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Radical Milieus and Salafis Movements in France:
Ideologies, Practices, Relationships with Society and
Political Visions

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Abstract

This paper deals mainly with the issue of radical Islam within French society over recent decades. More particularly, this study illustrates evolutions and the radicalization processes among some militant Islamic groups in this country since the end of the 1970s. Focusing on connections between geopolitical issues born in the Arab world and their implications within a predominantly non Muslim society, enables highlighting the centrality of some actors and currents that have been the impulse for the emergence of a radical and militant activism in France. Some specific attention is paid to Salafist movements, whether they are primarily interested in political protest or whether they desire first to break with the rest of society in order to purify their beliefs and social relations. This paper has to do with the political vision, strategies, history and sociology of Islamic radical militancy in France.

Keywords

Islam, Salafism, Islamism, Radicalism, France

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Introduction

Salafism refers to a search for Islamic authenticity. To understand it, we need to adopt some kind of “mental topographic” reflection. From its very beginning, Islam in its Sunni tradition has insisted on the principle that the closer believers are to the time of the Prophet, the closer they are to his moral genuineness. This mindset is legitimised by the two main sources of morality: spirituality and legislation. The *Quran* (Word of Allah) and *Sunna* (Path of Muhammad) were articulated in their true sense by Muhammad, the Seal of the Prophets (*khatim al-abiyya*). Therefore, the first believers – those who learnt their religion from the Prophet himself – are seen as the greatest Muslims ever. By being Muhammad’s contemporaries, they were inspired by the truest embodiment of Islamic values. As a result, these first-generation Muslims benefit from the greatest prestige among Islamic communities: if one claims to be a sincere Muslim, one has to take them as models. The most basic principle of Salafism is that only one path can be taken because only one is authentic. Understanding religious sources according to this interpretation must lead to one single vision of faith, worship, social relationships and political order. Immediately after Muhammad’s apostolate, many groups – “sects” – appeared, as did many others along the history of Islam. This created the perception that many misinterpretations were corrupting the purity of the initial creed, which is why the need to restore the very first understanding of the faith emerged, and many Muslim scholars rediscovered the heritage of the *Salaf Salih*. This expression refers to the first three generations of believers, whose practice and spirituality was directly inspired by the Prophet Muhammad. These were his companions, those who followed them (*tabi’oun*), and those who came after this second generation (*tabi’ tabi’in*). Afterwards, any Muslim who decides to follow this path may claim he is a Salafi, someone whose understanding is “orthodox” as he focuses only on the *Quran*, the *Sunna*, the *Athar* (the trace of the *Salaf Salih*) and the opinions of the ‘*Ulama* (Islamic scholars) based on these orthodox sources¹. By embracing this religiosity, Salafis intend to restore and imitate what is understood to be “true Islam” as it was at its very beginning. By means of *fatwas* (religious opinions), followers find moral guidelines for their daily lives.

Although Salafism requires puritanism and no subjection to non-Islamic influences, historically it led to many currents, diverging for instance in their approach to politics². As Salafism essentially appears when Muslims go through religious and temporal crises, many scholars and believers have tried to use this path to revitalise Islamic civilization. Today, Salafism can generally be divided into three major currents, the relation of which with politics is crucial for an understanding of their differences. One group consists in “Jihadists,” who aim to restore an Islamic state, purged of “treacherous leaders” who they accuse of being allied with “Enemies of Islam” like the United States. Another branch of Salafism is known as Reformist, since it takes part in political systems and participates in elections, seeking to enlarge its religious influence through legal participation. The last current is the Purists and its followers shun activism in favour of a non militant religiosity. Contesting established regimes, whether led by Muslims or not, is seen as an abomination, which is why the “Jihadists” are loathed by the Purists for creating chaotic sedition (*fitna*). The Purist preaching is essentially devoted to increasing Muslims’ awareness of orthodoxy, which means venerating no one but Allah and purifying acts of worships of “blameworthy innovations” (*al-bida’*, plural of *al-bid’a*). Politically, for example, most Purists do not see voting as legitimate; only Allah has power and the Law is well known, so in a “society of disbelievers” this would mean agreeing with the miscreants (*al-kuffar*).

Salafism came to France mainly as a result of a massive preaching effort coming from Saudi Arabia. More specifically, Salafi preaching has been through a process of globalization since the 1970s. Taking advantage of new sources of influence, this religiosity has been exported to an audience

¹ For the religious and historical aspects of Salafism, see Bernard Haykel, ‘On the Nature of Salafi Thought and Action’, in Roel Meijer (ed.), *Global Salafism. Islam’s New Religious Movement*, Hust & Company, London, 2009, pp.33-57.

