

Is It All About Religion?!

**Looking for the External Factors
of Salafi Movement's Radicalization
by Compared Analysis of Tunisia and Xinjiang**

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Riassunto

Lo scopo ultimo di questo lavoro è ricercare le modalità in cui il movimento Salafita opera e organizza le sue reti, al fine di comprendere le sue dinamiche e trasformazioni. Obiettivo finale di tale studio è quello di mostrare che l'espansione del Salafismo a livello mondiale, generalmente segue un percorso preciso e replicabile, sotto condizioni specifiche. Questa ricerca è costituita da quattro capitoli: il primo esplora i meccanismi del movimento Salafita aprendo con una descrizione dettagliata sullo stato dell'arte, su come è strutturato l'universo Salafita, i suoi teorici e personaggi chiave. Il secondo capitolo esamina invece il fenomeno Salafita contestualizzato in Tunisia, nello specifico prendendo in esame il gruppo Ansar al-Sharia e il suo ruolo all'interno della rete del jihad Internazionale. Il terzo capitolo infine, verterà su un'analisi comparata del Salafismo jihadista nel suo habitat naturale, ovvero Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia, paese musulmano a maggioranza sunnita, con il fenomeno Salafita nella regione cinese dello Xinjiang. Il quarto ed ultimo capitolo verte infine sul controverso e complesso rapporto tra Islam e politica. L'analisi di tale rapporto poggia su una base storica, passando attraverso lo sviluppo dei movimenti sociali e dell'influenza di questi sulla religione.

Tale studio permette di constatare che il Salafismo può crescere e svilupparsi anche in contesti ampiamente differenti, tuttavia sotto precise condizioni politiche, sociali e religiose. Simile flessibilità mostra innanzitutto l'estremo dinamismo interno al movimento, il quale attecchisce e matura anche in barba alla struttura altamente dogmatica del credo Salafita. L'obiettivo di simile ricerca si trova dunque nell'individuazione di una tendenza che possa ampliare la nostra comprensione circa il fenomeno del radicalismo di matrice Salafita con l'obiettivo di creare un modello di analisi riproducibile, libero da vincoli geografici e culturali.

Il primo capitolo si divide in tre sottoparagrafi, il primo di cui riguarda il quadro storico del Salafismo, soffermandosi in particolare sull'evoluzione storica della *salafiyya* e sui molteplici significati che ha assunto nel tempo, dall'età d'oro del Califfato ai giorni nostri. Il secondo paragrafo del primo capitolo riguarda invece l'ideologia Salafita, mentre l'ultimo si concentra sulle principali ramificazioni all'interno del movimento stesso. Il Salafismo infatti è caratterizzato da un elevato grado di frammentazione ideologica e pratica, che ha portato alla forma-

zione di tre trend differenti, quello scientifico, politico e infine quello jihadista. L'ideologia Salafita è caratterizzata da una buona dose di idealismo religioso mista a realismo politico. La parola Salafismo deriva dall'arabo *salaf al-salih*, i saggi antenati, i primi compagni del Profeta Maometto, dunque coloro che meglio hanno conosciuto l'essenza dell'Islam. Salafiti sono coloro che vogliono ispirarsi alla vita e alle opere di tali pii antenati, così da crescere nella fede e intraprendere la 'retta' via. Tale approccio fondamentalista nel senso letterale del termine, ovvero legato alle tradizioni e alla ricerca delle antiche pratiche, unito ad una interpretazione letterale del Corano, può indurre lo studioso ad assimilare il Salafismo con la corrente Wahhabita di origine Saudita. Wahhabismo e Salafismo tuttavia, sono i frutti di storie e percorsi differenti, seppure con alcuni elementi in comune. La dottrina Wahhabita prende le mosse dalla scuola giuridica Hanbalita, estremamente rigida e conservatrice nella lettura dei sacri testi: Salafismo e Wahhabismo inizialmente ebbero un approccio opposto alla prassi religiosa, specialmente alla pratica del *takfir*. Il *takfir*, o scomunica, è la pratica di etichettare come miscreidente chi non è conforme all'ortodossia islamica, con gravi conseguenze per il malcapitato, costretto all'esilio o alla pena di morte. Successivamente, tale pratica non fu condivisa dai Salafiti, soprattutto qualora tale prassi veniva applicata a comuni musulmani non ligi alla rigida dottrina di Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab. Il Salafismo si sviluppa innanzitutto in Medio Oriente a fine 1700; successivamente si sviluppa in Egitto, tra il 1920-30, ispirandosi al pensatore e accademico Hasan al-Banna, fondatore del movimento dei Fratelli Musulmani. Questa seconda ondata di Salafiti Egiziani, a differenza della prima, crea un forte legame con la famiglia Saud poiché quest'ultima si rende disponibile ad accogliere tutti i Salafiti che fuggivano dalle ondate repressive di Nasser. La famiglia Saud, in cambio di protezione necessitava di insegnanti preparati per migliorare e rafforzare l'istruzione in Arabia Saudita. Prevedibilmente, il movimento Salafita e il sostrato Wahhabita finirono per influenzarsi a vicenda. L'ultima fase di sviluppo Salafita è da ricondurre agli anni 1970-1980 in seguito alla rielaborazione dell'eredità ideologica di Sayyid Qutb, intellettuale egiziano giustiziato da Nasser nel 1966. La visone manichea della realtà di Sayyid Qutb influenza profondamente i Salafiti egiziani, i quali iniziano una deriva intransigente e radicale tale da rendere impossibile qualunque comunicazione anche con la dottrina Wahhabita. Qutb estremizza la pratica del *takfir* estendendola non più solo al governo empio, bensì ad ogni membro della comunità di credenti.

L'ideologia Salafita è estremamente frammentata e problematica al suo interno, l'unica base condivisa è caratterizzata dall'*aqida*, la parte di dottrina che stabilisce il dogma e il credo e che

poggia su tre pilastri. Primo fra tutti, l'assunto secondo il quale dio è il solo e unico creatore del mondo, il secondo stabilisce la supremazia assoluta e l'unicità di dio; infine il terzo stabilisce che solo dio può essere adorato, rendendo così illegale l'adorazione dei santi. Roel Meijer ritiene che il fenomeno Salafita abbia una doppia natura attivista e quietista, con un approccio ideologico e pragmatico al tempo stesso. Il concetto di violenza è pure controverso, poiché non esiste un'opinione univoca su di essa, alcune frange Salafite si occupano esclusivamente dei testi e di teologia, altre fanno della violenza un mezzo, altre ancora il mezzo per eccellenza. Infatti, Wiktorowicz ha suddiviso il movimento Salafita in tre principali tendenze, quella Purista o Quietista, Politica e jihadista. Wiktorowicz è riuscito ad individuare tali orientamenti in base alle rispettive disponibilità verso l'impegno politico, piuttosto che teologico o militante. I Puristi – anche detti Scientifici o Quietisti – sono la frangia Salafita dedita allo studio e alla diffusione del Corano e della Sunna, una sorta di guardiani della dottrina. I Politici invece, sostengono di avere un'approccio più pragmatico dei Puristi e di essere più credibili proprio grazie al loro maggiore contatto con la realtà. Spesso accade che i Politici scherniscano i Puristi per il loro scarso senso pratico, per la loro visione medievale del mondo e per la loro ossessione per la teologia escludendo tutto il resto. L'Islam Politico è uno degli argomenti più dibattuti e cruciali per comprendere l'Islam contemporaneo. Innanzitutto, per quale motivo il concetto di Islam politico suona come un ossimoro per un occidentale? Perché appare come assurdo? La storia occidentale è piena di esempi di commistione di poteri, temporale e spirituale, tra Stato e Chiesa. A tutt'oggi l'occidente si avvale della retorica religiosa per ottenere consensi in politica e mantenere lo status quo. Se dunque il connubio 'religione e politica' non è sconosciuto al 'nostro' mondo, perché risulta così assurdo se traslato in altre culture? Il forte legame tra religione e politica presente nel mondo arabo-islamico è sicuramente dovuto alla necessità di sviluppare un'identità ben definita rispetto a quella occidentale. Inoltre, l'Islam è una religione che possiede gli strumenti per la messa in pratica del 'buon governo', acquistando così rilievo politico ogni qualvolta la situazione politica presente sia deludente. Il discriminante principale tra le varie correnti Salafite è la modalità di attuazione dei rispettivi progetti: jihadisti sono coloro che eleggono la violenza a mezzo principale per rappresentare le loro istanze, che nel jihad vedono l'unico mezzo efficace per stabilire lo Stato Islamico. I rapporti tra Jihadisti e Puristi sono particolarmente tesi, infatti i primi criticano ferocemente i secondi per la loro inefficacia, intrinseca mancanza di coraggio e inutile pignoleria.

Joas Wagemakers e Roel Meijer considerano la divisione eseguita da Wiktorowicz scientificamente utile, tuttavia troppo schematica per soddisfare le esigenze della realtà contemporanea. Wiktorowicz infatti ha indagato maggiormente le differenze che le similitudini tra i vari gruppi, dipingendo così un quadro semplificato del mondo Salafita. Meijer e Wagemakers puntano l'attenzione sulla necessità di identificare forme ibride di Salafismo, connessioni e contaminazioni tra i gruppi.

Il secondo capitolo è invece incentrato sul fenomeno Salafita in Tunisia, in particolare di un gruppo, Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia, AST. L'accento è posto sulla Tunisia e in particolare su questo gruppo Salafita in quanto rappresenta un unicum nel panorama Nord Africano. Infatti, le specificità storiche del Paese unite alla recente transizione democratica hanno modellato il paesaggio socio-culturale della regione in modo unico. Ciò che rende degno di nota il Salafismo di AST in Tunisia è la sua storia, caratterizzata da un processo di quasi-inclusione nel panorama politico tunisino. Il secondo capitolo di questo lavoro inizia con un breve excursus sulle teorie di democratizzazione nel mondo arabo in seno al panorama accademico, per poi concentrarsi sulla storia recente della Tunisia dalla caduta di Ben 'Ali alla transizione democratica. Qual è stato il ruolo del movimento Salafita in tale frangente? Esso si è dimostrato cruciale ed efficiente nella lenta sostituzione allo stato in carica, forte di una forza d'attrazione potente, specialmente sulle masse dimenticate e in regioni isolate o di frontiera. Il contesto di interazione di AST con il governo viene indagato in modo da osservarne le strategie politiche e i taciti obiettivi. Utile al nostro scopo è anche l'indagine sui legami esterni alla Tunisia presenti In AST, al fine di osservare le reti di organizzazione Salafite.

Il terzo capitolo analizza invece il Salafismo nello Xinjiang, regione nord occidentale della Cina in cui la popolazione di etnia Uigura, è a maggioranza musulmana. La scelta di prendere in esame tale regione è stata dettata dalla curiosità di trovare un caso empirico simile alla Tunisia per modalità di radicalizzazione, eppure molto lontano a livello geografico e culturale. Tale somiglianza e diversità insieme costituiscono un mix interessante da approfondire in futuro. La storia recente dello Xinjiang è caratterizzata da politiche repressive da parte del governo di Pechino nei confronti degli Uiguri al fine di sfruttare indisturbati le risorse minerarie della regione. Le politiche del governo centrale di Pechino nei confronti dello Xinjiang, oltre che repressive sono proiettate al solo sfruttamento della regione, senza alcun interesse per i suoi abitanti la cui lingua e cultura ha subito un processo di profondo sradicamento. Come è facile intuire, le politiche violente e repressive attuate dalla Cina nei confronti degli Uiguri non hanno

di certo favorito i rapporti tra regione e governo centrale, esacerbando le istanze indipendentiste presenti tra gli Uiguri. Ed è proprio qui, che entra trionfalmente in scena l'Islam. Non solo in quanto religione per alleviare le asperità della vita, piuttosto in quanto serbatoio politico accumulatore di dissenso, rabbia e frustrazione. L'Islam si trasforma così in boomerang contro il potere percepito come oppressore. Infatti, negli anni Novanta in Xinjiang nasce ETIM, il movimento islamico per l'Est Turkestan indipendente. A ETIM, altri movimenti di ispirazione islamica sono seguiti e centinaia di Uiguri si sono radicalizzati nel nome dell'Islam, indipendentemente dall'appartenenza a gruppi specifici. L'Islam in Xinjiang è diventato così sinonimo di identità.

Il percorso di radicalizzazione comune evidenziato sia in Tunisia che in Xinjiang si basa su quattro fattori fondamentali, ovvero la repressione politica e religiosa, la radicalizzazione nelle carceri e il Salafismo di ritorno. La presenza di tali condizioni in contemporanea aumentano esponenzialmente il rischio di radicalizzazione, che resta come unica realtà possibile in quanto sono svaniti gli ideali di politica, legalità, merito e benessere economico. Il processo di radicalizzazione dunque, si innesta su una base di crisi politica e valoriale in cui la religione ha un ruolo marginale eccezionale fatta per il suo potere di aggregazione.

Il quarto ed ultimo capitolo riguarda infine il complesso rapporto tra Islam e politica, dall'istituzione del primo califfato, continuando con il revivalismo islamico di metà Ottocento e la corrente modernista. L'epoca contemporanea è caratterizzata da un Islam sempre più politico nel senso più profondo del termine: in molti paesi arabi (e non) la religione ha riempito il vuoto di potere lasciato dallo stato, dando speranza ai diseredati ed ottenendo proseliti. In Tunisia come in Xinjiang l'Islam ha dato voce alle istanze rivoluzionarie da un lato e reazionarie dall'altro; ha nutrito la speranza di rinnovamento e quella dell'istituzione del califfato degli esordi. Come fa il Salafismo ad essere sia radicale che flessibile? Per una questione di opportunità politiche e pragmatismo, fattori tenuti in grande considerazione tra i movimenti islamisti contemporanei, nonostante tale approccio razionale destabilizzi ancora l'occidente. Il mondo occidentale infatti, fatica a tutt'oggi a concepire il mondo arabo-islamico al di fuori delle categorie orientalistiche dei secoli passati. Eppure, sembra che nulla di eccentrico risieda nella presenza dell'Islam politico, anzi, esso rappresenta la chiave della mobilitazione. Secondo Donatella della Porta e Asef Bayat l'Islam è un movimento sociale che porta avanti istanze prettamente politiche.

Conclusione di tale studio è che la religione non rappresenta il motivo principale di radicalizzazione in quanto essa è piuttosto un mezzo per arrivarvi più velocemente. L'Islam è anche rivoluzionario poiché trasporta in sé le potenzialità del movimento sociale per la sua natura pragmatica e idealista al tempo stesso.

Introduction

"Tunisian press and political commentators continue to regularly employ the term 'Salafism' as a convenient by-word for 'bearded' youths whose rage we don't understand."¹ Salafism is a broad category that includes multiple ideological trends and different ways of practicing religion. Etymologically, the term 'Salafi' derives from the Arabic *salaf al-salih*, the pious companions of the Prophet. Thus, Salafism is a branch of Islamism which not only raises Sharia as supreme law, but also focuses on strict religious practices, according to a literalist interpretation of the Holy Koran. Salafis have a common creed. "This creed revolves around strict adherence to the concept of *tawhid* (the oneness of God) and ardent rejection of a role for human reason, logic, and desire."² It is possible to notice that, especially over the last few years, the phenomenon of Salafism has grown and rooted in the Arab societies...and not only there. What is interesting then, is to investigate of what are the real aims and claims of Salafis. Since Salafi groups are numerous and their objectives different, the focus will be on a specific group. In this work I focus on the history and development of a particular Tunisian Salafi group, Ansar al-Sharia, whose path is relevant since it sheds light on the complex dynamics of political inclusion and exclusions and its results. The choice fell on this group because of its particular history in Tunisia, a country in democratic transition. Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST) took advantage of the particular situation of openness and freedom from 2011 to 2013, never experienced by any radical Islamist group before. AST emerged on the Tunisian scene just after the fall of Ben Ali, rapidly getting exposure in the entire country for its missionary activities to the benefit of the disenfranchised. The peculiarity of the group was its presence during the Tunisian political transition from authoritarianism to democracy. That precise time was characterized by freedom of expression and political activism and therefore Salafis as well could express their ideology and freely proselytize. AST gained a degree of support from people and in part from the Islamist party Ennahda, which maintained an ambiguous attitude toward AST. While initially the perspective of some kind of Salafis' political inclusion was likely, an actual integra-

¹Marks Monica, "Who are Tunisia's Salafis?" Foreign Policy, 2012

²Wiktorowicz Quintan, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement", Studies in Conflict and Terrorism, 2006

tion of AST in the Tunisian political scene became gradually impossible. Some incidents occurred between 2012 and 2013 until the group was finally outlawed. This work aims at finding the principle elements of rupture between AST and the government, by analyzing the dynamics of integration and exclusion.

As the title of this work suggests, my objective is to debunk the stereotype of religion as the main cause of conflicts. In fact, following my analysis, the violent and coercive actions justified by religious principles, are only instrumental to the reach some political goals. We need to demonstrate here, that religious postulates and dogmas are just the box that carries political needs, such as independence, anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism, ethnic identity, freedom of expression and cultural belonging. Religion is not the driver, but the vehicle. Such ideas have accompanied this study systematically, searching for answers different from the religious ones. In order to show this, I compare Tunisian AST with another case study, both geographically and culturally distant from the former: the Islamic upheaval in the region of Xinjiang, China. It is interesting thus, to observe the causes of this growth of Salafism and where it happened. The Arab World is the cradle of Salafism, but it is not the only one: Salafism grew in China too, characterized by specific political and social conditions. To inquire such conditions means to understand the profound dynamics of radicalization by admitting more than one Salafism and their different histories. What is striking, is that by following the path that brought Salafism from the Arab world to the extreme oriental China, it is possible to trace some common factors of radicalization between these two worlds. Both Tunisia and Xinjiang in fact, are affected by an increasing Islamic fundamentalism and suffered (or are still suffering) from authoritarian state repression. The political and social situation in Xinjiang is profoundly tense between PRC and the Xinjiang ethnic minority, the Uyghurs. This ethnic group experienced Chinese repression for decades, since at least the harsh Mao's Cultural Revolution. The Chinese government has a low threshold of tolerance for minor ethnic groups, since they challenged the absolute control of the Party on the country. Initially, the Party cracked down on the Uyghur, as their religiosity contravened the Chinese principle of atheism. The period of the Cultural Revolution was a real witch-hunt of Muslims (also Christian, Buddhist, Daoist and so on). The following step on the road that eventually led to the attempted destruction of an ethnic group was the cultural assimilation: namely, the burning of hundreds of the Uyghur books and the ban of

Uyghur language in public places. Obviously, everybody who tried to bypass the law, was imprisoned, tortured or killed. And when the Chinese establishment discovered the potential of the region of Xinjiang, rich in natural resources, it started a process of land grabbing through the mass migration of Han Chinese in the region to take on leading roles, and segregating the locals to miserable occupations. The abuses committed by the Party at the expense of this ethnic minority are numerous, and the Uyghurs understandably developed widespread feelings of hatred against the Chinese government. Such a tense context in Xinjiang led to people mobilization by means of religion. Islam turned the chaos of rage into an organized programme of resistance in the name of Mohammad and his pious followers. Some subjects of this oppressed minority gradually radicalized in order to obtain their freedom and independence by means of violent resistance. Many ETIM militants joined the Taliban in Afghanistan and have ties with al-Qaeda too, marking the Xinjiang context as an increasingly explosive one. It is highly probable that the region will radicalize more, if no political compromise is achieved between the north-western province and Beijing.

The adaptability of Salafism, results above all, from the extreme dynamism of the groups, which pursue their goals by means of uncompromising religious dogmas. Interestingly, the doctrinal rigor of Salafism turns into flexibility by adapting to local contexts and exploiting specific political conditions. While Tunisian Salafism became quasi-moderate and mostly focused on assistance and social activities, in Xinjiang it became vehicle for independence. In conclusion, the purpose of this research is to find a trend which could help in understanding Salafis' radicalization and which could generate a replicable model of analysis, untied from any specific geographical context. I claim that Tunisia and Xinjiang are closer than it appears, since both the regions share specific factors of radicalization: it seems in fact, that the expansion of Salafism worldwide always follows a precise path, under specific local conditions. The question is thus what explains the growth of Salafism in such diverse conditions.

In order to approach the Salafism issue, its history, ideology and internal debate I focused on the essential works of Bernard Rougier and Quintan Wiktorowicz. Rougier focuses on the structures and different forms of Salafism in North Africa, Saudi Arabia and France, in order to track the theological, political and social reasons of such a complex phenomenon. The author highlights how ideologies from Saudi Arabia shaped the rest of the Arab world and even beyond. In fact Rougier, addresses his analysis on the French context too, in order to show evidence of

this phenomenon ability to grow in many and different places. Another key author on the inner structure and aims of Salafism, is Quintan Wiktorowicz. He explained the difference between Salafi trends, focusing on its multiple ways of expressing and practicing the Islamic creed. The author focuses on violence, by enhancing the different use of it within the Salafi trends and by so doing representing the multiple viewpoints within the Salafi movement. The section of this work dedicated to the Tunisian context rests on the numerous works of Francesco Cavatorta, Fabio Merone and Stefano Torelli. The academics analyzed the Tunisian Salafism in numerous papers and articles. They firstly claim that Salafism in Tunisia is not an imported phenomenon, but an internal one, emerging thanks to the specific social and political conditions of the democratic transition. In a second moment, their focus shifts on the work of their reference Salafi group, Ansar al-Sharia, which marked a deep change in the conception of relationships within the Tunisian society: at its core there were no more wise imams or old people, there were the young instead. The youth's contribution to Salafism, made of energies, dedication and practical activities was the actual driving force and the true novelty of the movement. The scholars analyze this young and energetic phenomenon, its trend, from its moderate and missionary approach to the more violent one, by building on the notion of political inclusion and exclusion in Tunisia. Before the Salafis in fact, Ennahda too, experienced a period of marginalization. According to the authors, the marginalization, even more than the inclusion could bring radicals to participate to the political game. In regards to the analysis of Xinjiang and Salafism in China, many authors were relevant: Michael Clarke, Rémi Castets, Yitzhak Schichor and the work "ETIM" by Todd Reed and Diana Raschke. Clarke focuses on the Chinese repressive attitude toward the Uyghur politics, religion and culture. Castets links religion to the cultural identity of Uyghurs in Xinjiang. Yitzhak Schichor is the intellectual who questioned the existence itself of ETIM, both internally and externally in respect to China, since his viewpoint is that despite the harsh Chinese repression, the Uyghurs do not want to increase violent attacks against the Party. Opposite to this point is the work of Reed and Raschke, "ETIM", where they describe the history, ideology and external ties of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement: this work is a coherent and unavoidable analysis in order to understand the Salafi group.

This study consists of four main chapters: the first one focuses broadly on Salafism, opening with a detailed description of *what* we know about this trend, *how* the Salafi ideological framework develops in practice and *who* are the main thinkers of the original Salafi thought. The

second chapter examines in depth the phenomenon of Salafism in Tunisia, especially referring to the group of Ansar al Sharia and the conditions within which it developed, giving rise to a form of religious engagement thata is also vehicle for other socio-economic and political demands. The third chapter is about a compared analysis of Salafism in its home-ground such as the Arab world, and out of its context, specifically in Xinjiang, China. This study aims at highlighting the Salafi phenomenon, how it grows and develops in different contexts, under specific political, social and religious conditions. The fourth and last chapter is about the complex relationship between religion and politics, initially from an historical perspective by enhancing the archetypical role of the early Caliphate in the narrative of Islam. An excursus upon the 19th century Islamic revivalist and modernist trends will follow, until finally analyzing the subtle still profound political connotation of contemporary Islam. In fact, Islam often filled the gaps left by the state, by so doing gaining appeal and followers. What is relevant here, is to focus upon the fact that there is no point in considering the behavior of political Islam a constant exception. According to Donatella della Porta and Asef Bayat, there is no exception in Islamic behavior since it develops social movements according to the existent contexts: Islamic movements too, follow the Social Movement Theory like any other movement in contemporary human history. The role of religion is relevant of course, but it is not determining in the birth and building of a movement.

To sum up, religion does not seem the main factor for radicalization, still it represents an extremely useful vehicle to it.

Chapter 1

Mechanic of Salafism

It is imperative at this stage to begin with an examination of what Salafism is, according to the scientific community and the literature. Salafism is a growing phenomenon both internal and external to the Arab world: the recently-formed ISIS, the foreign fighters phenomenon and the numerous attacks on Muslim and non-Muslim communities across the globe are paradigmatic of the spread of the Salafi – jihadi and not - trend. What is relevant here, is the investigation of Salafi history and background in order to identify the complex set of ideas and beliefs behind Salafism, its multiple trends and the relative growth of this intransigent religious phenomenon.

Is it all about religion?

This piece of work aims at analyzing the hidden drives within Salafism. History shows us that there are usually multiple reasons behind violent actions, from uprisings to intransigent ideologies, and yet rarely connected to religion as a cause-effect phenomenon. In fact, the reality is much more complex than it appears at a first glance. It seems helpful to highlight here how intransigence is not inherently linked to religion, rather, to political, economic and social factors. Religion alone is not enough in order to radicalize hundreds of thousand: anger, frustration, unemployment and poverty also contribute to foster extremism, but so does hope in a better world. This work assumes that religion provides people a valuable 'raw material': hope. The hope for a better life, jobs and justice for everyone and a purpose is the dream of millions of people in the world. The improving one's present conditions' is the engine of commitment, whatever it is. Nevertheless, the conditions of political, economic and social distress are meant to be the actual cause of involvement in the Salafi rows, therefore they should not be underestimated. The single act of violence does not come out from the nowhere since it has specific and often dramatic backgrounds. The comprehension of such a background allow us to better contextualize violence and even understand it. Purpose of this study is to investigate Salafism under both scientific and political perspective, by reading the events from the political angle and not from the religious one. In fact, it could be interesting to identify the main causes of

radicalization and find rationality in an apparently absurd behavior, by so doing defusing radicalization.

This chapter takes into account the phenomenon of Salafism by collecting the vast literature on it, in order to introduce the main issues around the Salafi thought and to fix its theoretical frame. Furthermore, this work analyzes the elements that confer relevance to the Salafi lifestyle such as the feeling of belonging to a community, the Salafi involvement into the Sunni-Shi'ite fight, the need of a strong purpose in life and the relevance given to youth. Salafism's merit is the making of a theoretical building which conjugates idealism and pragmatism, apparently at least, that gave huge appeal to the movement.

Three main sections compose this first chapter about the inner structure of Salafism, namely its history, ideology and trends. The first paragraph concerns the historical context in which Salafism grew and developed, linked to the historical-oriented discourse over *salafiyya*. The problematic concept of *salafiyya*, namely the Salafi's ideology, shows the past and present scenario of Salafism, by means of conceptual history, which is relevant in order to contextualize concepts and ideas which do not follow a linear path. As Lauzière claims in fact, the history of *salafiyya* needs to be discovered again and its meaning re-contextualized, relatively on times and spaces. The second paragraph shows, with the help of the literature, the multifaceted ideology within the same Salafi phenomenon, the common element of belief and the points of internal disagreement. Finally, the third and last section of this first chapter approaches the multiple Salafi trends by presenting the Wiktorowicz' categorization of the militancy.

1.1. History

The historical path of Salafism has been curvy and influenced by many political interferences which have constantly been shaping its ideology, from both a theoretical and a theological viewpoint. Despite some narratives claim that Salafism is an ancient trend, it is rather considered a modern phenomenon by historians, a recently-born and increasingly developed especially nowadays. "Salafism represents a return to the example of the pious founders. However,

deciding precisely who these “pious founders” are and exactly what “a return to their example” means is debated within the movement.”³

1.1.1. Salafism: Religious Idealism vs Political Realism

'Salafism' comes from the Arab words *salaf al-salih*, namely, the pious ancestors and companions of the Prophet. Everybody who describes himself as a Salafi in fact, really aims at following the ancient worshippers and their 'right' path. Salafis read the Koran in a literal way, forbidding any different interpretation from the pious ancestors'. In the Salafis' opinion in fact, since the nowadays world is essentially corrupted and wasted, it is mandatory that a vanguard of religious and enlightened people bring the entire community of Muslims to the salvation. “In legal matters, Salafis are divided between those who, in the name of independent legal judgment (*ijtihad*), reject strict adherence (*taqlid*) to the Sunni schools of law (*madhahib*) and others who remain faithful to these. All Salafis, however, claim that an *ijtihad* based on a probative proof text (*dalil*) that contradicts an established school's opinion is to be accepted as superior.”⁴ The Salafis' decision to follow an ancient trend of faith is not problematic *per se*: the issue lies in the arduous meaning of the ancestors' interpretations. Is there any approved authority who decides what is orthodox or not? Are there any objective parameters in order to quantify and list the main religious principles? Furthermore, is there any agreement upon the ancestors' viewpoint among the Salafis themselves? Given that the answers are mostly negative, the acknowledged notions on Salafism are few and superficial. What is certain is that Salafism represents a modern Islamic trend, internally fragmented and in precarious balance between religious idealism and political realism.

According to Bassam Tibi, Islamism is a fundamental view of Islam, based on the invention of a tradition, rather than based on Islam: this is a very interesting point. “Islamism is a variety of religious fundamentalism and reflects a defensive cultural response to modernity. In an offensive move, Islamism makes a claim at remaking the world. The challenged become challengers.”⁵ And 'remaking the world' is possible since Islamism is linked to *dawla*, as the state.

³CDR Aboul-Enein, “Framing Salafism: Lesson From Yemen”, review of Laurent Bonnefoy “Salafism in Yemen: Transnational and Religion Identity”, vol 37, no1, 2013

⁴ Excerpted from THE PRINCETON ENCYCLOPEDIA OF ISLAMIC POLITICAL THOUGHT, edited by Gerhard Bowering, article by Bernard Haykel, Princeton University Press, 2013

⁵ Tibi Bassam, “The Politicization of Islam into Islamism in the Context of Global Religious Fundamentalism”, *Journal of the Middle East and Africa*, vol 1, n 2, pp 153-170, 2010

Islamism is thus connected to politics, law, culture and security. According to Tibi in fact, the Islamist conceive politics into the Manichean frame of prescribing good and forbidding evil, according to the Sharia law. A completely invented factor is the Islamist claim that the various nations within the Islamic 'umma - from Morocco to Indonesia - share the same culture and collaborate to build a globalized Islam. This is a completely wrong assumption, especially since it presume the cultural homogeneity among extremely different nations, but it is widely appealing. The globalized Islam in fact, aims to remove the contextual differences within the 'umma – geographical, historical, social, economic, political, etc - and by so doing it gives worshippers a sense of comfort and belonging. On the basis of such a conception of the world, made of shared culture, religion and worldview, renounce to Islam is impossible. So, the internationalization of Islam must be promoted through the continuous effort, which is called *jihad*. Tibi assesses in fact that Islamism is a political phenomenon just imbued with religious meaning. "Islamic civilization is in a state of crisis and requires Islam as the solution. Instead of seeking a solution, Islamists seek a scapegoat."⁶

David Commins identifies the first historical wave of Salafism around 1700, in Egypt, Syria, Iraq and India.⁷ This new Islamic trend was born thank to a group of intellectuals who were engaged in the scholarly fight against the pervasiveness of Western ideology and some practices from the corrupted popular Islam. "Reformists such as the salafiyya were, for the most

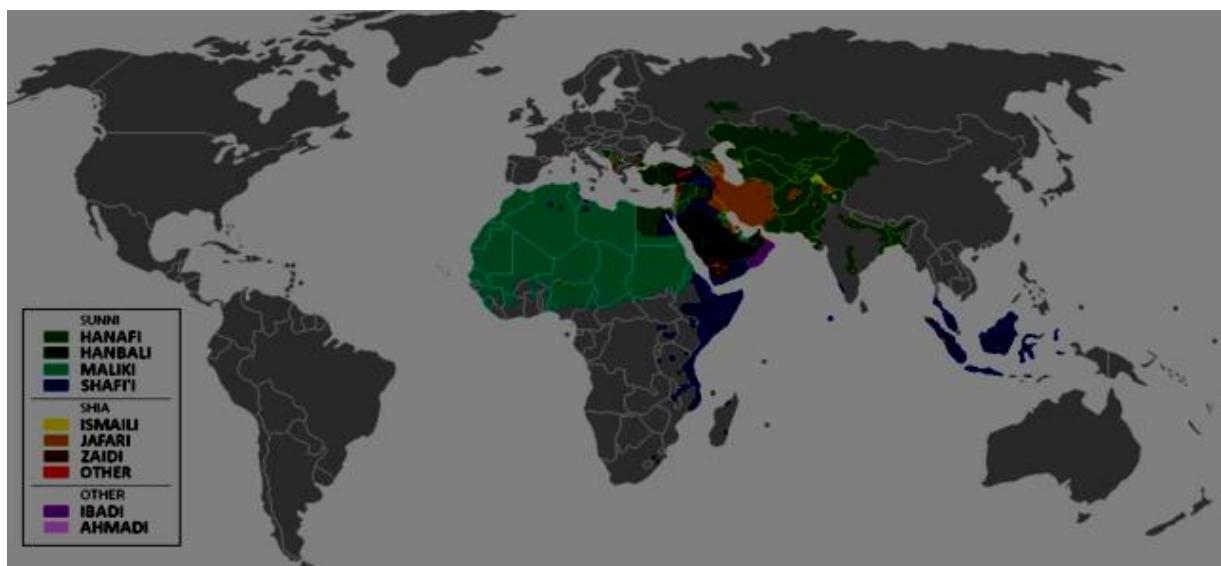


Fig. 1: Distribution of Islamic schools worldwide

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Rougier Bernard, Qu'est-ce que le Salafisme?, éditions Proche Orient, pp 25-44, 2008

part, Sunni ‘orthodox’ shaikhs and scholar-preachers who advocated the way of the *salaf al-salih*, the pious Muslims of the early Islamic period. [...] Of all the Salafi movements that gripped the region in that period, the Wahhabis were the most radical of the Sharia-centered revivalist movements.”⁸ These intellectuals showed a new attitude toward modernity and political engagement in order to build a constitutional government, they adopted scientific teaching methods and a more flexible attitude toward religious prescription.⁹ What is interesting is that the early Salafis were not pious guardians of the creed as the Wahhabis were: the Salafis rather wanted a multifaceted approach to religious issues by means of borrowing styles, approaches and interpretations from four different schools.

The Sunni Islamic school of law are four, as the Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i and Hanbali.¹⁰ The more ancient religious school was the Hanafi school, founded by Abu Hanifa and spread in the ex-Ottoman territories, Russia and China. Hanifa is the founder of the *qiyas* reasoning, as the analogy, in order to pinpoint the Islamic law even when the Koran or the *hadiths* were ambiguous. The Maliki school is the major school on the west-side of the global 'umma, it was founded by Malik in the 8th century and it categorizes the main sources for the law, such as the Koran, the practices of people of Medina, the habits of the companions of the Prophet, the analogy and the consensus of the 'umma. The Shafi'i school especially relies on Koran and *hadiths*, and finally the Hanbali school, founded by Ibn Hanbal in Saudi Arabia and Qatar, around 10th century, is the strictest trend among the Islamic schools. The Hanbali school was originally narrow, since it developed later thank to Abd al-Wahhab, by diffusing it in the Gulf region. The Hanbali school prescribed a strict and uncritical reading of the sources, *bi-la kaif*, without questioning. The Hanbali approach became suddenly popular, since ignorant people easily understood rigid (and easy-reading) approach to the sources. While the interpretation effort involves profound and demanding studies, conversely, the literal reading is for everyone. Moreover, “The doctrinal intransigence of the Hanbali school's defenders strengthened the image of a religious school immune to the pressures of political power.”¹¹

⁸ Fattah Hala, “Wahhabi Influences, Salafi Responses: Shaikh Mahmud Shukri and The Iraqi Salafi Movement, 1745–1930”, *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 2003, vol 14, issue 2, pp 127-148

⁹ Rougier Bernard, *Qu'est-ce que le Salafisme?*, éditions Proche Orient, pp 25-44, 2008

¹⁰ Image: By Peaceworld111 - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=37809704>

¹¹ Rougier Bernard, *Qu'est-ce que le Salafisme?*, éditions Proche Orient, pp 1-21, 2008

According to Abdallah Laroui, there was a deep involution from the Hanafi to the Hanbali school: in the lapse of a century, the schools' milestones shifted from the freedom of human interpretation, the so-called *ra'y*, to the total absence of human judgment.¹² So, the Hanbali school, which grew thanks to Abd Al-Wahhab trend, opened the doors to the Wahhabi extremism, profoundly different from Salafism. While the Salafis' approach to religion aimed at purifying it from popular practices as the Wahhabis did, the former were not as radical as the latter. Salafis were more moderate than the Wahhabis in fact, who easily condemned common people who believed in saints as *kuffar*, unbelievers. Such a sentence was serious both for its religious and social consequences since it meant immediate exile or death for the *kafir*. This Wahhabi practice called *takfir* became codified overtime but the early Salafis maintained a critical approach to it.

Salafism firstly grew in the geographic area of Saudi Arabia, Syria and Iraq. "Wahhabism was not, of course, the only Islamic-revival movement that based itself on the salafi way. It must be noted that there had long been a salafi tradition in Iraq."¹³ In fact, many *shaikh* in Iraq were Salafis who rejected the Wahhabi thought. During the half of 18th century the Mamluk government defined the Wahhabi *da'wa* a dangerous innovation, *bid'a*, by encouraging the scholars to contain that phenomenon. Despite cleavages among the Salafi and the Wahhabi though, the Wahhabi *da'wa* expanded also in Iraq. Around the early 19th century, the Wahhabi-Salafi ideological confrontation arose to a political conflict, since the main religious and political trends were the opposed movements of Sufism and Salafism. Since the Wahhabi implementation of the Sharia's law was too cruel, they were progressively isolated by the Middle East scholars and their ideas progressively rejected. At the end of the 19th century, the Iraqi scholar and the so-considered leader of the Salafiyya movement Al-Alusi, wrote a harsh critique against the Wahhabis, especially on the field of *takfir*. "Anybody, Alusi asserts, who follows the faith is a Muslim, even if he commits an error in following this faith."¹⁴ The Iraqi environment is relevant to our analysis since Hala Fattah explains that Al-Alusi strongly rejected the label of Wahhabi. It is possible to deduce that Religious drifts become strong trends only whenever sustained by political needs.

¹² Rougier Bernard, *Qu'est-ce que le Salafisme?*, éditions Proche Orient, pp 1-21, 2008

¹³ Fattah Hala, "Wahhabi Influences, Salafi Responses: Shaikh Mahmud Shukri and The Iraqi Salafi Movement, 1745–1930", *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 2003, vol 14, issue 2, pg 127-148

¹⁴ Ibid.

According to Commins, the second wave of Salafism displayed in the 1920-30 Egypt, among the ranks of the early Muslim Brotherhoods, under the ideological boost of Hasan al-Banna. The Muslim Brotherhood absorbed the multifaceted political environment of the early 20th century-Egypt. In fact, socialists, communists and nationalists lived close to each other, trying to get the favor of a more and more urbanized population. Notwithstanding their religious convictions, the Brothers' program was essentially an economic one: they especially wanted to boost the Egyptian development. "The organization financed both the building of industries and literacy courses for workers."¹⁵ Crucial is the difference between the Salafi and Wahhabi approach to society and religion, in fact: "These behaviors practiced in the name of the 'Salafi message' are far enough from the Wahhabis' obsession for rituals and belief."¹⁶ While both trends were religiously inspired, their viewpoint over the issue of a legitimate political authority was deeply conflictual. While the Wahhabi angle was essentially pro-Saudi, the first wave of Salafis was harshly critical of it, establishing the incompatibility between Islam and the monarchy. The second wave of Salafis, were instead more collaborative in regards of the Saudi kingdom and the Wahhabi thought. Such a behavior was mainly due to the harsh repression of the 1950s Arab regimes in Egypt and Syria, while the Saud family did firmly condemn the nationalist and socialist Arab governments.

For the Brothers, the kingdom became the only hope of getaway from the hard persecutions at home. Moreover, it happened that, from the 1950s onward, both the Saudis and the Brothers had coinciding interests. In fact, while the formers needed protection, the latters wanted to implement a modern teaching program by importing scholars and professors in order to improve their educational system. The cooperation between Brothers and Wahhabis easily came, so that "Since the 20th century the Wahhabi shaikhs and the second Salafi wave of activists, closely worked in order to defend the Sunni Islam within the Muslim world and the Muslim diaspora in the West."¹⁷ Commins explains that it is not clear whether the Salafis or the Wahhabis most influenced the other; what is certain is that the second wave of Salafis reached important positions within the Saudi society. The just attained harmony between the Wahhabis and the Salafis begun to falter during the Gulf War, when the Saudis decided to resort to USA's protection. The Jordan and Pakistani Salafis then, rebelled against the Saudi strategy

¹⁵ Rougier Bernard, *Qu'est-ce que le Salafisme?*, éditions Proche Orient, pp 25-44, 2008

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

by making alliance with the Baathist Iraq of Saddam Hussein. According to Joshua Teitelbaum, the Islamist Saudi environment increasingly developed between 1980s and 1990s, for the new ruling class emerged among the ranks of the Saudi Islamic universities. Consequently, the ruling Islamic Saudi class was hit by the decline of oil prices which brought Saudi Arabia to reduce social programs and by the resentment provoked by Gulf War. "To quell dissatisfaction over the years, the Saudi regime has regularly attempted to coopt or marginalize the establishment 'ulama. [...] As the Saudi state became more bureaucratized, incorporation of the 'ulama into the state administration diminished their role."¹⁸

Finally, the third Salafi wave developed from the cultural heritage of Sayyid Qutb, in rupture with the Brothers' idea of restoring Islam by moralizing society. Qutb called for the reversal of the impious regimes by means of excommunication, the *takfir* practice. It is possible to establish here, *prima facie*, a parallel between the Wahhabi complaint of excommunication and the Qutb's. Still, the pushes are different: while for Mohammad 'Abd al Wahhab the jihad was the mean to condemn the personal unholy religious practices, Qutb's jihad was instead an instrument of punishment through which to judge the blasphemous regimes, for their abuse of human law and neglect of the divine law, namely the Sharia. The radical innovation in Qutb's thought lies in splitting the society into good and evil Muslims. This Manichean paradigm gave the 'good' worshipper the new social role of savior of the corrupted 'umma. In order to be coherent to this role, it was mandatory for the pious Muslims to reverse the impious regimes, such as the Saudi kingdom, since it sacrificed the divine law in the sake of the the impious US power.¹⁹

Conversely, the Wahhabi doctrine imposes total obedience to political authority, whether it is legitimate or not. So, "The intransigent nature of the third wave of Salafism made impossible a cooperation with Wahhabism. [...] Somehow, Osama Bin Laden is the symbol of the shift between the Muslim Brothers' tradition and the Sayyid Qutb's one."²⁰ Sayyid Qutb, Egyptian writer, educator and essayist stayed for two years in the USA and came back in Egypt in 1950 shocked by the Americans' perverted habits, until he joined the Muslim Brothers more determined than before. He was arrested several times until his condemnation to death in 1966.

¹⁸ Teitelbaum Joshua, "Holier than you: Saudi Arabia's Islamic Opposition", *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, pp 145, 2000

¹⁹ Rougier Bernard, *Qu'est-ce que le Salafisme?*, éditions Proche Orient, pp 25-44, 2008

²⁰ Ibid.

According to Shepard, "It was in prison, particularly after 1957, that he developed his most radical ideas."²¹ In Qutb's view, Islam did not exist at his times since there were no real Muslims but the so-called *defeatists* (not *kafirs* to not discourage them) and his times were cursed by a new *jahiliyya* age. Then as now, the concept of *Jahiliyya* had a particular impact on the Muslim society for its adaptability to each historical time and geographical area. Qutb's thought of Islam as a 'practical' religion brought him to focus on Muslim society, rather than on theoretical issues. "In any case, Qutb's primary focus here is on society, not on the individuals in it. This is perhaps why *jahiliyya* rather than *kufr* is the central term."²² According to Gilles Kepel the Arab regimes were the synthesis of the contemporary *jahiliyya*, despite the Qutb's conception according to which "It is not just the state, but the whole society that is *jahili*."²³ In Qutb's view, *jahiliyya* is the real enemy to be fought, and jihad is not a defensive means but an offensive one. "Although Qutb does not use the word 'revolution' here, or very often elsewhere, it does seem fair to describe his jihad as a revolutionary struggle and this passage as a call to Islamic revolution."²⁴ The incited violence against the *kuffar* is useful to radicals to the extent that this practice could bring the constitution of the Islamic State faster. It is relevant to highlight Qutb's emphasis on action rather than on discussion and speculation, since the real Muslim must involve himself in the total change of Muslim society. Qutb's thought fascination lies in the fact that "Islam is a 'practical' religion that deals with theoretical matters only as they have a direct influence on action."²⁵ Nevertheless, the theoretical frame promoted by Qutb is not about a quick reversal of the impious regimes. It is a matter of long-lasting fight instead, that will ends with the establishment of the Islamic State. According to Shepard in fact, the doctrine of *jahiliyya* consists of a much longer fight. "Qutb came to his *jahiliyya* doctrine only after the failure of Islamism in the early 1950s. It may be that only if and when the current wave of violent activism fails some of the radicals will turn to Qutb's doctrine for the more profound, if starker, guidance that it offers."²⁶

²¹ Shepard William E., "Sayyid Qutb's Doctrine of 'Jahiliyya'", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol 35 no 4, pp 521-545, 2003

²² Shepard William E., "Sayyid Qutb's Doctrine of 'Jahiliyya'", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol 35 no 4, pp 521-545, 2003

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Shepard William E., "Sayyid Qutb's Doctrine of 'Jahiliyya'", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol 35 no 4, pp 521-545, 2003

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

The third wave of Salafism is also characterized by the widespread use of the new technologies such as satellite television, cassettes and videotapes, especially in Egypt. "Through such means of outreach, the neo-Salafis have had a significant impact on Egyptian social life which has, in many respects, become steadily more conservative under the influence of the TV sheikhs."²⁷ Høigilt focuses upon Salafi activism, especially relevant to Arab leaders and governments since it is frightening and countries' leaders are not going to support potentially violent acts. Moreover, it is worth taking into account the highly political value of Salafi activism, in fact: "Although Salafis participate in this kind of activism, and it is often clad in religious garb, in practice it is more likely to be rooted in local political grievances than religious ideology and convictions. [...] In fact, southern Egyptians' deep-felt resentment of centrally imposed policies and corruption has been a long-standing cause of violent clashes between government forces and locals in the south."²⁸ The third wave of Salafis finally made the international community to pay attention to the political issue within the Islamic fundamentalism as it questioned which is the most relevant power between religion and politics and which one should effectively be the ruling one.

According to March's analysis, Qutb's effort of establishing the Islamic law was also supported by the belief that it constituted a coherent 'realistic utopia' to the extent that the divine laws are suited to rule in harmony with the human nature. "Qutb's project is thus an account of exactly why and how Islam requires politics, and how modern humans can be both free and governed. [...] A realistic utopia is a vision of a society that is the best we can or ought to wish for and that, by virtue of its proper implementation, would remove the main perennial human obstacles to justice, morality, and good."²⁹ In other words, the evils of society are socially caused and the perfect implementation of the Salafi Reform theory will remove such causes. As March highlights, it is the same as any other human theory, such as Marxism, and Rousseau theories of the better world, where everything is perfectible. In Qutb's thought the realistic utopia could be implemented only by the fulfillment of five stages: the Imperialism, the Authenticity, the Practically Premise, the acceptance of Islam, and Islam harmony with human nature. March analyzes the concept of Political Islam in Qutb's thought, especially its search

²⁷ Høigilt Jacob, "The salafis are coming – but where are they going?", *NOREF Report*, July 2011

²⁸ Høigilt Jacob, "The salafis are coming – but where are they going?", *NOREF Report*, July 2011

²⁹ March F. Andrew, "Taking People As They Are: Islam As a 'Realistic Utopia' in the Political Theory of Sayyid Qutb", *American Political Science Review*, vol 104, n 1, pp 1-19, 2010

for rule in a frame of moral excellence. Qutb's conditions to the realization of the project are the human inclination to monotheism and the fact that the divine law is suited on human needs, by so doing assessing the concept of "natural religion".

Qutb is essential to our analysis since he firstly invented the concept of 'Salafi Reform trend' which aim was to rebuild the creed in modern terms, by maintaining the pious ancestors practices. The late increase of Salafis worldwide can be explained by many elements combined: the search for a sense of belonging, the fight Sunni versus Shi'ite Muslims, the failure policies of the Arab governments - and not only Arab - and the need of a more radical way of life inspired by Islamic principles far from Western impositions. These factors are all relevant in order to focus on the growth of the Salafi phenomenon, but it is compulsory to remember that Salafism is not an uniform phenomenon. What is interesting in fact, is the variety in shape, thought, action, strategy and trend inside Salafism, which contributes to the adaptability and spread of such a trend worldwide. Salafism is composed by multiple trends which changed over time according to the highly subjective meaning of 'path of the pious ancestors'. In fact, while the early Salafis sought a constitutional type of government, the contemporary Salafi trends judge this kind of rule as impious instead, for the legitimate government must subdue the law of men to the law of God.

1.1.2. *Salafiyya as a Problematic Category*

Salafism is the specific understanding and practice of Islam, according to which the more the Islamic law is ancient and close to the Prophet's age, the more is true, reliable and correct. Its point of reference is the strict imitation of thoughts and actions of Prophet Muhammad early followers. The forefathers are called *salaf al-salih*, namely the pious ancestors, therefore Salafism is the trend and Salafis are its affiliates.³⁰ Bernard Rougier considers that the principle marker of the Salafi trend is the considerable importance granted to the Prophet's practice. It is crucial thus, to focus on the aspect of *salafiyya* upon which everybody agrees on: heterogeneity. *Salafiyya* is anything but a coherent trend, nor a commonly shared set of values, ideologies, religious norms and fixed objectives. The notion of *salafiyya* is in constant mutation

³⁰ Rougier Bernard, "Introduction", Qu'est-ce que le Salafisme?, *Proche Orient*, 2008

depending on the historical time, the geographical space and especially on the goals its affiliates want to achieve. *Salafiyya* is a highly problematic category, so it appears necessary to examine it under the conceptual history angle.

