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THE ORIGINS OF SALAFISM IN ISLAM

ABSTRACT

This article tries to understand the occurrence conditions of Salafism to partially reveal a framework for Salafi mentality. To do this, comprehension of Salafi mind is a requirement and fulfilling this requirement is only possible by re-visiting the dilemma between its means of rules and traditions. This article analyzes the extent and the motivation sources of Salafist stance against traditions, innovations, and other denominations of Islam. In this analysis, this article asks in a historical context the extent to which Salafism stands against the other sects of Islam. Therefore, attitudes and interpretations of founding fathers of Salafism against similar issues to traditions and innovations are on the origin of this analysis because of the impossibility of recognition of Salafi mentality without seeking the roots of the faith (aqida) of Salafism.

Keywords: Salafism, Islam, Islamic Sects, Origins of Salafism

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INTRODUCTION

Salafism has significance not only for Islamic theological perspective and Islamic political theory, but also in real politics of the today's world. But like all other significant issues in the real politics, the historical roots and mental basis of Salafism must be understood and conceptualized. In this respect, this article tries to understand the occurrence conditions of Salafism to partially reveal a framework for Salafi mentality. To do this, comprehension of Salafi mind is a requirement and fulfilling this requirement is only possible by re-visiting the dilemma between its means of rules and traditions.

Members of Salafi movements are prone to act in what their rules steer them. Therefore, the creed of all Salafi movements must be based on the Salafi mentality. In Salafi mentality, the literal interpretation has a strong determinative role on the religious life and also attitudes to other Islamic movements. Quran and Hadith have the centered place in Salafi traditions. Appropriately to the center place of Quran and Hadith in Salafi mentality, many Salafi movements accept traditions as well as innovations as corruption from the roots of Islam. At this point, this article analyzes the extent and the motivation sources of Salafist stance against traditions, innovations, and other denominations of Islam. In this analysis, this article asks in a historical context the extent to which Salafism stands against the other sects of Islam. Therefore, attitudes and interpretations of founding fathers of Salafism against similar issues to traditions and innovations are on the origin of this analysis because of the impossibility of recognition of Salafi mentality without seeking the roots of the faith (aqida) of Salafism.

In addition to the founding fathers' mentality, the historical context of Salafism is also very critical for this analysis. . Because of that historical context also led Salafi movements to have a bad image in people's mind, especially in Western society. To correct the biased image of Salafism in the eyes of even Middle Eastern people, the texture of Salafism can generate a beneficial analysis tool although some Arab countries have been strongly and negatively affected by the aggressive and violently behaviors of Salafi movements. Finally, this article explains how Salafi movements differently attitude to other sects of Islam.



PROMINENT SALAFI SCHOLARS

Conceptually, Salafi means the follower of the Prophet Mohammed and his companions. In this respect, all Muslims must be considered as Salafi because all Muslims have been also proclaimed by Prophet Mohammed as his followers and companions. However, by the time, Salafism turned to a branch of Islamic denomination and also is claimed to accept only Quran and Hadith. In earlier periods, the name of this branch was as ahl al Hadith. By the time, the scope and the content of this branch has dramatically changed and called as Salafism.

The word Salaf in Arabic literally means past or predecessors and refers in Islamic terminology to the scholars in the first period of Islam who had their own methods in religious issues. Additionally, the term salaf al-saleh (pious predecessors) to the first three generations after the beginning of the prophecy. A Prophetic tradition has been shown as a justification that “the best people is my generation, then the generation after my generation, and then, those who come from them” (Wiktorowicz, 2006). Therefore, the ultimate goal of Salafism of Salafism is to take the first three generations as leaders for themselves and to understand and to practice Islam like them. In other words, they aim to protect Islamic roots from manipulations by purifying it from all outside influences and innovations (bid’a). Living a pious and simple life as Prophet Mohammad and the three following generations is the sole way to realize the aim of purification.