² Quintan Wiktorowicz, ‘Anatomy of the Salafi Movement’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol.29, n°3, April-May 2006, pp.207-239.

all over the world. Amplified by the role of the internet, Salafism nowadays represents a globalized identity. However, in the French context, other groups claim to be representative of the legacy of the Pious Ancestors. The Algerian Civil war in the 1990s was, for instance, an opportunity to export violence and protests against the “enemies of Islam” to the former colonial power. In parallel, for some years there have been other movements who reject radical postures but were born in France and do not result from a foreign influence. They may follow some Salafi principles but do not belong to the currents previously mentioned. September 11th 2001 certainly brought more attention to radical Islamic groups, but many of them are not connected with “Global Jihad” and demonstrate that this issue is much more complex than the question of *Al-Qaeda*.

The Muslim population in France is generally estimated at 4 to 5 million people, but because of a lack of statistics based on ethnic background or religious affiliation it is very difficult to identify the real number of French citizens or immigrants sharing the Muslim faith. However, it would not be an exaggeration to consider Islam the second confession in French society. Many French Muslims live in the “banlieues” – suburban areas, where social and economic difficulties often lead to a drop in status. For this reason, some of them perceive religion as a way to regain their dignity and as a bedrock for life. Nevertheless, we find many other Muslim people rising up the social scale and blending their faith in harmony with the rest of their fellow citizens. Islam in France is, in this way, as influenced by global tensions which affect this identity as determined by national logics.

Genesis of Islamist Radicalism in the 1980s

For two decades, France was primarily a territory for the extension of violent conflicts originating from the Arab World. In this view, the presence of Radical Islam in the homeland should be considered fallout from French policy towards the Middle East and North Africa. Several movements indeed targeted France for its noticeable role in political struggles in these areas and contributed to making this country part of Islamic geopolitics. During the Algerian Independence War (1954-1962), some nationalist activists belonging to the FLN (*Front de Libération Nationale – Front for National Liberation*) highlighted their Algerian Islamic identity in their rhetoric but they never claimed to be fighting for Islam as a religion when they attacked policemen, derailed trains or torched ammunition warehouses. Metropolitan France was the scene of an anti-colonial struggle, not an antagonism based on religious views. However, the Islamist dimension started to really be observable in the 1980s when some militants working for Lebanese Hizbullah, itself supporting the Iranian Revolution, picked on the French State for being present in Lebanon during the Civil War. In February 1985, France experienced the first bomb attack in front of a Marks & Spencer shop in Paris and faced more than 20 more in the following months. September 1986 was the bloodiest period, with 7 persons killed and 55 injured near a Tati shop located in rue de Rennes in the capital city on the 17th. Resulting from the war between Iraq and Iran, during which the French authorities took Saddam Hussein’s side and helped the Bassist regime contain the Iranian Islamic Revolution throughout the Middle East, these attacks were actually the work of Hizbullah, created partly with the Mullahs’ support in 1982. France was experiencing Islamist terrorism for the first time. These attacks were organized by a Shiite Lebanese, Mohamed Mohajer, with the help of some Moroccan and Tunisian immigrants who represented the first generation of Islamic radicalism in France, largely constituted by Muslim immigrants whose religious awareness was due to the preaching of Tabligh. This movement is known to not endorse political engagement, but many believers, after having “rediscovered” Islam by means of it, decided to go beyond its non-activist approach to sometimes embrace a more militant religiosity. In the case of this radical Islamic generation, a Mosque located in the Jean-Pierre Timbaud street area³ in a popular district of Paris (11th arrondissement) played an important role, around the figure of Imam Shaykh Hammami. The Omar Ibn Al-Khattab Mosque is a famous Tablighi Mosque located in this part of Paris since the 1980s, and many immigrants have moved closer to religion by regularly attending lessons based on renewal of faith, purification of worship and non-involvement in politics. However, some believers have afterwards been convinced to identify with conflicts whose origin was in the

³ Hervé Terrel, ‘L’enclave islamique de la rue Jean-Pierre Timbaud’, in *Exils et Royaumes. Les appartenances au monde arabo-musulman aujourd’hui*, Gilles Kepel (dir.), Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 1994.

Middle-East. For instance, a Tunisian, Fouad Ali Saleh, was crucial in recruiting immigrants on behalf of Hizbullah at that time.

Radicalism becomes really endogenous: the second generation of violent Islamism

The 1990s represented a break in the history of Islamic radicalism. First of all, violence now came from the oldest French ex-colony, Algeria. This explains why France became directly targeted as a major enemy of Islam and became the only foreign country to which the Algerian Civil War was exported. Islamist leaders, for instance, reproached the French authorities for helping the Algerian Government to stop them winning the elections. Second, society was dumbstruck to discover that some of the radical activists in the civil war were French-born citizens with Algerian backgrounds. This phenomenon is still today at the root of a massive fear of a large part of the French population. This scare from a change in radical Islamist recruiting was all the more serious because the attacks took place only a few years after the First Gulf War, during which some opinion-makers identified a risk that some French-Arabs or French-Muslims might identify with Iraq and Saddam Hussein.