In the 8th century the Hanbali legal school developed in the Arabian Peninsula, wiping out all the previous philosophical speculations over the divine attributes. Ibn Hanbal's highly conservative thought designated the Holy Koran and Sunna as the fundamental sources of religion, promoting a literal understanding of sources and banning all attempts to different interpretations. Hence, in order to fit the tradition as much as possible, the practice of recollecting Prophet's claims, *hadith*, took its roots. Around 10th century then, the 'people of the *hadith*' begun to accumulate everything Mohammad said and did during his life. Islamic scholars deem this historical event and the birth of Hanbali school of thought an involution regarding the previous schools and a restriction of human opinion, namely *ra'y*, concerning the questioning of sacred texts. As Rougier outlines, the meticulous recollection of Prophet's claims was the only way to preserve religion from the assaults of the no-more-tolerated free thinkers, who could bring chaos to the Muslim community, (*fitna*), considered the worst curse ever.

By the 13th century the Hanbali ideological heritage turned into the obsession for the establishment, for absolute power and the struggle against religious deviance. The Mongols invasion of Syria during 14th century opened a new scenario: despite the non-Islamic origins of this population, Mongols were entirely converted to Islam, by 1300. Nevertheless, their were *de facto* invaders and not pious worshippers. Therefore, in this context stood out the Syrian Hanbali intellectual Ibn Taymiyya, author of numerous fatwas, "[...] legal opinions based on religious law"³¹ and of works such as: *As-Siyā-sat ash-sharīyah*, the Treatise on Juridical Politics and *Minhāj as-sunnah*, The Way of Tradition. His great engagement in religious affairs brought him to analyze and interpret his times under the Islamic lens: Ibn Taymiyya hence, threw his fatwas against the Mongols and started a rebellion against them based on the assumption that Mongols' conversion was not authentic, and they must be defeated through violence, (*jihad*). Being the first to introduce *jihad* as the all Muslims' duty to fight the 'non-authentic' Muslims, Ibn Taymiyya became the revolutionary figure within the Salafi-Jihadi

³¹ Laoust Henri, Ibn Taymiyyah, britannica.com, 2014

trend. His work is employed to show the necessity of violence against the 'new Mongols' alias the corrupted and impious Arab establishment also nowadays.³²

Around 1700, another relevant step in the development of *salafiyya* occurred since a new religious trend was about to settle in the Muslim world, namely Wahhabism. This new phenomenon owes its birth to the Saudi preacher Mohammad 'Abd al-Wahhab who stressed the uniqueness of God, outlawed the para-religious practices as popular traditions and launched the 'theology of suspect'.³³ Throughout the 18th and the 19th century, the power of 'Abd al-Wahhab' ideology grew thanks to the favor of the house of Saud, engaged in conquering most of the Arabian Peninsula. The Wahhabi innovative message was the extension of the label of infidel even to Muslims who did not conform their practices according to the strict Wahhabi doctrine. There was no more room for non-orthodox Muslims: the real Muslim was not just Muslim-born, but the believer who was engaged in adhering as much as possible to *salaf al-salih* habits.³⁴ This intransigent interpretation of Islam became widely followed from the second half of 20th century, when it became a widespread practice. Such a success was due to the promotion of jihad as the main means through which establishing the true religious doctrine. As a result, the Wahhabi ideology paved the way to develop the accusation of *takfir*, the supreme Islamic sin, as declaring supposed 'untrue' Muslims as impious unbelievers.³⁵

It is crucial to highlight that Wahhabism and Salafism are not the same ideology even if they maintain the same spiritual origin. Both of them in fact, promote the coming back to the source of Islam, by imitating the pure religiosity of the pious forefathers. "Wahhabism and neighboring movements are defined as those who follow the path of ancestors (Salafi) and often prefer this term Salafi."³⁶ At the turn of 19th and 20th century, the intellectuals Jam-aluddin al-Afghani, Rashid Rida and Mohammad Abduh revolutionized the Islamic ideology in the meanwhile that Wahhabism was getting widespread and followed up: they built thus, the modern theoretical frame of Salafism.³⁷ The young reformist Rashid Rida was not particularly

³² Lauzière Henri, "The Construction of Salafiyya : Reconsidering Salafism from the Perspective of Conceptual History", *Middle East Studies*, Issue 42, 2010

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Rougier Bernard, "Introduction", Qu'est-ce que le Salafisme?, *Proche Orient*, 2008

³⁵ Ungureanu Daniel, "Wahhabism, Salafism and the Expansion of Islamic Fundamentalist Ideology", This study was funded by CNCSIS–UEFISCSU, project number PNII–IDEI, 1993/2008

³⁶ Ungureanu Daniel, "Wahhabism, Salafism and the Expansion of Islamic Fundamentalist Ideology", This study was funded by CNCSIS–UEFISCSU, project number PNII–IDEI, 1993/2008

³⁷ Ibid.

influenced by the Wahhabi ideology, regarded Salafis as reformists, moderates and promoters of a new season of balance between Islam and the advanced Western civilization.³⁸ "Is Rida the father of modern Islamists? He is the first who brought the need for Muslims to create a party to represent them in the political field."³⁹ Consequently, in Rida's viewpoint, Salafism was commonly considered a step toward the compromise between Islam and modernity. Otherwise, Salafi's approach never resulted in a coherent modernist frame. In Rida's viewpoint Salafism and Wahhabism were not so different trends that they were even interchangeable.⁴⁰

On account of this, it is clear that the notion of *salafiyya* changed according to the different and multiple schools of thought and in behalf of specific political interests, as Lauzière outlined: "First, the notion of Salafism has become a victim of its own success and, as a result, has often been used loosely and without due regard to its historicity. [...] Over time, this relative lack of rigor in the secondary literature has perpetuated and validated the otherwise arguable idea that each era has had its own version of *salafiyya*."⁴¹ The key question is why the concept of *salafiyya* is quite unknown in premodern sources and how contemporary Salafis support this controversial concept. Lauzière discusses the assumption according to which *salafiyya* had a wide meaning in Middle Age, arguing that Ibn Taymiyyah' notion of 'Salafi way' could be both a religious trend and a reference to the tradition. Lauzière considers *salafiyya* a 'quasi-character'⁴², because of its continuous transforming and reshaping throughout history, thank to its doubtful origins. Therefore, Lauzière hypothesized that the contemporary concept of *salafiyya* developed during 19th century rather than in medieval times. Apparently, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad 'Abduh, first used the term *salafiyya* as a slogan for their reformist movement close to the end of 19th century. These two Islamic ideologues unwittingly diverted the notion of Salafism to their reformist cause, becoming the founders of the Salafi trend. So, the *Salafiyya* scientific frame is more complex than it appears. The presumed link between Salafism, reform trend and modernization increased thank to al-Maktaba al-Salafiyya, or Salafiyya Bookstore in Cairo, in 1909. The library made *salafiyya* spread without specifying its

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Lauzière Henri, "The Construction of Salafiyya : Reconsidering Salafism from the Perspective of Conceptual History", *Middle East Studies*, Issue 42, 2010

⁴¹ Lauzière Henri, "The Construction of Salafiyya : Reconsidering Salafism from the Perspective of Conceptual History", *Middle East Studies*, Issue 42, 2010

⁴²Ibid.

meaning nor targeting its affiliated. *Salafiyya* became a market brand and increased the sales of books, not only religious. Lauzière states that even Taha Husain published his famous, though controversial, work on pre-islamic poetry in the *Salafiyya* Bookstore.

Consequently, the brand *salafiyya* became the guarantee of Muslims' ancient and glorious past, this way filling the gap between the Arabs' sense of inferiority and the advanced and modern Western societies. "Despite its name, however, the bookstore did not emphasize Salafi theology. Instead, al-Khatib and Qatlan focused on the rationality and dynamism of Islam and Muslim societies."⁴³ In Lauzière's opinion, the sudden fall of the Ottoman Empire undermined the already difficult modernization process. The only opportunities left were religion and "[...] the young Saudi state, which offered hope of social and political renaissance in the Muslim world."⁴⁴ In fact, during 1920s the *Salafiyya* Bookstore became a Saudi prerogative, and a branch totally dedicated to Wahhabi thought was opened in it. "The reification of early 20th-century Salafism as an intrinsically modernist reform movement is a figment of scholarly imagination that cannot withstand historical scrutiny. In the Muslim discourses of the 1920s, al-*salafiyya* was at best a nascent conceptual construct and was already too ambiguous to be pinned down."⁴⁵

Something changed when the Wahhabi Salafism was officially linked to the Saudi family. "The marriage of interests between Wahabi Salafism and the Saudi ruling house would come to have an impact during the twentieth century in the 1970s. With the oil boom, the ruling Al-Saud family employed Salafis to serve the state, while Salafis used this relationship to define the country's public space in order to impose their religious view on society."⁴⁶ The 1970s Saudi economic boom arose the price of oil and produced many new employments. By so doing, Saudi Arabia spread the Salafi doctrine in the whole Arab world. During 1970s and 1980s, Salafis' only concern was to proselytize and spread doctrine, trying to stay apart from political opposition and open engagement.⁴⁷ "In the wake of the 1991 Gulf War, a heated debate

⁴³ Lauzière Henri, "The Construction of Salafiyya : Reconsidering Salafism from the Perspective of Conceptual History", *Middle East Studies*, Issue 42, 2010

⁴⁴ Lauzière Henri, "The Construction of Salafiyya : Reconsidering Salafism from the Perspective of Conceptual History", *Middle East Studies*, Issue 42, 2010

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Rumman Abu Mohammad, I AM A SALAFI - A Study of the Actual and Imagined Identities of Salafis, Friedrich Ebert Stifung, pp 265, 2014

⁴⁷ Ibid.

within the Salafi movement broke out when a new trend declared that it was forbidden to seek foreign military assistance to liberate Kuwait.”⁴⁸

Particularly interesting are Zakia Belhachmi's findings. She argues that *salafiyya* is deeply connected with the concept of authority. Belhachmi identifies crucial historical moments concerning *salafiyya* related to power. The fundamental Islamic institution was *al-waqf*⁴⁹, an Islamic grant through which the power in charge could maintain both political and religious life under control, by means of the monopoly of education. The different rulers maintained “[...] Arabic as the language of education and communication, and Islam as the symbol of national unity.”⁵⁰ Thus, Belhachmi remarks upon the pragmatic point according to which *salafiyya* is the result of political and economic changes, besides ideological issues. Effectively, despite *salafiyya* grew in contact with Wahhabism, its expansion toward Maghreb was to ascribe to the bankruptcy economy of the Ottoman Empire in the region. “However, [...] during the second half of the nineteenth century, al-salafiyya gradually abandoned the community's socio-political interests and built a political alliance with the state.”⁵¹ So, *salafiyya* split in *salafiyya al-qadima* and *salafiyya al-jadida*, the oldest and the newest one. The result is that during the 19th century *salafiyya* was considered an all-encompassing entity. A symbol of national unity, civilization and Arabization.⁵² Belhachmi defines *salafiyya* as an endogenous force that takes its origin from within the Arab-Islamic society, by expressing dynamism and adaptation, especially “[...] its capacity to accommodate social change over time.”⁵³ *Salafiyya* hence, is considered as a new developmental model, spread to the Maghreb and Mashreq, focused on “[...] restoring the Arab-Muslim power shaping the process of social change [...].”⁵⁴

⁴⁸ Rumman Abu Mohammad, I AM A SALAFI - A Study of the Actual and Imagined Identities of Salafis, Friedrich Ebert Stifung, pp 265, 2014

⁴⁹ <http://www.awqaf.gov.ae/Waqf.aspx?Lang=EN&SectionID=13&RefID=857> As it is reported on the General Authority of Islamic Affairs & Endowments' website: “In Islamic terms, waqf refers to a religious endowment, a voluntary and irrevocable dedication of one's wealth or a portion of it - in cash or kind (such as a house or a garden), and its disbursement for shariah compliant projects (such as mosques or religious schools...).” Moreover, there is a “Difference between Waqf and Charity: Waqf is a permanent donation. Once a waqf is created, it can never be donated as a gift, inherited, or sold. Disbursement of its returns is done in accordance with the endower's wishes . Charity, on the other hand, is a broader concept; it encompasses alms, grant, inheritance, loan, waqf...”

⁵⁰ Belhachmi Zakia, “Al-salafiyya, feminism, and reforms in the nineteenth-century Arab-Islamic society”, *The Journal of North African Studies*, Vol.9, Issue 4, 2007

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Belhachmi Zakia, “Al-salafiyya, feminism, and reforms in the nineteenth-century Arab-Islamic society”, *The Journal of North African Studies*, Vol.9, Issue 4, 2007

⁵⁴ Ibid.

What is relevant here, is to highlight the historical path of Salafism as constantly-renewing-idea by showing the multiple and faceted transformations of the concept of *salafiyya*. “Salafism is thus a loosely defined movement, the definition of which is debated by scholars and researchers due to the differing connotations.”⁵⁵ Despite the fragmentation of the movement and multiple meanings *salafiyya* absorbed throughout history, the Salafi movement is also characterized by specific elements. The Salafi pillars are the importance of the doctrine, a strong metaphysical basis, the relevance of monotheism and *tawhid*, the open dislike of innovation, *bid'a*, and the literal interpretation of the sacred texts and the total commitment to the Sunna. “On the whole, some common denominators unite the various strands of Salafis in terms of doctrine and jurisprudence, their stance on political activism, regardless of their opposition to or acceptance of Arab regimes.”⁵⁶

1.2. Ideology

This section focuses upon the Salafi ideology, its main characters and Salafism related to the Western society. What matters to this piece of work is to highlight Salafis' ideology over time, in order to understand their strategies and aims. Salafism is a specific Islamic practice that does not constitute a homogenous trend. Moreover, contemporary Salafis' political engagement recently had ups and downs but sharply decreased after the disappointed expectations of the post Arab Spring period.⁵⁷ It is possible that Olivier Roy's point is still true: it is the failure of political Islam we are witnessing at. Since 1994 Roy observed the difference between fundamentalism and Islamism⁵⁸ by introducing in the scientific community the concept of the multiple facets within Islam, different trends with different aims. According to Roy, fundamentalist and Islamist have distinct worldviews depending on the concepts of revolution, *sharia* and women. Roy assesses that fundamentalism strives for the application of the *sharia* law, the

⁵⁵ Rumman Abu Mohammad, I AM A SALAFI - A Study of the Actual and Imagined Identities of Salafis, Friedrich Ebert Stifung, pp 265, 2014

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Belhachmi Zakia, “Al-salafiyya, feminism, and reforms in the nineteenth-century Arab-Islamic society”, *The Journal of North African Studies*, Vol.9, Issue 4, 2007

⁵⁸ Villalon A. Leonardo, Book Review: The Failure of Political Islam, *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 89 Issue 3, 1995 by Roy Olivier, The Failure of Political Islam, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994

Islamization of society and the creation of the Islamic State, combined to the “[...] circumscription of the role of women”⁵⁹. This leads to a system of closeness and rigor as the Saudi one. Conversely, Islamism is founded on a different theoretical thought, the revolutionary one. According to the Islamic viewpoint, the society will bend under the Sharia rule only through revolution, in fact “[...] Islamists have tended to give preeminence to the political logic of their goals.”⁶⁰ Moreover, Islamists pushed women to conquer prestigious positions within societies as militants, students and workers. Roy states this trend led to a dynamic system as Iran. Roy assesses that the inner dynamic of Islamism is close to anti-imperialism and 'anti-Westernization', due to its revolutionary ingredient. The rejection of imported values and behaviors by rediscovering the pillar of the Arab culture and true Islam, is the focal point. According to Roy, such a theoretical elaboration makes of the Islamism a modern phenomenon. In Roy's words: “Islamism was a moment, a fragile synthesis between Islam and political modernity, which ultimately never took root”.⁶¹ The scholar's thesis then, is that Islamism didn't manage to put its objectives into practice, disappointing its supporters. Finally, Roy's viewpoint is that contemporary Islamic society is characterized by the phenomenon of neo-fundamentalism, or “Islam of resentment” as the scholar calls it, since its target is corrupted Western culture, and equally, the rejection of Muslim background and civilization. “The failure of Islamism is complete.”⁶²

1.2.1. Salafi Worldview and Relationship with Western Society

According to the academic Quintan Wiktorowicz, “The various factions of the Salafi community are united by a common religious creed or *aqida*.⁶³ *Aqida* establishes the content of creed by organizing religion and fixing the dogma. “It addresses such fundamental religious questions as the role of human reason, the balance between human agency and predestination,

⁵⁹ Villalon A. Leonardo, Book Review: The Failure of Political Islam, *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 89 Issue 3, 1995 by Roy Olivier, The Failure of Political Islam, Cambridge: *Harvard University Press*, 1994

⁶⁰ Villalon A. Leonardo, Book Review: The Failure of Political Islam, *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 89 Issue 3, 1995 by Roy Olivier, The Failure of Political Islam, Cambridge: *Harvard University Press*, 1994

⁶¹ Villalon A. Leonardo, Book Review: The Failure of Political Islam, *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 89 Issue 3, 1995 by Roy Olivier, The Failure of Political Islam, Cambridge: *Harvard University Press*, 1994.

⁶² Villalon A. Leonardo, Book Review: The Failure of Political Islam, *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 89 Issue 3, 1995 by Roy Olivier, The Failure of Political Islam, Cambridge: *Harvard University Press*, 1994

⁶³ Wiktorowicz Quintan, “Anatomy of the Salafi Movement”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 29, Issue 3, 2006

the nature of God, the nature of the Qur'an, and the basis of belief.”⁶⁴ The first common religious creed is the so-called *tawhid*, the notion of the unity of God, the fundamental dogma of Salafi creed, which leans on three pillars. First, the assumption that God is the sole creator and Lord of the universe, as the testimony of faith (*shahada*) says “I testify that there is no God except Allah and that Muhammad is His messenger.” Second, is the supremacy and uniqueness of God. God exists *per se*, detached from human feelings and above all his creatures. For this reason, humans must obey to God's law, namely *Shari'a*. Highly interesting is how dogma is related to politics, as Wiktorowicz explains: “This view of *tawhid* leads Salafis to reject secularism and the separation of church (or mosque) and state, because these suggest the supremacy of human-made laws and institutions over divine governance”.⁶⁵

The third and last pillar of *tawhid* is that God alone has the right to be worshipped, therefore the ban from the cult of saints, traditional creeds and popular culture. Moreover, given the assumption according to which Koran and Sunna contain obliges and suggestions in order to conduct a pious life, “[...] every act is an act of worship if it is in accordance with Islamic law.”⁶⁶ In addition, Salafis believe that human desires threaten the authority of *tawhid* because of their narrowness, not letting Islam accomplish its civilizing mission. Good Muslims must involve themselves into this mission by spreading Islamic values through proselytism, called *da'wa*.

Another important factor upon which both Roy and Wiktorowicz agree, is that culture is the first enemy of religion as Salafism systemically eradicated traditional Arab culture, pretending that nothing existed before Islam and “[...] delinking Islam from any cultural context.”⁶⁷ This is a careful and organized strategy since it makes Islam completely detached from any regional, geographic or cultural connection. Such a process helps the spread of religion and finally makes of Islam a globalized phenomenon. According to Salafis, the act of adapting rational values to the holy sources is an even worse sin than the cultural danger *per se* since it means that worshippers lose the right way, by abandoning their lives to their instincts and human desires. Still, knowledge is entirely written on sources, and even scholars do not need to know more than what they read on Koran and Sunna, so interpretation is banned.

⁶⁴ Ibid. pg 2

⁶⁵ Ibid. pg 3

⁶⁶Ibid. pg 3

⁶⁷Ibid. pg 4

However, multiple approaches to Islam are allowed within the Salafi environment and the *hadith* scholars, who study in order to authenticate the tradition (and by so doing to forbid the impious trends), hold a fundamental task. “But even if one is able to validate the reliability of a hadith, this in itself does not ensure an objective process of religious interpretation.”⁶⁸ Effectively, the most difficult part of a *hadith* scholar’s job is aligning the Prophet claims to the contemporary world, through the help of the analogical reasoning, namely *qiyyas*. Consequently, the emphasis upon a *hadith* rather than another depends on the interpretation the scholar gives of the reality. According to Wiktorowicz, another relevant issue to Salafism is whether Muslims can declare their rulers apostates, through the process called *takfir*. This process determines the most important division within the Salafi trend. The triggering event that set the sin of apostasy displayed by the episode of the famous fight between one of the Uthman’s relatives and governor of Damascus, Mu’awiyya, and the cousin of the Prophet, ‘Ali. The fight was a struggle for power between Mu’awiyya ad ‘Ali, where the first accused the second of commissioning Uthman’s murder, then the arbitration of the fight was submitted to the Holy Koran. It was at this stage that some of ‘Ali’s partisans turned against him, as submitting the arbitration to the Holy source implicated the human interpretation of the response, so they considered the issue as a betrayal. “The Khawarij, as they became known, argued that, “God alone has the right to judge” and declared Ali an apostate.”⁶⁹ Khawarij (literally the leavers, separatists) had a huge impact on the Islamic community, subverting the existing order based on the submission to the authority in order to avoid *fitna*. This group refused to submit to the authority instead, by launching the use of *takfir*.

From this secession a new stream of thought originated called *murji'a* whose members forbade *takfir*, instead. They operated a split between belief and actions, leaving the ultimate judgment to God alone. This new thought was strategic in order to maintain the community united and to avoid civil war. Apostasy though, is not completely rejected but it is considered extrema ratio, only admissible whether total abandon of Islam occurs. Moreover, it is possible to draw three situations under which the Islamic sin is not considered heresy, such as under the circumstance of ignorance, coercion and intention. In last case for example, the ruler who governs selfishly is certainly a sinner, still he is not an apostate. Until he rejects *Shari'a* and

⁶⁸Ibid. pg 9

⁶⁹Ibid. pg 22

denies God, at least. "Jihadis even argue that, "The ruler of a country is the one that has authority in it. Unless he is an atheist, he can rule even if he lacked shari'ah conditions."⁷⁰ However, the condition of ignorance, coercion and intention are not objective and there are no scientific parameters through which to measure the level of the ruler's knowledge about religion, his intention nor coercion.

Roel Meijer assesses it is necessary to analyze the appeal and the fascination of the Salafi movement and its relationship with politics and violence.⁷¹ Meijer stresses that the deep ambiguity of the phenomenon and its extreme fragmentation make the study of Salafism a true challenge. According to Meijer, Salafism has a double nature, both quietist and activist. The activist side is especially fostered by its external influences, principally the Muslim Brotherhood and by its transnational character, blending local and global strategies. Similarly, Bernard Haykel⁷² states that, while Salafism' dogmatic structure took its roots in the *hadith* tradition it absorbed Wahhabi elements too, which deeply radicalized within the Salafi trend since it was completely detached by any State establishment. So, the main cleavages between Wahhabis and Salafis are the following. First, the Wahhabi structure relied principally on *fiqh* as the Hanbali jurisprudence prescribed, even though the widely-sponsored aim of Wahhabism was the coming back to the Islamic sources. Salafis thus, concretely proved they were holier than the Wahhabis by totally focusing on *hadith*, instead of *fiqh*. Al-Albani explained that Abd al-Wahhab was neither an hadith specialist nor a Salafi, since he followed the Hanbali school of law. Al-Albani was especially critical toward any Islamic political engagement, therefore harshly attacked the Muslim Brothers, so putting the basis for the long-lasting friction between Salafism and the Brotherhood.⁷³ The second source of tension is the Wahhabi xenophobic and sectarian attitude toward the non-Wahhabi: "A true believer could only express his belief and the sincerity of his faith by demonstrating open enmity towards "idolators".⁷⁴ Third, Wahhabis condemned the Shi'a trend as heretic. Shi'a' veneration of Imams, deny of the Rightly

⁷⁰Ibid. pg 24

⁷¹ Meijer Roel, Introduction, pp 1-32, from Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement,Columbia University Press, pp 463, 2009

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Meijer Roel, Introduction, pp 1-32, from Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement,Columbia University Press, pp 463, 2009

Guided Caliphs, the companions of the Prophet and the hadith were considered impious by Wahhabis.

Roel Meijer studied the Salafi phenomenon in detail, by emphasizing the most relevant faces of Salafism, such as its capacity to empower and change identity.⁷⁵ Salafism 'magic power' is the transformation of disgruntled, humiliated young people into a chosen sect, namely *al-firqa al-najyya*, with privileged access to the Truth. The empowerment of poor people and the building of a new identity are crucial to the comprehension of the Salafi revolution. As Francesco Cavatorta and Fabio Merone highlighted too, the new Salafi freedom is so relevant to our study since it explains the huge appeal of Salafism. "Salafis are therefore able to contest the hegemonic power of their opponents: parents, the elite, the state, or dominant cultural and economic values of the global capitalist system as well as the total identification with an alien nation which nation-states in Europe impose."⁷⁶ The aspect of contesting power is maybe the most relevant to young people. In fact, the impact Salafism had on Muslim contexts was huge since it gave youth the possibility of reverse the static societal orders as they gave up respecting old people's authority. Salafism appeal lies in its strategy according to which it does not (openly) play on the ground of politics and reforms but on the ground of doctrine, by proposing a new way of conceiving religion, Truth and social action. "But the real power of Salafism's mobilisational capacity, as Haykel stresses in this volume, lies in its ability to morally upstage the opponent."⁷⁷ Salafis moral superiority expressed in six dimensions: the non explicitly revolutionary approach, the intellectual superiority, the strong identity, the identification with a bigger 'umma, its activist side and its deep ambiguity and flexibility. "It is the absolute character of Salafism that attracts. Instead of being passive followers, Salafis become active role models. Adraoui regards Salafism as a strong "product" because it succeeds in convincing the customers of the religious market in believing it is the real Islam, provides an explanation why their lives have gone awry and how to become a true believer by living in accordance with correct Islamic rules in line with the Salafi practice (manhaj)."⁷⁸ Salafis' special

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶ Meijer Roel, Introduction, pp 1-32, from Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement, Columbia University Press, pp 463, 2009

⁷⁷ Meijer Roel, Introduction, pp 1-32, from Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement, Columbia University Press, pp 463, 2009

⁷⁸ Meijer Roel, Introduction, pp 1-32, from Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement, Columbia University Press, pp 463, 2009

relation with politics allowed them to act non-politically in a political world, especially when Salafism became a mass movement. According to Haykel, the process of hybridization of Salafi trend started in Kuwait because of the attempt to try a combination between Salafism and Muslim Brotherhood. Relevant is Salafi approach to violence: “[...] Salafism’s appeal is based on the purist rejection of the world and one of its weakest aspects is the underdeveloped nature of its political vocabulary. Transcending politics, its overt political activism takes the form of violence and jihad. Salafism does, however, provide certain concepts and practices that can be transformed into political tools, such as the principles of loyalty and disavowal (al-wala’ wa-l-barā’) and commanding good and forbidding wrong (al-amr bi-l-ma’ruf wa al-nahy ‘an al-munkar).”⁷⁹

According to Haim Malka and William Lawrence, Salafism developed a new approach to violence compared to al-Qaeda's. Salafis in fact, are far more selective than al-Qaeda in combining social activism, proselytism and violent struggle worldwide.⁸⁰ While al-Qaeda abided a marginal phenomenon, Salafism became a global movement, able to inspire thousands of people, especially the young generations and by so doing there is the re-shaping of Bin Laden ideology. “The rise of new jihadi-salafi groups represents more than a rebranding of the ideology of which bin Laden was the most famous advocate. In fact, it is shaped by the failure of that ideology, or at least the failure of its strategy.”⁸¹ What is interesting of Malka and Lawrence analysis, is the focus on the extreme adaptability of Salafism: despite Salafis did not play the leading role during the Arab Springs of 2011 in fact, they did not disappear from the social and political sphere, they stayed instead, by adapting their rhetoric to the new revolutionary contexts.

Heghammar organized Salafis' motivations into five main categories, each one divided again into violent and non violent manifestation. In Heghammar' analysis the concept of *takfir* is relevant to better understand the Salafi movement. *Takfir* happens to be evoked above all, against an impious regime by legitimizing the use of violence. Moreover, *takfir* is launched in order to intimidate and label enemies and finally, it is called when a small group of Salafis decides to isolate from the whole society. *Takfir* in this last situation is useful to stigmatize the

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Malka Haim, Lawrence William, “Jihadi-Salafism's Next Generation”, Analysis Paper CSIS, Middle East Program, October 2013, <http://www.csis.org/mideast>

⁸¹ Ibid.

society and to establish a moral superiority marker. So, the appellation of *takfiri* is highly controversial since “When Arab state officials employ the term *takfiri* of a group of Islamists, they very rarely distinguish between actors who excommunicate *individual* politician or intellectuals [*takfir al-'ayn*], and those who excommunicate the *whole society* around them [*takfir al-'umum*]”.⁸² Hegghammer identifies the main reasons why Islamists act by calling them rationales, and by associating each rationale to its violent and non-violent form.

Monica Marks too, highlights that the identity provided by Salafism enables people to choose their own Salafi trend and their specific relationship with violence.

Another interesting point is highlighted by Mohamed-Ali Adraoui in his study about Salafism in France: he speaks of a-political Salafism when it happens to grow outside the Arab world, especially in France. “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 resistant to activism and political engagement. [...] However, they do not believe that they must deal with unbelievers violently.”⁸³ Salafi focus in

<i>Rationale</i>	<i>Non-Violent Form</i>		<i>Violent Form</i>	
	<i>Manifestation</i>	<i>Examples</i>	<i>Manifestation</i>	<i>Examples</i>
<i>State-oriented</i>	Reformism	MB, Saudi <i>Sahwa</i>	Socio-revolutionary activism	GIA, GSPC, EIJ
<i>Nation-oriented</i>	Nationalism		Violent irredentism	Hamas, LeT, Chechen mujahidin; Islamic Army (Iraq)
<i>Umma-oriented</i>	Pan-Islamism	MWL	Classical jihadism, Global jihadism	Arabs in Chechnya, al-Qaeda, QAP
<i>Morality-oriented</i>	Pietism	Tabligh, Madkhali	Vigilantism	Unorganised <i>hisba</i>
<i>Sectarian</i>	Sectarianism		Violent sectarianism	Lashkar e Janghvi, Iraqi militias

Abbreviations: MB=Muslim Brotherhood; GIA=Groupe Islamique Armée; GSPC=Groupe Salafiste pour le Prédictioп et le Combat; EIJ=Egyptian Islamic Jihad; LeT=Lashkar-e-Tayyiba; MWL=Muslim World League; QAP=al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula

Tab. 1: A Preference-Based Typology of Islamist Activism. Modified after Hegghammer (2013).

⁸² Hegghammer Thomas, “Jihadi-Salafis of Revolutionaries? On Religion and Politics in the Study of Militant Islamism” from Global Salafism by Roel Meijer, Oxford University Press, pp 463, 2013

⁸³ Adraoui Mohamed-Ali, “Radical Milieus and Salafis Movements in France: Ideologies, Practices, Relationships with Society and Political Visions”, Max Weber Program for Postdoctoral Studies, European University Institute, pp 1-19, 2014

France is to remain pure then, and avoid any contact with non-Muslims (and even Muslims sometimes), fostering a sort of self-exclusion from the Western society.

1.2.2. *Salafis' Main Characters*

This section is about the main characters of the Salafi movement in order to retrace its historical path, from the origins to the contemporary age. The emphasis will be initially placed on Ibn Taymiyyah's work because of his controversial figure and his profound influence on the next generations of Salafi theorists. The focus will then move on late-19th century thinkers, namely the modernist Jamal al-din al-Afghani, Mohammed 'Abduh and Rashid Rida and on an influential group of ideologues whose viewpoints radically changed the Islamic approach to society, politics and the Western world, composed by 'Abd al-Wahhab, 'Abu 'ala al-Mawdudi, Hasan al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb, Al-Albani and Abdullah Azzam. Finally, this section will deal with the main figures of the last twenty years, as Al-Zawahiri, and last but not least, Mohammad al-Maqdisi. It is mandatory to understand these characters' thoughts since their ideas profoundly influenced the contemporary Salafi world. It seems relevant to this work then, to analyze the rich and controversial heritage of the early Salafis in order to focus on the causes according to which it attracts many Salafis still nowadays. Effectively, contemporary Salafism is profoundly influenced by the rhetoric of the early Salafis because of its Manichean structure of good versus evil, which is applicable at all ages and contexts, but this may not be the only answer. How the fascination of the past ideologies spread today in such a wide scale, then?

First and foremost is **Ibn Taymiyyah**, the Syrian Islamic scholar who lived at the turn of the 13th century, during the Mongol invasion: his closeness to the Hanbali school of thought provided him strictness and rigor with regard to the reading of the Koran and Sunna. Because of his severe approach to sources, Ibn Taymiyyah has been considered the founder of Salafism and inspiration of Wahhabism and the Jihadi trend of Salafism. According to historical sources Ibn Taymiyyah condemned the Mongol invasion through his famous fatwa, namely *takfir*. Effectively, at the time of the third invasion, Mongols were already converted to Islam but, according to Ibn Taymiyyah, they were not real Muslims, so they deserved to be fought through *jihad* and expelled from the '*umma*. *Jihād* against the Mongols, was obligatory because the

invaders were still devoted to the Yassa code rather than to the Sunna. This meant that Mongols were living in a state of pre-islamic ignorance (*jahiliyya*).⁸⁴ The danger of the comeback of *jahiliyya* or the state of ignorance experienced before the arrival of the Prophet, allowed for the use of *takfir*, which introduced a new conception of Islam: to be a good worshipper it was necessary to follow the orthodoxy and being a Muslim-born it was no more enough. The academic Jon Hoover claims that Ibn Taymiyyah built as argument the fact Mongols were like Kharijis, who self-expelled from the Muslim community: the 13th-century scholar did not consider Mongols Muslim, despite they were already converted to Islam. Hoover discusses the role of *jihad* in Ibn Taymiyyah's thought, wondering if the violent effort was wished for in order to control the territory in the name of religion, or to defend the doctrinal integrity of the Muslim '*umma*.⁸⁵ Hoover states it is important to consider Ibn Taymiyyah's ideological heritage as a new doctrine of *jus ad bellum* too, particularly in relation to war and rebellion.⁸⁶ He investigates whether war is necessary to defend religion or political claims, and states Ibn Taymiyyah's viewpoint is more a philosophical theology rather than a strict interpretation of Islamic sources.⁸⁷ Moreover, it is necessary to find out if rebellion against rulers is always allowed, on which cases and for which reasons in particular. It is possible to consider Ibn Taymiyyah one of the most controversial Islamic thinkers because of his radical thought. Effectively, as Yossef Rapoport and Shahab Ahmed wrote: "Today, he is revered by the Wahhabi movement and championed by Salafi groups who call for a return to the pristine golden age of the Prophet. His writings have also been used by radical groups, such as al-Qaeda, to justify acts of terrorism and armed struggle."⁸⁸ This is a very interesting point: Ibn Taymiyyah's ideology actually, gained huge popularity among Salafis, but it is not necessarily true that the Islamic scholar's work was entirely based on the idea of *jihad*. Rapoport and Shahab add in fact that Taymiyyah was a powerful leader of a small circle of intellectuals, outside of the mainstream and rejected by the traditional scholars' environment.⁸⁹ Consequently, as Hussam S. Timani points out, Ibn

⁸⁴ <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t342/e0217> Ibn Taymiyyah, Taqi al-Din Ahmad, The Oxford Dictionary of Islam

⁸⁵ <https://sites.google.com/site/jhoover363/taymiyyan-studies/jihad-against-the-mongols> Jon Hoover

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ https://www.academia.edu/4699642/Book_Review_Ibn_Taymiyya_and_His_Times._Edited_by_Yossef_Rapoport_and_Shahab_Ahmed_-_in_Die_Welt_des_Islams_Academia.edu

⁸⁸ <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/ibn-taymiyya-and-his-times-9780195478341?cc=it&lang=en&#> re-cension of "Ibn Taymiyya and His Times", by Yossef Rapoport and Shahab Ahmed

⁸⁹ https://www.academia.edu/4699642/Book_Review_Ibn_Taymiyya_and_His_Times._Edited_by_Yossef_Rapoport_and_Shahab_Ahmed_-_in_Die_Welt_des_Islams_Academia.edu

Taymiyyah is a key-figure in order to understand fundamentalism nowadays, its path and its transformation overtime, from a defensive *jihad* to a terrorist war. The scholar states that “Although Ibn Taymiyyah was affiliated with the Hanbali school, he practiced independent or absolute legal reasoning (*ijtihad*).”⁹⁰ Timani states that Taymiyyah's opinions went against the Hanbali school, showing his ideology was new even for his times. Ibn Taymiyyah's powerful discourse against infidel rulers became a practice, namely *takfir* (excommunication), which gained support among later thinkers such as Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, Hasan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb, who employed Taymiyyah's viewpoint to declare *jihad* against blasphemous Arab governments.⁹¹

The first thinker who recalled Ibn Taymiyyah's work in a new and coherent doctrine is the Saudi theologian **Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab** (1703-1792), follower of the Hanbali school and founder of the Wahhabi movement who strongly preached the return to the original Islam purified from the medieval mediation.⁹² His strict and puritanical approach was conceived to purge Islam of all innovations, (*bid'a*) and he pursued his fight against expressions of faith and rituals such as saint worshipping which were not orthodox.⁹³ Still, the political action which gave him power and echo was actually “[...] an alliance with ibn al-Saud in 1744 that allowed Ibn al-Saud control over military, political, and economic matters and Ibn Abd al-Wahhab responsibility for religious concerns. The alliance resulted in foundation of the first Saudi dynasty and state and remains the basis for Saudi rule today.”⁹⁴

The next important Salafi theorists are actually the modernists, whose contribution to Islamic thought is remarkable, beginning with the philosopher, politician and intellectual **Jamal al-din al-Afghani** (1839-1897). He is broadly known principally thank to his ideas of pan-Islamism or Islamic unity, (*ittihad-i islam*): Afghani gave the modernist trend a new impulse, as a middle way between traditional Islamic culture and the philosophical and scientific challenges of the modern West.⁹⁵ Islamic Modernism had a double task: pushing Muslim societies into

⁹⁰Timani S. Hussam, “The Islamic Context of Global Jihadism: Why Ibn Taymiyyah Matters”, from “The Root of All Evil? Religious Perspectives on Terrorism”, Peter Lang Publishing, 2013

⁹¹<http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e959> Ibn Taymiyyah, Taqi al-Din Ahmad, The Oxford Dictionary of Islam

⁹²Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab – Encyclopaedia Britannica <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Muhammad-ibn-Abd-al-Wahhab>

⁹³Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, Muhammad – Oxford Islamic Studies Online http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e916?_hi=0&_pos=16

⁹⁴*Ibid.*

⁹⁵Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani - Center for Islamic Sciences <http://www.cis-ca.org/voices/a/afghni.htm>

the acquisition of Western technological and scientific knowledge in order to become competitive and fill the gap with the West, while not jeopardizing Islamic values and culture. Al-Afghani matched Modernism with the anti-colonialism movement in order to empower Muslim societies, developing "Islamic nationalism". Al-Afghani became well-known in Cairo and attracted the ideologue of the modernist movement, Mohammad 'Abduh and the founder of the Wafd party.⁹⁶ **Mohammed 'Abduh** was a theologian and Egyptian reformer (1849-1905) as well as disciple of Al-Afghani, who encouraged him to begin a career as journalist. "It is said that al-Afghani transferred Abduh from hermitage Sufism to philosophical Sufism and opened him up to journalism, religious reform, and politics."⁹⁷ 'Abduh had a huge influence on Muslim societies, as a pioneer of the Islamic renaissance. His thought was based on the return to the original Islam, to the teachings of the *salaf al-salih* and the constant work of demonstration of the compatibility between religion and modernity, Koran and science.⁹⁸ His motto, *naqil wa 'aqil*, means the transfer of the mind, the necessity to move from the tradition to new interpretations and perspectives throughout an effort, in the light of a new openness toward sciences in order to finally enter the modernity. Finally, **Rashid Rida** (1865-1935) was actually 'Abduh's biographer, a Lebanese Islamic scholar and the founder of the well-known Egyptian paper "Al-Manar". "He was concerned with what he considered the backwardness of the Muslim countries, a circumstance he believed resulted from a neglect of the true principles of Islam."⁹⁹ Rida wished for the reaching of progress and modernity through the constant consultation of religious authorities, which he considered as the Western parliamentary governments. Rashid Rida urged the unification of the Muslim community under the figure of the caliph, somebody who could guide the 'umma balancing religion and modernism. Rida's thought was open to the Western technological achievements, still he claimed Islam was the real answer to the Muslim world: Islam was the only key through which the Muslim world could enter the modernity. His thought was the base to the establishment of the Muslim Brotherhood by Hasan al-Banna in 1928.

⁹⁶Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani - Encyclopaedia Britannica <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Jamal-al-Din-al-Afghani>

⁹⁷Mohammad 'Abduh: A Profile from the Archives - http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/19307/muhammad-abduh_a-profile-from-the-archives

⁹⁸<http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/muhammad-abduh/>

⁹⁹Rashid Rida - Encyclopaedia Britannica <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Rashid-Rida>

The second group of thinkers is constituted by twentieth-century intellectuals, first of all **'Abu 'ala al-Mawdudi** (1903-1979), a Pakistani intellectual and journalist whose remarkable political activity was blended with religion through his anti-imperialistic and anti-democratic fight. His dream was the achievement of the Islamic state and the pillar of his system of thought was the “[...] thesis that God alone is sovereign, not human rulers, nations, or customs.”¹⁰⁰ In order to reach this goal, every means was legitimated, such as the Islamic revolution, re-defining Islam a political ideology, whose function was to represent the humankind and the society in a totalizing way.¹⁰¹ Consequently, in his doctrine Muslims had to learn again how to be good worshippers, and rulers had to become pious governors. Al-Mawdudi founded the group Jam'at al-Islami, on the same bases of the Muslim Brotherhood but more exclusive.¹⁰² **Hasan al-Banna** (1906-1949) is the Egyptian thinker and reformer influenced by Muhammad 'Abduh's doctrine, who founded the Muslim Brotherhood group in 1928. Al-Banna's contribution to Islamic thought was fundamental, as the intellectual pushed his society for a bottom-up change through religion: Islam became the frame for social and popular activism, (*da'wa*). Hasan al-Banna fixed six main principles on his doctrine: studying the Koran, unifying the '*umma* around the Holy sources, establishing social justice, doing charity work, liberating all Arab countries from colonialism and establishing peace according to Islamic principles.¹⁰³ The most influential Islamic thinker of the 21st century and a member of the Muslim Brotherhood is undoubtedly the Egyptian **Sayyid Qutb** (1906-1966). The ideologue was an official of the public instruction, therefore in 1948 the Egyptian government gave him a scholarship to live in the United States, in order to apprehend the last findings concerning education and bring the new knowledge back in the homeland. United States shocked Qutb and showed him the dark side of liberalism: drugs, alcohol, promiscuity, debauchery, naughtiness, and pockets of decay in peripheral areas. After his American stay Qutb became completely disenchanted about liberal society, assuming that it could and should not fit Muslim societies. Sayyid Qutb became a radical thinker, anti-modernist and anti-Western; he was prosecuted as a Muslim Brothers under Nasser during 1950s and he wrote in jail “Milestones”, his masterpiece, the

¹⁰⁰ Mawdudi, Abu 'I-A'la - Encyclopaedia Britannica <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Abul-Ala-Mawdudi>

¹⁰¹ Roy Olivier, “Généalogie de l'Islamisme”, Paris, Hachette Littératures, coll. Pluriel, 2001, pg 40

¹⁰² Ibid. pg 40

¹⁰³ Hasan al-Banna - A Profile from the Archives http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/18145/hassan-al-banna_a-profile-from-the-archives

work which expresses his ideological viewpoint and his conception of jihad in a radical frame.¹⁰⁴ Sayyid Qutb describe the *jihad* as the sixth pillar of Islam, conceiving it as a violent effort, as a war, different though from Al-Banna's idea: Qutb's revolutionary conception of *jihad* in fact, lies not just on the personal way to live faith, but on the power to mobilize the mass of worshippers as a compact and real community. Another authority of Islamism is **Muhammad Nasiruddin al-Albani** (1912-1999) an Islamic scholar whose Albanian humble origins did not prevent him from becoming one of the most known man of wisdom within the Salafi world. Al-Albani's huge fame is essentially due to his revolutionary approach to *hadith*, which according to him, are the only means to reach knowledge and to answer doubts which no other source, even the Koran, can answer. Al-Albani's viewpoint is generally assimilated to the Wahhabi thought, which is not completely erroneous as the scholar trusted the Wahhabi creed. However, he reject the Wahhabi approach to the law, namely *fiqh*.¹⁰⁵ Effectively the Wahhabi stream preaches the following of the Koran as ultimate and fundamental source of knowledge, jettisoning *hadith* as a minor source. Consequently, for Al-Albani: "The mother of all religious sciences therefore becomes the "science of hadith," which aims at re-evaluating the authenticity of known hadiths."¹⁰⁶ Al-Albani was a highly controversial scholar, for the *fatwas* he released, such as his exhortation to Palestinians of leaving their lands in order to practice their faith in proper conditions. Moreover, "[...] al-Albani took a strong stance against indulging in politics, repeating that "the good policy is to abandon politics"—a phrase implicitly aimed at the Muslim Brotherhood, whose political views he consistently denounced. [...] Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani's denunciation of the "Wahhabi paradox" and his promotion of a new approach to the critique of hadith as the pillar of religious knowledge have prompted a revolution within Salafism, challenging the very monopoly of the Wahhabi religious aristocracy."¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Sayyid Qutb – Dizionario di Storia Treccani http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/sayyid-qutb_%28Dizionario_di_Storia%29/

¹⁰⁵ Lacroix Stéphane, Al-Albani's Revolutionary Approach to Hadith, *Leiden University's ISIM Review*, 2008 pg 1

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. pg 2

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. pg 2

The last group of thinkers is composed by the most influential contemporary scholars within the Salafi movement. First is the Father of the Global Jihad¹⁰⁸, the Palestinian scholar **Abdullah Azzam** (1941-1989). Bruce Riedel, wrote that "As one former head of Israel's secret intelligence service, the Mossad, told me years ago, Azzam is both the father of the global jihad and the most important intellectual inspiration of the jihadis' war on America."¹⁰⁹ Azzam became well-known after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, when he wrote the fatwa "Defense of the Muslim Lands, the First Obligation after Faith", establishing the famous analogy between the Palestinian and the Afghan condition, both populations vexed by an external enemy and both allowed and exhorted to launch a *jihad*. Azzam took part to the Afghan struggle with the *mujaheddin*, urging the creation of a vanguard as the drive for a new society: "This vanguard constitutes the solid base for the hoped-for society ... We shall continue the jihad no matter how long the way, until the last breath and the last beat of the pulse - or until we see the Islamic state established."¹¹⁰ Under the influence of Sayyid Qutb, Azzam carried on the *jihad* ideology, calling for the hard line of the Islamic effort on the field, harshly disapproving of the Muslim Brotherhood for its ineffective political engagement.¹¹¹ According to Rougier, Azzam's heritage is characterized by bivalent interpretations: while *jihad* was a necessity and an obligation for real Muslims, nevertheless it had not to drift toward the *takfir* to the rulers, which Azzam did not approve. Notwithstanding his ideas, Azzam had to drive his companions' takfirist tendencies toward the Syrian regime: he could this way make the Gulf regimes immune to the *takfir* wave and keep earning their financing.¹¹² **Al-Zawahiri** born in 1951 is one of the strongest opponents of Abdullah Azzam though, both ideologically and practically because they contended bin Laden's financial resources.¹¹³ "It was in Peshawar that Zawahiri met the Saudi-born Osama bin Laden. Bin Laden, six years his junior, had much that Zawahiri lacked. He had charisma and a quiet calm that the intense, angry Egyptian could only envy. He

¹⁰⁸ Riedel Bruce, "The 9/11 Attacks' Spiritual Father", Brookings Institution, 2011 <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2011/09/11-riedel>

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ "The Solid Base" (Al-Qaeda), *Al-Jihad* (journal), April 1988, n.41

¹¹¹ Rougier Bernard, "Qu'est-ce que le Salafisme", éditions Proche Orient, Paris, 2008, pgg. 67-86 from "Le Jihad en Afghanistan et l'émergence du salafisme-jihadisme" by Olivier Roy

¹¹² Ibid. pg 67-86 from "Le Jihad en Afghanistan et l'émergence du salafisme-jihadisme" by Olivier Roy

¹¹³ Wright Lawrence, "The Looming Tower", *National Bestsellers*, 2007

also had access to money, which Zawahiri needed for his own militant followers. The partnership was to last twenty years.”¹¹⁴ As reported by Gilles Kepel, the importance of jihad according to Al-Zawahiri is huge, still it is incisive only if it strikes the impious regimes with violence.¹¹⁵ Finally, among the most influential living jihadi-thinkers, it is necessary to mention **Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi**: “By all standards, Maqdisi is the key contemporary ideologue in the Jihadi intellectual universe—he is the primary broker between the Medieval Authorities, the Conservative Scholars, and the Saudi Establishment Clerics on the one hand, and the Jihadi Theorists on the other (see Appendix I: Ideological Influence Map). [...] In addition to being the most influential living Jihadi theorist, Maqdisi is part of a new trend revealed: there has been a shift in intellectual influence from laymen in Egypt (like Sayyid Qutb) to formally trained clerics from Palestine (often living in Jordan) and Saudi Arabia.”¹¹⁶ As Joas Wagemakers points out Maqdisi is a highly relevant figure within the Salafi movement who is considered both a purist, and a jihadi thinker¹¹⁷: his principle concern is about *takfir*, as his voice rose up among the jihadis in order to frame and define again the concept and the use of excommunication throughout *jihad*. “While being absolutely clear on the permissibility of applying *takfir*, especially to un-Islamic rulers, al-Maqdisi continues his writings on this subject by stating so many conditions for and objections to *takfir vis-à-vis* ordinary people that it would be very difficult to apply any reckless and extreme form of this concept. The person guilty of *kufr*, for instance, should be an adult who acted consciously and voluntarily and his act of disbelief should be admitted afterward or confirmed by two reliable witnesses.”¹¹⁸ Finally this means that, according to Maqdisi, launching indiscriminately *takfir* to people is totally impossible, harmful for the faith and doctrinally wrong.