This section explains the contribution of prominent Salafi scholars to the Salafi creed (aqida), chronologically and analytically. Despite the Salafi claim to never use any sources except Quran and Hadith, the contributions of prominent Salafi scholars is very important to understand the change in Salafi creed. The reason is the subjectivity of the interpretation style of Salafism on religious texts to these prominent scholars.

Ahmad bin Hanbal is one of the most important scholars in Salafi school. He was born in Basra, Iraq in 780 and has been also considered as the founder of Hanbali school which is among four legal Islamic jurisprudence schools. He is famous for his deliberate choice of mursal hadith (hadith with a missing link) over any kind of reasoning in the absence of concrete evidence. The main reason of his prominence in relation to the historical story of Salafism was his defense against theologians of Mu’tezila in the Mihna event (The Encyclopedia of Islam, 2014). He said that: “If they are not Ahl al-Hadith, then I do not know



who they are” (Fath al Bari 1985). Usually, researchers understood the words the people of Hadith as the people of Sunnah. After the Mihna event, the view against Mu'tezila has emerged with the support of Abbasid Caliph al-Mamun to the reaction of Ahmad bin Hanbal against Mu'tezila (The Encyclopedia of Islam 2014). Although Salafis are considered as closer to the Hanbali school of Islamic law, Ahmed bin Hanbal, indeed, uphold the Salafi aqidah and rejected rationalism by strictly drawing his rulings from Quran and and the Sunnah.

Another important scholar was Ibn Taymiyya because of his contribution to the systematization and elaboration of Salafi school. He was born in Harran in 1263 and his grandfather was also a representative of Hanbali School. Therefore, he has also a well-designed education for jurisprudence, theology, philosophy, and Sufism in his early Ages (Assef, 2011). In his times, the Islamic world has been hardly experiencing the Mongolian and Crusaders invasions. The Islamic world has differently interpreted the invasions and moreover, some sects of Sufi groups were deviated. The Mardin Fatwa that Ibn Taymiyya gave about these deviations is still effective on the people today. The recruitment of Al Qaida for its new militants is the famous example of the effectiveness of the Mardin Fatwa (Güneş & Avuka, 2010). Additionally, this is also a very interesting example for the literal interpretation of the text without consideration of its mentality behind it.

Ibn al Qayyim was another important scholar for Salafi school although he was not as prominent as Ahmad bin Hanbal and Ibn Taymiyya. As a student of Ibn Taymiyya, his ideas and views became very tremendous on the school. He was known as a strong critical researcher in Hanbali school. To secure the justice for the benefit of the Muslim society, he mainly advised to turn the origins of religion and rehabilitation of the society by criticizing the mental stagnation due to the imitation of worship rather than verification of faith (Nursi, 2005). Ibn al Qayyim emphasized that true understanding and good intention are from the greatest of Allah's favors by which he blesses his slave. Therefore, a slave won't be bestowed with anything more virtuous or majestic than the two of them. For al-Qayyim, true understanding and good intention are the two legs of Islam, and by them, the slave protects himself from the paths of those with divine anger, corrupted intentions and understandings. In addition, al-Qayyim also stated that by these two legs of Islamic faith, the slave can be among those with divine favor, and on the straight path.

The reflection of al-Qayyim's thoughts can be found in his strong defense for the visit prohibition of cemeteries. This defense and his opinions on legal school



resembles with Abd al-Wahhab who was the founder of Wahhabism that can be called the next level of Salafism. Abd al-Wahhab claimed that the visit prohibition is a kind of obstacle to obey the Prophet Mohammad and his companions. Similarly, al-Qayyim thought that legal schools are not necessary to live Islam; indeed, he also claimed that Muslims can apply the rules of Islam more easily without the legal schools (Holtzman, 2003).

