Salafism and its Socio-Intellectual Foundations

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Abstract
Salafism is a movement of thought-religion that was born into Sunni Islam and Hanbali sect. Nowadays, several groups based on such thinking have overshadowed the social security of Middle East. However, many groups and different attitudes call themselves Salafis, but they all have common characteristics, the main of which is radical and retrograde interpretation of Islamic sources. Taqi Ad-Din Ahmad Ibn Taymiyyah in the Muslim world was the first thinker who established these thoughts. The author of this article initially tried to express the meaning of Salafism and its appellation in order to focus on the social context and thoughts of this movement. Extreme focus on the appearance of Quranic phrases and opposition to any new thing that did not exist in Qur’an, Sunnah and the first three centuries of Islam, are among the fundamental thought of Salafism.

Keywords
Salafism, Social context, Radical Islam, Socio-intellectual Foundation.

Introduction
While “Salafism” has been analyzed in recent years as a radical political movement, but it has seldom been studied as an intellectual and religious movement. Attention to the intellectual and theoretical foundations of the movement gives a better understanding of it as an influential religious movement, as well as more and deeper truths to the goals, interests and approaches of this movement even in political and social issues.

The radical, violent and irrational performance of the Salafists - as an Islamic movement - in social and political issues has caused negative feelings in the world public opinion to Islam and Muslims. However, many Muslims have been victims of the malicious activities of the Salafists and many Islamic scholars not only do not accept the Salafists Islamic teaching, but regard it absolutely incompatible with the nature of Islam and prophet Muhammad’s message to humanity.1

“Salafism” Terminology
Use of the word “Salafism” - implying a group of Muslims with radical ideas - is historically new, but the thought that the word “Salafism” has been laid on it, has a long history in Islamic history and dates back to the time of “Ahmad Ibn Hanbal” (780-855 AD).

“Salafism” literally: The word “Salafism” is taken from the Arabic root “salaf” (سلف) and in Arabic if used as “noun” means “everything that is related to a previous period” (Al-Farahidi, 1989, p. 258). It is also used to mean “ancestors and those passed away that were ahead in terms of excellence and time” (Ibn Manzoor, 1970. p. 158).

“Salafism” in terminology: The term “Salafism” is used in two senses in the works of Muslim scholars. In the first sense, it refers to those who claim that should follow the “righteous predecessors” (Salaf-e Saalih) beliefs and jurisprudence.

The Rise of Salafism
Finding a definite time and place to the emergence of a broad intellectual movement seems impossible or at least non-scientific. Undoubtedly, this general rule does not exclude “Salafism.” Salafism thought emerged approximately in the fourth century AH, within Sunni Islam and was derived from the opinions and ideas of Ahmad Ibn Hanbal. Early Salafists were Hanbalists that offered radical interpretations of the ideas of Ahmad ibn Hanbal. Salafism though has two very important milestones. The first turning point was in the seventh century AH and the emergence of a person named Ibn Taymiyya2 - The founder of Wahhabism - (Abu Zahra, 1996). Although Abdul Wahhab followed Ibn Taymiyyah in many issues, but their ideas is not consistent in all cases.

Many Islamic scholars consider very bad environmental conditions were effective in creating these two turning points. The first milestone coincided with the Mongol invasion of Islamic territory, and the other coincided with the gradual collapse of the Ottoman Empire and Western domination over Islamic governments. These conditions caused frustration of Muslims and their quest to return to the golden age of Islam - the early centuries of Islam - (Feirahi, 2013). Undoubtedly studying the development causes of Salafism thought in these two courses is very important and must be dealt with at the right time.