To conclude, the fascination of ancient (and more recent) ideologies on the new generations of Salafis is huge since ideologies are fundamental in order to build an alternative view of the reality. According to Geertz, the ideology is a system of symbols, a map where old and new point of reference coexist in order to better interpret the complexity of reality. Geertz in

¹¹⁴ Burke Jason, “Ayman al-Zawahiri:Al-Qaeda's arrogant doctor of death”, The Observer Profile, The Guardian, 19th june 2011 <http://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2011/jun/19/ayman-zawahiri-observer-profile>

¹¹⁵ Kepel Gilles, “Jihad: the trial of political Islam”, Harvard university Press, 2002, pg 282

¹¹⁶ Militant Ideology Atlas, 2006

<https://www.ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/AtlasExecutiveReport.pdf>

¹¹⁷ Wagemakers Joas, “A Purist Jihadi-Salafi: The Ideology of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi”, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 2009, pg 2

¹¹⁸ Ibid. pg 13

fact, conceives Salafism as the map through which Islam is adapted to the contemporary world. "Ideology, be it religious or not, provides 'a guide for political activity; an image by which to grasp it, a theory by which to explain it, and a standard by which to judge it' (Geertz 1973b, p. 340)."119 Moreover, there is no right or wrong ideology, since it is a symbol and not a coherent system of knowledge. Thus, the 'subjective' character of ideology results from the elaboration of reality: "Salafi intellectuals held that Islam as traditionally understood and practised was not an appropriate guide for social action in the new context. [...] Salafism was the first ideological alternative to traditional visions of religion at the end of the 19th century."120

Furthermore, Geertz contends that the ideologisation of religion derives from the secularization of traditional (religious) thought. Such a phenomenon occurs when the already existent traditional substrata happens to be unsuitable to contemporary world. According to Geertz in fact, "Salafi intellectuals were the first to be aware of changes in their society, of the maladjustment of the traditional interpretations of religion and the need for a new version of religion (Geertz 1968, pp. 69, 73, 102–105)."121 The peculiarity of the Salafi intellectuals was not just the return to religious traditions in order to defend them from Western ideologies, but also the invention and the reinterpretation of the same tradition. "On the contrary, what people used to practise (Sufism, veneration of saints, etc.) was largely criticised rather than defended. It is a soft ethnocentric prejudice to think that the emergence of ideologies at the expense of tradition is a universal process. Salafism was a response to the domination of Western civilization and not a reaction to the weakening of local traditions. [...] The ideologisation of religion was supposed to renew, revive, and strengthen not traditional religion (whether popular or scholarly), but an alternative view of religion."122

According to Rachik, the appeal of politics was a huge boost to religion reformation, since "The spread of politics has a double consequence: the emergence of religious and secular leaders who want to reform Islam, and the rise of a public that is begging for reform. [...] The

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Rachik Hassan, "How religion turns into ideology", *The Journal of North African Studies*, vol 14, no 3, pp 347-358, 2009

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Rachik Hassan, "How religion turns into ideology", *The Journal of North African Studies*, vol 14, no 3, pp 347-358, 2009

emergence of the public is crucial to the process of the ideologisation of religion.”¹²³ So, coming back to the question at the beginning of the paragraph on how the fascination of the past ideologies spread today in such a wide scale, it is important to remind the simplicity of the Manichean mechanism of good versus evil and its easy-spreading structure. However, the focal point of the nowadays religious ideologies appeal does not lie on its content, but on its consumers. While in the past the appeal of political activism was limited and people were mostly linked to traditions, the nowadays call for political engagement is much stronger than before and so it is people answer to it. “It is the modern structure of the public sphere that stimulates and maintains the ideologisation of religion – and not only of religion. The plurality of diverse views within the same polity is a necessary structural condition for the rise of ideology in general and of religious ideology in particular.”¹²⁴ It is in this blending of religion and politics that religious ideologisation births: the concept of *jahiliyya* for example has been used, manipulated and restructured multiple times along the history, always according to political needs, since “The potential use of an idea is determined less by its previous uses than by the ideological project it is supposed to sustain.”¹²⁵

Finally, what is relevant of the ancient ideologies is their malleability in the present time according to political needs: the main Salafi characters' tales are paradigmatic of the bending of religious ideas and dogmas to the ideologues' political contexts. So, since Islam has not completely split from politics, the religious ideology produces a new guide for a changed social context, through old and new vocabulary, means, strategy and problems. “But the present is what is at stake; the past serves as a store to be visited according to the needs of the present.”¹²⁶

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Rachik Hassan, “How religion turns into ideology”, *The Journal of North African Studies*, vol 14, no 3, pp 347-358, 2009

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Rachik Hassan, “How religion turns into ideology”, *The Journal of North African Studies*, vol 14, no 3, pp 347-358, 2009

1.3. Trends

In this section it is important to recall the principle theoretical assumptions outlined in the previous passage, that is to say that the Salafi movement is not a uniform one, rather a highly complex category within which multiple tendencies exist. According to Quintan Wiktorowicz in fact, the major Salafi factions are called Purist, Salafi and Jihadi, each one labeled on the basis of their different adherents' attitudes. There is a relevant element though, which is a common one among the three trends, as the certainty of being on the 'right side' of the faith. Effectively, as Wiktorowicz explains "As a purist Salafi put it, 'Salafism is a single way which is found in the unified understanding of the Salaf. Just as there were no two Prophet Muhammads or two sets of Companions, there are no two Salafisms.' This mentality creates an exclusivist understanding of Islam in which each faction claims to represent 'the real Salafis'."¹²⁷

According to Roel Meijer, the Salafi relation with politics is profoundly characterized by ambiguity and constant oscillation between quietism and activism. Within the Salafi structure in fact, numerous political tensions emerge as "The ambiguity of Salafism political behavior must be ascribed to its basic predicament: on the one hand, as in many revivalism movements, politics and contact with authorities are regarded as corrupting, leading to a compromising of religious belief. On the other hand, these movements inevitably seek power - although they might not acknowledge it – and act politically in the pursuit of their reform programme."¹²⁸ Moreover, Meijer explains that the direct oppositional Salafi attitude to politics is a contemporary phenomenon, which took its roots with the birth of political Islam first conceived by Sayyid Qutb and Mawdudi. This oppositional behavior emerged into three main Salafi strains such as quietist Salafis, or the apolitical trend, the politicos, and the jihadis, or the violent radical trend which boosts its resistance against the establishment and the West. However, the division of the three strains is liquid and not clear: "This ambiguity will continue as long as religious tools of purification, with their quietist and activist sides, remain at the heart of the movement."¹²⁹

¹²⁷Wiktorowicz Quintan, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 29, Issue 3, 2006

¹²⁸Meijer Roel, Salafis: Doctrine, Diversity and Practice, chap 3, from Political Islam: Context Versus Ideology by Khaled Hroub, pp 315, *Soas Middle East Issues Series*, 2010

¹²⁹Ibid.

1.3.1. Purists

The Purists' objective is to preserve the theoretical framework of the creed by promoting the Salafi principles and condemning deviant customs, such as polytheism, passions and independent reasoning.¹³⁰ Hence, the main task for purists is to safeguard the *tawhid* and the purity of Islam from evil influences. Purists in fact do not engage in politics nor fight, as "purists do not view themselves as a political movement; they in fact often reject reference to Salafis as a harakat (movement), because this carries political connotations."¹³¹ The academic literature named the Purists also as Scientifics and Quietists.

The first purists' concern is summed up in the formula 'following good and avoiding evil' by splitting the world in two opposed interpretations where the first named *sunna*, represents the will of conforming to the Prophet's actions, while the second called *bid'a*, means innovation. "This idea helps explain, for example, why many Salafists reject nationalism, political parties, and nation-states."¹³² According to the Koran, 3:118, in fact: "the Jews and Christians will never be pleased with you until you change your religion."¹³³ The literal interpretation of this line led purists Salafi isolate themselves in order not to get in touch with unbelievers, (*kuffar*). This underlying conspiratorial perception of anything different from their faith is the leading cause of their sectarian behavior, which expresses itself into a strong isolationism. The isolation is carried on both in the Muslim and in the Western world, where it is exacerbated until the material separation of Purist Salafis from Western societies into the so-called 'Salafi ghettos'. These new urban architectures represent the only solution to the corrupted West and the only allowed alternative to the return to a Muslim country. Choosing which is the best attitude regarding Westerners and Western culture is a relevant issue, often object of disputes within the Salafi movement, as each trend interprets the implementation of the strategy as it better suits to its principles. Purists in fact, discriminate between the creed, namely *aqida* and the method or strategy, namely *manhaj*: Scientifics do not accept violent opposition or political actions, as they are considered innovations and a Western corruption of Muslim culture, then a sin. Consequently Quintan Wiktorowicz states that "salafis who form political organizations

¹³⁰Ibid. pg 11

¹³¹Ibid. pg 12

¹³² Olidort Jacob, "The Politics of 'Quietist' Salafism", Analysis Paper, *The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World*, n 18, 2015

¹³³ Wiktorowicz Quintan, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 29. Issue 3, 2006

are frequently labeled *Ikhwani*s (Muslim Brothers) or *Bannawites* as followers of Hasan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood.”¹³⁴

Purists disregard jihadis because, by acting differently from what the sources require, they detach themselves from the Prophet's example. Moreover, they scorn also politicos as they are led by human passions instead of the wisdom of the *hadith*. Finally, purists boycott both politicos and jihadis in order not to be corrupted by their deviance: “this indicates that the purists' major concern with the other factions is related to strategy, not belief.”¹³⁵

When it comes to purists, Meijer affirms that the appear of the Brothers on the political scene was a hard blow for the *ulema*.¹³⁶ Scientifics in fact were concerned by theoretical themes, crucial to faith and political involvement was not one of their tasks and it was firmly avoided and condemned. On their account, the Muslim Brothers were sinners because of their innovation, promoting activism, establishing a hierarchy within the *jamaa*, the group of activists, then doubting of the unity of God. “Although quietist Salafism is careful not to excommunicate its opponents (*takfir*), they are vilified, their reputation smeared and their followers ostracized, with the implication that their souls hang in the balance and they are on the brink of becoming unbelievers (*kuffar*).”¹³⁷ Meijer focuses on the fact that quietists Salafi have a highly political nature actually, as the presence of the *wali* is wished for and fixed through worshippers' obedience, in order not to harm the entire community; in addition, *status quo* is hoped for too, for revolutions and upraising damage the community. Quietists approach to religion then, is strictly connected to political power: Wahhabism, the ancestor of (and highly linked to) Scientific Salafism, was totally tainted with the governmental power of the Saud family. “This means that the individual should defend his own honor, respect those of others, maintain social stability, and above all pursue ‘moderation of emotions’.”¹³⁸ In the scholar's analysis, quietists are certainly more hardened than it appears at a first glance, as they are stuck in the never-ending fight against politicos, begun around 1970s. From that period they have developed a polemical discourse, often called “muscular”, based on condemning political efforts in the name of pure creed.

¹³⁴ Ibid. pg 14

¹³⁵ Ibid. pg 14

¹³⁶ Meijer Roel, *The Problem of the Political in Islamist Movements*, from “Whatever Happened to the Islamists?”, edited by Amel Boubekeur and Olivier Roy, 2012, pg 1

¹³⁷ Ibid. pg 23

¹³⁸ Ibid. pg 24

Ryan Evans' review paper adds his contribution to the purist Salafism analysis, enforcing Meijer's discourse: "[...] that even "quietist" Salafism cannot be considered reliably quietist."¹³⁹ for its specifically political nature and influence within the Salafi world. The huge influential power of the quietist trend is shaping the malleability of Salafi movement, in order to substitute themselves to the state control and yet, having a huge impact on society, both locally and internationally. "Salafi ideology can be and has been profoundly shaped by its positive and negative interactions with governments and other social movements."¹⁴⁰ According to Evans, even quietists cannot be considered entirely quietists since they are somehow influenced by the appeal of politics. Al-Albani, one of the most relevant quietist Salafi ideologues, is the symbol of the continue tension between politics and belief within the Salafi movement. According to Evans, al-Albani thought that all Muslims wanted an Islamic state, but they employed different means in order to reach such a goal. Instead of fostering innovations and political activism, al-Albani promoted social help and education to disenfranchised people.

A pragmatic example of the purist Salafis' total detachment from real life is the borderline figure of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, for the scholar Joas Wagemakers describes as a *purist-jihadi-Salafi*.¹⁴¹ The scholar analyzes al-Maqdisi's paradox, beginning from the principle difference among the three Salafi trends, which is strategy. Effectively, given that purists, politicos and jihadi express their strategy differently: "All three groups challenge each other, accusing their opponents of deviating from the correct *manhaj*."¹⁴² Concerning *kufr* for example, purists' mainstream operates a distinction between *kufr* of actions and *kufr* of heart, following the most eminent and contemporary sheik al-Albani: accordingly, the ruler who does not governs following the Islamic law is a sinner, not a *kafir*. One becomes eventually blasphemous when he openly declares his atheism or disbelief. Differently, al-Maqdisi's viewpoint is more oriented on the ruler's actions instead of his intentions: this way, the ruler who does not governs according to the Islamic law is automatically an infidel and he is subjected to *takfir*.¹⁴³

What is striking, according to Wagemakers, is that al-Maqdisi shares this viewpoint with other purists, making evident the cleavage within the same Salafi trend. Moreover, due to al-

¹³⁹ Evans Ryan, *Identity, Ideology and Malleability*, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 2011

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Wagemakers Joas, *A Purist Jihadi-Salafi: The Ideology of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi*, British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, 2011, pg 4

¹⁴² Ibid. pg 5

¹⁴³ Ibid. pg 12

Maqdisi's middle position between purist and jihadi, he results also sheltered from purists' criticism. Another major field of division is jihad: "Again, this does not mean that the jihadi manhaj is less important; it is the most prominent method that can be found in al-Maqdisi's writings. Still, his focus on *da'wa* implies that from a purist perspective, he is much closer to being a true Salafi than other, more revolutionary jihadis whose rhetoric only emphasizes fighting the infidels."¹⁴⁴ Jihad though, which is rejected by purists and promoted by *jihadis*, is a controversial issue for al-Maqdisi. His conception of Islam envisages *takfir* by *jihad*, yet whether it is not practiced in a blind and indiscriminate way, as his disciple al-Zarqawi did. It is important though, to recall Wiktorowicz's division and to place al-Maqdisi in a halfway position between purists' and jihadis' box, for he does not preach for *da'wa* alone and reject any irrational *takfir*.¹⁴⁵

1.3.2. *Politicos*

"The politicos argued that they have a better understanding of contemporary issues and are therefore better situated to apply the Salafi creed to the modern context. They generally stop short of declaring revolution, unlike the jihadis, but are highly critical of incumbent regimes."¹⁴⁶ that is Wiktorowicz's analysis, specifying that the Salafi movement was cohesive, once. It split later, since the Saudi kingdom did not experience the colonial wave of oppression and violence, which characterized the North Africa and Middle East. The scholar states that the original Saudi Salafi's community was actually "[...] purist in nature."¹⁴⁷ Politicos Salafi came from the ranks of the Muslim Brotherhood and emigrated to Saudi kingdom during 1960s. As Wiktorowicz reports, Safar al-Hawali told the relationship between purists and politicos was tended, especially during the Gulf War. "We cannot justify everything for them [the senior purists], we cannot say they are infallible!! [...] we round them off! But not from our superiority upon them, but because we have lived the events, and they have not lived them because they lived in another time! Or different conditions!"¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁴ Ibid. pg 17

¹⁴⁵ Ibid. pg 18

¹⁴⁶ Wiktorowicz Quintan, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 29. Issue 3, 2006, pg 17

¹⁴⁷ Ibid. pg 16

¹⁴⁸ Ibid. pg 17

According to politicos, purists are completely detached from real life, therefore they do not deserve such a high standing and trust. While during 1960s and 1970s uprisings blew up and political movement spread everywhere, purists' main concern was to remind worshippers to pray. This was just unacceptable for politicos and their frustration grew: consequently, politicos insulted purists and made fun of them, calling them in offensive ways such as "[...] mummified, a collection of blind men who have given themselves the roles of leading the ummah in giving verdicts, and those who live in the Middle Ages."¹⁴⁹ Politicos instead, present themselves as reliable, modern and up-to-date intellectuals, more worthy of people's confidence than purists, with their medieval attitude completely disconnected from the real life.

According to Mohammed Ayoob, it is necessary to deconstruct at least three major prejudices upon political Islam in order to understand the multiple Islamic trends. Above all, the bias of the monolithic nature of Islam, consequently, its innate violence, finally, the belief according to which the blend of politics and religion is specifically Islamic.¹⁵⁰ "Political Islam is a modern phenomenon, with roots in the sociopolitical conditions of Muslim countries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries."¹⁵¹ Ayoob employs Olivier Roy's concept of Islamo-nationalism addressing Muslims who seek to establish the Islamic State: many Islamic movements and organizations rose with that aim in order to set a plausible alternative to the colonial oppression. Ayoob assesses that only during the huge deception of the post-colonial period the Islamic identity became such a relevant issue to ordinary Muslim people: this is the breach where the Islamic discourse penetrated.¹⁵² The discourse of Abu Ala Mawdudi in Pakistan and Sayyid Qutb in Egypt about a strong opposition to secularism and the will to establish the Islamic state did not result as effective as it would have been in the short term. However, this ideas tailored its own space within all secular Arab societies. Step by step yet, the new-born Arab secular societies of the second half of the 1900s co-opted or suppressed the Islamic elements, having a huge Western media coverage and huge economic opportunities back. Because of the Arab governments' repressive behaviors, "The attempt to suppress Islamist elements by coercion forced them underground and led violent acts against the regime

¹⁴⁹ Ibid. pg 18

¹⁵⁰ Ayoob Mohammad, *Political Islam: Image and Reality*, World Policy Journal, Vol. 21, No. 3, 2004, pp. 1-14

¹⁵¹ Ibid. pg 3

¹⁵² Ibid. pg 4

and its most visible symbols and supporters; it also meant that Islamists could claim the high moral ground as victims of human rights abuses.”¹⁵³

Mohammad Ayoob focuses his analysis upon the third paradox, as the impossible separation of politics and religion in Muslim world. The scholar acutely compares Islamic reality to others: if it is true that religion and politics are innately inextricable, it is actually possible to speak of “political Judaism”, as well as the “political Christianity” given the huge rhetoric promoted by Bush or Al Gore in 2000 political campaign.¹⁵⁴ “In Western perceptions, political Islam is unique not because it uses religion for political purposes in order to create national identity or transform society. It is seen as uniquely threatening because it can also be used as an instrument of challenge, sometimes by violent means, the West's continued global dominance.”¹⁵⁵

Related to Ayoob's argument according to which there is no such a separation of politics and religion within the Muslim world, Roel Meijer adds a key-element in order to highlight a more complex analysis: “The major paradox of Islamism is that it is a modern phenomenon that emerged as a reaction to Western penetration of the Islamic world. Previously politics and religion were perhaps loosely related in theory but separated in practice. [...] The result has been a deep, but for a long time hidden, crisis; Islamic movements claim to be all things at once while not having the political instruments (which they had never developed) to deliver.”¹⁵⁶ Meijer effectively argues that the well-known slogan *al-Islam huwa al-hal* (Islam is the solution), is nothing but populism, which can only temporarily stop the permanent hemorrhage of the system. According to Meijer, in order to overcome the ambiguity of totally avoiding violence and opening to democratic system, a new opportunity was needed. As the rise of the Muslim Brothers' second generation to the middle class happened in 1980s Egypt: Muslim Brotherhood would become an open and public organization and participated to elections, astonishingly winning in 2005, with 88 seats. “All analysts agree that since then the Brotherhood has obtained an excellent reputation in parliament, showing political skills and discussing issues that were of broader concern of the people than only the implementation of

¹⁵³ Ibid. pg 4

¹⁵⁴ Ibid. pg 11

¹⁵⁵ Ibid. pg 13

¹⁵⁶ Meijer Roel, *The Problem of the Political in Islamist Movements*, from “Whatever Happened to the Islamists?”, edited by Amel Boubekeur and Olivier Roy, 2012, pg 1

the Shari'a, such as unemployment, inflation, corruption, debts, privatization."¹⁵⁷ In Meijer analysis, this huge score at the turning of 2000 was to be attributed to new generations of Brothers who won Syndicates' elections during 1980s, strengthening ties with students too. In 1984, the Brothers even published their manifesto and the Statement on Democracy in 1985: big steps were taken by the Islamic group, even if the cultural and the artistic section of their program was strictly supervised and violence was not totally excluded from their political project.

1.3.3. *Jihadis*

If the cleavage between purists and politicos is consistent, it becomes huge when it comes to purists and jihadis, the most active, though tiny, faction of the Salafi movement. Jihadis judge purists as completely detached from reality and accuse them of concealing current events from people. At the turn of 1990s, after purists repressed politicos dissidents in Saudi kingdom, a void left, subsequently filled by jihadis. Gradually, a Committee for Defense of Legitimate Rights was built in Saudi Arabia and incarcerations took place, suggesting the fact the purists were regime's tools with the purpose of repress legitimate scholars.¹⁵⁸ "In this critique, the jihadis argued that the purist scholars were well aware of the context. How could they not be, given the extensiveness of the regime's deviancy and the aggression of the United States? The only explanation for their unwillingness to stand against the regime and America is that they are part of the machinations to destroy the "true" scholars."¹⁵⁹

Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990. The Saudis refused the alliance with Bin Laden's Arab Legion while opting for the American aid instead, so the Saudi jihadis felt profoundly betrayed by their scholars, accusing them of having validated and recommended the treason to the Saudi kingdom as a strategic move. From that moment onward, the confidence lowered between purists, politicos and jihadis, until fighting among the three different Salafi trends occurred. Consequently, Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq stated: "You, our clerics, reconciled with the tyrants and handed over the land and the people to the Jews, the Crusaders, and their hangers-on among our apostate rulers when you remained silent about

¹⁵⁷ Ibid. pg 20

¹⁵⁸ Wiktorowicz Quintan, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 29, Issue 3, 2006, pg 20

¹⁵⁹ Ibid. pg 20

their crimes, feared to preach the truth to them, and did not succeed in bearing the banner of Jihad and monotheism. . . . You abandoned us in the most difficult of circumstances, and you handed us over to the enemy. . . .”¹⁶⁰

Jihadis insult the purists labeling them traitors, hypocrites and unworthy of confidence and respect, reproaching them with terms such as “[...] palace lackeys, the corrupt ulama, and the ulama who flatter [those in power].”¹⁶¹ As a matter of facts, scientifics and scholars turned out to be corrupted and just formally pious leaders: they repudiate their creeds and dogmas on the behalf of realpolitik by negotiating with the supreme evil, the USA. Interestingly, while quietist Salafis protected themselves by supporting and safeguarding the kingdom interests, from the both ranks of politicos and jihadis thousands were the arrested. Predictably, the rhetoric of the betrayed part represented the huge number of prisoners as the honest, pure and devoted to their cause. Last but not least, they become martyrs of the blasphemous Saudi power, by building an image of accountability and sanctity in order to reach people's consensus and support. Bin Laden sums up this concept by saying: “The fatwa of any official alim [religious scholar] has no value for me. History is full of such ulama[clerics] who justify riba [economic usury], who justify the occupation of Palestine by the Jews, who justify the presence of American troops around Harmain Sharifain [the Islamic holy places in Saudi Arabia]. These people support the infidels for their personal gain. The true ulama support the jihad against America.”¹⁶²

According to Gilles Kepel, jihadist-Salafism is a particular ideology arisen from the fighters who took part to struggle in Afghanistan alongside the Afghan mujaheddin: this fight was just exploited by religious doctrine which openly sponsored violence, as there was no room for academic debates upon the unity of God. Consequently, Kepel calls jihadist-Salafism: “[...] a new, hybrid Islamist ideology whose first doctrinal principle was to rationalize the existence and behavior of militants.”¹⁶³ Moreover, Kepel discusses the different ways to pinpoint the complexity of Salafism: from the academic point of view it essentially consists of a “[...] reaction to the spread of European ideas.”¹⁶⁴, a movement which tries to combine modernity with

¹⁶⁰ Ibid. pg 20

¹⁶¹ Ibid. pg 21

¹⁶² Ibid. pg 21

¹⁶³ Kepel Gilles, *Jihad: the trial of political Islam*, Harvard university Press, 2002, pg 219

¹⁶⁴ Ibid. pg 219

Islam throughout the literal interpretation of sources. From the jihadi viewpoint instead, Salafism is not just a religious approach, it is rather the right way of life and the exact understanding of the voice of God, through literal reading of the Holy sources and the imitation of Prophet's lifestyle.

In Kepel's analysis, jihadists principally reject purists since they accuse the latter of being more engaged in the economic privileges derived from the oil revenues than in their God's name, such as the sheik bin Baz, disparagingly called 'court ulema'. Kepel maintains militant jihadsts' point of view while describing purists Salafi: "Their ostentatious Salafism was no more than the badge of their hypocrisy, their submission to the non-Muslim United States, and their public and private vices, in the view of the militants. They had to be striven against and eliminated."¹⁶⁵ Accordingly, jihadis banned even politicos, especially the Muslim Brothers, for their free-thinkers' attitude toward the sources and their interpretation: Sayyid Qutb was banned since his works were filled of personal interpretations of religion.¹⁶⁶ The jihadi trend expanded after 1989 while the practice of *takfir* was spreading through the Muslim world: that phenomenon initially contained by the alive sheik 'Azzam, eventually burst its banks after his death. "Along with these came a series of states whose rulers either were not Muslims or were bad ones, a formula that made the list of potential victims virtually infinite."¹⁶⁷ Effectively, indiscriminate *takfir* happened in Bosnia 1992, Chechnya 1995, Algeria and Kashmir.

In the Afghan context, Kepel draws another interesting connection, the one between jihadis and Taliban. Yet, Taliban belonged to the Hanafi school rather than the jihadi's Hanbali one, and their jihad were oriented against their own societies. Still, Taliban and Jihadi shared the common ground of Holy sources and jihad, which started a "[...] cross-fertilization between the two movements [...]. Both then were among the unexpected progeny of the Afghan jihad and the result of the hybridization with the Deobandi tradition, for which jihad had never been a priority since its birth in 1867."¹⁶⁸

Another important piece of the puzzle has been investigated by Bernard Rougier, who discussed of the concept of 'jihad's democratization'.¹⁶⁹ This concept comes from the analysis

¹⁶⁵ Ibid. pg 220

¹⁶⁶ Ibid. pg 220

¹⁶⁷ Ibid. pg 222

¹⁶⁸ Ibid. pg 223

¹⁶⁹ Rougier Bernard, "Introduction", Qu'est-ce que le Salafisme?, *Proche Orient*, 2008, pg 71

Rougier accomplished with regard to Azzam's declarations upon jihad: effectively, he urged worshippers to fulfill their jihad without the need of some kind of authorization from anybody, giving birth to the privatization of jihad, where the believer becomes the one who assumes responsibility of that kind of action.¹⁷⁰ Consequently, the scholar assesses that this sort of religious opening to the jihadi militants' free-interpretation is extremely dangerous, as the accusation of blasphemy could be addressed to anyone, in all circumstances. The kafir then, could be a non-Muslim country likewise a non-Islamist, yet Muslim, government.¹⁷¹ In addition, Rougier focuses on the notion of government under Islamic interpretation, that is, that any territory is under God's sovereignty. Azzam's discourse is then coherent, for there is no reference to conventional national borders, rather he claims a new religious space, whose liberation opens up to a permanent and globalized jihad.¹⁷²

Finally, Rougier outlines some concise identikits of the typical jihadi figure: the classical Islamist student who has generally abandoned his technical studies, the University student of religion and the common young man, unemployed and with no titles. According to the logic of jihadi Salafi, personal knowledge are useless if not set into the frame of moral sacrifice: Rougier in fact tells that in 1987 in Peshawar Bin Laden wrote a funeral oration for a young combatant who did not accomplished his secondary school. Consequently, the fighter obtained a degree in "literature of blood", for "students who fill the world with paper, ink and non-sense words did not offer anything to their community."¹⁷³

Thinking outside of the boxes

Wiktorowicz's categorization is fundamental to the understanding of Salafi movement within the academic world, to the enlightening of dynamics and phenomena otherwise incomprehensible. This is certainly a huge contribution to the scientific research. Yet, translating Wiktorowicz's boxes into the nowadays Salafis' reality can result slightly schematic, as Joas Wagemakers outlines. He assesses that Wiktorowicz's categories avoid similarities among the different trends, which is a problematic element in researchers' understanding of Salafi

¹⁷⁰ Ibid. pg 71

¹⁷¹ Ibid. pg 71-72

¹⁷² Ibid. pg 72

¹⁷³ Ibid. pg 74

thought: "In particular, it is clear that Salafis do not always share a common '*'aqida*' and that the *manhaj* of a jihadi may actually be closer to that of other Salafi branches than Wiktorowicz's division suggests."¹⁷⁴ Accordingly, it seems important to broaden the view from a theoretical, yet valid, description of Salafism, to another one based on historical events, contacts and contagion in order to find the problematic, though real, elements which escape from cataloging, such as Salafi hybridization.

As Roel Meijer outlines, between 1960s and 1970s the first hybridization between Salafism and Brotherhood happened: effectively, Egyptians Brothers under Nasser studied at Medina Islamic University, mixing their own faith and strategy with the local purist Salafism.¹⁷⁵ Consequently, others branches of the Brotherhood kept spreading in the Middle East, setting up The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood around 1970s which adopted overtime a deeper reformist program than the twin Egyptian organization.¹⁷⁶ The Syrian political environment forbade this organization to act freely, yet, notwithstanding its illegal status, its members were highly active in the whole country, especially the more radical ones.¹⁷⁷ The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's radical wing slowly changed during the 1980s, reaching its real breakthrough around 2000, when the organization " [...] issued a critical overview of its own history and its violent past."¹⁷⁸

The Syrian MB's leader expressed the necessity of revisionism within the organization and in 2004 he published the new manifesto of the SMB, expressing new values such as rejecting violence and accepting democracy. Moreover, SMB switched the ancient Qutbian principles such as sovereignty of God, unity of God and the sources of Islam with other ones more centered on the mankind, namely humanity and pluralism.¹⁷⁹ "Not surprisingly, the basic difference with the other currents is reflected in its approach to 'reality' (*waqi'*). Whereas in Salafism, and especially Jihadi Salafism, reality is regarded as a source of evil and corruption and a

¹⁷⁴ Wagemakers Joas, *A Purist Jihadi-Salafi: The Ideology of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi*, British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, 2011, pg 17

¹⁷⁵ Meijer Roel, *The Problem of the Political in Islamist Movements*, from "Whatever Happened to the Islamists?", edited by Amel Boubekeur and Olivier Roy, 2012, pg 26

¹⁷⁶ Ibid. pg 27

¹⁷⁷ Ibid. pg 27

¹⁷⁸ Ibid. pg 28

¹⁷⁹ Meijer Roel, *The Problem of the Political in Islamist Movements*, from "Whatever Happened to the Islamists?", edited by Amel Boubekeur and Olivier Roy, 2012, pg 26

thinker like ‘Uyairi tries to impose his will on reality and manipulate it in the service of a permanent revolution, or in the Egyptian Brotherhood’s case reality is approached with ambivalence, in the writings of the Syrian MB reality is regarded as a fact of life and is accepted as a source of inspiration for reform.’¹⁸⁰

Salafists' reality is more complex than it seems, there is no sharp division and sealed closure among its trends: there are multiple hybridization instead, as such the new discourse of the Muslim Brotherhood in the last decades which comprehended values and ideals different from the religious ones. They introduced terms like tolerance, cooperation, respect, mutual understanding and recognition and last but not least multiparty system, democracy and freedom. “This trend has infiltrated the writings of previous jihadi or more radical activist groups, such as the Jama‘a al-Islamiyya and other violent groups that recently have renounced violence, which show how strong this trend has become and the extent to which violence has been discredited.”¹⁸¹

Finally, Meijer wonders whether will prevail the conservative Salafist interpretation or the hybrid forms, getting rid of jihadi-Salafim: the scholar argues that whatever will be the future of Salafism, Western societies must transform their relations with Muslim world toward a more open and interested understanding. “Simply denying that Islam is dynamic and therefore should not be condemned as a whole—as some politicians and academics in the Netherlands insist it should—is not only not an option but is also counter-productive, for it drives many Muslims into the arms of the most intolerant trends.”¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ Ibid. pg 28

¹⁸¹ Ibid. pg 32

¹⁸² Ibid. pg 34

Chapter 2

Salafism In Tunisia: AST and the Global Jihadi Network

Salafism in Tunisia is a matter of many people and different groups. Some of them are affiliated to major organizations in order to be protected or to be more effective into practice. Often the affiliation is a strategic means by which maintaining the group's secretiveness. Other Salafi groups do want to act more freely, such as the most famous group in Tunisia, Ansar al-Sharia. It did not conduct its activities on behalf of other major groups, nor these groups re-claimed the responsibility for AST actions. Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia is not clearly associated to other Jihadi groups in the MENA region since the dynamics in that country followed a different path. That being said, AST had unquestionably ties with the international Jihadi network, as this work will show hereinafter: "It is the linkage between international Jihadism and local religious radicalism that shapes Tunisian Salafism."¹⁸³ The focus on Ansar al-Sharia, the partisans of Sharia, is due to its specific role in Tunisia in the temporal lapse between the fall of Ben Ali's regime in 2011 and the following democratic transition. Effectively, AST emerged in the region within the Salafi scene because it was the only radical group which had to deal with the Tunisian establishment after the fall of Ben Ali, starting a sort of process of integration in the new Tunisian society. Nevertheless, the process of integration turned into a failure for unclear and yet partially unknown reasons. Ansar al-Sharia's leadership behaved in an interesting way and played a particular role meanwhile the democratic transition in Tunisia occurred. It was unusual to notice worshipers praying with people in the streets and bringing assistance to the poorest. Effectively, AST took an important social role during the democratic transition in Tunisia. The investigation concerning the failure of AST's integration process is one of the aims of this piece of work.

This chapter will firstly focus on an overview of academic approaches to democratization theories, then focusing upon the Tunisian historical context, in order to highlight political and social conditions before and after the revolution. This chapter will then explore Ansar al-Sharia's structure and ideology in order to understand the dynamics which brought the group

¹⁸³Cavatorta, Torelli, Merone, *Salafism in Tunisia : Challenges and Opportunities*, Middle East Policy, 2012

from a reasonably moderate position, namely from commitment to social service to some serious violent actions against the government. The chapter will then explore the main theorists and characters of Ansar al-Sharia and it will concentrate upon the interesting dynamic of inclusion and exclusion which linked AST and the Tunisian government. Finally, this focus on AST will broaden the investigation into the global Jihadi network, the connection between Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia and the external world, taking into account its peculiarities which put it apart from the other Salafi groups and the elements which link AST to the global Jihadi network, instead. Final purpose of this chapter is to question the role of religion in the shift of AST from a moderate committing to a violent behavior. The hypothesis of this work is to find some causes, different from religious ones, which could explain the development and growth of Salafism. In particular, the political reasons hidden from the religious appeal.

2.1. MENA Democratic Transition – Overview of the Academic Debate

Tunisia has always been studied in the academic world as evidence of the strength of a authoritarian regime, and thereby supporting the assumptions of the 'authoritarian resilience' paradigm. In this line of thought, Ben Ali's dictatorial government was conceived so stable and durable, that scholars claimed Tunisia would never experience, at least in the short term, regime change. The so-considered stability was stagnation, instead. As it is magisterially explained by Christopher Alexander, the point of no return was the 1989 elections: "Those elections marked the end of Ben 'Ali's honeymoon and the beginning of Tunisia's slide into deeper authoritarianism."¹⁸⁴ A considerable number of studies and researches have been carried out about the so-called "Arab exception" in regards to the lack of democratic transition in the Arab world from the end of 1990s. Scholars have been striving for years in order to theorize scientific paradigms which could explain such an authoritarian drift. What is relevant to this work is the analysis of existing academic theories before the 2011 Arab uprisings, in order to highlight the misunderstanding about the Tunisian political context. While the main concern of academia was the implementation of democracy in the MENA region, little attention was pointed

¹⁸⁴Alexander Christopher, "Back from the Democratic Brink: Authoritarianism and Civil Society in Tunisia", Middle East Report, n 205, pp 34-38, 1997

at the upgrading of authoritarian regimes, since it was synonym of stability. Ben 'Ali's dictatorial regime made the world think that it was not as bad as it sounded. And suddenly, right at the precise moment when the Tunisian regime collapsed and democratic transition begun, Salafism appeared. Is it a coincidence? Did the regime show its true colors in the awaken of Salafism? Could this growing phenomenon be explained through ancient political - rather than religious - motivations?

2.2.1. *Before the Arab Uprisings: Why don't they become Democratic?*

Raymond Hinnebush for instance studied the causes of authoritarian persistence in the Middle East, analyzing the large literature on the subject focusing especially on Modernization Theory (MT) and the requisites of democratization. "Some have always regarded the region as exceptionally culturally resistant to democratization and the Middle East's early liberal regimes quickly gave way to seemingly durable authoritarianism after independence."¹⁸⁵ According to him, MT is a useful tool of analysis, still not entirely exhaustive: the theory in fact, seeks to explain the absence of democracy in contexts of under-modernization. The scholar assessed that: "Where other conditions are right (such as level of income and the presence of a private bourgeoisie, as in Turkey and Malaysia), Islam is no deterrent to democratization."¹⁸⁶ Another important path attempting to explain the lack of democracy in the Middle East is sociology studies applied to politics: only in contexts of balance between the establishment and "independent class", civil society can emerge and drive a change. The limit of that theory however, is its bond with MT, as a consistent social change is usually related to high levels of modernization.¹⁸⁷ Furthermore, Hinnebush focused on the theory of different levels of regime institutions which bring to variable degrees of authoritarian persistence: what is fundamental, is observing that not all authoritarian regimes present the same level of institutionalization. This element is crucial in order to establish a relationship between the institutionalization of the regime and its durability: populist authoritarian regimes (PA) are deeply different from bureaucratic ones (BA) and rentier monarchies (RM). What actually characterize Arab authoritarian

¹⁸⁵Hinnebush Raymond, "Authoritarian Persistence, Democratization Theory and the Middle East: An Overview and Critique", *Democratization*, 2006

¹⁸⁶Hinnebush Raymond, "Authoritarian Persistence, Democratization Theory and the Middle East: An Overview and Critique", *Democratization*, 2006

¹⁸⁷Ibid.

regimes is their systematic strategy of targeting Islamists as one of the biggest obstacles to Arab societies' development.

Gudrun Kramer worked instead on the deeper causes of Arab uprisings. He assessed that: "A growing number of Muslims, including a good many Islamists activists have called for pluralist democracy, or at least for some of its basic elements: the rule of law and the protection of human rights, political participation, government control and accountability."¹⁸⁸ Kramer's discourse is deeply rooted into the strong conviction of the non-exceptionalism of the Arab world, especially Muslims. "Here I would like to focus on the theoretical aspects of the issue: assuming that they are acting in good faith and that they have adopted democracy as their 'strategic option', is there an Islamic path to a pluralist democratic society? And how can it be analyzed?"¹⁸⁹ Kramer highlights the paradox between religion and state in Muslim societies, sovereignty and authority and the challenge of pluralism. According to Kramer the relation between religion and state implies a paradox: while on the one hand State power is considered relevant for the community, on the other hand its principal role is to protect religion, becoming therefore a secondary power. As a consequence, the paradox lies where democracy can exist only in respecting Islamic values. Politics and religion are hierarchical entities, still highly interconnected: forbidding the evil and enjoining the good, the possibility to give counsels and the duty to consult, make religious duties politicized and political behaving sacred.¹⁹⁰ The point, as Kramer discusses, is that political rhetoric is deeply soaked into moral values, factor which often deprives politics of debate and opposition. Finally, he assesses that Islam is accepting liberalism, pluralism and political participation, protection of human rights, even if democracy is still far: "Having said that, it cannot be emphasized strongly enough that what we are observing is though in progress, responding to a considerable extent to societal conditions and government policies."¹⁹¹ In Kramer discourse religion is a central power that even manage to bend the State. What is to be asked is how the State could accept religion supremacy and why. Is the religious power in the MENA region so influential as it seems to be?

According to Eva Bellin, the main cause of non-democratization of regimes in the Arab world lies into state's capacity of repression: "In short, the strength, coherence, and effectiveness of

¹⁸⁸Kramer Gudrun, "Islamist Notion of Democracy", *Middle East Report*, 1993

¹⁸⁹Ibid.

¹⁹⁰Ibid.

¹⁹¹Kramer Gudrun, "Islamist Notion of Democracy", *Middle East Report*, 1993

the state's coercive apparatus distinguish among cases of successful revolution, revolutionary failure, and nonoccurrence.”¹⁹² Bellin analyzes the main conditions allowing the reinforcement of the authoritarian regime: first of all, the state need of a iron fist on the fiscal sector. Bellin assesses in fact, that if the state cannot economically maintain its coercive apparatus composed by army, police and security forces, its collapse is assured. Moreover, Bellin stresses the need, for dictatorships, of external legitimacy, generally granted by Western powers: if Western legitimacy was allowed only according to democratic reforms, this could be the road toward the Arab world democratization.¹⁹³ Finally, the repressive dictatorial apparatus could be challenged by citizens' rebellion and their active participation: Bellin explains that a high level of discontent with the regime could lead to a decrease of credibility and a loss of image and power for the regime itself. “Clearly, the high costs of massive repression will not deter an elite that believes it will be ruined by reform.”¹⁹⁴ Bellin concludes by highlighting the absence of a Middle East' exceptionalism, while remembering that even removing authoritarian apparatus, it could not lead to a democracy for sure. According to Bellin then, religion is a marginal actor. More and deeper is the influence of military and political choices.

2.2.2. Post-Arab Uprisings, a More Realistic Approach

After the upheavals produced by the Arab springs, academia moved away from rigid democratization theories, keeping an open mind in regards of more complex scenarios: multiple actors, internal forces and a more critical focus on Islamism and Salafism, avoiding the fruitless and outdated rhetoric of “democratic versus anti-democratic regime”. In this framework fits the new approach to Middle East and North Africa based on the study of Islamic and non-institutional actors. What is now at stake within the academic community, is no longer the process of democratization in the Arab world, rather the understanding of conditions of survival of authoritarian regimes: why and how dictatorial governments resist.

¹⁹²Bellin Eva, “The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective”, *Comparative Politics*, 2004

¹⁹³Ibid.

¹⁹⁴Ibid.

The academic Steven Heydemann focuses on this subject, reporting a statement of a Syrian political analyst in 2006: “Tunisia is our model. Just look at them! They are much more representative than we are, yet the West loves them. We need to figure out how they do it.”¹⁹⁵ Heydemann explains that authoritarian regimes are absolute and coercive, still, complex and adaptable: precisely in their adaptability lies their strength and power. Moreover, authoritarian regimes managed to enter the neoliberal market by opening their countries' resources to USA and European Union to invest. The participation into the liberal economy, led to the so-called upgrading of dictatorial governments. “[...] authoritarian upgrading involves reconfiguring authoritarian governance to accommodate and manage changing political, economic, and social conditions.”¹⁹⁶ Nevertheless, Heydemann specifies that there is not a unique model of upgrading and each Arab country developed its own style, based on its peculiar political and social context. Heydemann shows the five major trends of authoritarian upgrading: appropriating and containing civil societies, managing political protests, capturing the benefits of selective economic reforms, controlling new communications technology and diversifying international linkages.¹⁹⁷ Authoritarian governments then, are highly specialized in avoiding political pluralism, or in admitting it while rigging elections: the main finding is actually that Arab dictatorial regimes contrived new tools in order to better exploit their political environment. Consequence of this compliance to liberal economy without a true regime change, resulted in youth's deception and people's disenchantment in politics and collective actions. “By contrast, authoritarian upgrading suggests that failures of democratization are not a product of Arab resistance to change but rather of the effectiveness of regimes in adapting to and managing the pressures for change created by democracy promotion.”¹⁹⁸ The upgrading of authoritarianism is a serious issue then, the most important maybe, in order to analyze the MENA regions phenomena after the Arab spring. Consequently, the studying of authoritarianism history and changes proves that religion is just a marginal issue on the Arab scenario.

More specifically related to the Tunisian case, Hamadi Redissi highlighted that a relevant element of analysis is the growing Islamization of Tunisian society. While according to Olivier

¹⁹⁵ Heydemann Steven, “Upgrading Authoritarianism in the Arab World”, Analysis Paper for Middle East Policy, 2007

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

Roy and Asef Bayat it is time to overcome the rigid discourse over Islamism declaring its failure or seeking its transformation, Redissi builds his own thesis on the ability of Islamism to accumulate numerous failure experiences and derive its success from it.¹⁹⁹ In fact, Redissi introduces the concept of “negative legitimacy”²⁰⁰ which is precisely Islamism ability of taking advantage of its failures, such as defeats in terms of modernization, secularism and national ideology. As Redissi states, the Tunisian case is apart: “Of all the North African countries, Tunisia seemed to enjoy the best chance for a democratic transformation, as confirmed by universal indicators.”²⁰¹, especially because of Tunisia's semi-secular nature of government. Under Bourguiba in fact, Tunisians experienced a series of forced policies toward secular culture and French middle-class behaviors, a push for modernization which Bourguiba personally called “the modern jihad”. Bourguiba's coercive policies had the effect of repressing dissenters: in this scenario Redissi states that many people turned toward a more conservative vote or flowed to a radical religious drift. Especially Ennahda portrayed itself as the lighthouse of moral rectitude and credibility: “En-Nahdha makes the difference by presenting itself as a catch-all party promising each group what it expects.”²⁰² Its voters were general supporters, laymen, middle-class people, ordinary people who count on Ennahda promises, who want to challenge the regime, worshippers and social outcasts. The problem, affirms the scholar, is that: “En-Nahdha has ideas but no programs. Its electoral manifesto is made up of 365 proposals (one per day!).”²⁰³ According to Redissi finally, the only way to contain Islamism in Tunisia is by improving secular institutions. From Redissi analysis it is possible to conclude that the radical religious drift exploded in Tunisia under (and after) Ben 'Ali was just a reaction to authoritarian policies. The profound analysis made by the scholars reported in this section are fundamental in order to understand the scientific debate upon the regime-change and the democratic transition within the academia. Furthermore, these analysis are useful since they confirm the premise of this work, as the primary role of politics over religion. The next section will explore the Tunisian transition in detail and the birth of Salafism in that deeply-changing context.

¹⁹⁹Redissi Hamadi, “The decline of political Islam's legitimacy: the Tunisian case”, *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 2014

²⁰⁰Ibid.

²⁰¹Redissi Hamadi, “The decline of political Islam's legitimacy: the Tunisian case”, *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 2014

²⁰²Ibid.

²⁰³Ibid.

2.2. Between Ben 'Ali and Transition in Tunisia

A great contribution to “transitology” comes from Larbi Sadiki, who analyzes Ben Ali's Tunisia in order to highlight the elements hindering the democracy building process, challenging Ben Ali's view of democracy and Tunisian identity. Sadiki in fact, likens Ben Ali's regime to a “façade democracy”, where democratic mechanisms such as elections, pluralism and gender policies were adopted, but formally and not substantially. In fact, he explains that the entire process of Tunisia's secularization has been a top-down one and the democratic implementation produced exclusiveness and a bipolar approach to opposition: “[...] singularity versus pluralism; loyalty instead of autonomy; presence of co-option not contestation; and regime preference for deference over difference.”²⁰⁴ Besides, according to Sadiki it is interesting to highlight, within the frame of democratic transition, the inner contradiction between the democratic path and the necessity of a national unity and ethnic homogeneity. Tunisia had it all, but in 2002 it was not a democratic state. In fact: “National unity is another word for political uniformity. Thus understood the state's imperative of unity and uniformity contradicts political pluralism and demotes rather than promotes democratic development.”²⁰⁵ Sadiki explains the main concepts of Tunisian unity and societal cohesion, which recall Ibn Khaldun's concept of *asabiyya*, namely the social solidarity and tribal kinship.²⁰⁶ The *asabiyya* then, built the Tunisian self-identification process, where individual instances were subject to the needs of community: “According to this conception, identity is a primordial given. Unlike the category of class, it does not follow from particular modes of capitalist production.”²⁰⁷ Therefore, ethno-nationalism and ethno-religiousness are two cardinal concept in order to understand Tunisian identity: the first one was boosted by French colonization, ethno-religiousness instead, is a concept based on the general religious consciousness because of common ground, culture and language. In Ben Ali's Tunisia, the concept of *asabiyya* survived in people's attitude, still unconsciously: the dictator in fact needed to assimilate that concept in order to make people more easily controlled, under the guise of “unifying” the country. “This task was achieved fairly

²⁰⁴Sadiki Larbi, “Political Liberalization in Bin Ali's Tunisia: Façade Democracy”, *Democratization*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2002

²⁰⁵Sadiki Larbi, “The Search for Citizenship in Bin Ali's Tunisia: Democracy versus Unity”, *Political Studies*, vol. 50, 2002

²⁰⁶Ibid.

²⁰⁷Ibid.

easily, with the state using a combination of repression (e.g. Ouled Shirayyt in the country's south) and equalization through welfarist redistribution of goods – e.g. education, housing, health, employment –(Zartman, 1991, p. 30).²⁰⁸ Ben Ali managed to recollect the Bourguibian heritage while enforcing his dual-track way of governance, through *l'Etat patron* and *l'Etat-parti*, both extremely useful in order to enforce the authoritarianism and the stability of the state. While both under Bourguiba and Ben Ali nationalism and secularism were enforcing, religion remained the target of regime's privatization instead: "[...] religion is God's; the fatherland is for all."²⁰⁹ According to Sadiki, the true problem with Tunisia's identity is the fact that it is not inclusive, since "Independence in Tunisia did not lead to automatic civil and political rights."²¹⁰ it led to a quite remote possibility of establishing the democratic game in Tunisia. Concluding, despite "Many 'transitologists' have taken national unity and the existence of a sovereign state as prerequisites for the development of democracy. [...] ethnic homogeneity is not a sufficient condition for genuine democratization."²¹¹

Another interesting point, this time on post-revolutionary Tunisia, is made by Béatrice Hibou, who explores the conditions that brought Tunisians to rebel despite the iron fist of the security forces. According to the scholar, the key factor which enabled people to took the streets was the annihilation of fear: how did this happen? How did an obedient people transform into rebels? The scholar explains her point by referring to the so-called "security pact", the most powerful governmental device of coercion: it is not merely implemented by violence and oppression, but also by compromises, and simple, ordinary economic mechanisms. Even if the main goal of the pact was of reaching and repressing the more people it could, it did not happen systematically, allowing room for disagreement and domestic resistance to the central power. Hibou focuses on the fact that conforming does not necessarily mean to adhere, therefore, people who obey are not automatically puppets in the hands of power, since they could behave differently in different contexts. The Jasmines Revolution was not driven just by the economic crisis: people asking for jobs, dignity and fair laws, declared implicitly ended the

²⁰⁸Sadiki Larbi, "The Search for Citizenship in Bin Ali's Tunisia: Democracy versus Unity", *Political Studies*, vol. 50, 2002

²⁰⁹Sadiki Larbi, "The Search for Citizenship in Bin Ali's Tunisia: Democracy versus Unity", *Political Studies*, vol. 50, 2002.