Ideologically, for the first time Islamists targeting France came from Salafi groups promoting a fundamentalist rhetoric clearly influenced by groups taking part in the war in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union. Muslim fighters, who were trained alongside Egyptians, Saudis and other nationalities, shared the duty of Jihad against the Soviet (*Dar Al-Kufr* – Land of Unpiety) unbelievers attacking the *Umma* and *Dar Al-islam* (Land of Islam) and decided to turn their fight against “false” Muslim leaders. The 1991 elections in Algeria saw a victory for the FIS (Front Islamique du Salut – *Islamic Salvation Front*) in parallel with greater influence for its two chiefs, Abbassi Madani and Ali Belhadj. Their objective was to implement an Islamic State whose legislation would be based on Sharia. This refers to Quranic and Islamic clauses meant to bring justice and guidance to society. By emphasizing the legitimacy of involvement in politics, their preaching was strongly criticized by Purist figures such as Shaykh Abdul Malik Ramadani Al-Jazaïri, Shaykh Muhammad Nassirudine Al-Albany and Shaykh Abdul Muhsin Al-‘Abbad. The first of these in fact wrote a book entitled *Madarik un-Nadhr fi's-Siyasah: Bayna't-Tatbiqat ash-Shar'iyah wa'l-Infia'lat al-Hamasiiyyah*,⁴ in which serious criticism was raised towards the FIS leaders.

After the FIS victory in the first round of the Parliamentary Elections in December 1991, the Algerian Army decided to cancel the electoral process before the second round. Many members of the party were arrested, which was taken for a declaration of war and inexorably slid the country into a civil war. Two military organizations appeared to react after the Government hardened its position towards the FIS. Some of the Islamists created the Islamic Salvation Army (Armée Islamique du Salut), which declared allegiance to the FIS and started leading guerrillas against the official forces. More radical was the Armed Islamic Group (GIA – Groupe Islamique Armé), which intended to set up a true Islamic State and overthrow “false” Muslim leaders, whereas the AIS was mainly interested in liberating the FIS members and negotiating with the Government. Created in July 1992, the GIA some time afterwards started to use France as a secondary headquarter to lead attacks against the Algerian Government. However, accusing the French State of supporting their country’s fight against them, actions started to be planned against the French population. On December 24th 1994, the radical group hijacked Air France Flight 8969 from Algiers to Paris to crash it there. However, the GIGN (French elite police force) stormed the plane in Marseille. In 1995, the GIA began making attacks in Paris. Between July 11th and October 17th, 9 bomb attacks left 10 dead and 114 injured. On July 11th, Abdelbaki Sahraoui was killed in his mosque by GIA members. He was one of the founders of the FIS and opposed the extension of the Algerian Civil War to France. On July 25th, the most infamous attack in this period took place in the Saint Michel station of line B, killing 8 victims. The method used was a gas bottle explosion. Other attacks happened in the following weeks, such as a bomb at the Arc de Triomphe on August 26th and a car bomb at a Jewish school in Villeurbanne on September 7th. A few days before this, on 3rd September a bomb had been found on the high-speed railway line near Lyon.

⁴ *Perceptions of Viewing Politics: Between the Divinely Legislated Application and Enthusiastic Disturbances*, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Dar Sabeel il-Mumineen, 1418 AH/1997 CE, 2nd Edition, preface by Cheikh Muhammad Nassirudine Al-Albani and Cheikh Abdul Muhsin Al-‘Abbad.

Lyon is well known for sheltering a large North African population for decades, some of whom have to face anomy, racism and social difficulties. One member of the radical groups which committed these attacks who was tracked down was Khaled Kelkal. He had moved from Algeria to France with his mother at the age of two, having been born in Mostaganem in Algeria in 1971. In 1992, he had been interviewed by a German sociologist, Dietmar Loch, to whom he admitted feeling neither French nor Algerian but only Muslim, and that he wanted to leave France. Although he was a good pupil, he started behaving as a delinquent and had been in prison several times. In 1990, he was sentenced to 4 years for having stolen cars. During his sentence, he met “Khelif”, an Islamist activist who brought him back to religion. Khaled Kelkal did not serve all his sentence and after his release started attending the Bilal Mosque in Vaulx-en-Velin, which was close to Tabligh. He began travelling more and more frequently in Algeria, where he was recruited by one of the GIA members working for its leader, Djamel Zitouni, who decided to punish France for its support for the Algerian Government. Being one of the main protagonists of the 1995 attacks, his fingerprints were found on the bomb which exploded at Saint-Michel station. He rapidly became public enemy number one and the hunt for him finally ended on September 29th after a search in the forest of Malval near Lyon. His death was shown on TV and symbolized for many people the fact that the fight for Islam could now involve French-born citizens. This fear was heightened when other “Jihad sites” started recruiting French Muslims, among whom converted people were particularly noticeable. This was the case of Lionel Dumont (Abu Hamza), a French soldier born in a Christian Family who embraced Islam after serving in Somalia. Together with some friends, he was found in Bosnia during the war between the Croats and the Serbs. In March 1996, he unsuccessfully attempted to set off a car bomb attack on the occasion of the G7 meeting in Lille.

