Purist Salafism in France

Salafis are usually qualified as revolutionary or reformist Muslims mainly interested in gaining primacy around the world and overthrowing pernicious 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 Jihadi target Muslim leaders, charged with trumping 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, Lille-Roubaix, and Lyon, 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. 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 sa'la (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 Brotherhood 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 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.

Before conversion

many Salafis lived an un-Islamic life including the consumption of alcohol and sexual promiscuity...
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 do’wa salafyya (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 muslmin (Muslim Brothers) are, in fact, ikhwan muflissin (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 that they form the one 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 “religiously oriented” customers.

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 major- ity of young Muslims who do not succeed at school and are above all mistrustful of the surrounding society. Muslim youth who are attracted through inspired scholars who are able to reform the state thanks to their religious knowledge. “Ordinary” believers have to stay away from theses 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.
3. In Roubais and Tourcoing.
4. In Versailles.

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