²¹⁰Ibid.

²¹¹Ibid.

"security pact".²¹² Hibou underlines the need of a more critical approach on the Tunisia post revolution, focusing on the ambivalent role of UGTT, on the economic miracle co-opted as power device and on the values and fights such as the emancipation, dignity, emotions and transverse principles driven by non-institutionalized actors.²¹³

Finally, the analysis of the democratic paradigm, can be useful in order to highlight trends and perspectives, even though other major changes can occur out of the democratic stage. In order to better understand democratic transition in Tunisia and the context where AST grew and developed, it is necessary to investigate the conditions that paved the way for such social actors and political changes. In these regards, scholars Cavatorta and Haugbølle analyzed Tunisia's environment shortly after the revolution in order to underline some hidden factors of Ben Ali's politics and myths: "In particular, this article highlights three distinct mythologies (economic miracle, democratic gradualism and secularism) about Tunisia that prevented a clearer understanding of the political and socio-economic situation."²¹⁴ The first mythology is the economic miracle, which at the very beginning was a true miracle: in late 80's in fact the macro-indicators of Tunisian economy grew and theorists of democratization acclaimed the economic growth as father of political stability, enemy of Islamism. The authors though, claim that Ben Ali's economic miracle was built in order to strengthen the regime's bonds on society "[...] through the provision of economic benefits to key social sectors that would find interests in striking an alliance with Ben Ali."²¹⁵ As evidence of this suspicion, the scholars explain that despite the miracle, unemployment and no opportunities for young people were the reality of Ben Ali's Tunisia. In addition, Tunisian economy rapidly became a dictator's property since Ben Ali's family and collaborators took advantage of it savagely, increasing inequalities and corruption: "This predatory behavior, backed by the possibility of relying on political contacts and the security services, led to a significant increase in corrupt practices that not only undermined economic performance, but created widespread resentment against the ruling elites among ordinary citizens given the increase in income inequalities."²¹⁶ Finally, the great economic

²¹²Hibou Béatrice, "La Tunisie en révolution? Tunisie. Économie politique et morale d'un mouvement social", *Le Dossier, Politique Africaine*, 2011

²¹³Ibid.

²¹⁴Cavatorta Francesco and Haugbølle Rikke Hostrup, "The End of Authoritarian Rule and the Mythology of Tunisia under Ben Ali", *Mediterranean Politics*, 2012

²¹⁵Ibid.

²¹⁶Cavatorta Francesco and Haugbølle Rikke Hostrup, "The End of Authoritarian Rule and the Mythology of Tunisia under Ben Ali", *Mediterranean Politics*, 2012

miracle deeply damaged workers' rights too, violently repressed by the security services, as in Gafsa, where not only workers but also citizens took the streets in order to manifest their deprivation against the regime. Another relevant myth of Ben Ali's age was the democratic gradualism: the dictator wanted in fact to prove he was credible and democratic, so he proposed the gradual legalization of oppositional parties if they did not dare to destabilize the central power. "Thus, there was an almost hidden, but very significant increase in Islamization based on the adoption of personal pious behavior that was overtly a-political, but had quite clear anti-regime overtones."²¹⁷ Finally, the third myth of Benalism was *laïcité*, or Westernization of Tunisian habits and values. That strategic move was supported by scholars who believed in democratic paradigm through the secularization of society. There was an obstacle though: the fact that the secularization was forced from above, not the will of Tunisian people. This brought to a re-Islamization of Tunisian society, since people felt the need of reclaim their own cultural values: "These pious men also felt that Tunisians in general lacked an identity of their own which could combine the best from the West, which they see as a crucial part of their identity, and from Islam."²¹⁸ As Cavatorta and Haugbølle claim thus, democratic paradigm and authoritarian resilience approaches are relevant, however, not the only key reading of democratic transition in Tunisia.

It is interesting to note that the economic miracle, the democratic gradualism and the myth of *laïcité* were not asked by people. Moreover, when these strategies produced negative effects on middle class, workers, opposition parties and common people, Ben 'Ali's power collapsed. Understanding Ben 'Ali's policies and strategies in Tunisia is relevant in order to point out some bad political choices that finally exploded in a huge popular discontent. Ben 'Ali's government unconsciously put the basis for the upheaval and for the building of a parallel apparatus, more credible and appreciated than the official one. The Salafis organization. Tunisian historical perspective is then essential in order to analyze and contextualize the Salafi phenomenon. In fact, the interesting fact is that it took root in the only MENA country in transition.

²¹⁷Cavatorta Francesco and Haugbølle Rikke Hostrup, "The End of Authoritarian Rule and the Mythology of Tunisia under Ben Ali", *Mediterranean Politics*, 2012

²¹⁸Ibid.

2.3. Salafism in Tunisia: AST and its Historical Context

Salafism in Tunisia is an extended phenomenon, often jihad-oriented to Syria. But as Alterman stated “By the end of 2012 two strains of jihadi-salafism had emerged in the country.”²¹⁹ While the first strand was born from the 2011 Tunisian revolutionary environment, the second took its roots on Al-Qaeda's strategy. The first group is called Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia, while the second is the Okba Ibn Nafaa Brigade: they carried on profoundly different strategies in order to implement the Sharia law. As Alterman points out the presence of these two different Salafi groups represents the two main strands Tunisian Salafis could take after the Arab spring. Alterman rise the question of whether Tunisia is a land of *da'wa* or a land of jihad.²²⁰ But why the core of work is Ansar al-Sahria in Tunisia? Tunisia, differently from any other MENA country, experimented a wide and revolutionary upheaval in 2011, which brought a real democratic transition. Tunisia is a unique case study in the MENA region until now. In addition, Tunisia lived a period of total freedom after the fall of Ben 'Ali. Such an opening and emancipation brought Tunisians in a new and never experimented context, since they could speak freely about taboos such as politics, sex and alcohol. As Alterman put it down “After decades of repression, a wide range of Islamist ideas flourished following the fall of Ben Ali: political Islamists, salafists, traditional Tunisian religious leaders, and jihadi-salafists all competed in an open market of ideas.”²²¹ This freedom was the real turning point of the revolution. It was in such a context that Islamists begun their showing up. A fundamentalist group especially active on the new Tunisian scene was Ansar al-Sharia. Differently from Okba Ibn Nafaa, AST seemed initially interested in social activities and its focus was more upon *da'wa* than upon jihad as the Brigade. Alterman efficaciously wrote “What differentiated Ansar al Shari'a during this period from armed groups such as the Okba Ibn Nafaa Brigade—and made them more of a strategic threat—is that they were a part of Tunisian society.”²²² AST grew in specific conditions, since revolution finally allowed it a space of freedom where to express its ideas. It was the first time ever. Ansar al-Sharia is especially relevant to this work since its sudden participation to

²¹⁹Malka Haim, “Tunisia: Confronting Extremism” from Religious Radicalism after the Arab Uprisings by Jon B. Alterman, Center for Strategic and International Studies, pp 208, 2015

²²⁰Ibid.

²²¹Malka Haim, “Tunisia: Confronting Extremism” from Religious Radicalism after the Arab Uprisings by Jon B. Alterman, Center for Strategic and International Studies, pp 208, 2015

²²²Ibid.

the Tunisian social fabric through voluntary works and preaching conquered people's credibility and support. AST seemed to be interested in being accepted by the establishment, initially at least. The Islamist party Ennahda in addition, tried to compose good relations with the radical group since it seemed possible to integrate it in the political system. What happened after the opening brought by the revolution was a new wave of repressive policies following some Salafi violent actions. The ephemeral freedom of expression soon ended for the Ansar, finally outlawed in 2013. What is relevant here, is to highlight the conditions through which the Ansar got their role in the new Tunisian society. Furthermore, the role of youth will be analyzed in relation to the Salafi doctrine appeal.

The Salafi group Ansar al-Sharia was founded in April 2011 after the fall of the regime by Sayfallah Ben Hassine, better known as Abu Iyadh, who had been set free from prison in the aftermath due to the general amnesty. The group silently birth in 2011 but grew in the context of the democratic transition in Tunisia; notwithstanding its ideological and structural connections to the international Jihadi network, its history is a unique experiment within broader Salafism. AST was born from the meeting of Abu Iyadh and the Algerian GSPC, future AQMI, with Al-Qaeda through the jihad in Afghanistan and, all combined with the Salafi-jihadi growing communities in Libya. The presence of these different groups, led Abu Iyadh to think about the creation of an Islamic State in Tunisia. During 1990s Abu Iyadh lived in UK where he met the exponent of the Algerian GSPC, so he sent many Tunisian militants to Algeria. Consequently he experienced the 'fieldwork' in Afghanistan, at the Jalalabad guesthouse, where he trained Tunisian militants who wanted to implement the jihad. Once he came back from Afghanistan, Abu Iyadh was imprisoned in Tunisia where he met his companions and founded Ansar al-Sharia. Generally in fact, in contexts of serious governmental repression the fraternization among prisoners increase and forge lasting bonds.

The oppressive regime of Ben Ali in Tunisia in its effort to stamp down all opposition to the regime, did not tolerate the Islamist part of society, constantly discouraging Islamic symbols in public such as the veil, like in Bourguiba's age. The growing intolerance of the regime against religious associations and Islamism in all its forms worsened after the case of the Suleiman Group in 2007 : “[...] a group of fighters who tried to infiltrate and recruit fighters in Tunisia in 2006 and 2007 known as the Suleiman Group. [...] The clashes resulted in the deaths of two

militants and the recovery of 34 automatic weapons and nearly \$55,000 in cash.”²²³ Then, the already ubiquitous and powerful police forces were ordered to chase and arrest all suspected fundamentalists. The police had repressive powers everywhere, in any way, and of course against anybody: “Occasionally, they would randomly choose one of the people coming out from prayer, and detain them for a while. There were many arbitrary arrests such as these. However, this policy did not yield the intended results, but rather led to the exact opposite. Instead, people started to ask about the ones who were arrested. The more police brutalized these pious men, the more the normal people felt sympathy towards them.”²²⁴

The 1980s Tunisian economic opening made essential to the establishment a better monitoring upon its people. The economic development encouraged the rise of a new, secularized and regime-backed middle class, evidently close to the government. The Tunisian regime strongly promoted the middle class in order to better control people, spread its propaganda and eventually gain the international community's support. The middle class was obviously cultivated and secular in order to show the world that Tunisia was legitimately taking its place among the civilized countries, by giving birth to the phenomenon called *tunisianité* based on the french model of citizenship. While on the one hand the Bourguibian middle class was strongly appreciated abroad since it effectively used Western language and habits, on the other hand it was isolated by the Tunisian society. Middle class people were healthier, more learned and especially more secular than the most of Tunisians. Within the new middle class in fact, the traditional Muslim identity was the label of backwardness and ignorance. The sudden emerging of the Tunisian middle class established a double track of inclusive-exclusive mechanism within the Tunisian society. This model established a highly hierachic society, soaked with the values of ancient French colonizers strongly supported by Habib Bourguiba. Later, the Ennahda party, a new political party managed to counterbalance the gap “secularized-religious” by reaching people who lived far from westernization and the *Bourguibism* ideal, firmly linked to religious tradition. Ennahda thence, by entering the political scene, actively contributed the new order of Tunisian society. The scholar Fabio Merone briefly explains the key-passages of the construction of Tunisian society: “In short, the heirs of Bourguibian

²²³Aaron Y. Zelin, Andrew Lebovich, Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, *Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb's Tunisia Strategy*, Combating Terrorism Center, ctc.usma.edu, 2013

²²⁴ Fabio Merone, “Salafism in Tunisia: An Interview with a Member of Ansar al-Sharia”, Jadaliyya.com, 2013

nationalism, allied with liberal and left-wing parties, have used the ideological tool of ‘modernity’ to exclude since at least the 1970s the ‘new kids on the block’—the Islamists—from shaping the national narrative and ethos of the modern Tunisian state, labeling them as ‘backward.’²²⁵ As Merone stated, the Ansar could not be allowed to enter the political scene because of their numeric inferiority and ambiguity about Jihad: this potential danger was the perfect device to stigmatize the group as terrorist and ban it from the community.²²⁶

The tipping point in the relations between Ansar al-Sharia and the Government occurred with the attack on the US embassy in Tunis in September 2012: the conservative party Ennahda, which had always tried to assimilate the group to the party because Abu Iyadh seemed to be like Rashid Ghannouchi in his youth, stepped back from AST by condemning the criminal acts and disappointing the group by not including Sharia into the draft of the new Tunisian Constitution. Abu Iyadh told his supporters: “They (secularists) want there to be a break between us and other Muslim currents...but, no matter how much we differ with other Muslims in this land, our religion prevents this.”²²⁷

The 6th February 2013 another violent episode occurred: Choukri Belaid, leader of the left-wing party Popular Front was murdered in front of his house. It happened after his declaration in which he condemned Ennahda for giving the green light to political murders, referring to the killing of Lotfi Nakhd the past year, another leader of the opposition party “The Call of Tunisia”, in October 2012. The murder of Belaid shocked the country and from that moment onwards violence escalated. Shawky Arif, wrote : “[...] Political violence in Tunisia is, unfortunately, not something new. Violence against political activists has been ongoing since the October 2011 elections. The so-called League for the Protection of the Revolution is one group responsible for the aggression toward political activists. Many believe that the so-called “leagues” are militias managed by al-Nahda. [...] Ghannouchi, once defending some fundamentalists accused of perpetrating violence, said that the Salafis are our sons and that they remind him of his youth.”²²⁸

²²⁵Ibid.

²²⁶Fabio Merone, “Enduring Class Struggle in Tunisia: The Fight for Identity beyond Political Islam”, *British Journal of Middle East*, 2014

²²⁷Fabio Merone, “Enduring Class Struggle in Tunisia: The Fight for Identity beyond Political Islam”, *British Journal of Middle East*, 2014

²²⁸Shawky Arif, “The Assassination of Chokri Belaid: When Ghannouchi Legitimizes Violence”, Al-Akhbar, February 2013

Another focal time in the history of AST was the 19th May 2013, when the government canceled AST third annual meeting in order to avoid clashes and disorders. This denial from above brought serious clashes between AST and the police forces in Ettadhamen. From then onwards, clashes, attacks and murders strongly increased, especially on Chambi Mountain, headquarters of the Jihadi groups. Notwithstanding the numerous violent actions and crimes, there is still no evidence of AST's will in committing and directing the violence; furthermore, new radical groups surfaced on the Salafi scenario in Tunisia, such as Uqba ibn Nafi, an explicitly violent group affiliated with AQMI. The analyst Aaron Zelin presumed that the real responsibility of the group Uqba ibn Nafi were hidden on purpose by the establishment, in order to let Ansar al-Sharia be the responsible and using it as a scapegoat : "[...] Uqba ibn Nafi has been using the area for storing weapons and training; its presence was discovered when more than a dozen Tunisian security personnel were injured by mines. Given the lack of progress in finding and engaging these militants, the government is now going after AST in order to show that it has things under control, arguing that some members may have links to AQIM."²²⁹

2.4. AST Structure and Strategy

Ansar al-Sharia structure is profoundly unconventional, since it is not a centralized one, nor a classic top-down organization. Many scholars analyzed such a complex phenomenon: Salafis' actions follow precise paths and schema, while AST members' relations are free and not hierarchical. Salafis claim that the 'organization' (scattering) in small groups should implement the defense of the '*umma* in case of extreme danger, as Abu Iyadh explained paraphrasing Sayyd Qutb's concept of vanguard. According to Qutb's ideal, Salafis are a group of elected, invested of the role of guide and defenders of the entire community. In addition, the Salafi inner organization is a subjective concept, not easily intelligible for Westerners. "We are all brothers, and every single one of us is responsible for himself."²³⁰ According to Fabio Merone, the group of the Ansar has not a centralized structure and relationships among members are fluid and horizontal. Merone interviewed a member of AST who told him: "You should not think though

²²⁹Zelin Aaron, "Standoff Between the Tunisian Government and Ansar al-Sharia", *The Washington Institute*, May 2013

²³⁰Ibid.

that it is a top-down organization that emerged. On the contrary, it is a lightweight and decentralized movement, with an extended autonomy for the local groups, which are the real core of the movement.”²³¹ Moreover, according to the interviewee, AST liquid structure allow the building of a program step by step, in which each member bring its competences and skills in a context of mutual learning.

With regard to AST strategy, as already mentioned, there is a substantial difference in strategy between AST and Okba Ibn Nafaa Brigade, since the latter's focus is mainly the implementation of jihad at all costs, usually trough violent means. Conversely, AST applied a three-steps strategy where the first stage of their engagement consisted of the implementation of *da'wa*, as social services. The second step is *hisba* as vigilantism: the act of patrolling the streets searching for unmoral behaviors. *Hisba*'s role is similar to the Saudi moralizing police's. AST's strategy finally aims at implementing *jihad*, as any other Salafi group, still, its strategy passes through helping and caring people, especially the poorest. “However, in February 2013 Abu Iyadh advised Tunisians not to migrate to Syria or other active jihad fronts but to stay in the country and carry out peaceful jihad there.”²³² The most serious case of jihad in Tunisia was the attack to the US embassy in Tunis, in December 2012: in that specific circumstance AST managed to show up as protector of the '*umma* since “[...] the attack targeted non-Muslims, and responded to a perceived provocation against Islam (the fact that the US did not stop the film critical of Muhammad from being produced in the first place).”²³³ Anyway, AST *da'wa* is the most relevant aspect of its strategy since it is the one which most caught people's attention. Effectively, Salafis built their reputation of respect and trust within the Tunisian society through the welfare policies they brought in the most marginalized neighborhoods. So, it is the concrete practices that make the difference. Ansar al-Sharia has always considered its main instrument of social change is *dawa*, or missionary practice, which guaranteed it a huge visibility. The Ansar activities ranged from the distribution of essential goods in rural and neglected contexts to the assistance to rural population during the disastrous weather conditions in 2012. AST distributed in fact aid caravans in Jenduba and Kasserine, proving the complete absence of government. Compulsory among the Ansar activities is the preach, anywhere they go. The social assistance is constantly supported by passionate sermons exposed in Tunisian dialect

²³¹Merone Fabio, “Salafism in Tunisia: An Interview with a Member of Ansar al-Sharia”, jadaliyya.com, 2013

²³²Merone Fabio, “Salafism in Tunisia: An Interview with a Member of Ansar al-Sharia”, jadaliyya.com, 2013

²³³Merone Fabio, “Salafism in Tunisia: An Interview with a Member of Ansar al-Sharia”, jadaliyya.com, 2013

instead of classical Arabic. By so doing, the Ansar made the creed accessible to numerous illiterates by using simple and understandable words. In practice, Salafis managed to bring religion in the street as well as faith discussions in cafes, making common people feeling part of a bigger project of re-Islamization. The AST project was based on the inclusion of the marginalized from both political life and revolution. By so doing, Salafis brought social redemption and dignity to hopeless people: through the exercise of religious and moral superiority in fact, everyone could be respected and took into consideration. This was the actual Salafi revolution since the Ansar disrupted the order of social classes, and even generations. Not only the marginalized youth achieved a new dignity and a place in society through religion in defiance of adults, but they have also gained authority thanks to their moral religious superiority, in spite of Shuyukh, old scholars, and their elders.²³⁴

The next step after *da'wa* is *hisba*, the moralizing activity. Targets of the *hisba* strategy were prostitutes initially, but later even journalists dressed in western fashion. Consequently, targets became ordinary citizens drinking alcohol, women without hijab and professors who did not tolerate niqab at university, as in the case of Manouba. The targets became then, the education, the freedom of expression and artistic initiatives: the situation got seriously worse. The events at the Manouba University, where Salafi students occupied university and director Habib Kazdaghli was put before a judge for not having wanted to examine two girls in burqas, made scandal. Despite the seriousness of the events, the police provided a poor response and insufficient support to citizens affected by the violence since police forces had considerably less legitimacy in the post revolutionary period. "Again, it is impossible to say with certainty which of these salafi hisba attacks can be attributed to AST. Some of violence was almost certainly unconnected to the organization - such as the assault on Zeineb Rezgui due to her allegedly skimpy attire, which was spontaneous in nature."²³⁵ Salafis tested the limit of the Tunisian perception when the assassination of Choukri Belaid occurred. Ross noticed that: "Regardless of on-the-ground reality, AST's propaganda was able to further the perception that it is in the process of creating a parallel state."²³⁶ That perception was fostered by the harsh

²³⁴Cavatorta Francesco, Merone Fabio, "Salafist Movement and Sheikhhism in the Tunisian Democratic Transition", *Middle East Law and Governance*, vol.5, 2013

²³⁵Ibid.

²³⁶Ibid.

living conditions in Tunisia, characterized by no hope for social redemption nor individual fulfillment. Especially young people then, found in AST credibility and morality. Moreover, the bad distribution of resources across the country naturally increased the exclusion of the already marginal regions: "If the political process seems unable to address the considerable challenges that the country faces, radical alternatives will appear more attractive to many Tunisians."²³⁷

Direct outcome of the Salafi intransigence is the drift toward *takfir*. Aaron Zelin put it like this: "Another popular term used by Shiite jihadis for their Sunni enemies has been "takfiri." A takfiri is a Muslim who declares another Muslim as an infidel. This declaration allows for the accused to be killed."²³⁸ Takfir is a contemporary phenomenon and generally shared by all Salafis. In this writing Faraj critique the jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan, affirming the need to fight against nearby enemies, especially the Arab regimes. He writes: "The first battle to fight is that which aims to eradicate these wicked governments and replace them with the entire Islamic regime. There will be the starting point."²³⁹ The jihadi-Salafi al-Zawahiri explained the impossibility of implementing the strategy against the nearest enemy, since citizens of different Arab countries would never fight against their own families in order to remove the establishment, despite its unlawful nature. It seemed more profitable then, to undertake the path of jihad against the far enemy, at least until 2000, when the leader of al Qaeda in Iraq, Musab al-Zarqawi, aimed for the new near enemy: the Shi'ite Muslims after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003. Today the target seems again the far enemy, after the attacks to Charlie Hebdo in Paris: the reason is that the far enemy is the only real threat to the Islamic State. Moreover, the logic of jihad against the far enemy requires the killing of Westerner citizens, not only targeting Western infidel governments, since Western people, by electing their representatives, also them became fighters. As the AST theologists Khatib al-Idrissi told: "The Jihadi salafist is different from other Muslims because he is coherent with the whole of the revelation and refuses

²³⁷Cavatorta Francesco, Merone Fabio, "Salafist Movement and Sheikhsim in the Tunisian Democratic Transition", *Middle East Law and Governance*, vol.5, 2013

²³⁸Zelin Aaron, "The Vocabulary of Sectarianism", *Foreign Policy*, 2014

²³⁹Puchot Pierre, "Plongée dans les lectures des djihadistes", Mediapart.fr, 2015

to dilute it in order to become a moderate simply to appease the government or the unbelievers [...] jihad does not exclusively mean fighting, but it is also the struggle to propagate the message of Islam through the dawa, [...]"²⁴⁰, 241²⁴²



Fig. 2a: AST Humanitarian Convoys Headed to South Tunisia²⁴¹



Fig. 2b: AST Food Distribution in Haydra in West Central Tunisia²⁴²



Fig. 2b: AST Food Distribution in Haydra in West Central Tunisia²⁴¹

²⁴⁰Torelli Stefano, Merone Fabio, Cavatorta Francesco, "Salafism in Tunisia: Challenges and Opportunities for Democratization", *Middle East Policy Council*, 2012

²⁴¹Zelin Aaron, "Jihadi Soft Power in Tunisia: Ansar al-Shari'ah's Convoy Provides Aid to the Town of Haydra in West Central Tunisia", *al-Wasat*, 2012

²⁴²Ibid.



Fig. 2d: Group prayer organized by AST in Central Western Tunisia²⁴²

2.5. AST's Principle Characters

Seifallah Ben Hassine (Abu al-Tounsi Iyadh)²⁴³ was sentenced in 1987 by the Tunisian government to two years in prison because of his involvement in the student movement; at the time he was a law student in Morocco. In 1989 Sayfallah left his studies and obtained asylum in London, where he came in contact with Abu Doha, the Algerian head of GSPC, now AQIM. Abu Iyadh sent Tunisian activists in Algeria to train in the ranks of the GSPC. "These years of training enable him to establish contacts with other armed Islamic groups, such as the Algerian GIA or Libya Abdelhakim Belhaj LIFG founded by the current commander of the Tripoli Military Council."²⁴⁴ Abu Iyadh went then in Afghanistan where he added the adjective 'al-Tounsi' to his name and began to head the 'House of Jalalabad' where Tunisian jihadists came and lived, to whom he gave military and ideological training. Abu Iyadh decided to create the Tunisian Combatant Group, (TCG), with Tarek Maaroufi to recruit other activists and provide false identities. After this experience, he was imprisoned by the Turkish police in 2003 in inhumane conditions. Extradited to Tunisia he was finally sentenced Ben Ali to 68 years in prison, accused of terrorism and incitement to hatred. However, he remained in prison for a few years until 2011 amnesty: in April the same year, with Abu Ayyub al-Tounsi, his right arm, Abu Iyadh founded Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia. Abu Iyadh described AST to the newspaper Al-Sharouk al-Tounsiyya thus: "Our project is to restore confidence that Sharia is the guarantor of the good life for the people. This stage is a prelude to the establishment of an Islamic State and is not subject to

²⁴³ Abu Iyadh al-Tounsi, Islamopediaonline.org

²⁴⁴ Sayah Habib, "Djihad: la face cachée du salafisme en Tunisie", Institut Tunisien de recherche Kheireddine, 2012

the limits of Sykes-Picot.” The confrontation between the state and Salafis after the attack to the US embassy in 2012, led to highly repressive countermeasures from the government toward AST: “The pursuit of Abu Iyad by authorities as well as the climate of repression against the Salafis have helped to mythologize the figure of the AST’s leader by portraying Abu Iyad as a symbol of state repression.”²⁴⁵

Khatib al-Idrissi, the number 2 in AST was one of the most famous Salafi highly appreciated in Tunisia and in North Africa. He was imprisoned in 2007 after clashes between the police and the jihadist group Katibat Ibn al-Furat because he was accused of being close to the group through his incitements to violence in his sermons; it was released in 2011. Zelin says: “Although there is more public distance between al-Idrissi and AST currently, when AST first began, al-Idrissi promoted its existence and early activities via his official Facebook page.”²⁴⁶

After the Gulf War in 1991 and his trips to Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, Al-Maqdisi finally arrived in Jordan where he found asylum. Imprisoned in 1995 for his writings, he met Musa al-Zarqawi who used to follow a radical way of living, which brought him to break away from Maqdisi's doctrine and radicalizing into a very violent and bloody jihad. Wagemakers focused his study on the new discourse by Al-Maqdisi, discovering that the Sheikh gave a new meaning to the concept of *al-wala w-al-bara* by making it more current: the fight against unlawful governments in the Arab world. Although it is imbued with radical Wahhabism, this concept leads to fierce criticism of the Saudis, because of their attitude to honor the authority, whatever its legitimacy and to relegate the principle of *al-wala w- al-bara* just in the social sphere. In al-Maqdisi's logic the concept of *kufr* is as coherent as much the one of *al-wala w-al-bara*: rulers who do not respect nor apply the Shari'a are *kuffar*, namely disbelievers. However, al-Maqdisi condemns Muslims who engage against their own societies in collective *takfir* with no ontological bases, becoming thus dangerous for the unity of the community of believers. al-Maqdisi's scholarly contribution is fundamental since he indicated the limits to respect even in *jihad*: he denounced in fact the extreme and ineffective application of the literalistic approach to the Holy Koran, expressing a new concept in the Wahhabi environment. Al-Maqdisi is in favor of jihad in fact, notwithstanding his position against irrational fight, and he rather

²⁴⁵Torelli Stefano, “A Portrait of Tunisia’s Ansar al-Sharia Leader Abu Iyadh al-Tunsi”, *Militant Leadership Monitor*, Issue 8, 2013

²⁴⁶Zelin Aaron, “Who is Tunisia’s Salafi Cleric Shaykh al-Khatib al-Idrissi?”, wordpress.com, al-Wasat, 2013

advocates a more organized and better coordinated jihad. Maqdisi links in this way, the religious endeavor with the policy strategy so that the effort is finally effective, and not just an act of violence tout court. Al-Maqdisi is therefore an original and strategic scholar, which must be more deeply considered by nowadays scholars. Aaron Zelin wrote that al-Maqdisi harshly critiqued the homogeneity within the conception of jihad: from his point of view in fact, there is the need of a profound distinction between fighting in order to defend against the enemy and fighting in order to consolidate power. While the first jihad guarantees only a short-term victory, the second one provides a long-term consolidation of the Islamic state, instead: "Maqdisi highlights the importance of planning, organization, education, as well as *dawa* (calling individuals to Islam) activities."²⁴⁷

2.6. Ansar al-Sharia and the Government: Inclusion/Exclusion and Break

"The conflict between AST and the government is increasingly entering uncharted territory, and several observers were concerned that this cancellation could signal the beginning of open military conflict between AST and the state."²⁴⁸ Initially after the fall of Ben Ali in 2011, there was a unique atmosphere of openness and freedom in Tunisia, in which multiple political and social players took part to the public scene. Islamists were no less of course, spreading their ideas and showing their way of conceiving society and public engagement. "Ennahda believed it could use a light touch approach and attempt to co-opt AST and bring them into the political system. This strategy was fraught with false assumptions; most notably that AST itself stated repeatedly it is against the democratic process since it contravenes Islam and places men on the same level as God."²⁴⁹ Ansar al-Sharia in fact, never conceived democratic practices within its structure nor ideology, nevertheless exploited Tunisian emergent democratic frame, in order to contest it and propose a different way.²⁵⁰ Effectively, when Fabio Merone asked his interviewee whether he considered the State legitimate or not, the man answered: "The only law with worth for us is God's law, and not secular law. Of course, as we said, we deal with

²⁴⁷Zelin Aaron, "Maqdisi's Disciples in Libya and Tunisia", *Foreign Policy*, 2012

²⁴⁸Gartenstein-Ross Daveed, "Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia's Long Game: Dawa, Hisba and Jihad", ICCT, May 2013

²⁴⁹Gartenstein-Ross Daveed, "Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia's Long Game: Dawa, Hisba and Jihad", ICCT, May 2013

²⁵⁰Cavatorta Francesco, "Salafism, liberalism, and democratic learning in Tunisia", *The Journal of North African Studies*, 2015

reality, but without forgetting that *sharia* remains our reference.”²⁵¹ The confrontation with the state began in early 2013, when AST constituted the “Neighborhood Committees” in order to maintain the public order, moralize on people's behaving and punish immorality. These vigilante groups, often violent, carried the flag of al-Qaeda while touring the major cities and villages of the country.²⁵² It is relevant thus, to focus on the specific nature of Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia: it is a Salafi-Jihadi group, aiming at the construction of the Islamic State in Tunisia and admitting violence as a means by which reaching the supreme goal.

Notwithstanding numerous acts of violence occurred between 2012 and 2013 for which many exponents of the Tunisian establishment considered AST partly responsible, Salafis seemed willing to participate in the political arena. As Cavatorta outlined in fact: “For the first time there was a space of unhindered activism, which allowed for the possibility of building up a structure that could lead, through *dawa*, to the creation of a new society here and now.”²⁵³ As underlined by the scholars Torelli, Merone and Cavatorta, in order to understand AST behaving, it is worth focusing on the historical process which brought the previous Islamist movement Ennahda toward the political compromise, in fact: “Through its decision to play the democratic game and demonstrate a significant degree of political pragmatism, Ennahda has become a key actor in the current process of democratization.”²⁵⁴ After the fall of Ben 'Ali a relation of tolerance and dialogue between Ennahda and Ansar al-Sharia was established, a unique episode in the MENA region. The young Islamic group recalled Ennahda's leader Rashid Ghannouchi his youth, so he supported and praised AST's preaching and social commitment. The scholars Francesco Cavatorta and Fabio Merone affirmed that Salafism in Tunisia experienced the great chance of dialogue and openness with power through the window of freedom after the fall of the regime, and even after, when Ennahda got the government of the country.²⁵⁵ According to Cavatorta and Merone, Ansar al-Sharia members naturally approached Ennahda, since it was not an “impious” regime.²⁵⁶ The fact that AST leadership was so close to compromise with an Islamist party gave observers reason to hope for a dialogue based on

²⁵¹Merone Fabio, “Salafism in Tunisia; Interview with a Member of Ansar al-Sharia”, *jadaliyya.com*, 2013

²⁵²Zelin Aaron, “Tunis Designates Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia”, *wordpress.com*, 2013

²⁵³Ibid.

²⁵⁴Torelli Stefano, Merone Fabio, Cavatorta Francesco, “Salafism in Tunisia: Challenges and Opportunities for Democratization”, *Middle East Policy Council*, 2012

²⁵⁵Merone Fabio, Cavatorta Francesco, “Salafist Movement and Sheikhhism in the Tunisian Democratic Transition” *Middle East Law and Governance*, 2013

²⁵⁶Ibid.

the same language. There could have been a bridge between the radical AST's and the institutional Ennahda's viewpoint. Merone and Cavatorta insisted on the need of political debate in Tunisia, which, against all the odds, could have brought precisely by Salafis.²⁵⁷ According to the scholars in fact, the Salafis presence in Tunisia could have opened a debate about whereby to rebuild the political scene of the country.

A focal point is also to whom addressing the label of 'Salafi'. Monica Marks assessed that despite Salafism is a right-wing religious movement, it comprehend a large number of different trends, motivations and practices.²⁵⁸ The studying of Salafism has such a great relevance for the future of so many countries that Marks stated :“Ultimately, a measured understanding of Salafism is at the very heart of the struggle to build an inclusive Tunisia that offers a peaceful, politically representative arena where the voices and concerns of all groups can be heard.”²⁵⁹ After the first democratic elections in Tunisia in October 2014, the scholar Monica Marks brought out the necessity of avoiding Manichean discourses about the victory of secularist Nidaa Tunis over “backward” Islamists.²⁶⁰ Notoriously, the standoff between good and evil is a powerful political rhetoric which have historically influenced all countries around the world. And still, this dual-track logic is highly dangerous, as its dynamic of inclusion-exclusion from the political participation transform the healthy political debate into a court trial. The dynamic which linked then divided Ansar al-Sharia and Ennahda was different from the “good versus evil” logic, at least at the beginning. What happened then? According to Marks, Ennahda's attitude in regard to Tunisian Salafis was a bipolar one: non-interventionist at first and repressive later, following the attack to the US embassy.²⁶¹ In addition, Marks explains that Ennahda's approach to Tunisian Salafis was initially a paternalist one since it minimized Salafis non-democratic behaviors while dis-empowering the movement. Ghannouchi aim apparently was reaching a dialogue with Salafis. And yet, Ennahda's attitude swung between acceptance and reproach, while showing Salafis their 'healthier' Islam.

²⁵⁷Ibid.

²⁵⁸Marks Monica, “Who are Tunisia's Salafis?”, *Foreign Policy, Middle East Channel*, September 2012

²⁵⁹Ibid.

²⁶⁰Marks Monica, “The Tunisian election result isn't simply a victory for secularism over Islamism”, *The Guardian*, October 2014

²⁶¹Marks Monica, “Youth Politics and Tunisian Salafism: Understanding the Jihadi Current”, *Mediterranean Politics*, 2013

What is relevant is in the set of policies under and post Ben 'Ali which oriented the Salafis attitude toward the State. As Monica Marks points out "Many in Ennahda argue that Ben Ali's constant policing of mosques drove young Salafis into the arms of radical Wahhabi sheikhs, whose internet sermons offered comparatively raw and unregulated religious guidance. [...] Ennahda has also supported efforts to create and strengthen Salafi parties in hopes that political inclusion will re-channel and diffuse anarchic strains of Salafi activism. Most of Tunisia's young jihadi Salafis, however, seem vehemently opposed to the very idea of political parties."²⁶² Apparently then, Tunisian Salafis did not want to compromise with politics, nor wanted any dialogue with the establishment. Moreover, Salafis denounced Ennahda for being subservient to Western political will and by so doing sacrifice its deepest Islamic values.²⁶³ In these regards, Marks also faced the subject of political imprisoning, which ostensibly would make the dialogue harder while allowing the sense of 'embattled martyrdom'²⁶⁴ into Salafis' narrative. Notwithstanding the complexity of the outlined scenario, the scholar keeps being open-minded about the possibility of Salafis' inclusion in the long-term.²⁶⁵

2.6.1. *What New with Ansar al-Sharia?*

Peculiar of Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia is the unique opening of the Tunisian political scene, that led Salafis freedom of expression as never before. Members of Salafi groups even participated on talk shows on television.²⁶⁶ The sudden freedom Salafis had in expressing their radical ideas shocked Tunisians as well as the Islamist party Ennahda. As Cavatorta explains, Ennahda's attempt to include the Salafi side underlies a clear strategy. In fact Ghannouchi knew that both Salafis' radical and revolutionary supporters would have increased the consensus for the party, since "Al-Nahda, with its moderate discourse, was never going to be the actor able to channel their revolutionary enthusiasm."²⁶⁷ In addition, Ennahda leadership was convinced that Tunisians would have spontaneously moderate Salafi radical ideas.²⁶⁸ In this respect Cavatorta

²⁶²Ibid.

²⁶³Ibid.

²⁶⁴Marks Monica, "Youth Politics and Tunisian Salafism: Understanding the Jihadi Current", *Mediterranean Politics*, 2013

²⁶⁵Ibid.

²⁶⁶Marks Monica, "Youth Politics and Tunisian Salafism: Understanding the Jihadi Current", *Mediterranean Politics*, 2013

²⁶⁷Marks Monica, "Youth Politics and Tunisian Salafism: Understanding the Jihadi Current", *Mediterranean Politics*, 2013

²⁶⁸Ibid.

wrote: "It is interesting to note that this notion of progressive integration into democratic politics relies on the twin notions of moderation and democratic learning."²⁶⁹ In order to fulfill the 'democratic integration theory' in fact, moderation and democratic learning are fundamental steps. The former happens when the anti-democratic players realize it is worth moderating in order to gain visibility and the latter, as the democratic learning "which argues that exposure to the rough-and-tumble of democratic politics...enhance(s) political tolerance."²⁷⁰

It is compulsory at this stage to explore the different theories concerning the political integration of radical groups. Alfred Stepan's theory of the 'twin tolerations' is the most widespread theorem of democratization. According to that theory, the first step regards people's flexibility toward their government policies concerning religion. Conversely, the second step is about state's tolerance toward religion and people's traditions.²⁷¹ Essentially, the 'twin tolerations' theory is grounded on the principle of moderation between the various political actors, in order to make the political ground accessible to multiple currents. Such a process is called 'moderation through inclusion'. However, interestingly the principle of moderation is not always the winning one, as Tunisian democratic transition widely shows.²⁷² According to Cavatorta and Merone in fact, Ennahda reached the secular arena only through repression and social exclusion, determining the new paradigm of 'moderation through exclusion'. Merone and Cavatorta explained that moderation is generally the result of political inclusion, and that inclusion and exclusion are two sides of the same coin. In fact, Ennahda would hardly had the interest of entering the democratic framework if it had not suffered exclusion and marginalization."In short, [...] 'an implicit social consensus', whereby extremism, including religious ones, are largely rejected in society. This means that forms of social organization that do not fall within this consensus remain marginal and minoritarian. [...] For instance, they do not genuinely understand radical Salafist literalist positions and perceive them as alien."²⁷³ As the scholars underline in fact, "The hypothesis here is that the harsh repression against the party at the hands of the state, the imprisonment or exile of its leaders and cadres together with the

²⁶⁹Marks Monica, "Youth Politics and Tunisian Salafism: Understanding the Jihadi Current", *Mediterranean Politics*, 2013

²⁷⁰Ibid.

²⁷¹ Stepan Alfred, "Tunisia's Transition and the Twin Tolerations", *Journal of Democracy*, 2012

²⁷²Cavatorta Francesco, Merone Fabio, "Moderation through exclusion? The journey of the Tunisian Ennahda from fundamentalist to conservative party", *Democratization*, 2013

²⁷³Cavatorta Francesco, Merone Fabio, "Moderation through exclusion? The journey of the Tunisian Ennahda from fundamentalist to conservative party", *Democratization*, 2013

strong rejection the party faced in large sectors of Tunisian society for quite some time made it possible and necessary for Ennahda to entirely re-elaborate how political Islam could contribute to the developmental trajectory of the country.”²⁷⁴ The theory of moderation through exclusion perfectly fits Ennahda's case during 1970s-1980s and contemporary Salafism since both of them need people's favor. As in the case of Ennahda of 1980s, people was not ready yet for the radical Islamist values and nowadays Salafis, after the accidents ascribed to AST, experienced people's alienation. Could it be possible theorizing a future lowering of radicalism due to Salafi necessity of not being excluded by society? Could it be possible as Ennahda did before, that also Salafi groups accept the democratic game in order to implement a project and maintain supporters' credibility?

2.6.2. *Ansar al-Sharia Youth*

The connecting link between Ennahda and Salafi path is the institutional politics of 'reformist Salafi method' of Mohammed Khouja.²⁷⁵ Khouja is one of the founders of the Tunisian Islamic Front of 1980s who told: “We said that we should engage in open political activities because conditions have changed, and now we have freedom of expression. We said we should found a political party, and we named it the Reform Front.”²⁷⁶ Khouja joined the scientific Salafism from the beginning of the revolution in Tunisia, forming the Jabhat al-Islah²⁷⁷ party and taking part in the political arena legally. Khouja decided to step toward democratic mechanism despite his ideological opposition to democracy: “The job of the lawmaker is to distinguish the “haram” (illicit) from what is “halal” (licit) according to Islamic law.”²⁷⁸ Even if Khouja party (and other fundamental Islamic parties) opposed strong resistance to the opening to democracy, what is significant is the effort to insert its structure into the democratic mechanism. Effectively, Cavatorta stresses: “These parties do not enjoy much popularity, but

²⁷⁴Ibid.

²⁷⁵Ibid

²⁷⁶El-Hennaway Noha, “Tunisia's Salafi flavor”, EgyptIndependent.com, 2012

²⁷⁷Torelli Stefano, Merone Fabio, Cavatorta Francesco, “Salafism in Tunisia: Challenges and Opportunities for Democratization”, *Middle East Policy Council*, 2012

²⁷⁸Wolf Anne, “An Islamist 'renaissance'? Religion and politics in post-revolutionary Tunisia”, *The Journal of North African Studies*, 2013

what is more important is the signal that they send in accepting the institutional parameters.”²⁷⁹ Consequently, it is necessary to analyze how AST Salafis attracted so many people at the very beginning of their developing. Merone and Cavatorta explained this phenomenon firstly, through religion as a safety net which make people give meaning to their marginalization and poor life-conditions: “Embracing the authentic message of the sacred text is the only way out of marginality.”²⁸⁰ Secondly, even more powerful and revolutionary, is Salafis’ authority to criticize other people, especially their elders, about religious conduct and doctrine: this is the real overturning of non-written societal power relations, the customary order in which young people have to learn from the elders, not the opposite.²⁸¹ In addition, since new Salafi members’ recruitment passed through prison, it happened that criminals suddenly became pious. Merone and Cavatorta commented this trend: “This is a point of pride for the movement rather than shame because it demonstrates the power of the religious message in redeeming lives.”²⁸² The peculiarity of Ansar al-Sharia in the Tunisian context is that they managed to attract a high number of young people, thank to their clear and simple message of hope. Salafis were “[...] building a new society from the bottom-up.”²⁸³ Salafism brings a strong contradiction, is to say, the extension of the concept of ‘sheikhism’²⁸⁴ to young people. “These young Sheikhs become the transmission belts of knowledge and activism between the better known older Salafists sheiks, [...] and the ordinary activists in their neighborhood of reference over which they exercise a degree of influence.”²⁸⁵ That is the revolution: making the oxymoron, between the two antithetical concepts of youth and wisdom, possible. The practical implication of such a project is an open challenge to the societal relationships within the Tunisian community.

²⁷⁹ Torelli Stefano, Merone Fabio, Cavatorta Francesco, “Salafism in Tunisia: Challenges and Opportunities for Democratization”, *Middle East Policy Council*, 2012

²⁸⁰ Merone Fabio, Cavatorta Francesco, “Salafist Movement and Sheikhism in the Tunisian Democratic Transition” *Middle East Law and Governance*, 2013

²⁸¹ Ibid.

²⁸² Ibid.

²⁸³ Merone Fabio, Cavatorta Francesco, “Salafist Movement and Sheikhism in the Tunisian Democratic Transition” *Middle East Law and Governance*, 2013

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

2.6.3. *Ansar al-Sharia Alike Ennahda?*

Furthermore, “The challenge to Tunisia’s security clearly lies in the potential radicalization of the country’s youth.”²⁸⁶ Anne Wolf describes the Tunisian context as a true competition for the recruitment of youth between Ennahda and Salafis. Both trends in fact, made huge efforts in order to reach young people, through religious literature and cultural and social activities. By so doing, the growing Salafi movement menaced the old prominent role of Ennahda among youth. In fact, an increasing number of young people left the ranks of the Islamist party in order to join the more revolutionary and ‘cool’ Salafis. Post-revolutionary youth was disappointed by the false promise of Ennahda concerning the inclusion of Sharia in the constitution, so “Many Salafists subsequently labeled Ennahda as “un-Islamic” and an ally of the West.”²⁸⁷ Moreover, young people were deceived by Ennahda’s behavior of tolerance toward Ben ‘Ali supporters: “Some cite this as one of the main reasons behind the controversial behavior of the Leagues for the Protection of the Revolution, stating that if the government does not do enough to protect the country and its revolutionary objectives, this task must be taken up by the people.”²⁸⁸ In addition, youth blamed Ennahda of not having implemented serious economic reforms. A young Ennahda member told Wolf: “when I grew up, my father, an Ennahda activist, was in prison. I was lucky because my mother worked and taught me a modern interpretation of Islam. But I am more of an exception. Many other young Islamists grew up in deep poverty and did not receive this kind of education but instead watched Saudi TV. This led some members of Ennahda’s youth branch to become actually very close to the current Salafi trend.”²⁸⁹ In relation to the difficulty for young people to find landmarks is interesting the analysis conceived by Ghannouchi: “This is a generation that was born with their fathers being absent and has grown up listening, like a litany, to stories of torture and suffering. The only references that unfortunately they found were religious channels from the Gulf, with a strong Salafist message.”²⁹⁰ Ennahda was suffering a serious hemorrhage of internal consensus so, it could have followed just two paths, as trying to co-opt AST or exclude it. “Although Ennahda

²⁸⁶ Wolf Anne, “The Salafist Temptation: the Radicalization of Tunisia’s Post-Revolution Youth” CTC.usma.edu, 2013

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

²⁹⁰ Merone Fabio, Cavatorta Francesco, “The Emergence of Salafism in Tunisia”, jadaliyya.com, 2012

initially featured a “soft” approach to small-scale religiously-motivated violence, it has become increasingly uncompromising toward jihadism.”²⁹¹

The first action of liberalization in Tunisia after Ben Ali, was the general amnesty, of which benefited numerous Salafis, the same of the Soliman's group: men aged from 40 to 45, who had already experienced the international jihad and the heavy state's repression of 2006-2007, together with young men who radicalized in jail. “It is a generation that experienced the harsh repression of the post-Soliman period simply for displaying their religiosity.”²⁹² Cavatorta assessed in fact, that the very first project of Ansar al-Sharia was born in prison with the aim of raising a jihadi-salafi group. Later, when AST became active on the field, this categorization was too tight to entirely describe the movement. AST gradual opening to the democratic environment break Wiktorowicz's categories of Salafism, challenging the rigidness of labels. “According to ordinary militants and leaders (Personal discussions, 2011, 2012 and early 2013), AST was going to be a new jihadi Salafi project based on an exceptional situation – the freedom Tunisia granted – in which dawa was possible as a way of action.”²⁹³ The problem with AST was neither democratic mechanisms nor liberalism, it was rather its absence of tolerance, since the Ansar's deeply doctrinal approach collided with any other position.

“How could the system therefore tolerate an actor that openly admitted that it opposed democracy and practiced violence to prevent others from enjoying the benefits of freedom?”²⁹⁴ In 2013 a young Salafi told Cavatorta and Merone about the meeting at the Palace of Government. This was the very final break between AST and the State, since young Salafis were in open disagreement with such a meeting: “If the state wants is to open dialogue it has to come to us and not the opposite.”²⁹⁵ Consequently, the system finally excluded AST from the public scene, when the government decided to outlaw the group in 2013. Effectively, the prime minister Ali Laryedh declared the banning of the Islamist group in a press conference in August 2013 with the effect that: “For many within al Nahda the decision also came as a relief.”²⁹⁶ Strategically, it could not be tolerated that an anti-democratic and potentially violent

²⁹¹ Wolf Anne, “The Salafist Temptation: the Radicalization of Tunisia's Post-Revolution Youth” CTC.usma.edu, 2013

²⁹² Cavatorta Francesco, “Salafism, liberalism, and democratic learning in Tunisia”, *The Journal of North African Studies*, 2015

²⁹³ Ibid.

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

²⁹⁵ Merone Fabio, “Salafism in Tunisia: An Interview with a Member of Ansar al-Sharia”, jadaliyya.com, 2013

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

group survived in Tunisia during the democratic process. So, AST and the new-born state went to hard clashes, proceeding to mass imprisonments, tortures and police crackdowns. Such political choices showed huge contradictions, firstly: “The paradox though is that in order to ‘save’ democracy from AST, highly illiberal practices had to be employed.”²⁹⁷ Secondly, is evident the paradox according to which AST's members want human rights to be recognized for them even though they never respected it. Cavatorta in fact, reflected on the permeability of the humanitarian right's discourse, its lack of any bond with laws and conventions, and its will of protecting the all different players in the society.