The age of Global Jihad

Although many GIA activists attempted to expand the Algerian conflict towards Europe by using countries like France, Belgium, Italy or Britain⁵, the former colonial power was the only one to be attacked in the 1990s as revenge against the one country still guilty of influencing Algerian politics. However, the end of the decade saw a change in the dimension of Algerian radicalism concerning France. About at that time, a part of the GIA globalized its struggle against the enemies of Islam and its connections with global Jihad supporters increased. In parallel, some young French Muslims joined transnational groups whose agenda was mainly the defence of the *Umma* rather than overthrowing any one specific Government. The struggle for Islam depended less on territory and what mattered now was to identify with oppressed Muslims anywhere in the world. Even though some French radical militants fought in Bosnia, Chechnya or Iraq with “Nationalist Jihadists” engaged in a conflict against one state (particularly Serbia, Russia, or the United States), their only goal was to build a new *Umma* through massive involvement in political violence in order to cleanse Islamic societies of any impious authority before re-establishing a global Caliphate, as in the first centuries.

This new generation of French Jihadists gravitated towards Usama Bin Laden, who stood for this global project. France, in a sense, has become a national market for this world plan and the differences between countries tends to fade. Radical Islamism has become more anti-imperialist and the militants aim to challenge the influence of the main political powers. The *Umma* is endangered and a religious avant-garde has to restore the dignity of Muslims. Palestine, Iraq and Kashmir are mentioned as lands for Jihad, where fellow believers have to suffer from American, French, British or Israeli domination suppressing Islam. By identifying with any Muslim who is said to be stifled, a transnational solidarity emerges and young men’s attention is now focused on the lands where Jihad is reported to be legitimate. In their view, traditional religious norms become meaningless, and so, for instance, Islamic worship of parents no longer makes sense. Furthermore, this makes this perception of Islam and Jihad understandable for numerous reborn Muslims. Even if, for example, in many banlieues there are young people coming from Christian families, they may tend to embrace their Muslims friends’ suffering and start challenging the State’s authority. Discrimination and social relegation representing symbolic distrust are construed as an obvious sign that Muslims are disliked

⁵ Some GIA presence was also noticeable in the United States, but less than in France, for instance.

and targeted by unbelievers. As a result, the converted are significantly present among Jihadists, together with French people coming from the overseas territories⁶ with names such as Willy Brigitte, Ruddy Terranova, Johan Bonte or Jean-Marc Grandvisir. These people find in Islam a way to erase social and ethnic barriers and to combat Western domination over the world.

Another point is related to the intellectual capital of Jihadists. The global struggle against the West is carried out by young Muslims who have degrees and can efficiently handle cultural practices within French society. Moreover, before being recruited into radical units, many of them have distinguished themselves by engaging in juvenile delinquency. Some Islamist activists are approached during their studies, like Kamel Daoudi, who started being radical when he moved to Londonistan in 2000 after obtaining a degree in Computer Science. Despite that, his education did not allow him to get a better job than as a social worker for the Athis-Mons municipality in the suburbs of Paris. Djamel Beghal is another case of radicalization despite academic success. He graduated in Business Administration after attending a Tabligh Mosque near Paris and listening to the Islamic Preacher Tariq Ramadan on audio tapes. Some time afterwards he moved to Leicester in Britain, where he started feeling very concerned by what had been going on in Afghanistan during the war against the Soviet Union and during the 1990s. Another striking illustration is given by Zakarias Moussaoui, often described as “the 20th member” of the terrorist network which planned the World Trade Center attacks in New York on September 11th, 2001. The son of an immigrant Moroccan lady who raised her two sons by herself in Perpignan in the South of France, he graduated in commerce and also moved to London, where he obtained another degree in International Trade in 1995. From this moment on, he began travelling very frequently to Pakistan and his connections with the rest of his family became rarer. He was finally arrested in the United States in August 2001 a few weeks before the attacks.

Most Islamist Radicals have experienced prison and because of its promiscuity and psychological tensions use it as a mould for recruiting new activists. In 2006, the French intelligence services (Renseignements Généraux) reported that 175 prisoners were regularly preaching to their gaolmates using rigorous rhetoric. Among them, 14% had been imprisoned for being connected with extremist groups. At that time, around 100 people had been arrested for planning terrorist attacks on French territory. Converted people are once more over-represented in gaol compared to their importance within Muslim communities in France. A famous example is Saïe Bourada, known for having recruited Khaled Kelkal. He was imprisoned, and while he was in gaol created a radical unit called *Ansar Al-Fath (Auxiliaries of Victory)* in Val-de-Reuil in Normandy. When he was released in 2005, this group was dismantled.