Social and Political Problems in the Age of Ibn Taymiyya
Ibn Taymiyya was born in 1263 AD in Harran - a town in southern Turkey. At the time of Ibn Taymiyyah, Islamic world was caught in a some major disorders which the most important ones were:

1(1263-1328 AD)
2(1703-1792 AD)
Mongol invasion of the Islamic lands

Mongols occupied Baghdad - one of the greatest cities in the Islamic world - in 1258 AD - 5 years before the birth of Ibn Taymiyyah - and ended the caliphate of the Abbasid. They overran Aleppo in 1260 and then attacked Damascus - another major city in Syria (Soyothi, 1953. p. 470).

The lack of central authority

In those days there was no strong central government and obedience to the caliph was minimized at various areas, the Islamic community was ruled mostly feudal, and even in 1260 AD there was no general rule and caliph. The fire of war was ignited between the states and numerous numbers claimed the caliphate (Soyothi, 1953. p. 475).

The attack of European Christians on the Islamic lands

After the failure to Muslims in Rome, the Christians put aside all internal conflicts and began to fight the Muslims. They seized Jerusalem in 1229 AD and Egypt was on the brink of collapse (Soyothi, 1953. p. 472).

As a sociological factor, the collection of turmoil and crisis in the Muslim world could maybe explain the shaping of Ibn Taymiyya’s opinion. According to Ibn Taymiyyah, it may just need a radical and fundamental change in thinking to reform those critical conditions. However, some Muslim scholars believe that Ibn Taymiyya’s activity not only did not improve the situation, but developed division and discord among the Muslims (Sobhani, 2004. p. 75).

The Fundamental thought of Salafism

The method of interpretation

Interpretation means explaining the meanings of the phrases of Qur’an and discovering their meaning and context (Tabatabaei, 1983. p. 4). The purpose of the interpretive method is a systematic method based on the particular epistemology that every commentator - knowingly or unknowingly - bases on it his interpretation of Quran. Different methods are employed to interpret Quran: The method based on the interpretation of a verse of Quran according to another verses in Quran,⁴ Quran interpretation based on Sunnah and Hadith, Quran interpretation based on rational reasons, interpretation based on science, etc. Even some interpretations use two or more of these methods simultaneously.

Ibn Taymiyyah is considered as the founder of interpretation method. He believed that “the best method of interpretation is the interpretation of the Quran by Quran. If we could not understand the content of the verses using this method, we refer to Sunnah because Sunnah best explains the Quran and prophet Muhammad has expressed the interpretation of all Quran in his time. If Sunnah could not interpret verses, the words of the companions (Sahaba) are used for interpretation, because they witnessed revelation and of course, the meaning of the verses was clear for them” (Ibn Taymiyyah, 1959. p. 93-96). Interpretation of rational reasons for understanding the verses of Quran is forbidden by Ibn Taymiyyah. However, the Hadith left from the prophet Muhammad and his companions on the Quran interpretation are very limited.

This method called “radical literalism” has affected many other issues of his thinking and led to the conflict and contrast of his ideas with mainstream Islamic thought. “Radical literalism” means pure emphasis on the apparent and primary meaning of “words.” Scholars and linguists believe that every word has a double meaning: the true meaning (apparent) and figurative meaning (Boroujerdi, 1994. p. 29). For example, the true meaning of the word “Arshi” (عرش) in Arabic is luxury throne with great bases that are especially made for the kings. But, when we say “the king lost his crown and his throne,” we mean that he has lost authority. The use of the word “throne” meaning “power” and “authority” is precisely the emphasis on the figurative meaning of this word. But in Ibn Taymiyyah’s method of interpretation, the figurative meanings of words and sentences have no place and that even is considered “diversion.” He believes that there is no figurative meaning in Quran and division of word meaning to true and figurative meaning is new because the righteous predecessors did not mention it (Ibn Taymiyya, 1972. p. 83). In this regard, according to verse 5 of Surah 20 (TA-HA) God says about Himself: “(Allah) most gracious is on his throne” (الرَّحْمَانُ عَلَى الْعَرْشِ اسْتَوَى). Almost all commentators have interpreted the meaning of this verse in the following way: “God’s power and authority is pervasive” (Tabatabaei, 1983). But, Ibn Taymiyyah’s extreme attention to the true meaning has led to his assumption that God has “real throne and crown and he rests on it, only its quality is unknown to us!” (Ibn Taymiyya, 1959. p. 164).