2.7. AST and the International Jihadi Network

“[...] there are no doubts that there is a linkage between vast sectors of Tunisian Salafism and the brand and ideology of international Jihadi Salafism.”²⁹⁸ As Cavatorta and Merone focused the founder of AST Abu Iyadh was a fighter in Afghanistan, met AQMI and “[...] declare without many problems their allegiance to the symbols of the international jihad.”²⁹⁹ AST is probably born in the international jihadist environment, nevertheless, it developed new elements in relation to the international context. Abu Iyadh enriched Ansar al-Sharia by his multiple experiences in close contact with many Algerian and Libyan activists within the international jihad. Abu Iyadh decided to leave for jihad in Afghanistan, obviously influenced by the head of GSPC Abu Doha and al-Qaeda strategy. A figure who profoundly influenced Abu Iyadh was the Sheikh Abu Qatada al-Filistini, the learned critic of the nowadays ISIS group. Al-Filistini's approach based on his indiscriminate strategy of violence, furthermore, he was a supporter of the branch of al-Qaeda in Syria, Jebhat al-Nusrah. Daveed Gartenstein-Ross explains: “According to Ben Brik, the founding members of AST have been active in Tunisia since 2003. Ben Brik referenced their 'experiences abroad' prior to their return to Tunisia, a clear reference to their activities as part of the transnational jihadist movement.”³⁰⁰

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

²⁹⁸ Merone Fabio, Cavatorta Francesco, “The Emergence of Salafism in Tunisia”, jadaliyya.com, 2012

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

³⁰⁰ Gartenstein-Ross Daveed, “Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia's Long Game: Dawa, Hisba and Jihad”, ICCT Research Paper, 2013

Whether AST is more or less part of the international jihadi network is a an unclear theme, so far. Evidences such as constant availability of medicines and wide presence of Salafi literature brought Aaron Zelin and Gartenstein-Ross³⁰¹ to advance the hypothesis that Ansar al-Sharia is one of the knots in the web of International Jihadism. The amount of literature diffused by the Ansar was Saudi-edited, making possible to deduce that the Saudi financed AST activities. Conversely, there is no unanimity about jihad within Salafis. In fact, divergent concepts of jihad divide scientific from armed Salafis: does one must fight the near or the distant enemy? Is there a single strategy to establish an Islamic state? Do scientific, jihadi and political Salafis agree about the means to achieve a common goal? Wide are the differences in approach, both intellectual and practical. AST implemented jihad in its violent actions, targeting 'sinners' in Tunisia and behaving as the guardian of public morality.

Conversely, the element that always differentiated Ansar al-Sharia from other groups is the importance given to missionary activities. Zelin wrote: "What sets ASB and AST apart is that they are providing aid to local communities in a non-state actor capacity, which has been unheard of previously."³⁰² The link with the international jihadi network does not necessarily mean an armed engagement in Tunisia, which Abu Iyadh defined as a *land of da'wa and not a land of jihad*. Effectively, there are some substantial differences between AST and other groups belonging to the Jihadi network, starting from AST peculiar approach to the jihadi ideology. In particular, are AST practices that make the difference as its deep commitment to *da'wa*. That being said, the international jihadism was probably the cradle of Tunisian Salafi-jihadi groups. Nevertheless, Torelli, Merone and Cavatorta focused on the Tunisian historical context, which they analyzed to prove that Salafism in Tunisia is not an 'imported product'.³⁰³ Expressions of contemporary Salafism as Ansar al-Sharia have obviously its roots in the international jihad, but they have found fertile ground in Tunisia in a specific historical lapse, around 1980s. It is important to highlight that the 'predisposition' to Salafism was present in the post-dictatorship Tunisia, as a reaction to the oppressive regime of Ben Ali, since, before the creation of Ansar al-Sharia, there was already multiple experience of Salafi groups, such as Jund al-Assad Ibn

³⁰¹ Gartenstein-Ross Daveed, "Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia's Long Game: Dawa, Hisba and Jihad", ICCT Research Paper, 2013

³⁰² Aaron Y. Zelin, "Maqdisi's disciples in Libya and Tunisia", *Foreign Policy*, 2012

³⁰³ Torelli Stefano, Merone Fabio, Cavatorta Francesco, "Salafism in Tunisia: Challenges and Opportunities for Democratization", *Middle East Policy Council*, 2012

Furat in 2006. "Finally Jihadism is a form of violent opposition to 'unjust rule' avocation at year Establishing Islamic state."³⁰⁴ Torelli, Merone and Cavatorta explain. So, despite his birth owes much to international Jihadism, the path of Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia represents a unique expression in the jihadi-Salafi landscape. According to the BBC "Indeed, the original purpose behind the creation of the Ansar al-Sharia brand, thought to be a front for al-Qaeda and which today exists in several Muslim countries, was to avoid the negative attention associated with the al-Qaeda name, with the group operating at the grass-root levels to build a public support base. [...] The group denies any links to al-Qaeda or other militant groups outside Libya, although the Tunisian security officials pointed to operational, financial and logistical links between Ansar al-Sharia in Libya and Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST), with the latter receiving weapons from its Libyan counterpart."³⁰⁵ Another interesting point is the phenomenon of 'brand', since it remains unclear whether AST is a hedge of al-Qaeda built in order to mislead observers and politicians, or it aims at the Islamic state, but through less violent means. Ansar al-Sharia, even if for a short period, lowered common people's fear of terrorism thank to the new political and historical context of freedom in Tunisia.

According to Gartenstein Ross, while US analysts tend to consider AST detached from other jihadi organizations, the two main claims about the nature of AST and its links with international jihad alleged by Tunisian government must be analyzed. Firstly, when Tunisian government banned AST in 2013, Ali Larayedh accused the group of having connections with AQMI, trough "[...] leadership ties, operational links, financial support, and intentions."³⁰⁶ Effectively, a document proves ties between AST and AQMI, the "Allegiance Act" signed from Abu Iyadh AST's leader and Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud, leader of AQMI. Concerning the operational links: "More generally, Mustapha Ben Amor, Tunisia's general director of national security, described AST as a member of "the parent terrorist al-Qaeda," and said that AST members receive training in Libya and Syria."³⁰⁷ About financial support, it is necessary to highlight that AST's resources came both from Tunisia and abroad, especially from Libya, Mali and Yemen, all AQMI strongholds. "If the funding allegation is true, it may mean that AST has tapped into al-Qaeda

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

³⁰⁵ Irshaid Faisal, "Profile: Libya's Ansar al-Sharia", bbc.com, 2014

³⁰⁶ Gartenstein Ross Daveed, Moreng Bridget, "Tunisia's War with Ansar al-Sharia: New Revelations about al-Qaeda's North African Network", warontherocks.com, 2013

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

donor networks, and may even be receiving financial support from the jihadist group's affiliates, like Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.”³⁰⁸ Finally, are AST and AQMI intentions really mirrored? According to Tunisian intelligence, AQMI changed its mind about Tunisia: it was no more considered as a warehouse for arms, rather a more fertile ground to rise its aims. Consequently, the second claim of the Tunisian government is that AST was involved in political violence, especially after the assassinations of Choukri Belaid and Mohammad Brahmi, addressed to Ansar al-Sharia. “In addition to the assassinations, the government has linked AST to a number of past attacks, and claims that the group has planned further attacks as well.”³⁰⁹ In spite of the international and especially American skepticism about Tunisian governmental claims, it must be told that it is important to consider all different paths. Moreover, as reported by Gartenstein-Ross, “[...] AST has done very little to deny the government’s charges. After being accused of being part of the al-Qaeda network, the group confirmed its “loyalty” to al-Qaeda, but said that it had “organizational independence” and was “not tied to any group outside.”³¹⁰ The author warned on the necessity of more accurate inquiries in order to better understand contexts and strategies. Al-Monitor reported even that Ansar al-Sharia divisions in Syria and Libya maintain relations with ISIS and AST’s leaders came to Syria to ask for alliance to Al-Baghdadi. However, “Despite the accuracy of this characterization, the course of events in the region is complicated, making it hard to tell who is with or against whom.”³¹¹ In addition, the supporting system is still largely efficacious among different jihadi-Salafi groups by gathering donations, communicating and spreading Salafi propaganda to locals and supporting jihad fighting in Syria.³¹²

Concluding, it must be said that what is certainly known is that Ansar al-Sharia is connected with the global jihadi network. What is still unclear is at which level: the numerous accidents occurred in Tunisia in 2012-2013 are supported, praised or ordered by groups outside the country? Is there room for supposing a tie between AST and the global jihadi network which incite violent acts against democracy, secular power and specifically against government? Specifically, is Ansar al-Sharia the hand which produced such crimes for sure? It will be interesting

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

³⁰⁹ Gartenstein Ross Daveed, Moreng Bridget, “Tunisia’s War with Ansar al-Sharia: New Revelations about al-Qaeda’s North African Network”, warontherocks.com, 2013

³¹⁰ Ibid.

³¹¹ Suleiman Ali Abdallah, “Global jihadists recognize Islamic State”, al-monitor.com, 2014

³¹² Ibid.

to observe in the next chapter, the dynamics of building and development of Salafism in China, even if geographically and culturally far from Tunisia and its environment. This focus will present an expansion in the analysis of global jihadi network, in order to establish a connection between such different worlds by finding some key-factors which explain the boom of 'salafization' of the Islamic world.

Chapter 3

Compared Analysis: Tunisia and Xinjiang

The research carried out in this chapter will explore the internal dynamics of the Salafi movement, its ability to adapt to different contexts internationally and its radicalization, through the compared cases of Xinjiang and Tunisia. This section seeks to analyze the common elements of these two case-study despite its different geography, culture and history. Thank to the analysis of AST in Tunisia, we barely put the bases for a broader understanding of the Salafi phenomenon. The previous chapter analyzed the conditions through which Ansar al-Sharia grew and spread in Tunisia, by exploiting the post-revolutionary context. What is striking, is the fact that the Ansar were not only inspired by blind religious dogmas but by more pragmatic grievances, since AST strategy usually followed political rather than religious logic. Aim of this work is to examine in depth how Salafis built their influence.

But why Xinjiang? Notoriously, Xinjiang is a Chinese region considerably far from the Muslim-Arab world, and yet not so far as it seems. In fact, the Xinjiang population is mainly composed by Muslim Uyghurs, ethnically different from the Han Chinese. In Xinjiang we can find the highest concentration of Muslims people in the whole China. Not only Uyghurs are ethnically and religiously different from the rest of Chinese people, but they also seek political independence from China. So, the most political active Uyghurs made up a radical Islamic group called ETIM in order to get rid of the Chinese government. The region of Xinjiang became a breeding ground for local and international Salafis due to multiple factors such as the Uighur

independence movement, the strict and repressive Chinese surveillance, and broad social frustration. The case of Xinjiang is paradigmatic in order to find evidences of the radicalization process. Is it boosted by religious or political causes? This essay wants to show in fact that the Salafi movement is rooted in very different contexts, as Tunisia and Xinjiang, both characterized by a repressed Muslim context, authoritarian governments, youth's disappointment and social frustration.

Moreover, how Salafism was able to interpret Uighur necessities, giving voice to people's ambitions for freedom and sovereignty? Interestingly, the Uighur independence movement happened to be framed within the broader Salafi goal, as the Islamic state. Finally, this essay will attempt a comparison with the Tunisian case in order to retrace the same conditions of radicalization.

To better answer these questions, this section explores three main factors. First, the political situation in Xinjiang related to China's larger context; second, the analysis of the conflict between Chinese state and Uyghurs in Xinjiang and third, the birth of separatist Uighur movements and the linkage between Uighur rebels and Salafism is analyzed. Finally, the comparative inquiry between ETIM in Xinjiang and AST in Tunisia is drawn, by means of empirical analysis and evidences which underlies similar dynamics. The core of this work will show that the sudden rise of the Jihadi Salafi trend, both in Africa and Central Asia cannot be a mere coincidence. This work highlights the presence of some transverse factors to the Tunisian and Xinjiang' case-studies which bring to radicalization.

3.1. China and Xinjiang: A Complex Relationship

The region of Xinjiang is the largest Chinese administrative autonomous district in the northwest of China and it borders with eight countries: Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. Xinjiang is also crossed by the ancient Silk Road from east to northwest, so the multiple rulers who took turns in the region considered it a highly strategic area. In the past centuries, there was no knowledge about the huge mineral and natural gas resources of Xinjiang, discovered only few decades ago. Nowadays, Xinjiang is China's largest basin of natural gas supply. The region of Xinjiang is, in turn, divided into two zones, different from one another geographically, historically and ethnically. Dzungaria in the

north and Tarim Basin in the south. Only in late 19th century, these two regions were united in Xinjiang. While Dzungaria was a steppe inhabited by nomads, Tarim Basin was a oasis popu-

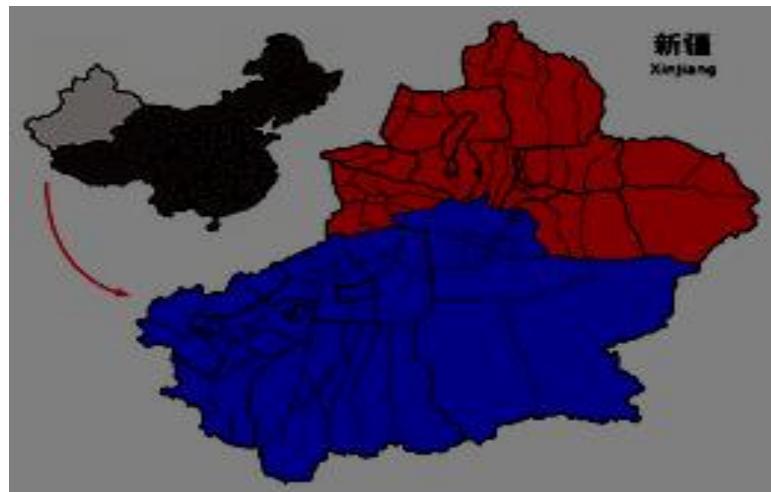


Fig. 4: The two Xinjiang main regions: Dzungaria (red) and Tarim Basin (blue).³¹³ located by sedentary Muslims. These Muslims, also known as Uyghurs, are ethnically different from the large majority of the inhabitants of China, the Han people. Furthermore, Uyghurs do not speak Chinese but a Turkic language³¹³.

The indigenous population of the region, the Uyghurs, considers Xinjiang part of East Turkestan, a mythical place that symbolically includes all Central Asian States. The term 'East Turkestan' was coined by the Russian Empire in 19th century in order to establish a zone of influence in dispute with China. Uyghurs always maintained their cultural and religious specificity, so that the incorporation to China in 1949 was perceived as a real occupation.³¹⁴ In addition, while Uyghur nationalists are proud of 6000 years of history and independent culture, Chinese assess that the Han dynasty lived in Xinjiang for 2000 years, by so doing claiming sovereignty upon the region.³¹⁵

"From the mid-eighteenth century to the end of the Qing dynasty, Chinese perception of, and policies towards the Western Regions (*Xiyu*) and its inhabitant underwent a radical transformation."³¹⁶ Laura Newby explains that during the hundred years of Qing government in Xinjiang, high levels of autonomy and freedom were granted to local Turkic-Muslim people,

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Quigley - Own work from File:Xinjiang regions.png , wikipedia.org

³¹⁴Starr S. Frederik, "The Xinjiang Problem", *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute*, 2003

³¹⁵Bovingdon Gardner, *The Uyghurs: Strangers in Their Own Land*, Columbia University Press, pp 304, 2010

³¹⁶ Newby Laura, "Xinjiang: In Search of an Identity", chapter 4 from *Unity and Diversity: Local Cultures and Identities in China*, by Tao Tao Liu and David Faure, Hong Kong University Press, pp 216, 1996

who lived according to their culture and traditions. "Ironically, the consolidation and development of the Turkic-Muslim identity, which was to some extent fostered, or at least made possible, by Manchus, further alienated the region culturally from China and hardened resistance to subsequent Chines assimilation policies."³¹⁷ Newby affirms that Uyghurs were born as a nation lately. Interestingly, despite Islamic influences from central Asia, Turkic-Muslim's rage engendered by Chinese occupation and the tiny, still fundamental experience of Xinjiang independence in late 1870s, people in Xinjiang were not aware of their identity until the early 20th century. The feeling of belonging to the Uyghur community grew within people of Xinjiang, as "Domestic dissatisfaction is combining with a sense of empathy with Middle Eastern Muslims perceived to be oppressed by foreign imperialist powers to forge an unprecedented sense of global Islamic solidarity among the Uyghurs."³¹⁸ Islam represents the most relevant identity-marker of Central Asians since it gathered people very far from one another. According to Ahmed Rashid, "The Central Asians embraced Islam not only to reestablish their own ethnic and cultural identity but to reconnect with their Muslim neighbors to the south, who had been cut off from them since Stalin closed the borders between the Soviet Union and the rest of the world."³¹⁹ The Chinese Han intellectuals during the Qing dynasty imagined Xinjiang as the boundary between China proper and Western Regions. In fact, Chinese perceived Xinjiang as a wild land characterized by an exotic culture, very different from theirs.³²⁰ Manchu descriptions of Muslims of Xinjiang were harsh and racist, since the people of the steppe was described as false, wild, immoral, promiscuous and lazy. "Such descriptions naturally reinforced Chinese intellectuals' discrimination against local people in Xinjiang, widening the gap between people from China proper and Xinjiang locals, especially Uyghur."³²¹ Toward the beginning of 19th century though, the Chinese attitude concerning Xinjiang changed, turning into a deeper interest. "It reflected the changing place of Xinjiang in literati imagination, and Xinjiang

³¹⁷Ibid.

³¹⁸ Newby Laura, "Xinjiang: In Search of an Identity", chapter 4 from Unity and Diversity: Local Cultures and Identities in China, by Tao Tao Liu and David Faure, Hong Kong University Press, pp 216, 1996.

³¹⁹Rashid Ahmed, Jihad, The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia, Yale University Press, pp. 280, 2002

³²⁰Jianfei Jia, "Whose Xinjiang? The Transition in Chinese Intellectuals' Imagination of the 'New Dominion' during the Qing Dynasty", *Harvard-Yenching Institute Working Paper Series, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences*, 2011

³²¹Ibid.

studies developed swiftly thereafter. [...] Instead, they discussed how to rule Xinjiang effectively, how to control the frontier stably, and how to alleviate the social crisis there through effective management.”³²²

After the breakup of the Qing dynasty, for some decades from 1911 to 1949, the region of Xinjiang was ruled by a military governor “[...] who nervously sought aid and sponsorship first from Soviet Russia and then from the Nationalists, before ultimately surrendering to the Communists in Xinjiang in September 1949.”³²³ In 1957 the Communist Party organized a hard-line wave of religious repression since it did not want to recognize 'local nationalism' and ethnic minorities. Especially after the Cultural Revolution of the decade 1966-1976, “The Uyghur in Xinjiang, like other Muslim minorities throughout China, saw their religious texts and mosques destroyed, their religious leaders persecuted, and individual adherents punished.”³²⁴ After a short lapse of *detente* between the Chinese Republic and the Uyghurs around 1980s, a hard comeback to hostilities occurred in 1996 after the meeting of Shanghai Five. It was the organization of China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Russia made on purpose “In order to counteract the perceived threat of cross-border independence movements between Uyghurs and other ethnic groups in China and their co-ethnics in the newly independent former Soviet republics [...]”³²⁵ The Shanghai Five became the Shanghai Cooperation Organization after the adhesion of Uzbekistan in 2001. As Dwyer explains, the relationship between Xinjiang in China actually worsened in the 1990s, when the Chinese regime started an 'iron fist' policy.³²⁶ According to her analysis, these years coincided with a period of massive exploitation of natural resources and human capital in Xinjiang in order to reach the Chinese economic development. This time was characterized by a growing communist culture concerning practices and language, to the detriment of minorities, particularly Uyghurs. The frustration among Uyghurs broke out in 2000s, through the implementation of several terrorist attacks against China's policies. The alleged presence of a terrorist training camp dis-

³²²Ibid.

³²³Van Wie Davis Elizabeth, “Uyghur Muslim Ethnic Separatism in Xinjiang, China”, *Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies*, 2008

³²⁴Ibid.

³²⁵Holdstock Nick, “Islam and Instability in China's Xinjiang”, *Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Center, NOREF*, 2014

³²⁶Arienne M. Dwyer, “The Xinjiang Conflict : Uyghur Identity, Language Policy, and Political Discourse”, *East-West Center Washington, Policy Studies* 15, 2005

covered in 2007 in the Xinjiang region contributed to increase the violence on both sides, Chinese and Uyghur. To the violent resistance promoted by Uyghurs, the Chinese responded through harsh repression. “It is clear that the Chinese leadership fears that Xinjiang separatism has and will continue to gain support from transnational Muslim extremists, with possible ramifications both for other latent Chinese separatist movements without a Muslim connection and for other Chinese Muslims without a separatist agenda.”³²⁷

Another relevant factor to better understand the complex social context of Xinjiang, is the phenomenon of mass migration of the Han Chinese population into the region, which constantly occurred since the second half of 21st century. “Not only is this making the western regions more ethnically Chinese, but also it is reinforcing the “minority” status of the Uyghurs, who watch the better paying jobs go to Han Chinese while the harder labor, poorer paying positions are given to Uyghurs.”³²⁸ As Howell and Fan assesses, from 1950s to 1960s the Chinese government massively relocated Han Chinese to frontier regions, obviously to Xinjiang too. The Popular Republic constituted the Xinjiang Protection and Construction Corps (XPCC) in 1954, a paramilitary group entirely composed by Han people, which was charged to build infrastructures in the northwestern region in order to speed up the State-led migration of Han

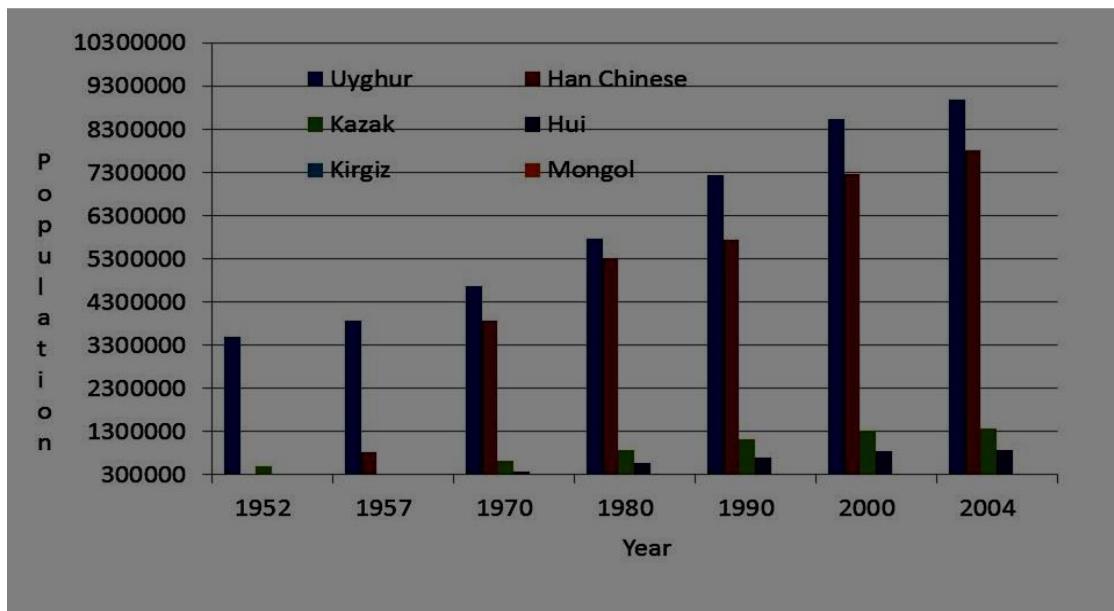


Fig. 4: Demographic Changes of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region

³²⁷Van Wie Davis Elizabeth, “Uyghur Muslim Ethnic Separatism in Xinjiang, China”, *Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies*, 2008

³²⁸Ibid.

to Xinjiang. "Scholars have noted that Han migrants to Xinjiang still are given priority over minorities in obtaining urban employment, a source of persistent inequality between Han and minorities (Iredale et. al., 2001; Su et. al., 2001; Gladney, 2004; Wiemer, 2004; Pannell and Schmidt, 2006)."329 The following picture represents the Xinjiang demographic composition, focusing on the Han Chinese migrations overtime.³³⁰

Inequality is the key-word in order to analyze the social context in Xinjiang immediately after the first round of Han migrations. If it is true that Han people boosted the industrial and economic development in the region, it is also true that Uyghurs perceived the migration as a colonization, since the Han-colonizers only could take advantage of the new jobs.³³¹ Howell and Fan claim that the Uyghurs were effectively excluded from the large majority of employments in the industrial sector, so they had to migrate, in turn, from the southern to the more industrialized northern Xinjiang, working in the informal sector and getting low-payed jobs. "The persistence and perception of Han-Uyghur inequality has fueled ethnic-based conflicts and separatist movements in the region (Bovingdon, 2004)."332 In addition, "Not only does Xinjiang have considerable energy resources in terms of gas and oil, in addition to its former role as the Chinese nuclear test grounds, but also Xinjiang is the gateway to Central Asian energy resources."³³³

3.2. China's Attitude toward Uyghurs

"The incidents have included an increasing number of ethnic clashes between Uyghurs and Han Chinese, explosions and Chinese military operations in XUAR, and a number of high-profile incidents involving Uyghurs. [...] A number of observers have seen in these attacks evidence of growing radicalization among Uyghurs."³³⁴ The incidents Kilic refers to happened between

³²⁹Howell Antony, Fan C. Cindy, "Migration and Inequality in Xinjiang: A Survey of Han and Uyghur Migrants in Urumqi" *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 2011

³³⁰https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Xinjiang_Demographic.jpg

³³¹Ibid.

³³²Ibid.

³³³Ibid.

³³⁴Kanat Kilic, "Repression in China and Its Consequences in Xinjiang", *Hudson Institute*, 2014

2013 and 2014 in Tienanmen Square and many spots in Xinjiang. What is interesting is to analyze the deep causes which lies behind such violent actions. Why such a violence?

Since the second half of 21st century, the Chinese government cracked down systematically on Uyghur minority, by abducting the emergence of security. The Chinese strategy of repression has been uninterrupted and scientific, since it started by assimilating Uyghurs' culture through mass imprisonments and religious repression. Consequently, the PRC expelled Uyghur population from its own territories by State-led, massive Han Chinese migrations toward Xinjiang. Furthermore, once settled in Xinjiang, only the Han Chinese took advantage of the governmental economic policies. Chinese official pretexts in order to rule over Xinjiang are the following: the security issue, the Western Development, cultural assimilation and terrorism.³³⁵ The Chinese attitude toward Uyghurs will be analyzed in these paragraphs.

According to International Relations theory, the security issue represents a real 'dilemma' for the international community, since the increase of security measures by a state bring the other states to worry and feel insecure, and by so doing, it triggers a process of self-defense escalation.³³⁶ If the security concerns internal dangers, it turns into 'societal security', since the danger is directed to the country's identity. "Meanwhile, PRC authorities have prosecuted Uyghur dissent and activism as manifestations of extremism, separatism, or terrorism."³³⁷ Effectively, China considers Xinjiang as a potential danger for the Han community and for the whole region of Central Asia. Uyghurs in fact, are Muslims as many people in Central Asia and they did not settle only in Xinjiang, but spread in numerous Central Asian Republics. Last but not least, Uyghurs experienced independence in Xinjiang around 1930s, actually. This short-lived, still true period of independence made Uyghurs build a clear self-representation, as "politically significant ethno-national and religious identities."³³⁸ The 2009 incidents, which followed the Han lynching of Uyghur workers, turned into a violent clash between Uyghurs and police, which harshly cracked down on civilians. Hundreds were the casualties and remained unknown the causes of death. Chinese authorities handled the incident as an evil, and fiercely repressed it. Any method was allowed, therefore: "During and after the clashes, the

³³⁵Clarke Michael, "China's Internal Security Dilemma and the 'Great Western Development': the Dynamics of Integration, Ethnic Nationalism and Terrorism in Xinjiang", *Asian Studies Review*, 2007

³³⁶Ibid.

³³⁷Ibid.

³³⁸Ibid.

government closed off the region to international observers for months. Officials expelled foreign journalists, disrupted Internet access and cellphone reception, and limited news from the region to the PRC's state-run media.”³³⁹

The Chinese government targeted Islamic radicalism as the main cause of 2009 clashes, and yet, the incident was about the repression of civil rights. No religious claims were involved. “Attentive observers of the conflict reject the oversimplification of the government’s narrative, instead putting forth a complex mélange of causes that stem from social and economic discrimination, forced assimilation, and religious repression at the hands of the government.”³⁴⁰ According to Yitzhak Shichor, Beijing is exploiting and misrepresenting Xinjiang historical heritage through the passkey of the security issue. “This is not to say that the problem of Uyghur separatism and Islamic radicalism does not exist. Little known outside China and relatively latent inside China until the early 1980s, Uyghur separatism and Islamic radicalism in Xinjiang have begun to gather momentum and attract some scholarly and media attention.”³⁴¹ Regarding the Uyghur Independent Movement ETIM, for example, the Chinese government took an intransigent stand, since it labeled the movement only for its Islamic aspect: “For Beijing, the link between separatism and Islam is self-evident and has been made primarily by the ETIM.”³⁴² So, the Chinese positions upon both Uyghur separatism and Islam in Xinjiang are mirrored and mutually reinforced. Concerning Uyghur religious culture, however, China's attitude was bipolar, both 'soft' and 'hard'. Soft policies of tolerance were introduced, such as the construction of mosques and the institution of the Chinese Islamic Association in order to better control religious activities, but also hard line was followed whenever China called for a terrorist threat.³⁴³ Especially after 2001, “Thus, Muslim clerics and students were arrested or detained for participation in “illegal religious activities”, “illegal religious centres” were closed, and imams were compelled to attend “political education” sessions.”³⁴⁴

³³⁹Kanat Kilic, “Repression in China and Its Consequences in Xinjiang”, *Hudson Institute*, 2014

³⁴⁰Ibid.

³⁴¹Shichor Yitzhak, “Blow Up: Internal and External Challenges of Uyghur Separatism and Islamic Radicalism to Chinese Rule in Xinjiang”, *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, 2005

³⁴²Shichor Yitzhak, “Blow Up: Internal and External Challenges of Uyghur Separatism and Islamic Radicalism to Chinese Rule in Xinjiang”, *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, 2005

³⁴³Ibid.

³⁴⁴Clarke Michael, “China's Internal Security Dilemma and the 'Great Western Development': the Dynamics of Integration, Ethnic Nationalism and Terrorism in Xinjiang”, *Asian Studies Review*, 2007

Michael Clarke's point is that the Chinese government is deeply aware of the absence of a real 'Uyghur threat', nevertheless, it meticulously applies the preventive strategy, as it did in Tienanmen. "Put differently, China's leaders do not regard, and have never regarded, Uyghur separatist activism in Xinjiang as a real threat, only as an excuse to neutralize and suppress the sprouts of national separatism while they are still relatively harmless."³⁴⁵ Furthermore, while the Chinese power obsessively designates the Uyghur diaspora associations as the first enemy, they involuntarily increase the adhesion to these organizations, both in and out of China. Need to be focused is the analysis of the Chinese rhetoric dual-track. According to Shichor in fact, China adapts its discourse according to whether it needs to get US or Hong Kong's attention. Depending on China's need of the former or the latter partner, the propaganda sharply changes. In order to obtain US support in fact, China needs to prove Washington its strict commitment in combating terrorism, therefore China displays the Uyghurs as PRC principle enemy. Conversely, if China wants to attract foreign investments, the Xinjiang issue will be largely underestimated by Chinese authorities.³⁴⁶ Accordingly, if Uyghurs focus on armed struggles and violent clashes with the government, the Chinese security apparatus will predictably hide Uyghur protests and claim to the foreign press. Therefore, it is not certain that Uyghurs will receive international attention and help. In fact, a provocative behavior toward Chinese authorities could be counterproductive for Uyghurs.³⁴⁷ Shichor, in his analysis of a Chinese propagandist documentary on terrorism in Xinjiang, assesses that Xinjiang is not an area of terrorism and that PRC largely falsify reality. "The bottom line is that Beijing is trying to manipulate public opinion – at home and abroad – by exploiting the remoteness of Xinjiang as well as the cultural distance and the restricted information, to influence foreign governments [...]"³⁴⁸ However, since the main Chinese strategy is the preventive action, even if the terrorism risk is low, the government would implement inquiries, tighten policy control and increase military interven-

³⁴⁵Ibid.

³⁴⁶Shichor Yitzhak, "Blow Up: Internal and External Challenges of Uyghur Separatism and Islamic Radicalism to Chinese Rule in Xinjiang", *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, 2005

³⁴⁷Shichor Yitzhak, "Blow Up: Internal and External Challenges of Uyghur Separatism and Islamic Radicalism to Chinese Rule in Xinjiang", *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, 2005

³⁴⁸Shichor Yitzhak, "Fact and Fiction: A Chinese Documentary on Eastern Turkestan Terrorism", *Central-Asia Caucasus Institute*, Silk Road Studies Program, 2006

tions in Xinjiang. Furthermore, “[...] the perception it creates is then useful to justify and legitimize a further crackdown campaign [...]”³⁴⁹ Finally, China's attitude toward terrorism in Xinjiang seems bipolar and instrumental on the one hand, in order to gain the international attention; on the other hand, to get a valid pretext to freely crack down on Uyghurs. “In this regard Michael Dillon has noted that, “By defining all separatist activity in Xinjiang as terrorist, the government of the PRC is hoping to obtain carte blanche from the international community to take whatever action it sees fit in the region” (Dillon, 2004, p. 162).”³⁵⁰

Another main issue is the Chinese 'Great Western Development', as the paternalistic Party attitude concerning Western regions, especially overbearing toward the ethnic minorities. “The implication is clear – the ethnic minorities represent “traditional”, colourful and ultimately “backward” societies, whereas the Han represent modernity.”³⁵¹ Xinjiang is considered *the* frontier from the Han Chinese, by originating thus, the phenomenon of the 'oriental orientalism', as Gladney defined it. The Chinese rhetoric toward the Western regions is based on the need of 'national unity', 'social stability', and economic development, of course. Consequently, the policy of the regional autonomy applied to Xinjiang is mostly ruled by the Chinese government. “Significantly, although the state’s policy on regional autonomy explicitly states that the head of an autonomous region, prefecture or county must be a member of the ethnic group exercising autonomy, in actuality it is the CCP that wields real power in the region.”³⁵²

The economic sector is also an important field of analysis since the disparities are huge between cities and countryside and they are also linked to the ethnic composition. Especially, Han live in cities, while ethnic minorities in rural areas. Moreover, given that the Hans only, are part of the paramilitary XPCC organization, the Chinese government gave it the discretionary power of implementing security measures, making it a “[...] powerful colonizing force through its absorption of Han migrants, [...].”³⁵³ The total lack of political inclusion of the Uyghurs into the Chinese government, the economic fragility of Xinjiang and the deep disappointment and

³⁴⁹Ibid.

³⁵⁰Clarke Michael, “China's Internal Security Dilemma and the 'Great Western Development': the Dynamics of Integration, Ethnic Nationalism and Terrorism in Xinjiang”, *Asian Studies Review*, 2007

³⁵¹Ibid.

³⁵²Clarke Michael, “China's Internal Security Dilemma and the 'Great Western Development': the Dynamics of Integration, Ethnic Nationalism and Terrorism in Xinjiang”, *Asian Studies Review*, 2007

³⁵³Ibid.

frustration among the Uyghur youth, led inevitably to violence. "In economic terms Xinjiang lags behind the prosperous eastern provinces, but is by no means among the poorest regions in China."³⁵⁴ The Xinjiang oil, gas and electricity are deeply exploited by China since these natural resources are fundamental for China sensitive issues as energy security and strategic diplomacy with Central Asian Republics. "The energy deals China has signed with Xinjiang's neighbors are key elements of China's overall engagement strategy for Central Asia [...]"^{355b}

The language of minorities are a threat to China, too. The Chinese government in fact, allege that minority languages are vehicles of separatism, therefore they need to be censored. "The extent of the state's connection of "separatism" with any overt sign of ethnic minority identity has been reinforced since 2001, with the authorities limiting the use of Uighur language in education and the increased censoring of Uighur literature dealing with political or cultural history (Amnesty International, 2002; Dillon, 2003)."³⁵⁶ The official Chinese rhetoric claims that the Uyghur language does not contain the adequate scientific terminology, so it is useless to Chinese universities and progress. Young people thus, need to study in Mandarin language in order to get access to scientific and technological research. Ultimately, Uyghur language is an obstacle to development of the entire country. According to Michael Dillon, the issue of cultural repression has recently hardened in Xinjiang: "In the region's main university, Xinjiang University, Uyghur and Chinese were both used as languages of instruction until a government decision in May 2002 decreed that the vast majority of courses would be taught only in Chinese. Uyghur students have for many years had to make the difficult decision of whether to study in Chinese or their own language but this ruling deprives them even of that choice."³⁵⁷ Many books about traditional Uyghur craftsmanship were also banned and destroyed, and a precise strategy of cultural genocide was set by the Chinese Party. In Chinese rhetoric, separatists are destroying and distorting the history of Xinjiang, therefore Chinese authorities have the moral task of strengthening education.³⁵⁸ Furthermore, "The campaign against separatism has been waged by the Chinese authorities since the early 1990s but has

³⁵⁴Holdstock Nick, "Islam and Instability in China's Xinjiang", *Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Center, NOREF*, 2014

³⁵⁵Ibid.

³⁵⁶Clarke Michael, "China's Internal Security Dilemma and the 'Great Western Development': the Dynamics of Integration, Ethnic Nationalism and Terrorism in Xinjiang", *Asian Studies Review*, 2007

³⁵⁷Dillon Michael, "Uyghur Language and Culture under Threat in Xinjiang", *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Analyst*, 2002

³⁵⁸Ibid.

been given added impetus by China's support for the USA-led war against Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. China hopes that this support will reduce the criticism it has received from human rights organizations over its policies on minority languages and culture in Xinjiang.”³⁵⁹

3.3. The (fake) Open Door Policy

“With the 'open door' policy launched in the late 1970s and the subsequent economic reforms, there was a religious revival in the XUAR as in the rest of PRC. The authorities allowed the reopening of mosques and the use of funds contributed from some Islamic countries to build new mosques, found Quranic schools and import religious materials. Many Muslims were allowed to travel to Islamic countries, and contacts with Muslims abroad were encouraged.”³⁶⁰
What lies behind such a dreamy picture?

According to Gaye Christoffersen, the Open Door policy was successful for Xinjiang since it led the region opening both to Han China and to the Great Muslim Circle, promoting local autonomy and national integration. The concept of Great Islamic Circle was conceived by Han Chinese economists, and it aimed at exploiting cross-border Islamic population in order to link China, via Xinjiang, to Soviet Central Asia and Middle East.³⁶¹ Especially, in 1980, Xinjiang “[...] liberalized its policies toward Islam, reinstating the Xinjiang Islamic Association. Muslim minorities were encouraged to establish friendly contact with Muslims outside the country.”³⁶² In 1990, the huge project of the commercial railway was completed, it linked Druzhba, the Soviet Central Asia and Urumqi. The infrastructure was largely supported by USSR and warmly welcomed by Uyghurs, who could visit their families in Central Asia, trade and organize trips to Mecca.³⁶³ Hilton Isabel focused also on the presence of two large faiths in China, Islam and Buddhism, which each correspond to an autonomous region, characterized by different culture, which represent a potential danger to the unity and stability of the whole country.³⁶⁴

³⁵⁹Ibid.

³⁶⁰Bhattacharya Abanti, “Conceptualizing Uyghur separatism in Chinese nationalism”, *Strategic Analysis*, 2008

³⁶¹Christoffersen Gaye, “Xinjiang and the Great Islamic Circle: The Impact of Transnational Forces on Chinese Regional Economic Planning”, *HeinOnline*, 1993

³⁶²Christoffersen Gaye, “Xinjiang and the Great Islamic Circle: The Impact of Transnational Forces on Chinese Regional Economic Planning”, *HeinOnline*, 1993

³⁶³Ibid.

³⁶⁴Hilton Isabel, “God in China”, *Index on Censorship*, Vol. 33, no 4, pp 200-204, 2004

Yitzhak Schichor deeply analyzed the peculiarity of the Uyghur independent movement, especially its delay, if compared to the Third World's movement for independence of 1960s. The Uyghur movement in fact, begun to be universally known only from the 1980s. Is there any explanation to such a trend? First of all, according to Schichor, the first factor which caused the delay was the absence of pressures on China by the international community, since 1960s, when the Chinese government self-portrayed as anti-colonialist and no country dared to contradict it. Moreover, at the beginning of his government, Mao was seen as a hero by most part of Western public opinion. In fact, in 1960s there was no such a great involvement in human rights and the political attention was captured by the trend of the Cold War. China thus, was free to commit repressions, ethnic persecutions and largely gloss over human rights. "Basically, besides remote academic circles, little was known about Uyghurs, their history, culture and their obscure nationalist claims."³⁶⁵ Secondly, but more relevant are the Chinese political internal causes of the silence of the Uyghur Independent Movement: "Having crushed the surviving remnants of Eastern Turkestan rebels in the early 1950s and Beijing did not treat Uyghur separatism as a serious having largely "pacified the west" (*anxi*) thereafter, threat at least until the 1980s."³⁶⁶ According to Schichor in fact, Deng Xiaoping's Open Door strategy, brought the country under the international attention for the first time. Such an opening strategy was economically convenient to China, but also dangerous, since its security was at stake. So, a wider and tighter system of control and repression, especially over the peripheries, was put in place. "Under these circumstances, Uyghur identities (ethnic, political, social, religious, economic, international, etc.) in general and "Uyghur separatism" in particular, have become a primary target for this ongoing crackdown, unprecedented even in Mao's time."³⁶⁷

According to Goldman, in Mao's China religion was a sensitive issue, especially for Christians, but the Party in its early years never cracked down on religion. It rather created institutions which controlled religious issues, as the Bureau of Religious Affairs. "But it was not until the

³⁶⁵ Schichor Yitzhak, "Limping on Two Legs: Uyghur Diaspora Organizations and the Prospects for Eastern Turkestan Independence", *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, 2007

³⁶⁶ Ibid.

³⁶⁷ Schichor Yitzhak, "Limping on Two Legs: Uyghur Diaspora Organizations and the Prospects for Eastern Turkestan Independence", *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, 2007

Cultural Revolution, from 1966 to 1976, that the regime moved from a policy of gradually repressing religion to one of extinguishing altogether.”³⁶⁸ Notwithstanding Mao’s terrific Cultural Revolution aimed at eradicating religion and destroying temples, churches and mosques, people could still maintain an informal kind of belief, through clandestine gatherings and meetings. Religion became an underground issue, completely out of the Party control. Goldman assesses that after the unspeakable crimes of the Cultural Revolution, people were annihilated, disappointed and largely frustrated: the revolution they hoped for, was not the bloodshed they were living. Worshipers largely grew from Mao’s time to Deng Xiaoping’s: million of new believers were the proof that religion had been suppressed but not extinguished. The new leader decided that the Party had to allow the cult of religions in order to better control them: so Deng Xiaoping ordered the rebuilding of churches, temples and mosques and furnished books and schools where educate clergy. Under Deng Xiaoping independent home gathering became outlawed: it was necessary to be registered. “While seemingly benign, the Party’s policy toward Islam, as toward Christianity, was to tighten political control. Besides the strategic and political reasons, the Party’s reestablishment of religious institutions was also to gain tourist dollars.”³⁶⁹ In conclusion, it is relevant to note that, both under Mao and Xiaoping, periods of relaxation followed period of harsh repression. What is interesting is Muslims’ reactions to the Open Door policy, since according to Byram Balci: “Similarly, Uighurs took advantage of the economic opening of China and Xinjiang in the middle of the 1980s to develop contacts with their fellow countrymen. [...] Numerous Uighur students in Saudi Arabia were sent back home by the League to reislamize the population according to the Saudi tradition. Their active involvement favoured the spreading or strengthening in Xinjiang’s Uighur community of fundamentalist trends like wahhabism and salafism.”³⁷⁰ The World Islamic League was instituted in 1962 in order to protect and support Muslims all over the world and its main objectives were to promote religious education, to spread the faith and to help oppressed and persecuted Muslims. “From its creation in 1962 until the collapse of the USSR in 1991, the League had no

³⁶⁸ Goldman Merle, “Religion in Post-Mao China”, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 483, pp.146-156, 1986

³⁶⁹ Ibid.

³⁷⁰ Balci Bayram, “Central Asian Refugees in Saudi Arabia: Religious Evolution and Contributing to the Reislamization of their Motherland”, *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, vol. 26, no 2, pp 12-21, 2007

operations in Central Asia since the region was completely inaccessible to any external influence.”³⁷¹ From 1991 onward, the League begun to reach Central Asia too by taking care of translating Koran and Islamic literature and involved Turkestani Uzbek intellectuals, who had the task of coming back home and preach the ‘right’ Islamic message. The members of the League were followed by hundreds of pious men who proselytized and built mosques in their homelands. “Their task was not easy, since Saudi Islam differs very much from the Central Asian tradition and rituals, which are mixed with mysticism and deeply rooted in Sufi traditions.”³⁷² According to Balci the reislamization process in Central Asia depends on the time the exiled spent in Saudi Arabia, and on their contribution to proselytize in their motherlands. Uyghurs fled in Saudi Arabia from China during the Cultural Revolution and came back under Deng Xiaoping; thirty years of elaboration of the Islamic faith.

Schichor discovered that the harsh repression of Uyghur separatism implemented under Deng Xiaoping never happened in Mao's time. According to the Chinese propaganda in fact, Uyghurs under Mao were considered a legitimate minority, while Xiaoping considered them as an illegitimate nationality that must be assimilated to the Han. “Therefore, Uyghur persecution—that had been resumed in the 1980s—has increased by China following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the Central Asian republics as independent entities in the early 1990s.”³⁷³ Predictably, the consequence of Xiaoping's harsh repression was the attraction of foreign press and NGOs for human rights defense, which begun to get interested in Uyghurs' condition. From 1990s onward, the East Turkestan Independence Movement became worldwide-known, and numerous associations and organizations were born in order to defend and support Uyghurs' rights. The Uyghur expatriates found support in USA, Canada and other countries, but since the repression worsened they did not came back to China and preferred standing for their rights from outside China.

By the mid-1990s, China became more and more sensitive to Uyghur separatism, therefore it applied growing pressure on Ankara in order to suppress Turkish solidarity activities and demonstrations to the East Turkestan movement, tacitly supported by Erdogan. Gradually,

³⁷¹Ibid.

³⁷²Ibid.

³⁷³Schichor Yitzhak, “Limping on Two Legs: Uyghur Diaspora Organizations and the Prospects for Eastern Turkestan Independence”, *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, 2007

Turkish support to the Uyghur cause vanished, since Erdoğan had to dial with the Kurdish challenge and international pressure.

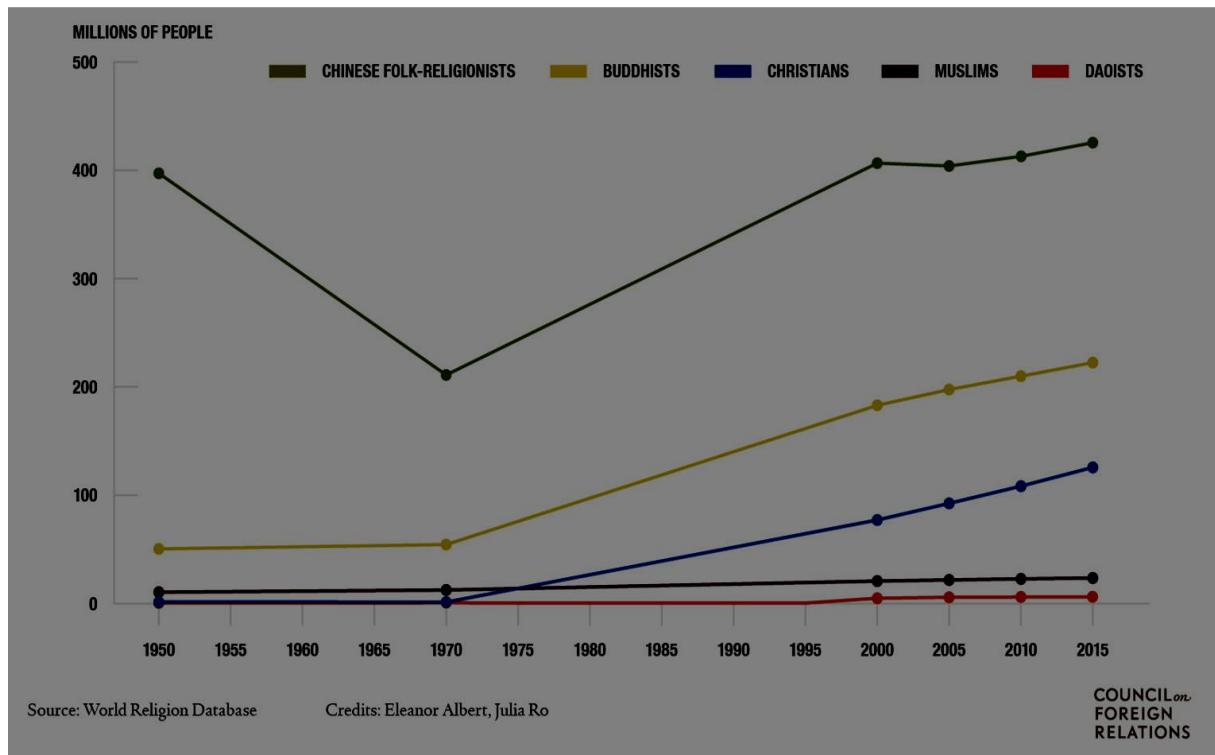


Fig. 5: Trend of religions in China over time

Anyway, the country which had the largest Turkic immigrant population in Europe was Germany: "A number of Eastern Turkestan organizations had been established in Germany; most important among them are the Eastern Turkestan Cultural and Social Association, the Eastern Turkestan Information Center and the Union of East Turkestani Youth."³⁷⁴ What is sure is that Beijing has no intention of improving Uyghurs' conditions, let alone the claim for independence.