Another way to radicalization is through the internet, as religious violence is widely legitimised on the web. Jihad is first of all cyber Jihad, through which Salafi activists are recruited, plan their terrorist operations, promote their actions and send messages worldwide to threaten or condemn the policy of Western States. In 2004 and 2009, this was specifically the case against the French Government, which passed laws preventing the wearing of the *hijab* in public schools and the full veil in public areas. Calls to target French interests from Usama Bin Laden and Ayman Al-Zawahiri, who has been head of Al-Qaeda since May 2001, have been taken up, especially by the heirs of GIA located in Algeria.

The current threat over France: Global Jihad and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb

Today, France is primarily the butt of a double threat. In a first stage, the anti-French feeling which came from the Algerian GIA is now globalized, and when crises have emerged in North Africa and the Sahelian zone over the last decade, radical groups swear allegiance to Al-Qaeda. This means more particularly that France is more in the frontline in the war on terror than ever. Another significant point is that radicals do not hesitate to capture and execute French citizens moving to this region, for example for business or humanitarian aid. Secondly, another generation of young radicals working alone but influenced by global Jihadists is capable of wading in to commit attacks.

The American intervention in Iraq has allowed many Muslims across the world to enlist as soldiers of Islam. After 2003, this country indeed became the major scene for global Jihad, and some

⁶ Which have been historically populated with slaves working for the French Empire.

recruitment processes followed the trail back to France. The famous case of Farid Benyettou, whose militancy convinced several Salafis from Paris and its suburbs to increase the numbers of Jihadists in Iraq reveals how a radical unit works. Although his group, known as the 19th district network, was dismantled in January 2005, some permanent features can be mentioned. First of all, Farid Benyettou describes France as a racist and anti-Islam society. In an interview with Samir Amghar, the radical activist says:

France is a country of unbelievers. I don't like this country. It doesn't respect Muslims, there is discrimination and Islamophobia. We must fight in France to defend Muslims but we must do so by legal means. We must turn democracy against France. But we must not use arms or lay bombs. France has not declared war on us.⁷

He does not really consider France a legitimate place for engaging in Jihad as there is no French army clearly assaulting Muslims, but this country has to be fought even by democratic means and by turning its values against itself. The presence of foreign and impious armies seems to be the key factor in his view of unbelievers. As a result, he played a prominent role in convincing several young Muslims to leave their country to combat the US occupation in Iraq.

This trend is very different to the "merger" that characterized the "Algerian Jihad" born after 1991 and the "Global" one due to *Al-Qaeda*. By adopting the views of world jihad figures, most of the previous Algerian fighters who challenged their State in the 1990s have turned their movement into a "paradoxical" one. They identify with the combat for Islam worldwide but they mainly act in North Africa. This is why, after creating the GSPC (Groupe Salafi pour la Prédication et le Combat – *Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat*) in 1998, some of its leaders saw it as a more radical unit than the GIA, which was seen as focused on the fight against the Government, and this has led to some bloody attacks over the last few years. The GSPC was founded by Hassan Hattab, and since its birth has acted more regionally, by acting in Mauritania, Mali and Niger and directly targeting France as its major enemy. In September 2005, the GSPC published a communiqué in which this country was threatened as "Enemy number one". After starting as an Algerian network, on September 25th 2007 the GSPC became *Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb*, in this way conveying the parent group's primacy. Its leader, the Emir Abdul Malek Droukhal, who previously fought the USSR in Afghanistan, benefited from Abou Musab Al-Zarkawi's support in 2005 to unseat Nabil Sahraoui, the successor to Hassan Hattab. Since that time, the GSPC has clearly been connected to *Al-Qaeda* and its objective is to export the Iraqi "success" to North Africa. It describes the Algerian leaders as "traitors serving France". Since that time, France has been seen always more as an imperial power behaving towards Muslims, and more precisely towards Algeria, like the United States in the Middle East. In 2005 and 2006, Ayman Al-Zawahiri published several communiqués condemning and threatening France for prohibiting the headscarf in public schools and still aspiring to rule its former colony.

Even though information is rare about this organization, in 2004 the Front Islamique Français Armé (*Armed French Islamic Front*) claimed responsibility for the bombing of the Indonesian Embassy in Paris and demanded the release of two GIA members imprisoned in France. This unit is today considered dormant. However, at that time it was described as close to *Al-Qaeda*. This group also called for the admission of Turkey into the European Union and for the censorship of any publication likely to offend Muslims, such as the writings by Michel Houellebecq which insisted on the archaism represented by Islam.