The Salafism’s rare beliefs about the attributes of God are rooted in his interpretation by this method. Their beliefs about the nature of God and his attributes are listed in the following:

Visibility of God

Ibn Taymiyyah believes that God is seen by material eye. In this regard, he said: “Sometimes the object is what is referred to or has attributes. God is seen in the hereafter. This can be proved with some Quran verses” (Ibn Taymiyya, 1986. p. 28).

His theory about the visibility of God is based on this verse:

(١١٧) مَعِيْشَةٌ يُؤمِنُونُ بِهَا إِلَى رَحْمَةٍ (Quran, Chapter 75: AL-QIYAMA, verses: 22 and 23)

According to him, “looking” at objective things just is meaningful; therefore, according to this verse in the other world, God is objective that people may look at him.

In contrast, according to many Muslim commentators, here the figurative meaning of “looking” is considered. In their view, when a rich person comes to a poor person and says “Look at me!” he means “pay attention to my plight and help me.” So, the meaning of this verse is that: In that world, people expect God to pay attention to their bad situation and have mercy on them (Tabatabaei, 1983).

Corporeality of God

Ibn Taymiyya believes that God has physical body, and in this regard he writes: “According to the Hadith of the prophet (pbuh) - which says about God: He is on his throne above the

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⁴This method is generally known as the method of interpreting “Quran by Quran.”
heavens and is above his creatures! - doesn’t it mean that God has a body?” (Ibn Taymiyya, 1972. p. 401).

While other Islamic scholars believe that emphasis on “universal dominance and power of God” was the goal of prophet in this hadith. They cited various intellectual reasons to explain that God’s is free of objective appearance (Sobhani, 2010. p. 11).

**Proving a place for God**

Ibn Taymiyya referring to some verses of Quran believes that God is placed in a specific location. In this regard he writes: “Highness of God includes all creation, and he is the highest point is in the sky, so people refer to sky when talking about God” (Ibn Taymiyya, 1986. p. 98). Referring to a hadith of the prophet in the interpretation of one of the verses of Quran, he expressly states: “God is above the heavens, in the last third of the night he comes down and says: Who is to call me so that I answer him?” (Ibn Taymiyya, 1972. p. 489). Many Muslim scholars disagree with this opinion of him.

**Monotheism and polytheism**

According to Islam, a monotheist man is someone who believes in unique God as creator and who knows the divine will dominant on all things in every moment. So, whoever does not believe in God as the creator of the universe is disbelieving, but everyone who believes God is the creator of all things, but in addition to his will, knows enforced the will of another person in controlling the universe is polytheist!

But Ibn Taymiyyah believes that polytheism is much broader in sense:  

a. Only to “Allah” shall one take an oath, and those who take oath in creatures are polytheists because they have regarded the creature at the same level as the creator  
b. Vow is done only for the creator, so if someone vows for anyone other than “Allah” for the acceptance of his prayers, is a polytheist  
c. People shall only pray to God, and just ask him to answer their prayers. Thus, the pilgrimages who go to the graves of prophets and saints for the fulfillment of their prayers, and tell their needs to them are polytheists (Ibn Taymiyya, 1986. p. 69-73).

However, Muslim scholars believe that prophets and saints can be asked for help and this does not conflict with monotheism, because in this matter they are taken into consideration just because they are close to God.