Additionally to Hanbal, Taymiyya and Qayyim, Mohammad abd al-Wahhab was another prominent scholar and he has a crucial role for Salafism. He developed a simple but a revolutionary doctrine such as return to original Islam (Sfeir, 2007). The effective tools to understand this doctrine can be found in details. He was born in the Najd region of the Arab peninsula and received education in Hijaz where holy cities of Islam are. He advocated that the sole way of returning to the origins of Islam is rejections of all intermediaries, the saints and other prophetic imams. His bounding political ideas with the belief on the decline of Muslim world have differed his school from the predecessors. He thought that the main reason of the decline was the pernicious foreign innovations (bid'a) including European modernism (Stanley, 2005). This differentiation caused them to be called Wahhabi even though al-Wahhab and his companions continued to call themselves Salafi.

Scholars, philosophers and even statesmen felt to make changes in Islamic life while seeking the regression between the Islamic world and Islamic life. This reaction turned to separate the faith from the governance in many Islamic country like Turkey, Egypt, and Syria. Even though the countries governing by Salafi interpretation of Islam like Saudi Arabia, Salafi creed might have been used as a mobilizing identity and as preventing Islamist view to intervene into the politics against Emir's hegemony. On the other hand, violent organizations based on Salafi creed were the other effect of the Salafism on the Islamic world. They accept religion not only as a religion or as a way of life but also as an ideology that constitutes the core of their organization. They prefer a violent way of act in the name of Islam underestimating the purist Salafi scholars as the scholars of power.

SALAFI AQIDA

For remembering, it should be noticed that Salafism has its roots from the Arabic term "al-salaf al-salih" which means pious venerable forefathers or the worthy ancestors" (Byman & Gold, 2012). Byu this term, Salafi movements claims that they provide to emphasize the strict commitment of the Proph-



et Mohammad and his companions. In this strict commitment, the tawhid, oneness of Allah is proclaimed as the core of Salafi doctrine. Mohammed bin Abdulwahhab has also concerned the oneness of Allah in his famous book titled *Kitab'ut Tawhid* (Abdulwahhab, 2011). According to Salafist explanation of tawhid, the contradictions and threats unexplained in Quran and Hadiths were accepted as *bid'a*, and in conclusion as unbelief (Kufr). Therefore, the intercession of any pious Muslim even of Prophet Mohammed was rejected.

Shirk is the crucial point for the differences between Salafism and other denominations of Islam. It means polytheism which is strictly banned and accepted as an unforgivable sin by Islam in various verses. For instance, Allah says in al-Nahl/51 that "Do not establish two Gods : He is the only One Allah, worth worshipping : then fear Me (and Me alone)". In the name of standing against shirk, the salafi *aqida* demolishes the graves, rejects saints, has adversary to Sufism. In more details, additionally to its commonly rejection of imitation in religion with other four law schools, Salafi schools also rejects rationalism like Ahmad bin Hanbal. This is the breaking point of ahl al Ray and ahl al Hadith particularly. Therefore, *qiyas* and *ijma* which all four law schools of Islam apply are unacceptable for Salafism in decisions about life. Rather, they consider the literal meaning of Quran and Hadith by avoiding any analysis or contextual meaning. The view of only one explanation of sacred texts causes them to forbid Islamic pluralism (Wiktorowics, 2006).

Forbidding the pluralism can explain the Salafist attitude to exclude other sects of Islam naming as *tekfir*. Moreover, the other sects of Islam are even deserved to exclude from Islam because of their tendency to contextual meaning rather than literal meaning. By demonstrating the verses steering the Muslims not to be divided like, Salafists blame other four law schools for their different understanding of the same verses. On the other hand, the self-isolation of Salafism from other sects of Islam seems in a contradiction with its own proclaim on the unity of Islam, paradoxically.

The Salafi acceptance about themselves as the saved sect (*al-firqa al-najiyya*) and the victorious group (*al-taifa al-mansura*) is the basic reason of the intolerance of other sects about Salafi creed (Meijer, 2009). On the other hand, Salafists claim that other sects, as a consequence of this intolerance, try to find the verses and hadiths supporting their arguments to show themselves as rightful and victorious, rather than believing in Islam and praying to Allah to be a part of the saved sect. Additionally, Salafists practice *takfir* more frequently than any other Muslim sects. The intolerance of other sects and the



adversary of Salafists against them must be understood from this perspective (Güler, 2013).