"Apolitical" radicalism: the cases of Salafiyya 'ilmiyya, Tabligh and Ahbache Salafiyya 'ilmiyya

Although some groups have tried to make France a land for violent "Jihad" by understanding this concept primarily as a duty to challenge non-Islamic authorities, Salafism in this society is essentially

⁷ Samir Amghar, 'Foundations of Muslim Radicalism in France', in *Ethno-religious conflict in Europe. Typologies of Radicalisation in Europe's Muslim Communities*, Edited by Michael Emerson, Center for European Policy Studies, Brussels, 2009, pp.27-50.

resistant to activism and political engagement. Followers call themselves “*ilmiyyoun*”, meaning that their first priority is the purity of the creed and not the Islamization of institutions. Their main objective is to cancel out history so as to go back up to the first Islamic centuries. However, they do not believe that they must deal with unbelievers violently. Their socialization consists in establishing a strict separation between themselves and the rest of the society. Identifying with the mainstream religiosity in Saudi Arabia, their spiritual and legal references are Shaykh Abdul Aziz Ibn Baz, the former Mufti of the Kingdom, Shaykh Muhammad Ibn Othaymine, member of the Great Ulama Committee and Shaykh Muhammad Nassirdine Al-Albany, an Albanese-born Muslim who emigrated to Syria with his family after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. All of them are dead, but they still hold much influence over many Muslims all over the world. They are considered key figures of Islamic orthodoxy by Purist Salafis, following in the line of famous historical Sunni imams such as Shaykh Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, Shaykh Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya and Shaykh Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahab, who contributed to the birth of the first Saudi Kingdom in 1744 when he allied with Muhammad Ibn Saoud, a tribal chief whose family is still at the head of the country.

Purist Salafis are legalist and do not show any interest in politics and active militancy. This is one of their key principles, as involvement in this field may lead to contestation and challenging established authorities. This would simply be a religious abomination in their view because the true Islamic creed does not tolerate any sedition. In a Muslim society, even if political leaders are not as pious as they should be, no worshiper has the right to criticize them; otherwise, the *Umma* risks chaos, division and an absence of reference points. As a result, this political vision lauds obedience as long as the *wali al-amr* (“sharer of authority”) does not commit any visible act of impiety. This is a major difference with respect to jihadists, who judge modern Muslim countries to be irrelevant to Islam. They have betrayed their faith, for instance by allying with the United States and deserting certain causes like Palestine. Unlike them, Purists fear that even praying would not be possible in the case of rebellion against political leaders. When they live in non-Muslim countries such as France, Salafis mainly focus on remaining pure, which means that they are incessantly restricting relationships with other people, even Muslims sometimes. Their life is centred around mosques, where they like to study at *dorous* (lessons), in which, most of the time, the cleric insists on the necessity of living according to the legal opinions (*fatwas*) of the *Ulama*. Even if they claim to not be politically involved because of their duty to preserve the *Umma* from partisanship (*hizbiyya*) to the detriment of Islamic unity, they clearly have a high regard for Saudi Arabia. This monarchy indeed represents the most successfully completed Islamic society nowadays. As it reflects the image of a sincere Muslim society where the *Ulama* share power with the Royal Family, Salafis are reluctant to contravene their dogmatic injunction and criticize this “model-country”.

Another implication of their faith is a duty to leave France, as a true Muslim is not allowed to live in an impious society. This duty refers to *hijra*, which can be defined as salutary migration with the goal of allowing Salafis to live in an Islamic context. The 2004 law banning religious signs from public schools and the 2010 one prohibiting the full veil resulted in persuading them they were targeted by the French State. Today, the Salafi population in France is estimated at 10,000 to 20,000, while there are thought to be only 100 to 300 Jihadists. Several thousands of the Purists have left France, although sometimes only for a brief period. Some have definitively taken up residence in Algeria, Morocco, Egypt, or the United Arab Emirates, but the vast majority returned to France after a few months or years. The main objectives of *hijra* are emancipation from a country seen more and more as Islamophobic and escape from the defects of an impious society. Mixed-sex education is often mentioned, for instance, as a source of moral perdition. During their stay in an Islamic society, these Salafis give high importance to learning Arabic and improving their religious knowledge. Many French Salafis have moved to Cairo, living in the areas of Rehab or Madinat Nasr, for example. In this quarter, a famous school created by US Salafis and managed by French converted Salafis from the suburbs of Paris is well known for welcoming Purists from all over the world, although the majority of the students are French. Its name is *Markaz Al-Ibana* (Al-Ibana Centre) and it consists of one ground-floor apartment located in a traditional old building. It is becoming ever better known among Salafis in France, who try to attend this institution when they move to Egypt.

However, most Salafis still live in France, despite not intending to integrate into society. The community is formed of two main groups. First of all, there are young believers from North African families living in the principal French suburban areas around big cities such as Paris, Lyon or Lille. Nevertheless, over the last decade this religiosity has spread to medium-sized towns. They do not identify with French nationality although it is useful for them when they want to travel, establish themselves in a Muslim country or take advantage of the welfare state. They much prefer to consider themselves Algerian, Tunisian or Moroccan, although they tend to struggle against the religious education they received from their parents, who they say are Islamically deviant. Indeed, Salafis stigmatize practices like venerating saints (*awliyya*) or neglecting prayers, which many Muslims do. Life in a modern society has made their parents' generation lazy compared to the first Muslims and it is their duty to serve as models for the whole *Umma*. The second main group consists of converted people. According to our observations, they represent at least 30% of the French Purist Salafis. They say they are attracted by the logical aspect of this religiosity and tend to identify with their friends in the banlieues who connect more and more with religion.

