roubaix and Tourcoing.
4. In Vénissieux.

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