**Takfir**

“Takfir” means ascribing blasphemy to others. Ibn Taymiyya developed the meaning of polytheism mentioned above, and his mind many religions and Islamic groups out of Islam, and excommunicates them. With this approach, the number of people who are Muslim would be negligible. Some of the groups that Ibn Taymiyya rejects them as heretic include:

Those who would mediate between themselves and God/men who do not accept what has been proven with the Quran and the Sunnah/those who oppose the successive consensus/those who deny religion necessities/insult or ridicule of God or divine revelations, or one of the divine prophets/regarding other than stated in the Qur’an and Sunnah as Halal/those who imitate infidels/those who do not consider Jews and Christians infidels or suspect their infidelity or regards following their religion permitted/those who to work with the unbelievers/philosophers/Sufis and those who believe in the Pantheism/who believes in Shia (Mash’abi, 1997).

**Opposition to anything new**

Ibn Taymiyyah believes that all actions shall only be based on Sunnah of the prophet, and righteous predecessors. Thus, he opposed to anything new and called it Bid’ah. According to him, all human inventions and achievements are Bid’ah and their use is forbidden if we do not find any reason that the prophet or righteous predecessors would use them, or at least agree with them (Ibn Taymiyya, 1987. p. 219).

However, the majority of Islamic scholars quite the contrary to Ibn Taymiyyah believe that it is the principle that everything is permissible unless prohibited by reason in the Qur’an and Sunnah.

**Reaction of Muslim Scholars**

Ibn Taymiyya was imprisoned several times in his life for his radical ideas. Most scholars of his age strongly opposed him. In the year 1305 AD, Ibn Taymiyyah was sent from Damascus to Egypt and then after arguing with him, he was cast into prison because of his corrupt beliefs about the existence of God. It was also announced in Damascus, that anyone who like Ibn Taymiyyah, believes that God has organs and limbs is not a Muslim (Naqavi, 1927. p. 31). One of the scholars of his era writes: there is no worth in his word, he not only attacked great Islamic Sufis’ beliefs but also objected the great figures of Islam (Haythami, 1888. p. 87).

But today Wahhabis respect him much and remember him as a great figure. The intellectual affinity between the Wahhabis and Ibn Taymiyya is evident in many cases. Ibn Taymiyyah finally died in 1328 AD in a prison in Damascus (Zahabi, 1955. p. 1496).

**Results**

What is nowadays called “Salafism” as a radical Islamic movement that has made several security threats in the Middle

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10SURELY ALLAH IS ABOVE HIS THRONE AND HIS THRONE IS ABOVE THE HEAVENS” (الله فوق عرشه و عرشه فوق سماواته) (SUNAN ABI DAWUD, Beirut: Dar Al-kutub Elmiyah, Hadith: 4726)

11“THE BENEFICENT ONE, WHO IS ESTABLISHED ON THE THRONE.” (الرخمين على عرشه) (QURAN, Chapter 20: TA-HA (TA-HA), verse 5)

12“SAY: HE IS ALLAH, THE ONE AND THE ONLY” (قل هو الله أحد) (QURAN, Chapter 112: AL-IKHLAS, verse 1)

13“ALLAH IS THE CREATOR OF ALL THINGS, AND OF ALL THINGS HE IS THE GUARDIAN” (الله خالق كل شيء وهو على كل شيء قدير) (QURAN, Chapter 39: AZ-ZUMAR, verse 62)

14“HE COMMANDS, WHEN HE INTENDS ANYTHING, IS ONLY TO SAY TO IT: BE! SO IT IS” (إِنَّمَا أَمْرُهُ إِذَا أَرَادَ شَيْئًا أَنْ يَقُولَ لَهُ كُنْ فَيَكُونُ) (QURAN, Chapter 36: YA-SEEN, verse 82)
East, arise from a particular approach to Islam. In this movement rationalism, human logic, and non-Islamic influences are considered particularly damaging to the original message of Islam. This approach, with a strong emphasis on the appearance of Islamic texts is quite distinct from the mainstream of Islamic thought. This radical approach has shaped in response to socio-political factors. The most important of these factors include a cultural and political protest against the domination of the West over the Muslim world and attempts to return to the golden age of Islamic civilization. The radical strategy of Salafis, has done harm to the Muslim community and has caused much criticisms in all over the world.

References