One key point in the Salafi way of life is that followers feel they have been initiated into a pure and true form of Islamic worship. Other Muslims do not grasp the true meaning of *tawhid* (God's uniqueness). By mastering the true sense of Muslim authenticity, they join the *farqat najiyya* ("saved – by God – group") and the *tayfat al-mansura* ("victorious branch"), which they understand to be the only ones recognized by God. Other Muslims have not followed the path of the Pious Ancestors and have thus endangered their salvation. This feeling of having been elected is at the heart of their immune way of life. Salafis actually intend to cut themselves off from the rest of society, which is seen as radical behaviour by many other Muslims. Marriage is almost systematically contracted with Salafi women, many of whom wear the *jilbab*, which is a large one-piece simple dress not showing their figure. Some of them have adopted the *niqab*, which is a full veil that hides even the face. The ban on the *niqab* in 2010 highlighted the image of Salafism as a radical and antagonistic religiosity.

However, reality is more complex, as at the economic level they are largely oriented towards business and entrepreneurship. Salafis show a great appetite for earning money through self-employment and describe it as a sign of election, as God rewards them for being able and determined enough to symbolically challenge the impious society. Although they are not engaged politically and do not take part in elections, they remain connected to their neighbourhoods in the banlieues and to the rest of society through their businesses and shops, such as fast-food restaurants, travel agencies organising trips to the Gulf countries or real estate firms. Purist and legalist Salafism can be described as a post-Islamist religiosity insisting on consumerism, social success, conservative values and disdain for politics.

Tabligh

This is probably the oldest mass-preaching Islamic movement today. It was born in 1927, in the Indian province of Mewat. In the eyes of its founder, Muhammad Ilyas, the Muslim minority was risking forgetting its religion. Through mass preaching, he therefore aimed to re-Islamize Indian Muslims, who he considered had been in contact with Hindus and the British for too long. For him, given that the faithful were not Muslim enough, an efficient approach would be focusing on the religious basics, such as prayer. Because of its massive proselytism, which leads Tablighis to go anywhere where there are people, this movement is probably the biggest religious network in the world today.

Jama'at Tabligh (the Tabligh Association) was very efficient in France in the 1960s among the first migrants to establish themselves to work in France, who were mainly living in workers' hostels. Being very influential among immigrants from Muslims countries, most of whom were single or distant from their families in North Africa, Tabligh has historically been a key actor in re-Islamization. It controls numerous mosques and organizes frequent outings to preach to and convert (*khourouj fi sabil-ilah*) as many people as possible, but this Purist Salafism movement is reluctant to engage politically. The most essential thing is to focus on religion without any real interest in anything likely to divide Muslims.

At the end of the 1960s, a group of Pakistani preachers decided to set up a mission in France, and some years later, in 1972, a first association, *Foi et Pratique* (Faith and Practice), was created. In

1973, the Abu Bakr Mosque was founded in Paris and some years afterwards the Omar Ibn Al-Khattab Mosque in rue Jean-Pierre Timbaud became one of the most famous and influential mosques in France. Since the 1980s, most French cities with a noticeable Muslim population have experienced Tablighi outings and most French mosques have been visited by Tablighi preachers at some time. In the 1980s, the historical leader, Shaykh Hammami, started facing competition from younger Lebanese imams who created “Tabligh wa da’wa lilah” (Tabligh and preaching to God) in 1985. This current within the French Tablighi universe gave birth to the Saint-Denis centre (*Markaz Saint-Denis*) in the North of Paris, where outings are planned every Thursday after the Asr prayer. Tablighis travel within France and even to other European countries.

Today, Tabligh missionaries tend to work with mosque officials in numerous cities. The Tablighi leaders are not really interested in meeting officials or taking part in elections for the French Council for the Muslim Faith, created in 2003, but they engage in good relations with non-Tablighis so that their movement can continue to preach and call for a return towards the path of Allah.