In conclusion, the Open Door policy was a real watershed in the Uighur-China relations, since it opened the possibility to worshippers to show their faith more freely than before, at least. Even though the policy was primarily conceived to fulfill the Chinese economic interests, it marked a turning point. Unfortunately, the Open Door failed to turn into an opportunity for

³⁷⁴ Schichor Yitzhak, "Limping on Two Legs: Uyghur Diaspora Organizations and the Prospects for Eastern Turkestan Independence", *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, 2007

integration between Uyghur and Han people. In 1980s Islam was no longer feared nor stigmatized by the Party, but strictly controlled and harshly repressed, so even the remote chance of integration vanished. It seems interesting to notice the similar outcomes of the opening process both in China and Tunisia: on the one hand, the Chinese policy initially raised the number of worshippers, since they felt less oppressed than under Mao. On the other hand, after the religious repression of Ben 'Ali and his fall, it seemed that everybody, even Salafi could express and make their ideas spread. Anyway, the policies of openness within the frame of dictatorial governments, generally last too short to make things change, and what is left is people's frustration. "What is at stake is therefore not faith per se, but individual and collective identity. [...] Thus, the Uyghurs who wish to integrate into Chinese economic dynamism not only have to accept cultural Sinicisation, but also find themselves in increased competition with Han migrants who arrive from the central regions of the country. Added to acculturation then, is the sentiment of foreign domination."³⁷⁵

3.4. The Roots of the Xinjiang Conflict

Uyghur people always contested the Chinese occupation of Xinjiang, since they consider the northwestern region belonging to the Central Asia Republics rather than China: "For many of these the preferred term for the region is "East Turkestan", a term first coined by 19th-century Russian Turkologists, who perceived an affinity between the peoples of the Tarim Basin (the desert region that makes up most of present-day southern Xinjiang) and those of "West Turkestan" – the area in Central Asia that corresponds to the post-Soviet states of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan."³⁷⁶ During the period of warlords' rule in Xinjiang, the First East Turkestan Republic was settled near Kashgar in 1933, as a result of a miners' revolt. Predictably, the experience of freedom short-lived since the Han warlord Sheng Shicai overthrew the newborn Republic the following year, in 1934. Another similar attempt was organized in 1944 by USSR, however, once again it resulted in a flop. A plane accident killed the upheaval leaders, and the Xinjiang became finally Chinese in 1949. "While it is

³⁷⁵Peyrouse Sébastien, "Security and Islam in Asia: lessons from China's Uyghur minority", *Policy Brief, FRIDE*, no 87, July 2011

³⁷⁶Holdstock Nick, "Islam and Instability in China's Xinjiang", *Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Center, NOREF*, 2014

impossible to ascertain how widely this ambition is shared by Uyghurs in Xinjiang, given the sensitivity of the topic, we can say that the formation of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan following the break-up of the Soviet Union is likely to have had some impact on Uyghurs' aspirations to form their own state.”³⁷⁷

Relevant to our analysis is Uyghurs' feeling of exclusion in their own land, increased by Chinese largely repressive policies, especially regarding Uyghurs' traditions, language and culture. Many Uyghur musicians, writers and artists have been persecuted and imprisoned, as the latest and most shocking governmental scapegoat was the case of the Uyghur scholar Ilham Tohti, accused of separatism and incitement to violence, and imprisoned in January 2014. “The roots of the Xinjiang conflict can only be understood by examining official and unofficial policy.”³⁷⁸ Arienne Mr. Dwyer affirmed that it is possible to learn about the history of the Xinjiang conflict either through the official propagandist sources, which show the Chinese attitude of tolerance toward the Uyghurs despite their wild and violent behaving, or through informal references. While the former sources aim to highlight the state's behavior, the latter paint a bleaker picture, describing Chinese policy as largely assimilationist toward the Uyghurs. Since the 1980s in fact, the Chinese political rhetoric focused upon the security issues, terrorism and Uyghur threat, without facing the fundamental component of the conflict, as the profound cultural difference between Uyghur and Han Chinese.³⁷⁹ The real conflict is played on the cultural level since, according to Dwyer, an inclusive project from Beijing toward the Uyghur community is necessary. A project that must protect Uyghur language, traditions and religion. Note that the Uyghur population in China swings between 8 and 11 million of people, and the Uyghur language is considered lingua franca and one of the official languages of the Government and the Chinese court. The relevance accorded to the Uyghur language is apparent, indeed, since the only official media and press language is the Mandarin. Therefore, according to Dwyer, China's violent and repressive mono-cultural approach contributed to the destabilization of region.³⁸⁰

³⁷⁷Holdstock Nick, “Islam and Instability in China's Xinjiang”, *Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Center, NOREF*, 2014

³⁷⁸Dwyer M. Arienne, “The Xinjiang Conflict : Uyghur Identity, Language Policy, and Political Discourse”, *East-West Center Washington, Policy Studies* 15, 2005

³⁷⁹Ibid.

³⁸⁰Dwyer M. Arienne, “The Xinjiang Conflict : Uyghur Identity, Language Policy, and Political Discourse”, *East-West Center Washington, Policy Studies* 15, 2005

"Language planning, [...] is actually one of the most effective tools for enacting social and public policy."³⁸¹ This repressive approach vis-à-vis the Uyghur culture, developed a deep sense of frustration in this ethnic minority, which inevitably pushed the Uyghurs toward a deeper identification in their Turkic and Muslim roots. "Although many (particularly northern) Uyghurs are secularized, being Muslim Turkic is central to a modern Uyghur ethnic identity."³⁸² Religious repression is a focal point that closely affects Uyghurs. Chinese authorities constantly monitor mosques and usually forbid students or employes from attending ritual prayers at the public mosques. Moreover, the Chinese police often ban religious celebrations and arrest imams. The Chinese government acts in a repressive way against religion almost systematically, especially toward Wahhabism, which is considered a dangerous extremist ideology. However, a relevant point is "While there is a broad scholarly consensus that "Wahhabism" has increased in popularity in south Xinjiang since the 1990s (e.g. Bovingdon 2004; Fuller & Lipman 2004; Gladney 2003), the degree to which it has done so remains unclear."³⁸³ How and Why Islamic radicalism developed in Xinjiang?

According to Ahmad Rashid, after 1991 a wide Islamic revival occurred in Central Asia, especially in Tajikistan. "Tajik Islamicists include the 'unofficial' ulema who were forced underground to during the Soviet period, the registered clergy belonging to 'official' Islam, the Sufi pirs and their followers in the Pamir Mountains, and a younger generation influenced by the war in Afghanistan and the reassertion of Tajik nationalism following the collapse of the Soviet Union."³⁸⁴ Especially from 1990 to 1992 more than 200 mosques were built in Tajikistan and the civil war made many people adhere to Islamic radical groups. Interestingly, after the war the Islamic movement in Tajikistan almost disappeared. In fact, it was instrumental to the conflict and the Islamic state was not deeply desired by common people.³⁸⁵ A famous Middle East Islamist group that became known in Central Asia is Hizb ut-Tahrir, HT. "The HT has a vision of uniting Central Asia, Xinjiang Province in China and eventually the entire *umma* (Islamic world community) under a *khilafat* (caliphate) that would reestablish the Khilafat-i-Rashida, which

³⁸¹Ibid.

³⁸²Ibid.

³⁸³Holdstock Nick, "Islam and Instability in China's Xinjiang", *Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Center, NOREF*, 2014

³⁸⁴Rashid Ahmad, *Jihad, The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*, Yale University Press, pp. 280, 2002, pg 95

³⁸⁵Ibid.

ruled the Arab Muslims for a short time after the Prophet Mohammad's death in 632."³⁸⁶ During 1990's also Uzbekistan had its Islamic movement. According to Rashid the geostrategic context of Central Asia during the Soviet Union hegemony was essentially of a forgotten land. Central Asia was profoundly isolated and considered an extension of USSR sphere of influence. In 1990s the new geopolitical world order made Central Asia shift from a marginal position to a central one. Huge amount of natural resources, such as oil and gas were found in that region which became contended among the main world powers, USA, Russia and China. In addition to the exploitation of natural resources, Central Asia was also crucial to the implementation of anti-terrorism policies. In fact "Saudi Islamic charities have provided Central Asia with missionaries, scholarships and Islamic literature, including millions of copies of the Koran translated into native languages. But Saudi generosity has come at a price, as the Saudis seek to turn Central Asia towards their own radical Wahhabism."³⁸⁷

The Chinese rhetoric, obsessively focused on the "Three Evils" as a security issue and major public dangers. The Evils are terrorism, separatism and last but not least, religious extremism. "The website of the Chinese Embassy in the U.S. has a section entitled "History and development of Xinjiang" which claims that: *Since the peaceful liberation of Xinjiang [in 1949], the "East Turkistan" [sic] forces have never resigned themselves to their defeat. The tiny group of separatists who had fled abroad from Xinjiang collaborated with those at home, and looked for opportunities to carry out splittist and sabotage activities* (Chinese Embassy in the U.S., 2014)." ³⁸⁸ Rémi Castets claims that Islam became the standard through which recognize Muslims against non-Muslim, then impious Chinese. Is precisely religion which gave legitimacy to riots through *jihad*, in order to come back into the mythic *Dar al-Islam*, the only safe territory where God's law is applied.³⁸⁹ Islam has always been the central pillar of popular culture in Xinjiang and Central Asia from the 10th century onward. While Uyghurs' interpretation of Islam was moderate, since inspired by the Sufi Maturide trend, the Saudi Wahhabi trend was largely more strict and radical. "Maturidi was an Islamic scholar who lived in the ninth century in Samarkand and is considered by the Uighurs as their godfather."³⁹⁰ Bayram Balci conducted an

³⁸⁶Rashid Ahmad, *Jihad, The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*, Yale University Press, pp. 280, 2002, pg 116

³⁸⁷Rashid Ahmad, *Jihad, The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*, Yale University Press, pp. 280, 2002, pg 116

³⁸⁸Ibid.

³⁸⁹Rémi Castets, "Opposition politique, nationalisme et islam chez les Ouïghours du Xinjiang", *Les Études du CERI*, 2004

³⁹⁰Metin Gurcan, "Oppressed by China, Uighurs drawn to Salafist ideas", *al-monitor.com*, January 19, 2015

interesting study on the re-Islamization of Central Asia and the link between Islam and Uyghurs. Balci explained the consequences of the large migration organized by the anti-Soviet Uyghur elite to reach the holy cities Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia. The migration took place during the last Chinese occupation of the Xinjiang region, between 1948 and 1949. In the nationalist Uyghur rhetoric the migration to Saudi Arabia mirrored the *hijra* of the Prophet, since Uyghurs faced dangers and huge sacrifices while crossing the rugged region of Karakoram and Himalayas. Consequently, Uyghurs adopted a new identity, that of *mujahir*, in order to be accepted by the Sunni communities of Mecca and Medina.

And yet, "At the time when Uzbeks and Uighurs settled in Saudi Arabia, the Islam they practiced contrasted sharply from the Islam practiced by the Saudis."³⁹¹ With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, Saudi Arabia started good relations with the newborn Central Asian Republics, especially with Uzbeks by means of the Muslim World League. In that occasion, the League envisaged to organize humanitarian aid to persecuted Muslims worldwide.³⁹² "Numerous Uighur students in Saudi Arabia were sent back home by the League to reislamize the population according to the Saudi tradition. Their active involvement favoured the spreading or strengthening in Xinjiang's Uighur community of fundamentalist trends like Wahhabism and Salafism."³⁹³ The scholar Smith Finley claims that in mid-1990s, the majority of the Uyghurs who conducted any kind of resistance against the Chinese government was still non violent and the protests were peaceful. No guns nor knives were used, but symbols and satire such as the emphasis on Han stereotypes and the representation of Han as colonizers and the Uyghurs as colonized and oppressed through popular folk songs.

From the end of 1990s though, after the Chinese campaign against separatism called 'Strike Hard' conducted in Ghulja, Xinjiang, "Heavy restrictions were placed on freedom of speech in order to suppress the expression of alternative representations, labelled 'local nationalist' and 'splittist' by the state."³⁹⁴ In Ghulja the strategy of the 'Three No' was instituted, there was in fact no questions about the riots, no talk of it and no visit to the prisoners. The principle aim

³⁹¹Balci Bayram, "Central Asian Refugees in Saudi Arabia : Religious Evolution and Contributing to the Reislamization of their Motherland", *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, Vol 26, n 2, 2007

³⁹²Ibid.

³⁹³Ibid.

³⁹⁴Finley Smith Joanne, "Chinese Oppression in Xinjiang, Middle Eastern Conflicts and Global Islamic Solidarities among the Uyghurs", *Journal of Contemporary China*, 2007

of the strategy was to delete any historical memory of the massacre and so discouraging internal oppositions to CPR. From 2000s onwards the Chinese government heavily cracked down on Uyghur culture, forbidding metaphors and stereotyping in oral transmissions, depriving Uyghurs, by so doing, of their non-violent resistance. Furthermore, due to the growing segregation and perpetrating of repressive acts by the Chinese, a new frontier emerged: Islam, “[...] as a vehicle of symbolic opposition to perceived Muslim oppression at national and international levels. I place this phenomenon in a sensible perspective against official Chinese claims of ‘Islamic terrorism’, and suggest that it results less from militant ‘Islamist’ ideological influences and more from increased dissatisfaction with oppressive and repressive domestic policies.”³⁹⁵ It is suitable to establish a parallel between Uyghurs' Chinese oppression and Middle Eastern people, oppressed too, by imperialist Western powers. In that perspective, Islam built solidarity among them, the only and shared hope for oppressed people. While before the first half of 1900, religion was just one of the elements of the identity of Central Asian people, Uyghurs included, after the Chinese occupation in 1949, Islam became essential: the new vehicle of self-representation for the Uyghurs, and the only weapon they had. “Decades of communist oppression have inevitably contributed to the radicalization of the Islamic identity of ethnic groups who survived such oppression, as became evident in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's disintegration. Once Muslims in Central Asia were permitted to contact the wider Muslim world, the seeds of global Jihad were already planted and the Central Asian Republics, Moscow, Chechnya and Beijing are indeed harvesting some of the bitter crops.”³⁹⁶

3.5. ETIM and Salafism

The acronym ETIM identifies two different agencies within the Uyghur movement for the independence, namely, East Turkestan Independence Movement and the East Turkestan Islamic Movement. The former advocates independence for the Xinjiang region, and presents two trends: the Secular, inspired by Kemal Ataturk, and the Islamist close to Saudi Arabia. The Islamist ETIM was founded in 1997 and its goal was the liberation of Xinjiang from Chinese occupation by establishing the Caliphate. However, despite secular or Islamist, these movements

³⁹⁵ Ibid.

³⁹⁶ Lutfi Ahmad, “China's Islamic Awakening”, jamestown.org, 2004

are largely hostile to the Chinese government. Yitzhak claims that the relationship between the Uyghur movement for the independence and the international jihad is distorted by the official Chinese rhetoric. “The ETIM considers itself the modern-day descendant of a militant group founded in 1940, but the group has changed its name, ideology, and tactics over time, as its leaders have been killed or detained.”³⁹⁷ ETIM’s history goes back to 1940s-1950s, when its founder, Abdul Hakeem, begun to organize its attacks against the Chinese government and changed the name of the group from Turkestan Islamic Movement, into East Turkestan Islamic Movement. Between 1950s and 1960s ETIM’s leaders were killed or imprisoned by PRC, and it is alleged that the group remained inactive until 1980s. At that time, “Deng Xiaoping had recently initiated sweeping reforms in China, and the PRC’s policies toward Uyghurs and Muslims were relatively permissive at the time. Abdul Hakeem went on to establish Islamic schools in Kargharlak that carried forward the ETIM’s ideas.”³⁹⁸ Effectively, Hasan Mahsum, one of the next ETIM’s main leaders, studied there from 1984 to 1989. In 1990s ETIM led new rebellions, firstly in Baren, where Hasan Mahsum was arrested. Baren rebellion was not an huge, it had strong repercussions, though, both for the militants and the government. The PRC started in fact a harsh campaign of mass imprisonments, with the only outcome of encouraging radicalization. According to Reed and Raschke “Xinjiang’s prisons became a fertile recruiting and training ground, with Islamic militants, students, criminals, and bystanders sharing close quarters for long periods. Instead of intimidating the Uyghurs into submission, the Chinese government created an atmosphere of animosity and heightened ethnic tension.”³⁹⁹ The multiple imprisonments and forced labors from 1990 to 1997, brought Mahsum to radicalize and increase his militancy. Mahsum then, tried to convince Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Turkey to support his movement, although he failed. Gradually, Mahsum reached al-Qaeda’s net, and he moved ETIM’s headquarter to Afghanistan of 1998 under the Taliban control. “From the testimony of Uyghurs detained at GTMO, we know the ETIM ran a training camp in Afghanistan’s Tora Bora mountains from at least November 2000 until the U.S. bombing campaign began in

³⁹⁷ Reed J. Todd, Raschke Diana, *The ETIM: China's Islamic Militants and the Global Terrorist Threat*, Praeger Security International, 2010

³⁹⁸ Ibid.

³⁹⁹ Reed J. Todd, Raschke Diana, *The ETIM: China's Islamic Militants and the Global Terrorist Threat*, Praeger Security International, 2010

October 2001.”⁴⁰⁰ 400 Guantanamo Uyghur prisoners told that the Tora Bora camp was for the new recruits, who needed a basic preparation in order to reach “[...] more advanced camps for additional training.”⁴⁰¹

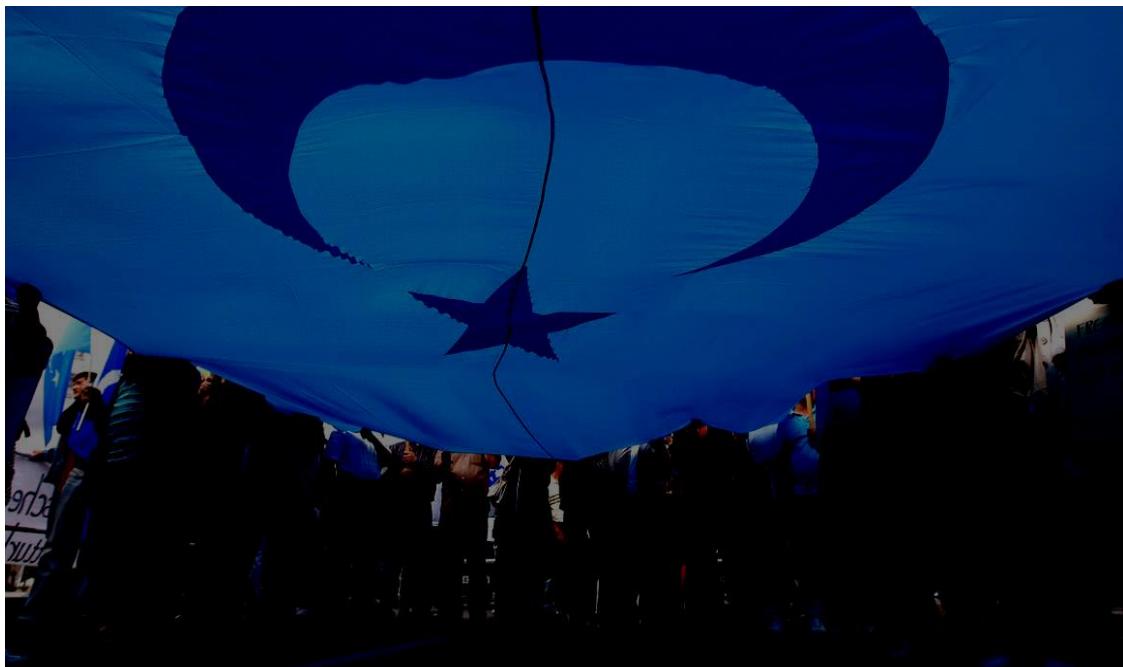


Fig. 6: East Turkestan flag.⁴⁰²

ETIM's goal is to establish the Caliphate under the Sharia law. Unlike al-Qaida though, its main target is not the West, but China: “The ETIM claims the right to use any means necessary to drive the Chinese out of East Turkistan. The group has threatened and attacked unarmed civilians as well as Chinese military and police targets, but ETIM spokesmen deny accusations of terrorism. The ETIM’s rhetoric implicitly justifies the group’s violence against unarmed civilians by defining the enemy as *all* Chinese people in East Turkistan, calling them “invaders” and “infidels.”⁴⁰³ Interesting is the discourse about the uselessness of pacific efforts instead of violent militancy, reported on ETIM’s website: most of these ideas came from ex-prisoners’

⁴⁰⁰ Reed J. Todd, Raschke Diana, The ETIM: China's Islamic Militants and the Global Terrorist Threat, *Praeger Security International*, 2010

⁴⁰¹ Ibid.

⁴⁰² Fabrizio Bensch/Courtesy Reuters , <http://www.cfr.org/china/east-turkestan-islamic-movement-etim/p9179>

⁴⁰³ Reed J. Todd, Raschke Diana, The ETIM: China's Islamic Militants and the Global Terrorist Threat, *Praeger Security International*, 2010

viewpoint and militants' who were tortured or suffered from Chinese tyranny. Accordingly, relevant is the following declaration: "For example, the narrator of a 2009 ETIM video declares that "speeches and writings won't have any impact" and "[a]nyone who is familiar with the battles that the mujahideen are engaged in today will know that the path of Jihad is the only path to prevent attacks and injustice."⁴⁰⁴ Moreover, according to Murad Batal, it seems that ETIM's leadership adopted the same rhetoric of al-Qaeda, in order to associate to it and in order to attract Uyghurs. Reed and Raschke assessed that ETIM rhetoric mirrors many claims raised by the Uyghurs against the Chinese oppression. "China has stood against Islam and Muslims, has forced atheist Communism and communist education on them, has prevented them from holding their religious ceremonies, has outlawed religious education and closed schools, institutes and universities teaching Islam, has prevented them from immigrating to Muslim countries, and has maintained a policy of isolation, population birth control, and ethnic cleansing," Shaykh Bashir declares.⁴⁰⁵ Thirteen alleged ETIM attacks and bombings occurred only in 2008, included the episodes during Beijing Olympic Games: "The ETIM's present size and capabilities are largely unknown, but its ability to execute attacks during the 2008 Olympics despite increased security measures demonstrates the group's resilience."⁴⁰⁶ More recent episodes of violence occurred in 2009 Urumqi Riots, and in 2013. While the former accident was completely untied from religious or independence issues, the incidents in Tienanmen an Kunming of 2013 follow different paths. According to the Chinese political narrative, both the incidents were organized and realized by separatist Uyghurs or ETIM. But the reality could be more shaded. According to Wu Boxin, psychologist and professor at the Chinese People's Public Security University, the killing of over 40 people at the Tienanmen Gate in Beijing was made by 'a lone wolf' and separatism is not at stake. Rather, the growing dissatisfaction of common people regarding Chinese laws is becoming a dangerous weapon against China itself.⁴⁰⁷ The attack called 'China 9/11' occurred at the Kunming Railway Station, where 30 people died. James Pach affirms: "If the Kunming attack is linked to Xinjiang, it could represent

⁴⁰⁴ Reed J. Todd, Raschke Diana, *The ETIM: China's Islamic Militants and the Global Terrorist Threat*, Praeger Security International, 2010

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁷ Dynon Nicolas, "China Attacks: Not the Usual Suspects", thediplomat.com, 2013

an escalation in Beijing's troubles with the region, with the violence now spreading to other parts of China.”⁴⁰⁸

Apparently, ETIM is both linked to al-Qaeda and to Taliban, since even a deputy of ETIM declared that they were fighting “[...] alongside the Taliban against the US-led coalition in Afghanistan.”⁴⁰⁹ Ostensibly, ETIM could not have trained its members in Afghanistan without Taliban's support. So, the link between the Uyghur Independence Movement and radical Islam ideology is evident. Finally, it is necessary to remember the Uyghurs Muslims trained in order to bring jihad in Syria and Iraq. It is likely that militants returning in Xinjiang introduced their military knowledge and engaged with Uyghur separatists against the Chinese occupation. Many scholars today are unanimous in analyzing the consequences of Jihad in Syria and Iraq, assessing that the jihad appeal favored the installation of Jihadi-Salafism in China.⁴¹⁰ Metin Gurcan interviewed a Uyghur jihadi militant in Syria: “Moreover, while fighting the [Bashar al-] Assad regime, we are also fighting China, which is his key supporter.”⁴¹¹ We must pay attention to the connection established between Assad and the Chinese oppression over Uyghurs, since it shows the typical metamorphosis of jihadi-Salafi ideology. The jihadi-Salafi rhetoric in fact, exploits Uyghur militants' claims against China, as independence, in the name of common Islamic values. The particular emphasis on the Sharia law in order to re-compact the Islamic community was the main Jihadi Salafis' strategy, (despite the fact that they want to establish the Caliphate and Uyghurs do not want the same thing necessarily). So the Jihadi Salafist ideology became the framework for Uyghurs' actions too. What is ultimately true, is the fact that both Jihadi and Uyghur militants consider China their main obstacle. It would be relevant to investigate on how Jihadi Salafism and Uyghur claims for independence blended, in order to understand the path for radicalization. Is it possible then, to consider the Salafi ideology as a largely pragmatic trend which exploited separatism as a recruitment reservoir? Which is the link between the Uyghur Movement of Independence and Salafism?

Salafism in China seems to be a trend imported from the Gulf, but actually “Salafism has been present in China for more than a century as a minority sect of Chinese Islam divided in

⁴⁰⁸Pach James, “Horrific Knife Attack in China Leaves 33 Dead”, thediplomat.com, 2014

⁴⁰⁹Reed J. Todd, Raschke Diana, The ETIM: China's Islamic Militants and the Global Terrorist Threat, *Praeger Security International*, 2010

⁴¹⁰Metin Gurcan, "Oppressed by China, Uighurs drawn to Salafist ideas", al-monitor.com, January 19, 2015

⁴¹¹Ibid.

small clusters scattered around the north-west and Yunnan province.”⁴¹² The Saudi version of Salafism was imported in Xinjiang by the Uyghurs who returned from Saudi Arabia to Central Asia during 1970s and 1980s. So, Saudi Salafists' ideology blended with the Salafi minority already present among the Uyghurs and their local culture based on Sufism. The initially peaceful character of the Uyghur Salafi trend, later became the symbol of Uyghur resistance to the Chinese occupation in the region. “Yilmaz, known for his expertise on the Uyghurs, said that in recent years because of China's oppression and increasingly effective Salafism in the region, the Uyghurs are deviating from Maturidi's peaceful and tolerant school of thought and adopting radical trends.”⁴¹³ In 2012, the researcher Kendrick Kuo asserted that the Salafi-Jihadi phenomenon in Xinjiang was not a threat, since the mainstream Uyghur culture did not accept the jihad as the main tool of resistance.⁴¹⁴ However, is it possible to suppose that something changed since the Arab spring and the Syrian crisis occurred?

“When China's leadership saw how Moammar Kadafi was shot in the street, how Saddam Hussein was marched onto the scaffold and how Hosni Mubarak was tried as he lay in a cage [...] they must have sensed, I think, that is not democracy they should fear, but revolution.”⁴¹⁵ The author of that statement, the writer Yu Hua, assessed that the serious lack of social justice in China could lead either to revolution or democracy. Hua assessed that the main references to the Jasmine Revolution were banned from the Chinese web, as well as references to flowers of all sorts, and even songs about flowers were eliminated from TV, radio and web. Analysts assessed that the leading causes of the Arab Spring, such as unemployment, injustices, economic crisis and people's frustration, could be projected in the Chinese scenario. A clear distinction needs to be drawn between the Chinese politically and economically stable context and the huge economic crisis which affected the Arab countries. And yet, a comparison between China and Arab countries is possible due to the presence of the same societal illnesses, such as injustice, corruption and growing inequality.⁴¹⁶ The Arab Spring is not a threat to

⁴¹²Enrico Fardella, “China's Debate on the Middle East and North Africa : A Critical Review”, *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Vol 26, n 1, 2015

⁴¹³Metin Gurcan, “Oppressed by China, Uighurs drawn to Salafist ideas”, *al-monitor.com*, January 19, 2015

⁴¹⁴Kuo T. Kendrick, “Revisiting the Salafi-jihadist Threat in Xinjiang”, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, vol. 32, no. 4, 2012

⁴¹⁵Hua Yu, “The Arab Spring and the Chinese Autumn”, *New Perspectives Quarterly*, vol. 29, no 1, pp 49-51, 2012

⁴¹⁶Hess Steve, “From the Arab Spring to the Chinese Winter: The institutional sources of authoritarian vulnerability and resilience in Egypt, Tunisia, and China”, *International Political Science Review*, vol 34, no 3, pp 254-272, 2013

China since the Party's control over the country is still too widespread. A sort of Jasmine movement happened in Shanghai too, but it was suddenly blocked by the Chinese security. As James Fallow describes: "On Sunday afternoon, February 20, while Muammar Qaddafi's troops were shooting into unarmed crowds in Benghazi, a handful of Chinese staged the first of a projected series of weekly "Jasmine" protests designed to extend the spirit of the Arab Spring protests to several major Chinese cities. [...] Jasmine demonstrators in Shanghai mustered a larger showing that day, but that turned out to be a high-water mark. By late February, the Jasmine "movement" was on its way to being decisively shut down."⁴¹⁷ Image.⁴¹⁸



Fig. 7: Protester carried out by the "Jasmine" movement

The Chinese government definitely strove in order to forbid the diffusion of information about the Arab revolution. But more than the Arab spring, was the Syrian war which became the pole of attraction of many Salafis both from the Arab world and from China. The Syrian war in fact represents the perspective for engagement and social justice. Increasingly young Uyghurs seek to join the Jihad in Syria: "Some of the Uighurs who flee hope to go to other countries, mostly Turkey, where they can enjoy religious and cultural freedom. There are also hundreds of young Uighurs in the age group of 15-35 who are influenced by Salafist ideology and who do everything conceivable to go to Syria and Iraq to join the armed groups."⁴¹⁹

⁴¹⁷ Fallows James, "Arab Spring, Chinese Winter", *The Atlantic*, September 2012

⁴¹⁸ commons.wikimedia.org https://www.google.it/searchq=east+turkestan+flag&source=lnms&tbo=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwj35pOB7efKAhWBkg8KHQ8cA5gQ_AUIBygB&biw=1366&bih=595#tbo=isch&q=jasmine+beijing&imgrc=qFAbfBbfdTjRyM%3A

⁴¹⁹ Metin Gurcan, "Oppressed by China, Uighurs drawn to Salafist ideas", *al-monitor.com*, January 19, 2015

3.6. Is Xinjiang' *Palestinization* Happening?

The missing piece of the puzzle is the focus on Uyghur radicalization, which I claim here, is not only the product of religious revivalism. As already discussed, Islam is much more than faith for the Uyghurs, it is rather the pillar of their identity. Uyghur resistance to Chinese oppression can be fulfilled thank to the adherence to Islam, the only aspect of their cultural heritage not entirely destroyed, burned (as happened to Uyghur ancient books) nor outlawed, yet. Furthermore, Uyghurs perceive Islam as the only link with the Turkic people of Central Asia, of Turkey, and with the Uyghur expatriates in the world. Islam is also the religion of Saudis, who welcomed Uzbek, Tajikis and Uyghurs who fled from China during the Culture Revolution and later. Saudi Imams made Uyghurs feeling part of a community for the first time, through the World Islamic League. "Islam is thus lived as a bastion of resistance to acculturation, but equally as a withdrawal to communitarian values for those at the margins of the 'Chinese mirage'."⁴²⁰

According to Philip Potter, Uyghur dissatisfaction and frustration largely increased during the last two decades, period of massive Han immigration in Xinjiang "[...] from just under 7 percent in 1940 to 40 percent today—leaving the Uyghurs as a minority in Xinjiang with approximately 45 percent of the population."⁴²¹ The Chinese repressive attitude toward Uyghurs, the war in Afghanistan and the jihadis' comeback contributed to the bonding of strong ties between Uyghurs and Taliban and al-Qaeda's militants.

According to Kendrik Kuo, there is not a Salafi threat in Xinjiang since, he explains, the Uyghur nature is inherently Sufi and linked to the Hanafi school more than to Wahhabism. He asks himself weather or not the salafi-jihadist threat is an illusion in China, answering that it could be, just from a strategic viewpoint. According to his analysis, Islam cannot be the main vehicle of Uyghur insurrection. Nevertheless, Kuo admits that "Religion is an important ethnic distinction that prevents complete assimilation and so religious freedom and religious identity is a valuable prize to strive for."⁴²²

⁴²⁰ Peyrouse Sébastien, "Security and Islam in Asia: lessons from China's Uyghur minority", *Policy Brief, FRIDE*, no 87, July 2011

⁴²¹ Potter B. K. Philip, "Terrorism in China. Growing Threats with Global Implications", *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, 2013

⁴²² Kuo Kendrik, "Revisiting the Salafi-Jihadist Threat in Xinjiang", *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, pp 1-17, 2012

Also in Joanne Smith Finley's works it is possible to find skepticism about the pivotal role of fundamentalism in Xinjiang, although: "On the other hand, the evident need to contest the exaggerated claims of the international media and Chinese officials concerning the threat of 'Islamic terrorism' in the region should not lead us to under-state the significance of Islam as a symbolic, oppositional force. Protests that have taken place in Xinjiang during the reform period have often adopted a focus on the protection of Islam or Islamic culture."⁴²³ However, the scholar assesses that Islamism is taking ground on Uyghurs habits and attitudes, since it constitutes a form of non-violent protest. Moreover, the show of Islamic symbols increased among the women of Xinjiang. "By 2002, the number of women wearing full veils or tying headscarves beneath the chin had greatly increased in the Erdaoqiao district compared with the mid-1990s, and included very small girls."⁴²⁴ The resurgence of the scarf and other Islamic symbols could be led by the believers' necessity of distinguish themselves, while giving the Chinese government a clear signal of religious resistance. It is possible to compare this situation to many Tunisian women' choice to wear the scarf during Ben 'Ali regime. Ben 'Ali in fact, as well as Bourguiba, was against the display of religious symbols in order to show the world Tunisian modernity and avant-garde trend. The choice of wearing Islamic clothes and displaying religious symbols thus, became the only means of resistance to the oppressive state power. Finley adds that a powerful vehicle of spreading Islam in Xinjiang was the flow of religious videos and medias, which entered in China from the Gulf thanks through the Open Door policy. "The problem remained at the top of the state agenda in 1999, when on 1 January a special 100-day 'Strike Hard' campaign was launched in Urumchi against pornography and 'illegal publications with political problems', a code for separatist and unofficial Islamic materials."⁴²⁵ In addition, Finley explains the Saudi Salafi revivalism since, once came back to Xinjiang, the young Uyghurs who studied in Saudi Arabia or in Central Asia were highly frustrated, since the imams in their homeland were Chinese-backed, not 'true' Muslims. Finley reports the interview to an Uyghur Islamic student in Pakistan imprisoned by the Party since he had a fight with the local Imam: "Abdullah's view on the episode was as follows: *I don't like this imam. He has sold his conscience to the Chinese, like an infidel. Look at his long white beard! He has sold it*

⁴²³ Finley Smith Joanne, "Chinese Oppression in Xinjiang, Middle Eastern Conflicts and Global Islamic Solidarities among the Uyghurs", *Journal of Contemporary China*, 2007

⁴²⁴ Ibid.

⁴²⁵ Ibid.

*to the infidels! He has sold his heart. They give him money, you know, to be a traitor...by the back door route [arqi ishik]...They wanted me to be an imam! They offered me this money too! But I said 'No, thank you very much'. Never!"*⁴²⁶

Furthermore, according to Steele and Kuo, "If the Chinese government does not directly address the causes of the nationalist discontent that permeates the Uighur community, it will be confronted indefinitely with political violence."⁴²⁷ Scholars insist on the necessity for the Party to find solutions in order to stop radicalization in Xinjiang. In fact, the Chinese government should enact policies in order to integrate Uyghurs, especially by compromising with the most moderate part of Uyghurs, "Thus, Beijing should refrain from undermining these groups to prevent popular support from turning in favour of radical Islamists."⁴²⁸ Finally, is the Palestinization of Xinjiang happening?

Michael Clarke attempted to answer this question by analyzing three levels of *Palestinization*: the repressive Han attitude toward Uyghurs, the Islamic radicalization of many Uyghurs and the internationalization of the Chinese-Uighur conflict. According to Clarke, the last years increasing violence suggests a shift in Uyghur narrative, from an ethnic religious nationalism to an ideological one.⁴²⁹ "In this context, Jurgensmeyer notes that, while 'the ethnic approach to religious activism politicizes religion by employing religious identities for political means, an ideological approach does the opposite, ' i.e., it 'tries to make politics religious'."⁴³⁰ This shift turns religion into the pillar of politics. The assassination of the Uyghur Imam in 2014, shows that some Uyghurs begin to target what is tied with the state, as a Chinese-backed imam. As it is reported on China Daily, the Chinese 'Strike Hard' campaign will continue in 2016: "On Monday, Xinjiang announced that it will continue to intensify its strike-hard campaign against terrorism in 2016. Zhang Chunxian, Party chief, said all anti-terrorism activities must be carried out in accordance with the law."⁴³¹ Clarke concludes by stating that "Here, China's repression of the Uyghur in Xinjiang and its ambiguous role in the fractured Middle East have intersected to embed the Uyghur issue firmly in the discourse of globally oriented radical Islamism. [...]

⁴²⁶ Ibid.

⁴²⁷ Steele Liza, Kuo Raymond, "Terrorism in Xinjiang?", *Ethnopolitics*, vol. 6, no 1, pp 1-19, 2007

⁴²⁸ Ibid.

⁴²⁹ Clarke Michael, "China and the Uyghurs: the 'Palestinization' of Xinjiang?", *Middle East Policy*, vol 22, no 3, pp 127-146, 2015

⁴³⁰ Ibid.

⁴³¹ Jia Cui, "Xinjiang to draft anti-religious extremism regulation", chinadaily.com, January 13, 2016

Finally, will Beijing recognize in time that its hard line in Xinjiang is giving oxygen to the radical Islamism that it fears the most?"⁴³²

3.7. The Common Path between Tunisia and Xinjiang

"According to Chinese analysts in recent years, the beliefs and customs of Chinese Muslims mostly belonging to Uyghur and Hui ethnic groups are leaning more and more toward the most conservative and orthodox schools of Islam, such as Saudi influenced Salafism, which reinforces their connection to radical groups in the Arab world."⁴³³

Xinjiang political context changes the perspective on Salafi radicalization, since the presence of a dominant Salafi group, as in the case of Ansar al- Sharia in Tunisia, is not strictly necessary in order to foster radicalism. Excluding the level of organization and coherence of any Salafi group, what is necessary first, is the presence of a social conflict. "In 2009 the protests were still localized in the Xinjiang province, and they were mostly secular and directed against Chinese authorities. Five years later, as demonstrated by the attacks in Kunming, the groups seem to have a more pronounced religious profile, they address civilians in several parts of the country, and they seem more coordinated with external fundamentalist cells such as the Pakistan-based and Uighur-led Turkestan Islamic Party."⁴³⁴

Analyzing the literature on the Salafi-Jihadi issue regarding Tunisia and Xinjiang, I empirically observed a common trend to both countries. On the base of the analysis of the literature concerning Salafism in Tunisia and Xinjiang, the detected steps to the radicalization are the followings: political exclusion, religious repression, radicalization in prison and the comeback Salafism.

3.7.1. Political Exclusion

Michael Clarke highlights the conditions of oppression experienced by Uyghurs in Xinjiang, forced into the Jihadist commitment. "One detainee's testimony, for example, highlighted the

⁴³² Clarke Michael, "China and the Uyghurs: the 'Palestinization' of Xinjiang?", *Middle East Policy*, vol 22, no 3, pp 127-146, 2015

⁴³³ Enrico Fardella, "China's Debate on the Middle East and North Africa : A Critical Review", *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Vol 26, n 1, March 2015

⁴³⁴ Ibid.

pressure placed on Uyghurs who left Xinjiang for Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan : If you go to Kazakhstan, they will not let us get property, training or anything. They will not let us in; as soon as they know we are in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, they will return us back to the Chinese. That is the reason we went to Afghanistan.”⁴³⁵ Chinese repressive strategy in Xinjiang is organized in order to stifle any different ideas from the Party's. The elimination of dissent passes also through the erasing of religious diversity, as in the case of Uyghurs. “Tumturk charges that what China wants in Xinjiang/East Turkistan is not only to eliminate Salafist trends but to launch a witch hunt to eradicate everything Islamic and assimilate the Uighurs.”⁴³⁶ Uyghur life-conditions became increasingly difficult: “The words of an Uighur fighter in Syria helps further explain the situation: “Living condition in Est Turkistan are more difficult and suffocating than a war zone. When we had restrictions on speaking our own language in our land, when we couldn't go to mosques, while our daughters are compelled to work in foreign lands far away from home, when our intelligentsia and politicians who express their opinions are tortured, we had no choice but to immigrate to Syria to be with our brothers here and live freely.”⁴³⁷ Moreover, as we have seen, the Chinese political exclusion against Uyghurs is quintessentially cultural. In fact, Chinese pragmatic attitude planned a systematic assimilation of Uyghur culture, both through the material disposal of Uyghur books and craftsmanship and the massive State-led migration of Han in Xinjiang. In addition, the political repression passed through Uyghur exclusion from many jobs, for the benefit of the Chinese immigrants. Uyghurs are forbidden to travel too, in fact it is quite impossible for them to get a passport from Beijing. There is a real discrimination put in place, since for Uyghurs is largely harder to get a passport than for Han. As Radio Free Asia reports “One Uyghur student who graduated recently from a university elsewhere in China, and who had managed to get a passport, said it had been taken away from him after he went back to his hometown in Hotan.”⁴³⁸ As well as the history of Atikem, a 21-year-old Uyghur girl who saw her passport refused for three times only because of her ethnic belonging. She was not a political agitator nor she failed her exams, still authorities refused her the documents on 'political grounds', namely Uyghur ethnicity. According to

⁴³⁵ Clarke Michael, “China's 'War on Terror' in Xinjiang : Human Security and the Causes of Violent Uyghur Separatism”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 2008

⁴³⁶ Metin Gurcan, "Oppressed by China, Uighurs drawn to Salafist ideas", *al-monitor.com*, January 19, 2015

⁴³⁷ Ibid.

⁴³⁸ Nan Hai, Abdilim Mihray, “Student Battle Travel Ban”, *Radio Free Asia*, 2012

Ilham Tohti, many students who got scholarships or have been accepted in good universities abroad, could not leave the country, since they could not get a passport: "Tohti said he is also aware of a number of Uyghurs currently overseas who would like to return to China but are afraid the authorities will confiscate or refuse to renew their passports once they are home."⁴³⁹

In Tunisia people experienced a comparable political exclusion since the 1980s *tunisianité* became a control tool of the secular social class over the religious one. The concept of *tunisianité* in fact, is based on a French model of citizenship: secular, educated and imported. The greater or minor adherence to the French secular model managed the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion of classes within Tunisian society. As Merone explained: "In short, the heirs of Bourguibian nationalism, allied with liberal and left-wing parties, have used the ideological tool of 'modernity' to exclude since at least the 1970s the 'new kids on the block'—the Islamists—from shaping the national narrative and ethos of the modern Tunisian state, labelling them as 'backward.'"⁴⁴⁰ That class exclusive system created frustration and massive disenfranchisement among Tunisians, especially youth. This large mass exclusion led to the climate of rage and repression of the outcast, who supported or joined Ansar al-Sharia, since they got visibility by giving voice to the marginalized. Then, after a new state closure and violent actions, the movement began a more serious radicalization.

3.7.2. Religious Repression

Within the age of religious resurgence in China, violent clashes occurred in Xinjiang, to which massive police repression followed: "There were dead and arrests, but the authorities reacted disproportionately in the fall of 1996 by closing all madrases in the region. Is worth mentioning the internal conflicts to Salafiyya, about the interpretation of the Qur'anic text, which turned to street fighting in Linxia in the early nineties." One of the most important rites for Uyghurs, for example, is the 'mäshräp' a kind of assembly in which the men discuss the Koran and the community issues."⁴⁴¹ By the 1990s, many were the 'mäshräp' organizations

⁴³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁰ Merone Fabio, "Enduring Class Struggle in Tunisia : The Fight for Identity beyond Political Islam", *British Journal of Middle East*, 2014

⁴⁴¹ Allès Élisabeth, Chérif-Chebbi Leila, Halfon Constance-Hélène, "L'Islam chinois, unité et fragmentation", *Archives de sciences sociales des religion*, 2001

which even intervened on social pitfalls as alcohol and drugs. These groups were real instruments of political change. "The groups even began to establish football clubs. In February 1997, the authorities cracked down on the groups, calling them illegal separatist gatherings. The government used football pitches for tank exercises and then cracked down violently on the subsequent protests. The groups became victims of the state's imperative to control every aspect of public life."⁴⁴²

In Tunisia, the repressive Ben 'Ali regime, never accepted the presence of Islamists and always discouraged the veil for women as in Bourguiba's age. The State intolerance worsened after the case of Suleiman Group in 2007, since the police adopted the logic of 'hunting fundamentalists', considering common worshippers as potentially criminals. Such a violent and suspicious attitude certainly blocked any possibility whatsoever of internalization of the Salafist movement.

3.7.3. Radicalization in Prison

"The United States seemed to agree that ETIM posed a real threat, listing the group as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist group in 2002 and detaining 22 Uighurs captured in Afghanistan and Pakistan at Guantanamo Bay. Some were held for more than a decade, though the United States later acknowledged that it didn't have adequate evidence against them."⁴⁴³ In Guantanamo as well as in Xinjiang, the members of ETIM, of the World Uyghur Congress as Rabia Kadeer, or Uyghur professors such as Ilham Tohti spent time in jail. Ironically, prison is more often pretext of radicalization, than of moderation of radical ideologies. Especially Guantanamo prisons registered an increasing holding of terrorists in recent years. The presence of many terrorists in the same prison, allowed them to exchange experiences and get to know each other, and bonding long-lasting ties. ETIM members met in prison, as "Xinjiang's prisons became a fertile recruiting and training ground, with Islamic militants, students, criminals, and bystanders sharing close quarters for long."⁴⁴⁴ In fact, "According to the ETIM's website, 'The understanding of Hasan Makhdoom underwent a radical transformation in that he decided alongside other group members, that peaceful, non-resistant ... efforts were only producing

⁴⁴² Schluessel Eric T., "Islam in Xinjiang : an ancient rival for a young China", *theguardian.com*, July 14, 2009

⁴⁴³ Drennan Justine, "Is China Making Its Own Terrorism Problem Worse?", *Foreign Policy*, February 9, 2015

⁴⁴⁴ Reed J. Todd, Raschke Diana, The ETIM: China's Islamic Militants and the Global Terrorist Threat, *Praeger Security International*, 2010

limited success.' (Many of these group members reached this conclusion after being imprisoned, presumably in China; their radicalization in prison parallels countless similar stories in other countries around the world.)" 445

Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia as well, was born from the meeting of several Salafists in prison: Abu Iyadh had the opportunity to plan the organization of Ansar al-Sharia precisely in prison, with the help of other young Salafists. "Abu Iyadh, in prison in Tunisia, fraternized with the young local men who were the target of Ben Ali's repression for their radical Islamist views. It is the linkage between international jihadism and local religious radicalism that shapes Tunisian salafism."446

3.7.4. The Comeback-Salafism

"Since the Xinjiang riots of 2009, in fact, there has been a transformation of the Uyghur separatist struggle. In 2009 the protests were still localized in the Xinjiang province, and they were mostly secular and directed against Chinese authorities. Thanks to the training they received in Afghanistan and Pakistan and their participation in the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts, the Uyghurs, as Major General Jin Yinan stated, have tried to raise the profile of Xinjiang among the jihadists of other theaters."447 The 'comeback-Salafism' is another key element to the recruitment of young Salafis and dissemination of the armed Salafi culture. Abu Iyadh began his radicalization after his jihad in Afghanistan, where he had his military and Salafi training. Predictably, Salafis fascinated many young people on their way home, by literally importing the culture and the expertise of the armed Salafism in Tunisia.

The 'field' training make the sharing of radical Islamic values possible, especially through its highly inclusive and friendly practices. Military training, religious education and jihad practice establish indissoluble links among activists who find themselves united by friendship ties and desire of social redemption. Today the Salafist-jihadist narrative especially communicate through new medias, social networks and propaganda videos on YouTube. Researchers Matteo Vergani and Dennis Zuev studied differences and similarities in the neojihadist narrative within Chechen and Uyghur communities, noting similar path through the visual narrative. "In the

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁶ Merone, Torelli, Cavatorta, *Salafism in Tunisia : Challenges and Opportunities*, Middle East Policy, 2012

⁴⁴⁷ Fardella Enrico , "China's Debate on the Middle East and North Africa : A Critical Review", *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Vol 26, n 1, 2015

neojihadist videos, the Chinese are depicted as infidels and invaders, while the Uyghurs are represented as “holy warriors” fighting against oppression, summoned to alleviate the suffering of other Uyghurs.”⁴⁴⁸ The core message is usually connected to many symbols: black flag, nasheed, armed militants and mountainous landscape. Videos contain images of violence, martyrs and dead, which have a huge impact on visitors and neophytes. “Within the war narrative, the symbols of sacrifice and martyrdom are among the most powerful drivers for recruitment, as they directly address the issues of the gratification of a noble death through martyr status, by means of the military struggle, which proposes a new meaning of life.”⁴⁴⁹ The victimization issue is a relevant strategy that justifies the use of violence under the pressure of serious injustices and oppression. That strategy is transverse to all conflicts, but symbolically connects the jihadi efforts to the Palestinian cause, giving them visibility and legitimacy. Once again the fascinating issue of camaraderie, is largely helpful in order to recruit new members: “The videos presenting a romantic picture of a military brotherhood, united by one goal and one leader and living an exciting everyday life surrounded by nature, belong to this sub-narrative.”⁴⁵⁰ Finally, Vergani and Zuef claim that the Uyghurs strategy of using Salafi frameworks could become dangerous for them, since: “The militant Uyghur videos may be used rather conveniently as anti-Uyghur propaganda in order to frame all Uyghurs as Islamic terrorists and justify the Chinese political pressure on them. Moreover, the Uyghur militants are still a rather mythical group about which very little is known, as recent studies on the case maintain (Reed and Raschke, 2010). Despite reflecting the neojihadist narrative, the nationalist cause in Uyghur videos appears to be in the foreground and the religious narrative in the background.”⁴⁵¹ However, an even more repressive strategy from the Chinese part, would also increase Uyghurs victimization. To conclude, the Uyghur Islamic radicalization is a strategy to achieve visibility and push its resistance against China.

⁴⁴⁸ Matteo Vergani, Dennis Zuef, « Neojihadist Visual Politics : Comparing YouTube Videos of North Caucasus and Uyghur Militants », *Asian Studies Review*, December 6, 2014

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁰ Matteo Vergani, Dennis Zuef, « Neojihadist Visual Politics : Comparing YouTube Videos of North Caucasus and Uyghur Militants », *Asian Studies Review*, December 6, 2014

⁴⁵¹ Ibid.