Additionally, the principles of loyalty and disavowal (al-wala wa al-bara) have the strengthening role for Salafists' enmity to other sects. Salafists believe that only God deserves to be loyal due to their claim to be the pure and intact version of Islam. Therefore, Salafists agree that the rest from God must be defied and disavowed for the protection of the purity. As a result, they set up the boundaries between themselves and other sects even by sectarianism. On the other hand, many Sunni scholars accepted the concept 'al-wala' wa-l bara' of Salafism as a harmful bid'a because they argued that even Ahmad bin Hanbal didn't use this concept in his own workings. The inventor of this term was Ibn Taymiyya in order to isolate and prevent Islam from other faith and practices of his time and conditions. However, this term and concept has embedded into the Salafi discourse and is frequently described as the part of the basis of Islam (Wagemakers, 2009).

SALAFISM AND SALAFISTS

The CRS reported that 'Salafism is not a unified movements, there is no single Salafi sect' (CRS Report). On the other hand, Salafi interpretations of Islam is considered as an alternative for a number of Muslims seeking a religious renewal against the modernist challenges. In addition, the extensiveness of Salafism especially in the Western Europe and the US is very remarkable (Duderija, 2014).

Salafism occurred as a result of the need for the essence of Islam. From this perspective, analysts on Salafism must be aware of the requirements of today world by focusing on the sociopsychology of Muslims. Additionally, the Salafi movement has become a reaction to the modernism with the aim of purification of Islam. However, the Salafi interpretation on the sources of Islam and its attitude towards other sects of Islam is problematic. Therefore, the Salafist movement is very open to manipulation and misunderstandings especially regarding to its lack of political and sociological mentality.

The modern interpretations of Salafism tend to be extreme ways like terrorism or pacifism which are more compatible with the modern world. Moreover, this type of Islamic movement is more preferable for the Western political actors. For instance, Western powers have invaded Islamic countries like Afghanistan and Iraq by blaming Salafist movements as terrorist groups. In the non-invad-



ed countries, they have also blamed the Islamic community for the increase in violence in that countries. However, the purist type of Salafism based on Hanbali school isn't useful for the western powers to blame Islamic community for the instability in the world politics.

Salafist groups are called tree groups and exclude the other Muslim groups in contrast to the call of Ibn Taymiyya for the unity of Islam. Whereas purist Salafists are very related to the apolitical stance and the purification of the religion, the West advertised Jihadist Salafists as a terrorist and their tendency to communal violence reinforce the inclination of the West. The last group as an example of Salafism was politico-Salafism and their remarkable role in the coup against Muslim Brothers wasn't beneficial or sensible for Egypt (Lacroix, 2013). Moreover, their relations with Saudi Arabia has generated very big questions and prejudices in the Islamic world towards Salafi movement.

CONCLUSION

By the literal meaning, Salafism must involve all Muslim communities in order to follow the Quran and Sunnah. However, the exclusion of other sects of Islam from the religion emerges as the main character of the modern Salafi groups. The prominent figures of Salafism give very important information on the transition of Salafi groups from the unity of Islam to the exclusion of sects of Islam. Indeed, their stance against others and demand for purification is remarkable and compatible with their situation. Salafism can claim that it only aims to follow the Prophet Mohammed, but it has also a historical evolvement like other denominations of Islam. The deny of this fact is very similar to reading Qur'an without reasoning.

Differentiation and diversification in Salafist creed seem to be certain with regard to its historical background. The politicization of Salafist groups based on differentiation and diversification didn't have good results for their political consciousness, on the other hand. Despite the difference between its origins and contemporary versions, the intention of Salafism seems to keep the same as the other denominations of Islam. Therefore, Salafism deserves to be understood and analyzed.



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