Ahbache

This movement’s origin was in Lebanon. It reveals another aspect of the globalized Islamic identities affecting the Muslim communities in France. Its founder is Shaykh Abdulah Al-Habachi, who is from Ethiopia. This religiosity was promoted mainly during the 1990s by Lebanese students established in France. In 1988, one of them, Khaled Zanat, created the movement’s first association in the south of the country in the city of Montpellier, where their Mosque, named *Tawba* (“Pardon”), is one of the biggest in the region. Zacarias Moussaoui’s brother, Abdul Samad, is one of the leaders of the movement in this area and after September 11 wrote a famous book in which he tells his personal story, entitled *Zacarias Moussaoui. Mon frère*⁸ (*Zacarias Moussaoui. My brother*). At the same time, an association close to the movement was set up in Paris. It was named *Association Bienfaisance Islamique* (Association Islamic Charity). In 1996, its founder arrived in France and this led to the union of the whole Ahbache network. This gave birth to the Association for Islamic Charity Projects in France, directed by the Lebanese students who set up the movement, like Khaled Zanat, Walid Dabbous and Tamim Abdelnasser. Ahbache Muslims are mainly from North African and Sub-Saharan immigrant families. Today this is a very influential movement primarily located in the South of France and in Paris. Over the last few years, some Ahbache followers have been involved in physical fights with Salafi in some Parisian Mosques, illustrating the rivalry for the representation of Islam that exists in some areas.

Newcomers in the Islamic Radical field: “Collectif Cheikh Yassine” and “Forsane Alizza”

Recent events in the Muslim communities as well as in the whole of French society reveal new faces of Islamic radicalism. Debates and disagreement around the headscarf ban in public schools or the prohibition of the full veil, not to mention the structural impact of global issues involving Muslims across the world, like the Israeli attacks on the Gaza Strip in December 2008 – January 2009, have been used to plead for the defence of oppressed fellow believers. In this context, new groups were born to fight what was seen as Muslim hatred in the media, across the population, and in legislation. These movements are all the more interesting in that they are inspired by other groups in the rest of Europe and at the same time they promote an endogenous Islamic opposition away from the influence of Muslim countries. In this respect, *Collectif Cheikh Yassine* and *Forsane Alizza* represent a new generation of radical activists. They are less organized but they thrive on frustrations that more and more Muslims feel because of the recent debates related to Islam in French society.

The Collectif Cheikh Yassine (*Cheikh Yassine Collective*) was born after 2004. Its name refers to the founder and spiritual leader of Palestinian Hamas, who died in an Israeli targeted killing in 2004. This group has the aim of fighting anti-Muslim feelings all over the world and of putting Islamic causes at the top of the French agenda, especially after the prohibition of religious signs in public schools after 2004. It was created by a former member of the Moroccan Islamist Parti de la Justice et

⁸ Abd Samad Moussaoui et Florence Bouquillat, *Zacarias Moussaoui. Mon frère*, Denoël, 2002

du Développement (*Party for Justice and Development*) who emigrated to France at the beginning of the 2000s, Abdelhakim Sefrioui . It counts a few dozens of people but it is very present on the web and has led many actions to gain the attention of the media and public opinion. Its two main proponents are Abdelhakim Sefrioui and his wife, a reborn Muslim, who always call for the mobilization of Muslims when the Government is believed to have passed laws against Islam or the faithful are attacked, as in December 2008 – January 2009 during the Israeli attacks against the Gaza Strip. Considering Muslims living in France to be systematically oppressed people, the Collective continually seeks to expose believers who can be considered to be too close to the public authorities. For instance, during the public and media debate over the possible prevention of wearing the full veil, Hassen Chalghoumi, the Imam of Drancy in the suburbs of Paris was severely criticized for supporting this legislation. Sit-ins, public demonstrations and calls for alternative prayers near his Mosque were organized to delegitimize Chalghoumi's views. This Tunisian-born Imam, who was formerly a member of Tabligh, was said to be too moderate and to be working for the government or the Jews. Presenting itself as a pro-Hamas movement, the Collective is also very active in promoting the need for Muslims to help Palestinians to fight Zionist aggression.

Another part of this new generation of radicalization is *Forsane Alizza* (The Cavaliers of Pride). This movement can be compared to the *Muhajiroun* in Britain, or to groups which actively preach in public like *Street Dawa*, except *Forsane Alizza* is more radical. It expressly calls for the reestablishment of the Caliphate and the primacy of Islamic laws, and can be related to *Sharia 4 Belgium*. It aims to show the growing influence of Islam all over the country and to defend the honour of its religion. On December 18th 2010, the first Meeting About the Islamization of Europe took place in Paris. It was mainly organized by a Secular Radical Movement called *Riposte Laïque* (Secular Reply) and a far-right extremist group, the *Bloc Identitaire* (Identity Bloc), and many religious and secular associations demonstrated near the place where it was held to condemn the event. *Forsane Alizza* held a parallel public demonstration to promote radical rhetoric based on the necessity of combating the enemies of Islam. Some slogans even claimed the imminent achievement of an Islamic society. The Cavaliers are primarily young people. Most of them are under the age of 40 and many distinguish themselves by having undergone periods of imprisonment. They do not recognize the legitimacy of the State and call for the progress of Islam through public meetings and demonstrations on public transport. This movement should not be compared to the Purist Salafis, even though some of their clerics are mentioned as inspiration. They are mainly interested in provoking friction with the rest of the society through active militancy, something which is rejected by those Salafis.

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