Chapter 4

Islam and Politics

This last chapter aims at showing the inner connection between Islam and politics in order to prove the main hypothesis of this work. The rhetorical question in the study title, '*Is it all about religion?*', fosters the doubt that the leading cause of radicalization processes around the world is not always religion. So, which is the role of religion within the radicalization context? And more broadly, why is religion so relevant to this study and to social dynamics? While the analysis of the previous chapters showed the historical and cultural path of Salafism, now the focus is upon the role of Islam and its connection to political power. This study in fact, investigated the birth and growth of Salafism in the Arab world and specifically in Tunisia and consequently focused upon the Chinese region of Xinjiang. The aim of this work is to highlight the paradox of the extreme adaptability of Salafism, despite its rigid dogmas and radical point of view. Finally, it seems interesting to examine the reasons why religion has such a profound influence on politics, social and political dynamics. Religion and politics in fact, do not seem so far from one another since they have in common the concept of power.

It is primarily crucial to this study to observe the main steps of the historical relationship between religion and politics, by analyzing political Islam development throughout the 21st century. Consequently, the second section of this chapter examines in depth how religion intercepts the political discourse since it seems that what religion offers happens to be more appealing than what politics does. How could that shift happen? How the promise of a better, though impalpable world could enhance people's faith in life? In particular, is there a link between what makes politics so unreliable and religion so charming? Furthermore, it could be relevant to focus upon the peculiarities of Salafism such as its simultaneous rigidness and flexibility. Why should a radical movement be both rigid and adaptable? The third section of this chapter handles the complex role of religion as a means through which putting into practice political needs. Religion becomes the privileged tool which boosts for mass mobilization and pretext for political claims. The growth of many social Islamic movements is the clear symptom of such a trend, as radical religious movements in Tunisia and Xinjiang is the evidence of it.

4.1. Historical Frame of the Islamic Power

"Islam holds great political power. Mohammad was not only a religious prophet, but also a temporal ruler and warrior. [...] For many Muslims Islam is not just a personal faith but also the blueprint for organizing a perfect society."⁴⁵² In this regard, Massimo Campanini assesses that the only true philosophy within the Islamic culture is politics (*siyasah*), "[...] since the political science depends on a religious input."⁴⁵³ So, Campanini rhetorically asks whether politics is an aspect of religion or the opposite since it is not possible to separate these two dimensions.⁴⁵⁴ Campanini answers that religion shows a 'qualitative priority' on politics since it represents the axis around which the Islamic world rounds. Consequently, the typical Islamic science is not theology, as it would seem, yet, jurisprudence. So, according to such a description, politics represents the social application of the Islamic jurisprudence. Bernard Lewis assessed that is not the State that creates the law since the law comes from divine will, so the main duty of any governor is to defend and maintain the law. According to political meanings, Campanini shows that there is relativity concerning political concepts since each one is contextualized within the religious frame. Freedom for example, is not an incontrovertible Islamic valor since it has no metaphysical value. Moreover, freedom lies implicitly in the divine justice since the major freedom for men is to fulfill God's will. So, since the Holy Koran does not show which is the best administration for the '*umma*', the political science pillar of the Muslim societies remains justice and not freedom. Justice in fact represents the pact between God and its people. Campanini assesses that Islam has often been exploited as an instrument of social and political control of the masses by the political classes, though, Islam was also a masses mobilizer especially when religion was in danger. During colonialism thus, Islam rose as the main resistance tool for the ignorant and poor. According to Campanini, Islam spread in poor African and Asian countries also thank to its inner anti imperialistic nature.⁴⁵⁵

⁴⁵²The Economist, Special Report, "The Arab World", May 2016

⁴⁵³Campanini Massimo, Islam e Politica, Saggi Il Mulino, pp 313, 2003

⁴⁵⁴Ibid. pg 16

⁴⁵⁵Ibid. pg 20

4.1.1. The Golden Age of the Caliphate

It is compulsory, at this stage, to take a step back and analyze the history of Islam from its very beginning, the 'glorious' caliphate. The building of the caliphate represents the first and most relevant experience in Islamic history, since it would have marked the Islamic political narrative from that moment on. The golden age of the caliphate, 632-1258, saw firstly the power of the Rightly Guided Caliphs, then the Umayyad and the Abbasid dynasties. "The Caliphate Period is particularly important both because it is the locus for the formation and development of Islamic ideology and institutions and because it is the reference point for Muslim self-understanding."⁴⁵⁶ According to John Esposito, Islam is the perfect tool to convey political meanings. "Islam provided a unity of purpose and central authority enabling Arabian tribes to achieve new levels of political organization and motivation."⁴⁵⁷ Under the Umayyads, the Islamic power passed through political and especially jurisprudential control. The introduction of new figures such as the Islamic market inspector and the judge, *qadi*, in the Sharia courts represents the increasing centralization in the Islamic political power. The Abbasid period's contribution fostered the codification of the Sharia. "However, by the eight century, the ulema had become a professional class of religious leaders."⁴⁵⁸

It is interesting to notice that, in spite of the Umayyad (661-750) rapid and wide expansion from Afghanistan to Morocco, the cultural and historical core of the Caliphate is still nowadays considered the Arabian peninsula. Therefore, the Maghreb corner is hardly ever took into consideration and its historical, cultural and political traditions are often assimilated to the Arabs'. "Abdallah Laroui argued that the Maghreb is frequently portrayed as 'a land that is conquered, that is exploited, that is civilized' by external forces – in other words a place that is simply the 'object' of history rather than the product of its own experiences."⁴⁵⁹ And yet, Maghreb's heart is Berber. Berbers were tribal people spread mostly in Morocco and Algeria but also in Tunisia, always competing for territorial power. Initially, Berbers were far from any kind of power organization more complex than a tribe. "However, the penetration of the region by other peoples and civilizations – notably the Phoenicians (who established Carthage) and the Romans –

⁴⁵⁶Esposito John L., *Islam and Politics*, Syracuse University Press, pp 273, 1984

⁴⁵⁷Esposito John L., *Islam and Politics*, Syracuse University Press, pp 273, 1984

⁴⁵⁸Esposito John L., *Islam and Politics*, Syracuse University Press, pp 273, 1984

⁴⁵⁹Willis J. Michael, *Politics and Power in the Maghreb: Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco from Independence to the Arab Spring*, Hurst&Company, pp 395, 2012

led some tribes adopting structures more akin to a state and the emergence of three Berber kingdoms that, together with the subjugated city of Carthage, formed the basis of the Roman Empire's four provinces in north-west Africa.⁴⁶⁰ The Arab invasion brought a new language and a new religion in that region, and yet, it did not alter the political equilibrium of Maghreb, since the Arabs were tribesmen too. It meant that most of the Maghreb people was Berber rather than Arab speaking, situation which endured until contemporary age. The 1200s Almoravid and Almohad dynasties built political control over the whole Maghreb region, "Their influence helps explain the distinction that exists between the Maghreb, as the western part of the Arab world, and the Mashreq, the eastern Arab world." As Willis explains, the 'split identities' of Libya is paradigmatic of such a division between West and East since Almohads governed just the Western half of the country. Interestingly, both the Almoravids and the Almohads imposed Islam in the Maghreb region, producing two main consequences: firstly, the conversion to Islam was a relevant matter. Secondly, Islam became the major political authority since it became the glue between the political and the religious power until nowadays. "Islam proved to be a faith in which religion was harnessed by political power. [...] Religious faith and ideology provided the ideological and motivational glue that united Arabian tribes and inspired and gave direction to the early period of expansion and conquest."⁴⁶¹ The contrived narrative of the unique Islamic authority, cohesive and peaceful of the golden age does not admit historical evidences. Moreover, contemporary rulers would exploit it in order to originate a Muslim self-representation, making it circulate within revivalist movements, Islamic political activism and radicalism. The recent politics of Maghreb is tightly connected to the Islamic revival. In the French-colonized Morocco of 1930s, mosques and imams had a great role in gathering Arab Muslims and Berbers against the French occupiers. Especially, the birth of the 1931 Istiqlal party marked a turning point in Morocco's history. In fact, the Independence party produced a huge mass movement of 100.000 members in 1951 under the guide of the Salafi leader Allal al-Fasi. "Nationalism made no real and important progress until it took the form of a religious brotherhood, the 'nationalist zawiya', and until Allal al-Fasi became Shaikh Allal."⁴⁶² In Algeria, Islam played a fundamental role in the independence struggle: "The slogan of the

⁴⁶⁰Willis J. Michael, Politics and Power in the Maghreb: Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco from Independence to the Arab Spring, Hurst&Company, pp 395, 2012

⁴⁶¹Esposito John L., Islam and Politics, Syracuse University Press, pp 273, 1984

⁴⁶²Esposito John L., Islam and Politics, Syracuse University Press, pp 273, 1984

revolution would be 'Algérie Musulmane' not 'Algérie Arabe'. [...] Thus, Islam was the basic impulse in Algerian Arab Nationalism."⁴⁶³ In Tunisia more than anywhere else, Islam became vehicle of local nationalism and symbol of Tunisian culture. Already before the WWI "Islam was a basic component of national identity and provided the ideological framework and symbols for mass politicization."⁴⁶⁴

4.1.2. The Islamic Revival

Campanini assesses that the 19th century marked a harsh phase for Muslims self-representation: frustration and inadequacy emerged in relation to the Western economic, social and political model. The only Islamic solution to the evident Western superiority was represented by the revival of the Islamic origins. That is the most influential and profound Islamic narrative, ever. What is striking, is that such a narrative still produces great impact, as the contemporary leader of the Tunisian Islamist party Rashid Ghannouchi showed, by encouraging people to step back toward the golden age of Islam. How is that possible? How a narrative can be unalterable for centuries? Presumably, the narrative of the 'golden' age of Islam maintained its intrinsic appeal for that long since it has constantly been exploited by political authorities. Why the golden age narrative adapted overtime? What political interests lied under such a rhetorical discourse? As already mentioned, the discovery of modernity was a shock to the Arab world which reverberated through the Muslim society causing a profound rupture between reformists and modernists, by opposing Islamic values and Western culture.

So, the unsolved dilemma of whether modernizing Islam or Islamizing modernity came to the 19th century intellectuals' attention. The Islamization of modernity in fact, draws its inspiration from the mythic representation of golden age of the Islamic caliphate. In this regards, Mohammad Ayoob highlights the fact that contemporary Arab culture started a process of glorification of the first Islamic state. However, he claims that the so-called golden age of the Islamic history was not as golden as it was (and it is) represented. Above all, the systematic murder of three of the Rightly Guided Caliphs displays a highly political unstable juncture. Moreover, the multiple tensions between Meccan and Medinan elites such as the Quraysh and Banu Hashim families characterized that 'golden' period, notwithstanding the beginning of

⁴⁶³Esposito John L., *Islam and Politics*, Syracuse University Press, pp 273, 1984

⁴⁶⁴Esposito John L., *Islam and Politics*, Syracuse University Press, pp 273, 1984

Sunni-Shia' secession. "To be sure, the concept of the caliphate, which became important as a way to hold the community together after the Prophet Muhammad's death, remained important at least in theory. But there is little to suggest that it was ever integral to the practice of Islam."⁴⁶⁵ In the contemporary age, it was first the Sultan Abdul Hamid II who exploited the figure of caliph in order to make Muslim rebel to European powers. And yet, even when the Sultan died and Ataturk transformed Turkey into a republic, the sentiment of rebellion to Western power endured and focused on Islamic caliphate revival. Campanini claims that it is necessary to separate classic from contemporary Islamic thought. According to the classic theory in fact, Islam fulfills and applies justice by itself, by establishing a balance between ruled and rulers, where rebellion is illicit unless the ruler is an apostate and a *kafir*. Conversely, the contemporary Islamic thought became herald of new values such as revolution and rebellion since it faced a new enemy, the West. "The normal order of things broke down once non-Muslim powers came to rule over most Muslim societies in the age of colonialism."⁴⁶⁶

Campanini explains that the first contact between Islam and modernity around 19th century put the basis for the developing of a profound feeling of frustration within Muslim countries. The Islamic society was traditional and stagnant while the Western civilization was technologically and economically advanced, modern and developed. The Arabs' answer to Western modernity was the development of modernist trend and *islah*. While the former was a secular trend, the latter was a reform program extended to culture and sciences but principally based on religious revivalism and the example of the pious ancestors. So, the easiest explanation about Arab countries' cultural and social backwardness became "[...] because Muslims were no longer faithful to the fundamentals of Islam. [...] These ideas were grafted onto the increasingly dominant European style nation-state, creating the hybrid notion of Islamic state, or rather the Islamic nation-state."⁴⁶⁷ The 19th century rhetorical discourse concerning the coming back to the ancient, golden and pure Islam was thus instrumental to increase Muslims' pride in order to fight the invaders. So, it was not a matter of worship and faith, rather of politics and independence. The most famous reformers, the Muslim Brothers introduced new values into worship, such as political militancy and social engagement. According to the reformers,

⁴⁶⁵Ayoob Mohammad, "The Myth of the Islamic State – The History of a Political Idea", *Foreign Affairs*, April 2016

⁴⁶⁶Ayoob Mohammad, "The Myth of the Islamic State – The History of a Political Idea", *Foreign Affairs*, April 2016

⁴⁶⁷Ayoob Mohammad, "The Myth of the Islamic State – The History of a Political Idea", *Foreign Affairs*, April 2016

Islam had to be reformed from its practices in order to become modern and to maintain a pivotal role in people's life. Conversely, the main supporters of the modernizing trend were mostly Arab intellectuals who accepted the European way of life and considered Islam obsolete. According to the modernist intellectual Taha Husain the Egyptian cultural heritage was more linked to the ancient Greeks and to the West than to Islam. Islam needed to adapt to modernity. According to Campanini, the 19th century colonialism definitively marked the relationship between Islam and the West, since the Islamic political thought modeled around it. Islam became the most powerful ideology in order to promote decolonization and fight colonizers. Colonialism provoked in fact a rigid ideological opposition between the Islamic and Western culture. That opposition was fictitious though, since Westerners were convinced of the superiority of their culture thanks to their modern lifestyle and the growing of the middle class. The first trend that deepened the theme of the power legitimacy was 'Abduh's Salafism, although it did not elaborate a structured and solid doctrine. In fact, even within the same Islamic trend there was no agreement. While the influential Salafi Rashid Rida considered the caliphate as the highest example of the legitimate power, another key Salafi figure, 'Abdel Ra'iq, was totally against the establishment of the caliphate, since he believed the Prophet was not a ruler. According to Rida, the caliphate had to be *quraysh* and composed by '*ulema*'. Interestingly, Rida's modern viewpoint lied in the administration of power, since he conceived that no divine authority had to choose the ruler but people, who had to elicit or overthrow the imam-caliph. According to Rida, the caliph was not an absolute ruler but a principle of unity and organization.⁴⁶⁸ It is to say that both the Islamic revivalism and modernism originated multiple Muslim approaches to the rebuilding of the society from within. Then, the reform movement also crossed with the nationalist movements around the world, such as the North African's and the Indian's.⁴⁶⁹ "Thus, Rida accepted the reality of patriotism and nationalism provided that national unity not overshadow or replace Muslims' identity and solidarity as members of a transnational religious homeland and community which remained the Islamic ideal."⁴⁷⁰

⁴⁶⁸ Campanini Massimo, Islam e Politica, Saggi II Mulino, pp 313, 2003

⁴⁶⁹ Esposito John L., Islam and Politics, Syracuse University Press, pp 273, 1984

⁴⁷⁰ Esposito John L., Islam and Politics, Syracuse University Press, pp 273, 1984

4.1.3. Contemporary Islamic Narrative

The early 20th century was characterized by the birth of the Wafd party in Egypt. The Wafd party was the most relevant and modern political organization in North Africa, which emerged since the Egyptian aristocracy wanted to become independent from the English colonial oppression. Finally, the Wafd party was not able to lead the protests in order to deeply transform the Egyptian political environment. The other main political movement born within the Egyptian society was the Muslim Brotherhood, which Campanini considered the obvious outcome of the Egyptian crisis caused by liberalism. The Muslim Brotherhood obtained wide success especially among common people, for two main reasons. Above all, the Brothers' message was clear and simple, easily usable by the illiterates. Moreover, the Brothers' appeal lied on the revolutionary message of its founder, Hasan al-Banna, from the ranks of the Islamic reformist movement. According to Richard Mitchell, there was a sort of analogy between the organization of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafiyya, concerning the effort to simplify and synthesize Islam in order to eliminate the sectarian conflicts. The Brotherhood as well as Salafiyya were different paths with the same aim: the Islamic reform from within. According to Campanini is difficult to define Islamism in opposition to secularism since the latter is a deeply controversial term. Abdallah Laroui in fact, assesses that secularism in the Arab world has always been represented by the military elites, which never had the masses' support, so that never existed a true and credible alternative to Islam.⁴⁷¹ Secularism in Algeria for example, was a catastrophe from the military populism to mass socialism to the civil war. Interestingly, the FLN highlighted the relevance of Islam as the vehicle of cultural and political identity. It was the effort to transform Islam into the privileged means of progress and rationalization. Campanini recalls that Nasser claimed the Islamic nature of Pan-Arabism in order to get the consensus of masses. Religion was exploited to consolidate power. "Muslim responses to Christian Europe's power and domination ranged from rejection to adaptation, from Islamic withdrawal to acculturation and reform. For many, colonial rule transformed the Islamically governed territory into a land of war, that is, non-Muslim territory."⁴⁷² The cohabitation of Muslims and foreign colonizers produced multiple social effects, as Esposito explains "The coexistence of traditional religious and modern, secular schools, each with its own constituencies, trained two classes

⁴⁷¹Campanini Massimo, Islam e Politica, Saggi Il Mulino, pg 209, pp 313, 2003

⁴⁷²Esposito John L., Islam and Politics, Syracuse University Press, pp 273, 1984

with divergent outlooks or worldviews: a Westernized elite minority and a more traditional, Islamically oriented majority."

According to Olivier Roy there is a contradiction between ethical impulse and political procedure within the radical Islamic discourse, since it does not take a party in order to reform the State, but the collective morality. Therefore, the Islamic party is not as necessary as it seemed to the project of restructuring the Muslim society. Of course it is not possible to reform society from a new mass culture, yet, if morality is oriented by law, then the morality reform could happen. Particularly, what matters to Islam is the implementation of the divine law as the only valid form of government, so the specific kind of establishment is not essential to Islam and its worshippers. Monarchy, republic, empire, caliphate are empty words if not filled with Shari'a. It seems that Islam aims at modifying the Arab society, moralizing it and proposing a restructured model of State. According to Fazlur Rahman Islam always aimed at conquering the political power since the God's will had to be realized on earth through a political order. According to Campanini, while in Al-Mawdudi, Qutb and Khomeini ideas political Islam contains classical theological elements, the following revolutionary Islamic reworked version of it elaborated different ideologies, such as self-conscience and Third Worldism. These ideologies are nothing but incompatible with the Western world as it is today, since it does not consider colonialism, occupation, cultural and political oppression as contemporary problems. To the Western eyes, revolutionary Islam is an obsolete system of values, which incites backward worshippers to fight senseless and fictional battles. In the Western world ideologies are dead since there is the perception they are useless and old-fashioned. In the Arab world Islam maintains a fundamental role as the most powerful ideology. Hasan Hanafi explains that *tawhid* is the instrument and revolution is the goal, as the unification of the human relationship originates from the revolution. According to Hanafi, the imamate is the only Islamic way of government and is warmly suggested not to contradict or be against the imam. By evoking God's name, it is evoked the revolution against power and the overthrowing of the political order is necessary to the establishment of a new political, economic and social order. According to Campanini Islam can assimilate any political order and establishment since its main interest does not lie in the ruler but in the law applied and the unity of God, or *tawhid*, is the main pillar of the political building. Does it exist a unique theory concerning Islam and politics? Does it exist a Islamic state beyond the project of the caliphate? According to Ayoob, the Islamic

state is nothing but an oxymoron, a fictive narrative built in order to maintain power: "Wherever and whenever a state calls itself Islamic, it is temporal power, not religion, that is in the driver's seat. The lesson one draws from all this is that Islam needs to be saved from the state, not that the state should become the vehicle for the imposition of Islamic norms."⁴⁷³

The last historical phase of Islamism, begun around 1970s, is called post-Islamism, firstly codified by Asef Bayat in 1995. Post-Islamism supports religion as well as the previous stage of Islamism, it is not secular nor anti-Islamic, though. It claims religion and civil rights can coexist in society, upgrading the Islamist worldview. According to Olivier Roy, post-Islamism fulfills specific criteria, as "[...] realism replaces ideology, acceptance of the nation state supersedes pan-Islamism, democracy eliminates jihadism, and Islamic identity progresses beyond mere normative concerns."⁴⁷⁴ Around 1970's Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia got to know the spread of Islamist movements. Willis explains that such movements were supported by the local elites since they were necessary in order to ballast the leftist parties influence. "The governments in all three states have similarly responded to the challenge these movements have represented with varying mixtures of compromise and repression."⁴⁷⁵ According to Willis, it is mandatory to observe the Maghreb context in which Islam emerged in order to figure out the role each state gave religion. "Thus, following independence, Islam was used by the governments to justify and legitimize policies to their populations."⁴⁷⁶ According to Bernard Lewis the political relevance of Islam is substantial, both internal and external since religion represents the ultimate brand of trustfulness and loyalty. Moreover, Islam is the only credible authority in hard political times since it represents the most complete and rich setting of ideas and norms. In fact, as Lewis points out "[...] Islam provides the most effective system of symbols for political mobilization [...]"⁴⁷⁷ John Esposito's analysis of the Islamic relevance in contemporary Arab politics focuses on the main causes of post-independence Arab frustration, as the boosts for Islamic revival. The causes of Muslims' frustration evidenced by Esposito are, above all, the huge deception with regards to Arab governments, corrupted, inefficient and repressive. The

⁴⁷³Ayoob Mohammad, "The Myth of the Islamic State – The History of a Political Idea", *Foreign Affairs*, 2016

⁴⁷⁴Rousselin Mathieu, Smith Christopher, "The Tunisian Constitutional Process: Main Actors and Key Issues", *Center for Global Cooperation Research*, 2015

⁴⁷⁵Willis J. Michael, Politics and Power in the Maghreb: Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco from Independence to the Arab Spring, Hurst&Company, pp 395, 2012

⁴⁷⁶Willis J. Michael, Politics and Power in the Maghreb: Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco from Independence to the Arab Spring, Hurst&Company, pp 395, 2012

⁴⁷⁷Lewis Bernard, *The Political Language of Islam*, The University of Chicago Press, 1988

mid-1900s independence movements did not bring freedom and better economic conditions, but only authoritarian regimes. Therefore, Muslims' frustration derived from their impotence toward their own governments, feeling deep social injustice. Muslims' widespread frustration was also directed toward the Western politics and their own absence of any strong identity (if compared to the Western's). The Arab comparison with the West was systematic and painful. Moreover, to European colonialism followed the American neo-colonialism through Arab countries' foreign policy manipulation, US military presence in Arab states and the US multi-national corporations everywhere.⁴⁷⁸ The Islamic synthesis of the West was imperialism and the only hope of rebirth for Arab societies was the return to Islam.

And what about the nowadays Islamic State? Is it the concrete nowadays example of the perfect, golden and traditional Caliphate? possible to speak about ISIS as the quintessential and original Islamic State? According to the study on ISIS government carried out by Costanza Spocci, ISIS most relevant and strategic issue is its self-sufficiency. Far more than religion. Spocci assesses religion is only instrumental to legitimize power, especially of ISIS politburo, since Islam represents the only appealing and unifying ideology that can immortalize and glorify ISIS leaders.⁴⁷⁹ Moreover, three ex-Saddam officials became ISIS members and ministers of Army, Economy and Security. According to the *divide et impera* style of ruling, ISIS built a new intelligence and informers in order to better control each village and city by knowing the loyalists and the opponents, so eliminating rebels. ISIS treats non-Muslims as they were treated under the Ottoman rule, obliged to pay a tax called *gizya*. Churches are confiscated and turned into mosques. Kidnapping and elimination of the opponents are systematic. ISIS bureaucracy is perfectly organized, its educational system is egalitarian and rich, and many people show adherence to the state. However, Spocci focuses upon an important question: is religion appealing enough on the long term, or other strategies need to be put in place? Concerning the education realm for example, schools do not work as good as it seems and school frequency is not mandatory. Moreover, ISIS supports foreigners in embracing jihad and declare allegiance to ISIS. Foreigners' ISIS support is the Dollar, since non-Arab Muslims are paid twice a normal salary without the need of paying the rent nor the principal goods. These privileges lie in the possibility that such foreigners stay alone without families, so they can devote their

⁴⁷⁸ Esposito John L., *Islam and Politics*, Syracuse University Press, pp 273, 1984

⁴⁷⁹ Spocci Costanza, "Islamico, ma pur sempre stato", Limes, vol 3, 2016

days entirely for the jihad. Spocci observes that despite the repressive ISIS environment, many have been people who tried to rebel. The social dissent increases and maybe not even the caliphate is the best political solution for Islamists.

4.2. How Islam Intercepts the Political Discourse

While the previous section focused on the historical frame of Islam and politics by highlighting the main ideologies that connected religion to authority overtime, this paragraph specifically approaches the Islamic political discourse in order to better explore the complex issue of the relation between Islam and politics. Firstly, the analysis of how Islam intercepts any political discourse, how Islamism became the main speaker for Tunisian people's political frustrations and how it managed to present itself as a reliable actor in Tunisian society, is analyzed. Moreover, it seems necessary to observe how politics exploited Islam's strong ideological appealing. So, two main questions characterize this section.

Firstly, what are the profound causes of people's distrust into the Arab states' institutions? This question inquiry into the 'plus' Islam offers to people rather than the State does. In fact, the common trend according to which Muslims prefer religious authority if compared to the State's needs to be understood. The second question is related to the inner constitution of the Salafi doctrine, instead. It seems compulsory to analyze the double nature of Salafism, both intransigent and adaptable. So, in which cases Salafis opt for displaying radicalism rather than adaptability? Are there political influences that guide such fluctuations?

4.2.1. *Why People's Distrust into the Arab States' Institutions grew overtime?*

According to John Esposito, many contemporary and newly-independent countries invoked the Islamic authority in order to establish its governments. States such as Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Libya and Iran supported and supports Islamic conservatism (with the only exception of contemporary Libya), by encouraging Islamic organizations, both quietist and militant. "All have advocated an Islamically oriented future, and employed Islamic symbols and rhetoric. Islam has proven a meaningful and effective mobilizing force among modern as well as traditional Muslims."⁴⁸⁰ Islam is considered the main and most appropriate way of changing reality

⁴⁸⁰Esposito John L., Islam and Politics, Syracuse University Press, pp 273, 1984

within the Arab world. According to John Esposito thus, four are the main Islamic political attitudes to change: secularist, conservative, neo-traditionist and reformist. Secularists hope for the division between political and religious authorities, since they perceive Islam as backward and unsuitable for a modern society. The conservative position preaches to come back to the medieval sources of Islam in order to fulfill the 'return to the true Islam'. In spite of their name, neo-traditionists are more radical than conservatives, since they claim that even the medieval Islamic version is corrupted and the only way to come back to the true source of Islam is to come back to the Salafiyya and the golden age of the caliphate. Finally, reformists aim at reforming Muslim society through modernity, and yet, not through Westernization. Reformists want to implement Islamic structures, schools and teaching in order to adapt Islam to contemporary age.⁴⁸¹ With regards to State organization and power administration, Esposito explains that the Western concept of 'secularism' does not find any synonymous among the Arab governments, since it does not fit its 'political reality'. In Islamic history the authority always maintained the Islamic law as a relevant source for ruling and administrating society. It means that politics always intercepted religion in order to maintain its power. "Moreover, despite the loss of power and autonomy occasioned by colonialism and the Western secular path followed by most Muslims governments, Islam has remained a primary principle of social cohesion and identity."⁴⁸² The problematic issue related to the absence of a structured and organized Islamic government lies into the great confusion that surrounds Islamic political history. In Esposito's viewpoint in fact, no historical Islamic rule were organized nor replicable. While the first Caliphate represents an idealized establishment, unrepeatable and unrealizable under the scriptures conditions, the next one under the Umayyad and Abbasid rule provided just a tiny list of prescriptions. Confusion lies in Arab Muslims frustration of not being able to establish the Islamic (utopian) state as well as a unique interpretation of religion-state relation. "Given the lack of a specific, agreed-upon authoritative model for an Islamic state, Islamic activists, organizations and governments have had to address a number of issues among them: the nature of Islamic government political institutions and international relations."⁴⁸³ Moreover, many are the critics to contemporary and past Islamic regimes, especially from Islamists and nowadays

⁴⁸¹ Esposito John L., *Islam and Politics*, Syracuse University Press, pp 273, 1984

⁴⁸² Esposito John L., *Islam and Politics*, Syracuse University Press, pp 273, 1984

⁴⁸³ Esposito John L., *Islam and Politics*, Syracuse University Press, pp 273, 1984

Salafis. Osama bin Laden for example, harshly criticized corruption within the Saudi family, considering it an impious regime despite its blatant Islamic orientation.

In order to explain how Islam intercepts the political discourse by taking its roots in the historical authoritarian Tunisian ground, it seems necessary to have a look at Bourguiba's and Ben 'Ali's policies. Since 1980's, several Arab governments opted for the building of more 'secular' laws in order to open their economies to liberalism and to get loans from the West. Many Arabs' legal codes became secular except for the Family Code, that remained almost impermeable to reforms. The Family Code was the most relevant sphere of influence of the Islamic law since interpersonal relationships must be ruled by religion. "Family laws, which includes laws governing marriage, divorce, and inheritance, has always enjoyed pride of place within the Shariah, reflecting the centrality of the family in Muslim society."⁴⁸⁴ Interestingly, during 1980's many governments like Tunisia chose a forced secularization even within the Family Code. Such a political decision met the multiple Western pressures for democratization at the expense of people's will and readiness for such a secular drift. As Esposito explains: "Governments imposed reforms from above through legislation. [...] They (people) denounced reforms as further erosion of the *Shariah* through an introduction of western, and thus un-Islamic, regulations and values by parliamentary bodies composed of non-experts."⁴⁸⁵ In regards to this, Tunisian rulers' secular impositions are to be mentioned. In fact, both Habib Bourguiba and Ben 'Ali played a leading role in forcefully secularizing Tunisia, by choosing highly unpopular policies. According to Larbi Sadiki, Bourguiba put in place organized and structured strategies in order to fight French assimilation. "But at the level of norms and ideology, Bourguiba and his Francophile allies did not reject French culture and had close contacts with the French model."⁴⁸⁶

The Bourguibian government was a patrimonial one, there was no room for political and ideological diversity nor for the building of multiple Tunisian identities, as religious, tribal or democratic. Bourguiba's discourse on Islam changed, with mixed fortunes, from 1930's to 1970's. The politician initially called for the veil in order to affirm the Islamic identity in opposition to the French colonizers', but "Once resistance of that kind was no longer needed, dif-

⁴⁸⁴Esposito John L., *Islam and Politics*, Syracuse University Press, pp 273, 1984

⁴⁸⁵Esposito John L., *Islam and Politics*, Syracuse University Press, pp 273, 1984

⁴⁸⁶Sadiki Larbi, "The Search for Citizenship in Ben 'Ali's Tunisia: democracy versus unity", *Political Studies*, 2002

ferent aspects of Islam must be mobilized to establish a new status quo. A religion of the republic had to be created.”⁴⁸⁷ As Bochra Kammarti writes, “Hardly had the independence been proclaimed on 20 March 1956, that Habib Bourguiba set gender issues at the heart of his policy of modernization of Tunisian state and society.”⁴⁸⁸ In fact, Bourguiba preached the abandon of the head-scarf for women since the new political project for the independent Tunisia was to become secularized and similar to France. In 1970's Bourguiba closed the famous al-Zaytunah university and publicly expressed his disapproval to Ramadan fasting, since he claimed it was against progress and in 1980's he banned veiling. Apparently, the veil was a particularly dear issue to Bourguiba and to Ben 'Ali too, since, while reopening the Zaytunah mosque, he strictly forbade the veil and the Islamic beards. So, as Malika Zeghal explains, “Under the regimes of Presidents Bourguiba and Ben 'Ali, official narratives described Islamism as the antithesis of 'modernity' and 'progress'.”⁴⁸⁹ Suddenly, Islam became obsolete, and the veil a symbol of backwardness. A new political discourse was about to absorb religion in order to fulfill its political interests. “Even if the dominant motivating idea for Bourguiba was some particular notion of 'progress' informed by the European Enlightenment, Islam had a role to play in the project as a source of identity and values.”⁴⁹⁰ According to Webb religion in Tunisia was absorbed by the establishment, since Bourguiba was trying to establish a specific version of religion: a Sunni, individual (rather than collective) and Turkish model of Islam. In Bourguibian ideal, religion was a tool to build the new Tunisian Republic and new Tunisians. Islam was implemented in youth instruction as a study subject and leveled to civic education. Consequently, the civic values of Islam were enhanced, such as loyalty, obedience and honesty. Edward Webb speaks of Bourguiba spirit of 'religious Jacobinism', since religion covered a new and institutional role. In *Nouvelle Conception*, manifesto of the Tunisian elite' projects for the new Republic, Bourguiba wrote: “After the duties of a good Muslim, the child will learn, through a natural connection, the qualities and virtues of a good citizen. Civic instruction will explain to him the institutions of his country and his future responsibilities as a citizen.”⁴⁹¹ Selected passages of the

⁴⁸⁷ Webb Edward, “The ‘Church’ of Bourguiba: Nationalizing Islam in Tunisia”, *Sociology of Islam*, vol 1, 2013

⁴⁸⁸ Kammarti Bochra, “Veiling in Tunisia: a marker of the religious fact's territorial implications”, *International Social Science Journal*, vol 61, issue 202, 2010

⁴⁸⁹ Zeghal Malika, “Competing Way of Life: Islamism, Secularism and Public Order in Tunisian Transition”, *Constellations*, vol 20, no 2, 2013

⁴⁹⁰ Webb Edward, “The ‘Church’ of Bourguiba: Nationalizing Islam in Tunisia”, *Sociology of Islam*, vol 1, 2013

⁴⁹¹ Webb Edward, “The ‘Church’ of Bourguiba: Nationalizing Islam in Tunisia”, *Sociology of Islam*, vol 1, 2013

Koran were taught in schools, as well as of other subjects such as history: "The regulations state that history is a "foundational element" of the moral and social curriculum "in its social and human conception," reinforced by the lengthier directions to teachers compared to the three subjects considered so far."⁴⁹² Bourguiba was the father of Tunisia, who asked its sons only to obey: school in fact, was not projected to independent reasoning and free thinking. Especially, Bourguiba instituted some principles called *directives particulières* concerning philosophy: "It is imperative to achieve sufficient unity between the teaching of philosophy and the study of Islamic thought."⁴⁹³ To conclude, Bourguiba attitude toward Islam was critical and oriented to bend it for the political sake. As Esposito writes "That attitude was rigorously challenged to its logical conclusion in the 1980's when Islamic revivalism did emerge as a force to be reckoned with."⁴⁹⁴ According to Francesco Cavatorta, Tunisians accepted Bourguiba secular policies as much as the economy grew and the living condition were stable, for the bourgeoisie at least. But when things got worse between 1970's and 1980's, the identity issue abruptly came to light on the Tunisian political scene.⁴⁹⁵

It can be drawn that the Bourguibian regime perfectly interlace with his successor's, despite differences in political rhetoric. As Cavatorta and Haugbølle highlight, such a governmental war to Islamic traditions and symbols led to mine the state' stability. In fact, the last years of Ben 'Ali regime were challenged by the same actors repressed under Bourguiba, the Islamists. "In the early 2000s, a religious reawakening began to offer a model of Arab Muslim identity that promoted values often associated with Western modernity, such as tolerance and self-improvement, and recast those values as forming the core of Islam. The new identity model was a rejection of both Bourguiba, which excluded Islam from public life, whether policymaking or regular communal prayer, and the Ben Ali regime's, which seemed to celebrate conspicuous consumption and corruption in the name of progress."⁴⁹⁶ According to Cavatorta and Haugbølle, Ben 'Ali alimented three principle 'mythologies' during his rule, such as the economic miracle, the democratic gradualism and the myth of 'laïcité'.⁴⁹⁷ As the

⁴⁹² Webb Edward, "The 'Church' of Bourguiba: Nationalizing Islam in Tunisia", *Sociology of Islam*, vol 1, 2013

⁴⁹³ Webb Edward, "The 'Church' of Bourguiba: Nationalizing Islam in Tunisia", *Sociology of Islam*, vol 1, 2013

⁴⁹⁴ Esposito John L., Voll Obert John, *Markers of Contemporary Islam*, Oxford University Press, pp 257, 2001

⁴⁹⁵ Cavatorta Francesco, "Religione e democratizzazione in Medio Oriente e Nord Africa, il caso della Tunisia", *Rivista di Politica*, Dossier: Democrazia, Politica e Religione, num. 2, 2012

⁴⁹⁶ Haugbølle Hostrup Rikke, Cavatorta Francesco, "Beyond Ghannouchi: Islamism and Social Change in Tunisia", *Middle East Report*, Issue 262, 2012

⁴⁹⁷ Cavatorta Francesco, Haugbølle Hostrup Rikke, "The End of Authoritarian Rule and the Mythology of Tunisia under Ben Ali", *Mediterranean Politics*, vol 17, issue 2, 2012

authors explain, “For instance, economic reforms intended to strengthen the grip of the ruling clique on the economic activities of the country in order to further secure the regime might have the unintended consequences of alienating social groups that used to be loyal to the regime, but are now dissatisfied with it and could potentially mobilize ‘below the radar’ against it.”⁴⁹⁸ Ben ‘Ali economic miracle was promoted as the only solution to the growth of Islamism, considered as the evil of Tunisian society. The Tunisian economic miracle though, was made of workers’ exploitation and inequalities, unemployment and huge gap between the coastal and the internal regions. Furthermore, the ones who enriched from such a mechanism were the Ben ‘Ali family and few people from his entourage. “This predatory behaviour, backed by the possibility of relying on political contacts and the security services, led to a significant increase in corrupt practices that not only undermined economic performance, but created widespread resentment against the ruling elites among ordinary citizens given the increase in income inequalities.”⁴⁹⁹ The democratic gradualism too, was an invented paradigm in order to get international approval and support. Ben ‘Ali in fact pretended to implement human rights and democratic policies on the long term, by giving the West the impression of a reliable player of himself. As well as the other paradigms, the myth of laïcité too posed the basis for the following social unrest. To the eyes of common people in fact, the blatant failure of the imported economic, societal and political models was conceived as the obvious consequence of the Arabs’ detachment from their deepest and Muslim identity. It was from the true essence of Muslims that Tunisia could rebirth. Cavatorta insists on the fact that most of such a popular unrest and turning toward religion was not perceived by analysts. “This means that the regime’s forced secularization and repression of Islamism neglected the dominant referent of values of the majority of the population, namely Islam.”⁵⁰⁰

Cavatorta explains that is relevant to deeply observe the phenomenon of the political Islam, since it represents the participation of Islamic movements to the political ground. According to Cavatorta, what is difficult to inquiry is the Islamic parties’ credibility to the eyes of the Western or democratic observers. In their viewpoint in fact, Islamic parties accept to play the

⁴⁹⁸ Cavatorta Francesco, Haugbølle Hostrup Rikke, “The End of Authoritarian Rule and the Mythology of Tunisia under Ben Ali”, *Mediterranean Politics*, vol 17, issue 2, 2012

⁴⁹⁹ Cavatorta Francesco, Haugbølle Hostrup Rikke, “The End of Authoritarian Rule and the Mythology of Tunisia under Ben Ali”, *Mediterranean Politics*, vol 17, issue 2, 2012

⁵⁰⁰ Cavatorta Francesco, Haugbølle Hostrup Rikke, “The End of Authoritarian Rule and the Mythology of Tunisia under Ben Ali”, *Mediterranean Politics*, vol 17, issue 2, 2012

democratic game only because they do not have other chances. Foreign observers see the Islamic commitment to democratic mechanism only moved by instrumental reasons since they do not believe Islamists can turn democratic. Moreover, as Cavatorta assesses, Islamic anti-western discourse as well as its no-global economic protests certainly do not reassure Westerners on Islamists 'good job' once on power. One thing is certain, that Islamic parties, even conservators, can be democratic in so far as they accept political pluralism, free elections and a constitutional chart. Democracy does not only mean to believe in human rights and in French Revolution' values, the adherence to it consists into the participation to the democratic mechanism too. Furthermore, according to Cavatorta, both Ghannouchi and Yassine have been preaching for the compatibility of Islam and democracy since 1980's. From 1990's onwards in fact, many people started to represent Islamism as the only viable solution and the most appealing contemporary ideology. Rachid Ghannouchi, leader of the Islamist party Ennahda, was profoundly anti-Bourguiba who brought Tunisia to imitate France by a forced secularization process. Ghannouchi felt himself as 'a stranger in his own country' and begun to gather people's frustration about Bourguiba government. Ghannouchi thought his party would be legalized under Ben 'Ali, and yet, the new ruler begun even a more repressive campaign against Islamists. Such State behaviors pushed Islamists to organize and ally with socialists, blatantly showing their democratic learning on pluralism.⁵⁰¹ Marzouki and Ghannouchi together in order to create a stronger opposition: that is democratic. However, since under Ben 'Ali it was quite impossible to organize religious activities by eluding controls, Islam was relegated to the private sphere becoming symbol of civil activism. After the Arab spring, many people deeply frustrated by Ben 'Ali government voted Ennahda since it represented the practice of moral values, completely lost under the dictatorship. Cavatorta highlights the Islamic movements' pragmatic dimension in connecting religious values and reliability with democratic mechanism. In order to answer to the first question '*what are the profound causes of people's distrust into the Arab states' institutions?*' it is possible to answer that people's distrust born into a chain of wrong policies which made Islam as the only reliable ideology left.

⁵⁰¹Cavatorta Francesco, "Religione e democratizzazione in Medio Oriente e Nord Africa, il caso della Tunisia", *Rivista di Politica*, Dossier: Democrazia, Politica e Religione, num. 2, 2012

4.2.2. Why are Salafis both Radical and Flexible?

Concerning the second question '*in which cases Salafis opt for displaying radicalism rather than adaptability? Are there political influences that guide such fluctuations?*', the following analysis tries to shed a light into this issue. Interestingly, Salafism despite is a radical Islamic trend has a profoundly controversial nature, both radical and flexible. Salafism in fact, is characterized by a rigid and straight doctrine which is linked to the pious ancestors' behaving. Acting differently from the early companions of the Prophet would mean detaching from the right path. And yet, Salafism often adapted to multiple contexts, as the examples of Tunisia and Xinjiang show. In fact, Salafism adapted even in contexts where the only exploitable sentiment was people's rage, mostly against the central government. Salafism is composed by many different souls which constantly had to balance religious unity and religious purity. "As long as they had to deal with this dilemma, they followed an intricate course characterized at times by flexibility and at other times by rigidity."⁵⁰² The Egyptian Salafi Call group for example, near in habits and behavior to Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia, stated "Our doctrine is very strict but our political behavior is flexible. The Brotherhood is the exact opposite."⁵⁰³ According to Khaled Hroub the exploitation of the failure of both nationalism and socialism led Islam revive, which adapted in many different contexts. In Hroub viewpoint Salafis' behavior and especially their political involvement is not always rigid and dogmatic, since they have to cope with real political grounds. Moreover, Salafis must be able to be attractive and flexible since their main support comes from ordinary people. "As we shall see the principle of *hisba* is in all cases ambiguous and flexible, having multiple political implications, allowing for peaceful moral righteousness as well as the pursuit of political goals, even by violent means."⁵⁰⁴ Hroub defines Salafism a slippery phenomenon where rigorous doctrine and flexible strategy coexist, changing from quietist to jihadi approach within the same Salafi trend. Roel Maijer explains that the birth of Salafism in Saudi Arabia for example, firstly established the concept of Salafism as a vanguard capable to mobilize people. "The strength of this revolutionary praxis is that it is based on a

⁵⁰² Lauzière Henri, *The Making of Salafism – Islamic Reform in the Twentieth Century*, Columbia University Press, pp 336, 2016

⁵⁰³ El-Sherif Ashraf, "Egypt's Salafists at a Crossroads", *Carnegie Paper*, April 2015

⁵⁰⁴ Hroub Khaled, *Political Islam: Context Versus Ideology*, SOAS Middle East Issues, pp 320, 2012

fixed uncompromising ideology of confrontation which is also very practical, adaptable and flexible.”⁵⁰⁵

To conclude this section on political and religious interceptions, it seems relevant to cite Anna Rita Ronzoni’s contribution to the debate. According to Ronzoni, every time the come back to religion as mark of identity happens, it is due to a substantial regression and worsening of political and societal conditions.⁵⁰⁶ The Arab loss in the aftermath of the Six Days War in 1967 seems to the author the true watershed in Arabs’ perception of the world around them. This event in fact, spread multiple reactions among people such as the feeling of forced submission to imperialistic powers, the increasing of extremist organizations and the related repressive state practices. Ronzoni speaks of a cultural and social regressive climate, where, to the increasing of the Islamist number worldwide, corresponded an alarming decreasing of their theoretical reasoning quality.⁵⁰⁷ Moreover, The author assesses that not only the enemy is represented by ‘the West’, but also by the Islamism as far as it is opposed to Islam. According to Ronzoni in fact, there is a fight between Islam and Islamism since the former represents the religious tradition while the latter is the ideological interpretation of reality. It seems difficult to accept the political presence in Islam and especially the political exploitation of religion, since “The political behavior of Islamists, and sometimes that of all Muslims, is often treated as an exotic peculiarity that defies normal analyses and can only be explained as an extension of their faith.”⁵⁰⁸ In Tripp’s discourse the stress is pointed on the localization of Islamism, since to his viewpoint it is not relevant to study Islamism in general, disconnected from a specific context. Tripp explains that the Muslim marker could only be considered as a variable, not the determining factor of specific behaviors. In fact, people’s frustration and violent acts in French peripheries is the result of wrong policies rather than of Islamic revivalism. With regards to Tripp’s discourse, Mahmood Mamdani speaks about the presence of a specific political will behind Islamism, such as the process of delinking religion from its local culture. Mamdani, by citing Roy’s neologism of ‘neofundamentalists’ wants to highlight the controversial nature of

⁵⁰⁵ Meijer Roel, “Making of a Revolutionary Salafi Praxis”, *Die Welt des Islams*, 2007

⁵⁰⁶ Ronzoni Anna Rita, “Religione e Politica nell’Islam: alle origini della comprensione”, *Rivista di Studi Politici*, 2006

⁵⁰⁷ Ronzoni Anna Rita, “Religione e Politica nell’Islam: alle origini della comprensione”, *Rivista di Studi Politici*, 2006

⁵⁰⁸ Tripp Charles, “All (Muslim) Politics Is Local – How Context Shapes Islam in Power”, *Foreign Affairs*, 2009

Islamism today since it means something ‘born against Islam’.⁵⁰⁹ According to Mamdani, Roy’s analysis of contemporary Islamism lies in the ‘secularization’ of religion since it is not controlled by any specific institution and it is increasingly becoming an individual project. Most relevant is the fact that “Because in the Middle East, Islamist parties have mobilized in response to particular state policies, by the end of 1990’s, most Islamist movements had become ‘more nationalist than Islamist’.”⁵¹⁰ According to Mamdani, the presence of global jihad could be better explained from the 1980’s *Reaganomics*. Reagan in fact, firstly set, in the last decades a politics of national liberation from the ‘evil empire’. Once the policy has been conceived, implemented and supported by every means, it becomes usable by anybody. In line with this, Mamdani explains that the Afghans warriors used such an idea in order to get ‘mujahidins’ to fight jihad.⁵¹¹ According to Roy, religion, and its current form of fundamentalism does not position itself in continuity with common forms of terrorism and political dissidence. Here, radicalism shows a rupture more than a continuity which is mostly generational: new radical generations in fact, even before of fighting jihad abroad, fight with their own families’ disapproval.⁵¹² Interestingly, Roy blink to the French ideology of laicism by assessing that it represents another kind of fundamentalism as far as it does not accept the presence of religion within its society. *Laïcité* dangerously becomes an ideology and a weapon, as well as the Islamic fundamentalism.

4.3. Religion as a Tool for Mass Mobilization

What is relevant to highlight here is the crucial role of Islam in starting social mobilizations. Despite religion is not the leading cause of people's activism, it can be considered as a tool that foster it. Quintan Wiktorowicz profoundly studied the phenomenon of Islamic activism, by inquiring what Islam adds or implements within social activism. According to Wiktorowicz, activism is rooted in a series of symbols, practices, dynamics, processes and discourses useful

⁵⁰⁹ Mamdani Mahmood, “Whither Political Islam?”, *Terrorism & Counterterrorism Politics & Society*, review essay, 2005

⁵¹⁰ Mamdani Mahmood, “Whither Political Islam?”, *Terrorism & Counterterrorism Politics & Society*, review essay, 2005

⁵¹¹ Mamdani Mahmood, “Whither Political Islam?”, *Terrorism & Counterterrorism Politics & Society*, review essay, 2005

⁵¹² Roy Olivier, “I nostri errori nell’autoinfittita guerra al terrorismo”, *Conversazione Limes*, vol 3, 2016

in evoking people's rage, frustration and more easily, reaction. "This indicates that the *dynamics, process and organization* of Islamic activism can be understood as important elements of contention that transcend the specificity of Islam as a system of meaning, identity and basis of collective action. [...] In other words, Islamic activism is not *sui generis*."⁵¹³ According to Wiktorowicz, the numerous efforts directed to essentialize Islam, weakened the perspective of a multifaceted Islamic reality. To essentialize Islamic variety, both concerning its interpretations and its expressions, means to iron out peculiarities by considering it exceptionalism.

This last section is organized into five smaller parties in order to better analyze and explore the phenomenon of religious movements. Above all, it is mandatory to understand why Islam can be the privileged tool to gather a social movement. What does religion have to do with social and political activism? Consequently, it would be necessary to deeply inquiry upon the phenomenon of violence linked to Islamic social movement. Where does it derive from? Is violence typical of the Islamic culture or is it common to other non-religious movements? So, in the third section the Social Movement Theory (SMT) is explored. Is it possible to apply the Social Movement Theory approach to Islamic movements too? Then, it is relevant to understand whether the Islamic approach is unique or not. What is the role of Islam in the process-building of social movements? Is it their main boost? Is Islam necessarily linked to specific geographical contexts or its applicability to social movements is the same everywhere? Finally, as Wiktorowicz explains, religion is undoubtedly the glue of people's frustration, rage, will of revenge and social cohesion. And yet, religion seems not to be the only boost for people's collective reaction. So, is ultimately religion the engine of social movements? Are, even Islamic movements, supported by drives different from religious ones?

4.3.1. Why Islamic Activism?

The first question concerns the ability of Islam in attracting people. Wiktorowicz assesses that despite most Islamic movements' militants hold high level of education, the bulk of them recently migrated to cities to find better paid jobs, but without human bonds. And many ordinary people became Islamic militants because of extreme pressures caused by the economic

⁵¹³ Wiktorowicz Quintan, Islamic Activism – A Social Movement Theory Approach, Indiana University Press, pp. 316, 2004

crisis. So, Islam was their only hope not to drawn in the urban areas.⁵¹⁴ Some scholars consider the huge religious appeal as a consequence of Islamic anti-imperialist critic to contemporary society, as the 'clash of civilization' discourse is still fascinating, both in Western and Arab countries. Plus, the Arab world bend under Western imperialism is highly appealing since it provides a scapegoat for masses. And it enhances that Muslims' subdued position in the world' power balance is due to the abandon of Islam' right path. As a consequence, Islam portrays itself as the only hope for the Muslim Arab world. Political explanation could be added to the previous since Islam had (and has) the role of people's frustrations catalyst for longtime. People' powerlessness face to politics and society, police repressive behaviors and disastrous bureaucracy led people believe the only solution was Islam, '*Islam huwwa al-hal*'. "Since political movement are banned under most authoritarian regimes, Islamic activism becomes a natural vehicle for political discontent."⁵¹⁵

According to Wiktorowicz, the Islamic brand of social activism is connected to culture and framing, symbols and language that recall Muslims their roots and common background. "Much of the work of Islamic activism is devoted to creating frames that motivate, inspire and demand loyalty."⁵¹⁶ Wiktorowicz specifies that such motivational duties occurs in repressive contexts and because of this, the dynamics put in place are different from any western social movement. Carrie Rosefsky Wickham deeply analyzes popular Egyptian societal dynamics concerning Islamic activism, focusing on people needs, hopes and reality. So, why is Islam so appealing? First and foremost, the Islamic organizations' forced clandestine condition determined by the authoritarian regimes made Islamic activism a secret activity. And yet, frequent state repressions did not make Islamic groups weaker, rather they grow overtime, becoming stronger and more organized since they had to struggle to survive. According to Rosefsky Wickham the 'micro-mechanisms of mobilization' are built on two pillars, as the 'rational actor' choice according to which choices are built on the benefits one gets in return and the 'call to arms' model, as the call for collective action. But, as Rosefsky Wickham asks, "Why were so many graduates ready to embrace – and act upon – an ideology that stressed the primacy of

⁵¹⁴ Wiktorowicz Quintan, *Islamic Activism – A Social Movement Theory Approach*, Indiana University Press, pp 316, 2004, pg 7

⁵¹⁵Wiktorowicz Quintan, *Islamic Activism – A Social Movement Theory Approach*, Indiana University Press, pp 316, 2004, pg 8

⁵¹⁶Wiktorowicz Quintan, *Islamic Activism – A Social Movement Theory Approach*, Indiana University Press, pp 316, 2004, pg 25

the public good over the pursuit of private self-interest?"⁵¹⁷ What is interesting in fact, is why so many people commit themselves to Islamic activism if they found there nothing more than volunteer activities. So, the question is : what Islamic activism brings into people's lives? According to Rosefsky Wickham analysis, many are the benefits people get from such an engagement. Islamic circles may be safe basins where to find a 'good' spouse, but first and foremost Islamic activism bring youth hope. As everywhere in the world, the graduates live the post-diploma as a moment to understand and experiment what to would do in their lives as adults. Generally, it is a period of worries about the future, but such a tension is helpful in order to find something to do. Where no job fits your studies and no money let you go abroad, a profound sense of frustration catches you. This is the case in Egypt, as in the Arab world in general, where young people have no perspectives. In such hopeless cases, young people seeking the meaning of their lives, often bump into Islamic circles. As Rosefsky Wickham highlights, anonymous and not wealthy students become part of a bigger project, soldiers of the Islamic reformation process of society. Rosefsky Wickham focuses that "Participation promoted a feeling of belonging and an intimacy with peers based on shared commitments and routines."⁵¹⁸ Islamic activism easily but substantially, provides people a 'sense of purpose'. Obviously, the Islamic reformist project put its bases on a bottom-up kind of engagement, voluntary and free. The Islamic activism mechanism of recruiting must involve symbols and promote stereotypes in order to make its members perceive a strong sense of community. Islamic activism is an exclusive mechanism, since people who share its values do it totally, and their aim is to involve in the movement as many other people as they can. "Critics of the Islamic movements have emphasized the role of coercion and argue that young people in many *sha'bi* communities face intense peer pressure to conform to Islamic moral and social codes."⁵¹⁹ According to Rosefsky Wickham, a 'transvaluation of values' is happening, as priorities undergo an overturning: the value of knowledge is appreciated only if Islamic. Literature, cinema and university education are worth to be known only if Islamic. The interviewee told Rosefsky Wickham that Islamic activism meant practical help for him, as "From the organization, I had 21 volunteers in helping

⁵¹⁷Wickham Rosefsky Carrie, "Interests, Ideas and Islamist Outreach in Egypt" from Wiktorowicz Quintan, Islamic Activism – A Social Movement Theory Approach, Indiana University Press, pp 316, 2004, pg 236

⁵¹⁸Wickham Rosefsky Carrie, "Interests, Ideas and Islamist Outreach in Egypt" from Wiktorowicz Quintan, Islamic Activism – A Social Movement Theory Approach, Indiana University Press, pp 316, 2004, pg 234

⁵¹⁹Wickham Rosefsky Carrie, "Interests, Ideas and Islamist Outreach in Egypt" from Wiktorowicz Quintan, Islamic Activism – A Social Movement Theory Approach, Indiana University Press, pp 316, 2004, pg 234

me find a cheap apartment. That's the meaning of Islamic solidarity."⁵²⁰ In addition, it worth noting that such an activism is not entirely understood by every Muslim. Especially Rosefsky Wickham, as also did Olivier Roy, focuses on the considerable split between the new generations of Muslims and their parents, who often do not understand their sons' radical commitment. Values are completely overturned: from parental authority to the concept of wealth and knowledge. Islamic activism thus, inserts itself into the scar of old ideologies but by renewing its style. Islam in fact, does not promise young people new and well-paid jobs, wealthier lifestyle nor to satisfy their personal ambitions, it promotes more readily fulfilled goals, achievable in everyday life. Such a pragmatic approach make youth overcome their frustrations and stay positive in life. How? Through *da'wa*. "By promoting a new ethic of civic obligation, the *da'wa* helped convert a passive political stance into an active one."⁵²¹ One Rosefsky's interviewee told the author that Islam made the so-called 'break of consciousness' possible. In Zeinab words in fact, while people keep living inside a circle of worries and anxiety, Islamists manage to move outside the circle and find their peace, trying to free the others in the circle. In these regards, the history of Islamic appeal in Egypt is not really different from the one in Tunisia. Particularly, Tunisian youth harshly frustrated by the bleak outcome of the revolution, naturally wind up into the Islamic circle. In fact, despite the Tunisian revolution was the only one with a democratic outcome, Tunisian youth remained deceived by not being included into the new-born state. The only group that actively supported and added value to youth was the Salafi movement of Ansar al-Sharia. AST in fact promoted a model through which young people could overturn the social hierarchies and could teach the right path to their elder relatives and old people. Such a perspective thus, is undoubtedly revolutionary and extremely appealing.

4.3.2. Why the Islamic Use of Violence?

The use of violence by alleged religious movements represents a contradiction to a contemporary western eye. It is mandatory to stress on 'contemporary' since the West too assisted to the Catholic Church unspeakable crimes in the past centuries. The Church blemished its sup-

⁵²⁰Wickham Rosefsky Carrie, "Interests, Ideas and Islamist Outreach in Egypt" from Wiktorowicz Quintan, Islamic Activism – A Social Movement Theory Approach, Indiana University Press, pp 316, 2004, pg 242

⁵²¹Wickham Rosefsky Carrie, "Interests, Ideas and Islamist Outreach in Egypt" from Wiktorowicz Quintan, Islamic Activism – A Social Movement Theory Approach, Indiana University Press, pp 316, 2004, pg 245

posed candid reputation several times in history, not forgetting the recently unveiled clamorous scandals of pedophilia within the high ranks of the ecclesiastic establishment. But Islam is always Islam, and whenever it is possible to stereotype and blame it, all western pens are ready to write about the multiple violence perpetrated in the name of Allah. However, what interests academia is not whether Islam is intrinsically violent or not, since such a dilemma is ultimately useless and, as every essentialist approach, has no solution except for a value judgment of righteousness or wrongness. Therefore, the scientific community prefers to concentrate upon the deeper causes of Islamic violence in order to investigate whether Islam is the active actor as it seems to be or not. Is violence a programmatic action within each Islamic activist movement? And where it occurs, is violence made as far as conditions allow it or even (and mostly) whenever conditions strictly forbid it? Why is violence linked to religion?

In order to try to answer these questions, it is compulsory to recall some Islamic-inspired violent movements: the Armed Islamic Group, known as GIA, in Algeria, the Jama'a Islamiyya in Egypt, Hamas and Shi'a groups in Bahrain, 1990s. "In each of these different country settings, the use of violence was, to a large extent, a tactical response to shifting opportunity structures and emerged under particular conditions and circumstances."⁵²² According to Wiktorowicz, whenever violence results into massacres, it means that the political ground is characterized by repression. Correlate conditions to the authoritarian state are the enhance of brutality, the creation of exclusive organization to avoid state-led brutality, and the promotion of anti-system frames by rebels. According to Wiktorowicz in fact "Repression creates a sense of injustice, legitimates a call to arms, and forces insurgents into clandestine organization that become increasingly isolated from the rest of society and countervailing pressures."⁵²³ As Wiktorowicz and Hafez assess in fact, a repressive, then violent regime, would produce nothing but violent reactions. "Political exclusion is likely to provide credibility for those in the movement who argue for violence because it limits the number of reasonable tactical options, especially those related to system reform."⁵²⁴ But what is the mean of anti-civilian violence?

⁵²² Wiktorowicz Quintan, *Islamic Activism – A Social Movement Theory Approach*, Indiana University Press, pp 316, 2004, pg 20

⁵²³ Wiktorowicz Quintan, *Islamic Activism – A Social Movement Theory Approach*, Indiana University Press, pp 316, 2004, pg 21

⁵²⁴ Wiktorowicz Quintan, *Islamic Activism – A Social Movement Theory Approach*, Indiana University Press, pp 316, 2004, pg 21

"Radicalization develops in a spiral of negative and unforeseen feedback. Those involved (particularly the police and demonstrators) interact, causing escalation through a series of vicious circles."⁵²⁵ This is how della Porta 'spirals of encapsulation' theory examines the dynamic according to which repression brings more repression and violence, rebels isolate themselves from society and strategical projects are left for irrational and emotive actions. "From this perspective, an analysis of insurgency and mass violence must investigate the political environment in which violence develops."⁵²⁶ What Hafez highlights is the fact that nobody engage him/herself into violent actions without a rhetorical discourse to sustain his/her intentions. Otherwise it would mean pure craziness. Among others, Venezuelan Forces of National Liberation as well as the Viet Cong committed massacres among civilian population in order to maintain people obedient to them and collaborative. Civil war works like this: people is not essentially good or bad, rather it can be on the right or on the wrong side of the fight. To FLN eyes for examples, pro-French and against FLN Algerians had to be eliminated. According to Hafez, the Algerian FLN experimented a moment of political opening in 1989 toward inclusive political organization. Hafez assesses that the FLN managed to take the other Islamist forces under its wing since it built a political vanguard and an organized political program, and because of FIS inclusiveness it also managed to rapidly expand and grow. However, "The rising power of the FIS and its imminent victory in the national elections of 1991 led the military to carry out a bloodless coup, nullify the electoral process and initiate anti-FIS measures that included its ban in march 1992."⁵²⁷ The true tragedy of such a military coup was the reaction engendered in the aftermath of 1992. FIS political exclusion and harsh repression ended in the group radicalization. FIS group begun to get contacts and alliances with other armed groups, but in September 1992, when a conference was held in order to organize the different groups, security forces attacked and killed many of the militants. GIA was born in 1994.

It is striking that the FIS path in Algeria is like a terrible script, replicable and dangerous. Tunisian Ansar al-Sharia for example knew a similar path, of (alleged) inclusion and exclusion and radicalization behind the curtains of the democratic Tunisian theater. To the eyes of GIA

⁵²⁵Della Porta Donatella, Diani Mario, Social Movements: An Introduction, Blackwell Publishing, pp 356, 2006, pg 184

⁵²⁶Hafez M. Mohammad, "From Marginalization to Massacres" from Wiktorowicz Quintan, Islamic Activism – A Social Movement Theory Approach, Indiana University Press, pp 316, 2004, pg 39

⁵²⁷Hafez M. Mohammad, "From Marginalization to Massacres" from Wiktorowicz Quintan, Islamic Activism – A Social Movement Theory Approach, Indiana University Press, pp 316, 2004, pg 46

as well as of AST, ordinary people who did not share their struggle and suffering had to be punished as infidels.⁵²⁸ Targets of violence in Algeria started from security forces, policemen and military, then expanded to opposition groups, journalists and foreigners. In 1994 GIA target were state employees, since in their radical logic, state workers supported the state in place.

Mohammad Hafez and Quintan Wiktorowicz ask two main questions related to the deliberately use of violence in Islamic activism: “[...] why did a number of Islamists turn to violence? More generally, why do social movements utilize violence as contention, given other tactics?”⁵²⁹ According to Hafez and Wiktorowicz, there is little agreement concerning state repression, since some academic assess that state repression necessarily led to violence and others who claim the opposite. The only measurable parameters in order to shed a light on this dilemma are timing and targeting. While the timing variable correspond to whether the repression is preemptive or reactive, the targeting concerns the objectives' strategy, that can be selective or indiscriminate.⁵³⁰ In the case of timing, it has been longtime observed that, while preemptive reaction lessens the possibilities of a harsher reaction from the rebels, the reactive repression associated to the will of eradicate the opponents is disastrous in terms of the counterpart violence. Reactive repression in fact, “[...] comes after sympathizers and supporters have had a chance to develop trust and bonds of friendship with the core activists of the movement as well as to realistically gauge the level of support and commitment in the movement.”⁵³¹ In regards to targeting instead, “Selective repression signals to supporters and sympathizers that only 'troublemaker' will be punished, and therefore those who keep their distance will not become victim of repression.”⁵³² Conversely, the indiscriminate repression only fosters violence since it targets anyone, so even the sympathizers may radicalize and become violent. According to Hafez and Wiktorowicz lies a paradox under the state repressive behavior, since “One of the paradox of state repression in response to social movement activism is that while governments often repress movements because of their potentially violent

⁵²⁸Hafez M. Mohammad, “From Marginalization to Massacres” from Wiktorowicz Quintan, *Islamic Activism – A Social Movement Theory Approach*, Indiana University Press, pp 316, 2004, pg 49

⁵²⁹Hafez M. Mohammad, “From Marginalization to Massacres” from Wiktorowicz Quintan, *Islamic Activism – A Social Movement Theory Approach*, Indiana University Press, pp 316, 2004, pg 61

⁵³⁰Hafez M. Mohammad, “From Marginalization to Massacres” from Wiktorowicz Quintan, *Islamic Activism – A Social Movement Theory Approach*, Indiana University Press, pp 316, 2004, pg 68

⁵³¹Hafez M. Mohammad, “From Marginalization to Massacres” from Wiktorowicz Quintan, *Islamic Activism – A Social Movement Theory Approach*, Indiana University Press, pp 316, 2004, pg 69

⁵³²Hafez M. Mohammad, “From Marginalization to Massacres” from Wiktorowicz Quintan, *Islamic Activism – A Social Movement Theory Approach*, Indiana University Press, pp 316, 2004, pg 70

or destabilizing nature, the very act of repression creates a crisis and the conditions for violence.”⁵³³ Hafez and Wiktorowicz apply this theoretical frame to the Egyptian case of the Gama'a members in 1990's. The Gama'a Islamic organization was in fact an Islamic group with stronghold in the Upper Egypt. The 1990's Egypt was regulated by a new policy called 'permisive repression', according to which overt state rebellion was harshly punished, but ordinary Islamist activities were tolerated. “But this policy had limitations, and eventually, escalating provocations prodded the state to intervene and limit the power of the Gama'a.”⁵³⁴ To the break of the policy, that can be considered the 'reactive state repression' followed the 'indiscriminate repression', characterized by mass arrests, raids on mosques, mass executions and brutal torture of Gama'a members. To conclude, as Hafez and Wiktorowicz assess “As the case of Egypt illustrates, violent contention was a rejection to predatory state policies and that threatened the organizational and societal gains of the movement, as well as a defensive reaction against an unpredictable future created by indiscriminate repression.”⁵³⁵ According to della Porta, repression strategies were applied also in Italy and Germany in 1970's. She noted that policies have a wide responsibility in enhancing or softening movements' reactions, as della Porta observes: “Radicalization among social movements in Italy in the 1970s coincided with a period of harsher repression during which the police killed a number of demonstrators at public marches. [...] In general, the most radical ideologies and strategies developed in countries characterized by low parliamentarization and the political isolation of the labor movement (Bartolini 2000: 565–6).”⁵³⁶

4.3.3. Social Movement Theory – SMT

Donatella della Porta's profound study of the multiple social movements' dynamics made her conclude that the main characteristics of the activists are the following: “[...] are involved in conflictual relations with clearly identified opponents, are linked by dense informal networks,

⁵³³Hafez M. Mohammad, “From Marginalization to Massacres” from Wiktorowicz Quintan, Islamic Activism – A Social Movement Theory Approach, Indiana University Press, pp 316, 2004, pg 71

⁵³⁴Hafez M. Mohammad, “From Marginalization to Massacres” from Wiktorowicz Quintan, Islamic Activism – A Social Movement Theory Approach, Indiana University Press, pp 316, 2004, pg 77

⁵³⁵Hafez M. Mohammad, “From Marginalization to Massacres” from Wiktorowicz Quintan, Islamic Activism – A Social Movement Theory Approach, Indiana University Press, pp 316, 2004, pg 80

⁵³⁶Della Porta Donatella, Diani Mario, Social Movements: An Introduction, Blackwell Publishing, pp 356, 2006, pg 211-220

share a distinct collective identity.”⁵³⁷ According to della Porta, the extremely fragmentation of contemporary society allows extremism more than in the past, since both isolation and the loss of familial roots make people more fragile and exposed to anti-democratic movements and fundamentalism. How does collective action work? From della Porta and Diani studies emerges that the feasibility of social mobilization depends on practical, material factors, such as work, money, services and non material ones, such as authority, faith and friendship. The mobilization results efficacious when multiple factors are organized. In fact, elements such as the managing of discontent, the cost of action, the building of solidarity networks and the achievement of external support, are crucial. Moreover, “The type and nature of the resources available explain the tactical choices made by movements and the consequences of collective action on the social and political system (McCarthy and Zald 1977; Edwards and McCarthy 2004).”⁵³⁸ Furthermore, della Porta and Diani claim that most of the old forms of mobilization such as labor movement mobilization gradually lose power since the economic balances widely changed in the last few decades. “The contractual capacity of trade unions has been significantly weakened by the threat of moving production to locations with lower labor costs (Castells 1996: ch. 2). Economic globalization has also raised specific problems around which actors, both old and new, have mobilized.”⁵³⁹

In addition to the role of economy in determining the conditions for social activism, the role of identity is also crucial. In fact, as far as a social movement is efficacious, it must represent the multiple people that work in it. People take part to collectives when they share common aims and methods but also whether the single personality experiments personal benefits within the community. People need to recognize themselves into a group. “In speaking of identity we are not referring to an autonomous object, nor to a property of social actors; we mean, rather, the process by which social actors recognize themselves – and are recognized by other actors – as part of broader groupings, and develop emotional attachments to them (Melucci 1989, 1996; Polletta and Jasper 2001; Goodwin et al. 2001: 8–9).”⁵⁴⁰ The concept of identity

⁵³⁷Della Porta Donatella, Diani Mario, Social Movements: An Introduction, Blackwell Publishing, pp 356, 2006, pg 31

⁵³⁸Della Porta Donatella, Diani Mario, Social Movements: An Introduction, Blackwell Publishing, pp 356, 2006, pg 47

⁵³⁹Della Porta Donatella, Diani Mario, Social Movements: An Introduction, Blackwell Publishing, pp 356, 2006, pg 51

⁵⁴⁰Della Porta Donatella, Diani Mario, Social Movements: An Introduction, Blackwell Publishing, pp 356, 2006, pg 91

is crucial to the building of social movements but it is not a fixed one. Therefore, in our globalization age the identity issue is even more complex and each single identity is nowadays profoundly contaminated by million of other identities from around the world. As della Porta explains, the revival of nationalism, radical right-wing positions and religious mobilization as Islamic radicalism are all fostered by the interference globalization brought in their ancient organizations. "While cultural globalization risks causing a loss of national identity, new technologies also provide a formidable array of tools for global mobilization, easing communication between worlds once distant, with a language that defies censorship. [...] Religious fundamentalists may target first of all the spread of individualistic, American-dominated worldview and lifestyles and the resulting threats to the identity and moral values of specific populations."⁵⁴¹

The matter of how getting involved in social movements activism depends on network ties. The evidence della Porta found is the relationship between the demands of the organization and the network ties requested. The more the movement is demanding, the more ties are necessary. "In the case of world-rejecting religious sects, who require of their members a total break with their previous lifestyles and habits, involvement may be easier for isolated individuals than for people who are well embedded in social networks."⁵⁴² Interestingly, the social movement theory mainly puts its bases on the concept of 'political opportunity structure', suggesting that mobilization can happen only when political conditions are positive or at least tolerant. According to such a frame, political environment is crucial to the growth and spread of social movements, especially if religious.⁵⁴³

Thomas Olesen uses the social movement paradigm in order to show how Islamic groups recruit new members and how Islamic radicalization path works. According to Olesen in fact, recruitment is a crucial moment in the social movement theory. Social movements' existence in fact is profoundly connected to the need of being known and gain followers as their growth and survival widely depends on how many members and affiliates the Islamic (or not) group has. Recruitment passes through the continuous reshaping of individually and group's identity in order to find the members better fit the group's and its affiliates' values. Moreover, the

⁵⁴¹Della Porta Donatella, Diani Mario, *Social Movements: An Introduction*, Blackwell Publishing, pp 356, 2006, pg 63-88

⁵⁴²Della Porta Donatella, Diani Mario, *Social Movements: An Introduction*, Blackwell Publishing, pp 356, 2006, pg 135

⁵⁴³Munson Ziad, "Islamic Mobilization: Social Movement Theory and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood", *The Sociological Quarterly*, vol 42, n. 4, 2001

recruitment process passes through the necessity of 'existing institutions and organizations (mosques, prisons)'⁵⁴⁴ and the relationship the group has with the institutions: can it interacts with public institutions freely? Is it obliged to hide? "A central concern in social movement research over the last 40 years has been to explain why some people choose to participate in activism while others – the majority – do not."⁵⁴⁵ According to Olesen, Islamic activism recruitment and consequent radicalization follow the same path and are composed by the same factors such as individual explanations, network ties, political environment and media communication. In Olesen viewpoint, individual explanation for recruitment can be further specified in *biographical availability, personal experience and grievances, strain and deprivation* and *identity transformation process*.⁵⁴⁶ Biographical availability means that recruitment in Islamist activist groups, as any other activist group, is a process that must guarantee to the group time, ideas and finally, extreme availability. "Consequently, "some individuals will be more available for movement exploration and participation"(Snow et al. 1980: 793) than others. Individuals possessing these characteristics are primarily found among the young."⁵⁴⁷ Moreover, as della Porta focuses too, relevant to recruitment are people' previous experiences of radicalization such as the rejection of politics and the sense of frustration for friends' death or imprisonment. "Deprivation and strain can occur, for example, when a group is deprived of certain benefits it has come to expect. This also means that these processes often have a socio-economic dimension."⁵⁴⁸ The last requirement of 'identity transformation process' occurs when the member has already begun a process of detachment from reality, by hiding him/herself into a group which is perceived as essentially 'good'. Potentially radical elements divide the world into Manichean categories by depersonalizing the group's enemies in order to more easily use violence against them.

⁵⁴⁴Olesen Thomas, Khosrokhavar Farhad, "Islamism as Social Movement", *Centre for Studies in Islamism and Radicalisation (CIR)*, 2009

⁵⁴⁵Olesen Thomas, Khosrokhavar Farhad, "Islamism as Social Movement", *Centre for Studies in Islamism and Radicalisation (CIR)*, 2009

⁵⁴⁶Olesen Thomas, Khosrokhavar Farhad, "Islamism as Social Movement", *Centre for Studies in Islamism and Radicalisation (CIR)*, 2009

⁵⁴⁷Olesen Thomas, Khosrokhavar Farhad, "Islamism as Social Movement", *Centre for Studies in Islamism and Radicalisation (CIR)*, 2009

⁵⁴⁸Olesen Thomas, Khosrokhavar Farhad, "Islamism as Social Movement", *Centre for Studies in Islamism and Radicalisation (CIR)*, 2009

To sum up, Olesen assesses that the theory according to which 'the higher is the risk, the higher is the commitment to the organization', make the organization potentially more appealing than another which requires a 'normal' kind of commitment. What is sure anyway, is the fact that people who get involved into highly dangerous activities do it in order to fulfill their identity-making needs, hence the importance of network ties. "In other words, choosing not to participate when others in one's friendship network do so can have undesirable effects on the non-participating individual's identity. Being part of a network thus creates pressure towards participation by increasing the identity costs of non-participation (Friedman and McAdam 1992: 163-164)." ⁵⁴⁹ Moreover, the life of recruited is often organized according to the needs of the group.

4.3.4. Islamic Activism is Not Unique

Comparing the Islamic activism with social movement theory is not a paradox, yet an interesting way in order not to consider Islamic activism and everything around such a issue, exceptional. Islamic activism is not exceptional since its main mechanisms, aims and organizational frames are the same as any other kind of activism.

Wiktorowicz promoted a new approach on Islamic activism, based on the concept according to which it is not as exceptional as it seems in order to better understand and analyze what are its true drives and how it develops and grows. Three are the main processes individuated by scholars, common to all movements: resource mobilization, decision-making, and framing.⁵⁵⁰ According to Wiktorowicz, it is illusory to think that it is misery that fosters mobilization *for sure*. It is not automatic that mobilization originates, even in contexts of widespread misery and oppression. Wiktorowicz assesses that there is a missing step between the evidence of harsh conditions in a specific context and social activism. This missing step is the so-called 'resource mobilization'. "Money, communications technology, meeting places, social networks, and other resources are needed to organize, direct, and mobilize contention."⁵⁵¹ Wiktorowicz shows Algerian FIS as a winning model for resource mobilization since, through

⁵⁴⁹Olesen Thomas, Khosrokhavar Farhad, "Islamism as Social Movement", *Centre for Studies in Islamism and Radicalisation (CIR)*, 2009

⁵⁵⁰Wiktorowicz Quintan, "A New Approach to the Study of Islamic Activism", *IIAS Newsletter, Research&Reports*, issue 33, 2004

⁵⁵¹Wiktorowicz Quintan, "A New Approach to the Study of Islamic Activism", *IIAS Newsletter, Research&Reports*, issue 33, 2004

the network of mosques mobilization, FIS managed to become known, recruit members and organize activities. Groups in Egypt used also NGO's networks in order to spread their message and find new adherents. "A focus on resource mobilization emphasizes how movements mobilize, rather than the ultimate goal of mobilization."⁵⁵² Another relevant point is the decision-making, since the assumption according to which Islamic activism proceeds only by following ideological path is misleading. Moreover, it represents an orientalist conception of Islam, where everything is allegedly subdued to religion and dogmas. Conversely, Islamic activists think rationally and constantly balance costs and risks of their actions, since in repressive contexts the smaller mistakes is harshly punished. "This is not to completely marginalize the role of Islamist ideology in decision-making. [...] But the rationality of Islamist decision-making demonstrates that the process of choice is shared by many types of movements."⁵⁵³ Finally, framing a social movement is crucial in order to better targeting members, since "In the parlance of social movement theory, movements must 'frame' their arguments to persuade audiences and elicit support and participation."⁵⁵⁴ Again, the concept of Islamic exceptionalism fade away since also framing is an essential step in social movement theory. It means that framing too must be present in all kind of social activism, and the Islamic one is not extraordinary.

Diane Singerman assesses that, despite the Social Movement Theory, Islamic activism maintains some specificity not shared with other form of activism. Singerman specifies "However, what is specific to Islamic movement is the political context within which they operate."⁵⁵⁵ The specific context of which Singerman writes is the repressive environment in Arab countries, to which people must conform in order to survive. Differently from any Western reality, if Muslims want to do activism in their home-countries they have to mobilize their own informal networks in order not to be imprisoned nor tortured. Forcefully, the context is crucial. As Singerman focuses, the MENA region is characterized by political exclusion, repression and wide military presence which obviously restrain the practice of citizenship. "The collusion

⁵⁵²Wiktorowicz Quintan, "A New Approach to the Study of Islamic Activism", *IIAS Newsletter, Research&Reports*, issue 33, 2004

⁵⁵³Wiktorowicz Quintan, "A New Approach to the Study of Islamic Activism", *IIAS Newsletter, Research&Reports*, issue 33, 2004

⁵⁵⁴Wiktorowicz Quintan, "A New Approach to the Study of Islamic Activism", *IIAS Newsletter, Research&Reports*, issue 33, 2004

⁵⁵⁵Singerman Diane, "The Networked World of Islamist Social Movement", from Wiktorowicz Quintan, *Islamic Activism – A Social Movement Theory Approach*, Indiana University Press, pp 316, 2004, pg 143

among monarchical, dynastic regimes, the military, and intelligence forces has suffocated a wide range of mediating structures and formal organizations throughout the region, whether they are professional associations, regional clubs, neighborhood and community organizations, political parties, women's associations, human rights groups, youth groups, etc.”⁵⁵⁶ Nevertheless, it would be misleading to say that in MENA there is not activism. So, why is social activism so widespread in MENA despite it is so risky, too?

Two are the main Islamists strategies in order to overcome the oppositions connected to their playgrounds. Islamist activists are highly innovative, therefore they firstly reorganized the line between public and private, by rejecting the Western model of government and criticizing their own governments, often labeling them as infidels. “Islamist movements have framed their agenda around fundamental questions about the meaning of life and how Islamic beliefs and practice should inform daily life, law, morality, the economy and governance.”⁵⁵⁷ Moreover, Islamists are innovative since they mobilize informal networks in order to gather ideas, people and consensus. Such an Islamic activism is a way to redefine the identity concerning those Muslims who do not recognize themselves nor as free Muslims in their countries, nor as free citizens. According to the recruiting and the sense of belonging, Islamic activism is not far from other movements in the world. In fact, social networks are necessary in all kind of activism. Tarrow examines four social dynamics that make the movement appealing and therefore growing. Above all, opportunity structures must occur, in order to foster the backing of a movement, secondly, a movement is characterized by its strategic choices, as its repertoire of collective action. Thirdly, in order to understand a movement, its network ties must be analyzed, and finally, relevant is also the the cultural frame around which people mobilize. What is specific to Muslim world, is not the networking, rather that it is usually informal and because of this for longtime underestimate by Western analysts. Singerman assesses that “Networks need to be understood within the context of specific political structures and environment. [...] These heterogeneous, informal networks must be considered in any assessment of the phenomenon of Islamic movements, since they provide a vehicle for recruitment, facilitate the

⁵⁵⁶Singerman Diane, “The Networked World of Islamist Social Movement”, from Wiktorowicz Quintan, Islamic Activism – A Social Movement Theory Approach, Indiana University Press, pp 316, 2004, pg 148-149

⁵⁵⁷Singerman Diane, “The Networked World of Islamist Social Movement”, from Wiktorowicz Quintan, Islamic Activism – A Social Movement Theory Approach, Indiana University Press, pp 316, 2004, pg 150

consolidation of their material and social bases, and offers general support and solidarity.”⁵⁵⁸ While the networks are informal, and the political context repressive, the result is often highly fragmented social movements. The key-words of Islamic activism are 'networks, repression and informality', but it is not a guarantee of efficacy: without networks, Islamic movements would not exist, but forced informality and political repression make Islamic movements not use all their potential. Social movement theorists claim that, if only Islamic movement could be legal in their home-countries, they could mediate with the state and reach their goals legally. “This is the point of social movement theorists who employ a quasi-modernist understanding in which social movements do best when they engage the state, become part of their organs, and win major concessions. [...] The criminalization of politics' produces activists and sympathizers who create their own political world, with different rules and norms where the transcendental end justifies the means.⁵⁵⁹”

4.3.5. *So, is Religion the Only Drive for Social Activism?*

The most suitable answer seems to be 'no, it isn't', but what are the main forces which drives social movements then? According to Benjamin Smith, who conducted a field study in the bazaars of Teheran discovered that social mobilization is more connected to political and economic grievances than to religious ones. In fact, Smith evidenced that bazaars were one of the most active social movement that strongly contributed to the overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty, around 1977-1979. Since during the revolution merchants and *ulema* were in close contact, many academic thought there was a cooperation between them. History proved the opposite. According to Smith in fact, the alliance between the religious and the merchants did not put its bases on religious ideology but on common interests. The twentieth century was in fact characterized by continuously state attempts at controlling the bazaar activities, which led bazaaris to organize themselves in order to resist to such state interventions. In Smith's words the business areas of: “[...] fair market standing relative to foreign capital, freedom to set prices

⁵⁵⁸Singerman Diane, “The Networked World of Islamist Social Movement”, from Wiktorowicz Quintan, Islamic Activism – A Social Movement Theory Approach, Indiana University Press, pp 316, 2004, pg 154- 155

⁵⁵⁹Singerman Diane, “The Networked World of Islamist Social Movement”, from Wiktorowicz Quintan, Islamic Activism – A Social Movement Theory Approach, Indiana University Press, pp 316, 2004, pg 159-160

internally and freedom from forced competition with state-subsidized cooperatives are arguably the three most important [...]."560 Therefore, the hypothesis according to which the merchants rebelled to the monarchy in order to follow Islamic values is not realistic. According to Smith, state's interference with the bazaar economic interests represents the core drive for bazaaris activism. "By focusing exclusively on religion as a mobilizing ideology, others were primarily motivated to challenge the state on religious grounds (Arjomand 1986; Saleh 1988; Moaddel 1993), despite the sizable documentary and interview evidence suggesting that economic concerns were foremost form many of the bazaaris who joined the opposition (Atiqpur 1979; Parsa 1995, 2000; Kurzman 1996)."561 The cooperation between the bazaaris and the ulema was then a mere convergence of interests⁵⁶² rather than merchants' sincere pious fervor. What seems interesting is that, while in 1975-1977 bazaaris organized mobilizations independently from the religious class, in Khomeini's age bazaaris mobilized against ulema.⁵⁶³ So, the bazaaris bond with the ulema lasted until they had the same enemy to fight, as the shah. The exact situation can be observed in the Tunisian and the Chinese case studies, where social Islamic mobilization did not start for religious causes, rather for contextual interests. The post-revolutionary context in Tunisia left people frustrated and disillusioned toward politics so that Islamic ideology implemented its consensus. The true Tunisian grievances were not connected to Islam or religious issues, rather to political and economic ones. The context in Xinjiang is comparable to the Tunisian one since both ETIM and the Islamic oriented Uyghur groups were firstly moved by political exclusion, where Islam was only the triggering factor of an already potentially explosive context. Islam is then the means through which political and economic grievances can express.

A recent study about religion and social networks reveals that is not religion *per se* that maintains social organizations united, but another, more human and stronger force called friendship. Chaeyoon Lim and Robert Putnam explain this phenomenon by putting human beings (and not ideologies) at the core of social networks' studies, by focusing on people's levels

⁵⁶⁰Smith Benjamin, "Collective Action with and without Islam", from Wiktorowicz Quintan, Islamic Activism – A Social Movement Theory Approach, Indiana University Press, pp 316, 2004, pg 190

⁵⁶¹Smith Benjamin, "Collective Action with and without Islam", from Wiktorowicz Quintan, Islamic Activism – A Social Movement Theory Approach, Indiana University Press, pp 316, 2004, pg 187

⁵⁶²Smith Benjamin, "Collective Action with and without Islam", from Wiktorowicz Quintan, Islamic Activism – A Social Movement Theory Approach, Indiana University Press, pp 316, 2004, pg 188

⁵⁶³Smith Benjamin, "Collective Action with and without Islam", from Wiktorowicz Quintan, Islamic Activism – A Social Movement Theory Approach, Indiana University Press, pp 316, 2004, pg 198

of satisfaction and happiness. Lim and Putnam observed 'how and why religion affects life satisfaction'⁵⁶⁴ since many scholars already established the relation between religion and individual well-being. According to Lim and Putnam in fact, "When compared with other correlates of well-being, religion is less potent than health loneliness, but it is just as or more potent than education, marital status, social activity, age, gender, and race."⁵⁶⁵ A worthy element to be focused is the religion ability in creating networks and assistance among people. So, Lim and Putnam inquired the social resources mediation in order to measure religious influence in social wellness. Lim and Putnam discovered that "Only when one forms social networks in a congregation does religious service attendance lead to a higher level of life satisfaction."⁵⁶⁶ But why? Above all, the results show that totally satisfied people are those who both 'have a strong sense of religious identity'⁵⁶⁷ and strong networks within their religious community. Moreover, the fact of being friends while sharing the same religious values and doctrine, means to live harmoniously and share the same worldview. Such a condition comforts people and makes them happier than in a condition of absence of community. Furthermore, "Combined with the findings on congregational friendship private religious practices, this suggests that religious belonging, rather than religious meaning, is central to the religion–life satisfaction nexus. [...] These findings suggest that in terms of life satisfaction, it is neither faith nor communities, per se, that are important, but communities of faith."⁵⁶⁸

4.4. Conclusion

To conclude, it is useful to remind the path made until now in order to investigate the complex relationship between religion and politics. This last section is organized in four main paragraphs in order to better explore the issue. In the first paragraph the analysis of the historical

⁵⁶⁴Lim Chaeyoon, Putnam Robert, "Religion, Social Networks, and Life Satisfaction", *American Sociological Review*, 2010

⁵⁶⁵Lim Chaeyoon, Putnam Robert, "Religion, Social Networks, and Life Satisfaction", *American Sociological Review*, 2010

⁵⁶⁶Lim Chaeyoon, Putnam Robert, "Religion, Social Networks, and Life Satisfaction", *American Sociological Review*, 2010

⁵⁶⁷Lim Chaeyoon, Putnam Robert, "Religion, Social Networks, and Life Satisfaction", *American Sociological Review*, 2010

⁵⁶⁸Lim Chaeyoon, Putnam Robert, "Religion, Social Networks, and Life Satisfaction", *American Sociological Review*, 2010

relation between Islam and power since the golden age of the Caliphate is traced, with a special focus upon the multiple waves the relation Islam and politics underwent. The myth of the early Caliphate and the 19th century revivalism has been observed: interestingly, Islam always adapted to different contexts.

Conclusion

Is it all about religion?!

According to this study, it seems that concerning Islamic radicalization process religion is just one piece of the puzzle and that not *all* depends on it. In order to answer my research question I displayed the empirical evidence through the two case studies of Tunisia and Xinjiang. While it is true that religion does not appear as the main cause of conflicts and radicalization, it is also true that religion can be a strong push for radicalization. Moreover, religion represents an exhaustive ideology to believe in for anyone who needs deep motivation to commit any type of violence or abuse. However, religion is just the 'last push' for radicalization, certainly not its leading cause. In fact, more pragmatic and profound drives develop and grow within society and politics before religion. Thus, the aim of this study was to trace a replicable 'path of radicalization' in order to recognize and understand the case of radicalization in-process and potentially defuse them.

Besides, it seems interesting to notice that Islam could boast a deeply rooted political tradition, which followed ups and downs in history. The so-called Political Islam is not an exception in the Islamic ground, only a new and more recent formula. The last but not least significant conclusion of this study concerns the development of a new conception of Islam, far from the West-beloved orientalism and more anchored to reality. While it is true that Islam has a double nature, both religious and political, it is also true that all religions in the world share such a nature with it. In fact, all religions display a doctrinaire and normative side, as well as a spiritual and assistive face. For what concerns the Catholic Church, the strong kinship between political and spiritual power expressed in the past is hardly deniable. All religions are structured in order to govern and maintain power, the status quo. This work analyzed the complex relationship between religion and politics initially from an historical perspective by enhancing the archetypical role of the early Caliphate in the narrative of Islam. Moreover, the 19th century Islamic revivalist and modernist trends were observed and finally the political Islam was analyzed. According to the case of Islam, what is striking is the fact that too many times Islam substituted the power of the state in our contemporary history. By so doing, it gained appeal

and followers. What is relevant here is to focus upon the fact that there is no point in considering the behavior of political Islam a constant exception. According to Donatella della Porta and Asef Bayat, there is no exception in Islamic behavior since it only applied the social movements theory, like any other movement in contemporary human history. Islam became the contextual factor useful in order to gather people and start social movements and activism. It is mandatory to remember though, that Islam is not the leading cause of radical mobilization.

People's Frustration: the Path of Radicalization

This study started with the hypothesis that religion could not represent the main cause of radicalization. In fact, any empirical inference would affirm that religion is only one of the numerous factors that influence people's life; therefore, it could not be the most relevant one. It seemed blatant that other were the issues that foster radicalization. How to find them? It was crucial to this work to find economic and political evidence of radicalization, in at least two case studies, possibly with a different background. Tunisia was selected as the first case study, specifically for the Salafi group Ansar al-Sharia' in Tunisia (AST) peculiar history during the democratic transition. Several law and order incidents occurred in Tunisia in 2012 and 2013 marked the red line for the further expansion of the movement, and AST was eventually outlawed. At this stage of the analysis, I started questioning about the leading causes of the huge success of AST in Tunisia: was it all about some mysterious religious appeal, or were maybe different reasons for such a large spread of Salafism? Was the Salafi phenomenon only present in the Arab world? There was no other region in the world with which to compare the case of Tunisia?

The second case study needed an historical and political background different from the Tunisian one, but still characterized by the presence of a Muslims majority and social distress. The Xinjiang case study casually showed up during my researches, hence it seemed it perfectly fit this inquiry. In fact, Xinjiang, is a region where, as well as in Tunisia, Salafism was growing. I deeply analyzed the scientific literature on the issue, and I realized that both regions underwent the weight of a deeply repressive environment, uninterrupted, for too long. In fact, many were the analogies with the Tunisian case. Both were majority Muslim regions, whose people similarly experienced political exclusion because of the presence of authoritarian regimes and both suffered from religious repression. Moreover, radical Islamic movements were rising both in Xinjiang and Tunisia since 1990's, especially after radicalization in prison. Both

Uyghur and Tunisian Salafis in fact, met in prison the comeback Salafis combatants from Afghanistan and Iraq, learning from and building alliances with them. Predictably, the widespread of Salafism was only one of the outcomes. Therefore, a parallel process of radicalization between Tunisia and Xinjiang emerged on my watch.

As already stated, this work aimed at finding the dynamics of radicalization and its hidden causes apart from religion. According to this research, the main causes under which radicalization occurs are the followings: political exclusion, religious repression, radicalization in prison and comeback Salafism. These empirical findings are proved by the mirrored factors, contexts and trends highlighted in both Tunisia and Xinjiang. Aim of this work is to highlight an empirical and common path of radicalization between Tunisia and Xinjiang, focusing on the instrumental role of Islam, historically exploited in order to fulfill political goals. By following the empirical analysis of the compared cases of Salafism in Tunisia and Xinjiang, it is possible to notice that Islam plays a leading role in both regions. It defines part of the Tunisian identity as well as the Uyghurs' one. In both the former and the latter examples, Islam shapes people's identity, becoming central to their self-representations.

The idea though, according to which Islam is the main source of radicalization and violence, is to be rejected since the real question is how religion managed to reach the same power and authority as the state. This is much more interesting, since under this perspective it is possible to find factors that explain the decline of the state as opposed to the attraction of religion. Furthermore, the focus of this work was also to discuss a framework that could in fact represent a common path of many similar situations in the world.

For what concerns Chinese repressive strategy in Xinjiang, we saw as the elimination of dissent moves through the erasing of religious diversity, as in the case of Uyghurs. The Chinese political exclusion is in fact mostly cultural. A systematic assimilation of Uyghur culture plus a massive State-led migration of Hans in Xinjiang led to political and social distress in the region. Political exclusion not only passes through violent behaviors, it displays its repressive nature also by preventing people from actively participating in political life, traveling and expressing their ideas. In Tunisia, people experienced many years of similar political exclusion since the Bourguibian fashion of *tunisianité*. This long-lasting class-exclusive system created frustration and massive disenfranchisement among Tunisians, especially the youngest ones, and in turn

led them to support or join radical Islamic movements, which, as Ansar al-Sharia did, gave voice to the marginalized.

Religious repression is a subtle and repressive tactic that aims at lessen people's right of freedom and at eliminate any other power different from the authoritarian one. The violent closure of mosques in Xinjiang are evidence of such a trend, as it happened in Tunisia, where the repressive Ben 'Ali regime, never accepted the presence of Islamists in the streets. Such a violent and suspicious attitude certainly blocked any possibility of internalization of the Salafist movement neither in Xinjiang, nor in Tunisia.

Radicalization in prison seems ironic, still prison is more a pretext of radicalization than of moderation. The presence of many terrorists in the same prison, allowed them to exchange experiences and get to know each other, and bonding long-lasting ties. Both ETIM and Ansar al-Sharia in fact, were born from several imprisoned Salafists.

The 'comeback-Salafism' is another key element as AST number one Abu Iyadh began his radicalization after his jihad in Afghanistan. Military training, religious education and jihad practice establish indissoluble links among activists who find themselves united by friendship ties and desire of social redemption. Uyghur Islamic radicalization is a strategy to achieve visibility and push its resistance against China.

People's Frustration: Islamic Response

Islam had a leading role in mobilizing people, both in Tunisia and Xinjiang, why did it happen? In fact, it seems that Islamic activism is the easiest answer for desperate people, which do not find any other structured response to their frustration. The merit of Islam is the fact it managed to intercept the political discourse and interfere with the political environment in order to give its own contribute. Proselytize in order to establish the Islamic State. It is essential to ask ourselves what brought people to distrust their own regimes. People in Xinjiang and Tunisia until the Arab Uprising at least, display a similar level of intolerance concerning their establishments, since they are profoundly repressive and violent. The Chinese government keeps on repressing Xinjiang by any means and whenever it is possible, in order to maintain Uyghurs weak and subdued. The same happened in Tunisia at the age of Bourguiba and Ben 'Ali, since they put in place harshly repressive politics concerning Tunisian identity, which had

to be assimilated to the French one. Moreover, especially Bourguiba led the repression of Islamic symbols and morally condemned religious people as backward. Such a domineering attitude made people progressively detach from state institutions and lose faith in them, while on the other hand, faith in religion was constantly increasing. Thus, Islam is the only credible alternative to the seemingly-secular, repressive and authoritarian regime. Religion becomes then a tool for mass mobilization. How does Islam manage to attract people? According to Wiktorowicz, Islam is considered by many a lifeline, since it represents the way of meeting people as you, sharing religious values and viewpoints on world issues, organizing a safety-net within single communities in order to help one another. Some scholars consider the huge religious appeal as a consequence of Islamic anti-imperialist critic, plus, the Arab world bend under Western imperialism is highly appealing since it provides a scapegoat for masses. So, why is Islam so appealing? First and foremost, the Islamic organizations' forced clandestine condition determined by the authoritarian regimes made Islamic activism a secret activity. Yet, frequent state repressions did not make Islamic groups weaker, rather stronger, in order to survive. The 'micro-mechanisms of mobilization' are built on two pillars, as the 'rational actor' choice and the 'call to arms' mode. It is interesting that many people commit themselves to Islamic activism, so, the question is: what is that Islamic activism brings into people's lives? Islamic circles may be safe basins where to find a 'good' spouse, but primarily Islamic activism brings new hopes to the youths. Young people seeking the meaning of their lives, often bump into Islamic circles. Furthermore, the regular participation to Islamic groups and movements systematically tightens human bonds among people; therefore, it is easy to approach but harder to leave them.

The use of violence too is a contemporary issue that we always link to Islamic movements. However, again, the context matters. What interests academia is not whether Islam is intrinsically violent or not, but it is useful to understand the deeper causes of Islamic violence. Why is violence linked to religion? According to Wiktorowicz, della Porta and Hafez the more the subject suffers from violence, the more he accumulates rage and will of revenge, that predictably will come out as violence again. Briefly said, given that most of the Islamic actors suffered from harsh treatments from their own institutions, it is plausible that their action would resemble more to a violent reaction than to a pacific march.

According to dalla Porta, the extremely fragmentation of contemporary society allows extremism to develop more than in the past, since both isolation and the loss of familiar roots make people more fragile and exposed to anti-democratic movements and fundamentalism. How does collective action work? From della Porta and Diani studies emerges that the feasibility of social mobilization depends on practical, material factors, such as work, money, services and non-material ones, such as authority, faith and friendship.

Furthermore, della Porta and Diani claim that comparing the Islamic activism with social movement theory is not a paradox, yet an interesting way in order not to consider Islamic activism and everything around such an issue, exceptional. Islamic activism is not exceptional since its main mechanisms, aims and organizational frames are the same as any other kind of activism. Wiktorowicz promoted a new approach on Islamic activism, based on the concept according to which it is not as exceptional as it seems in order to better understand and analyze what are its true drives and how it develops and grows. According to Wiktorowicz, it is illusory to think that it is misery that fosters mobilization *for sure*. It is not automatic that mobilization originates, even in contexts of widespread misery and oppression. Wiktorowicz assesses that there is a missing step between the evidence of harsh conditions in a specific context and social activism. This missing step is the so-called 'resource mobilization'.

To sum up, I have just explored the empirical analysis of the path of Salafi radicalization and its repercussions based on the compared examples of Tunisia and Xinjiang. This work is only a first attempt to move a step into the academic world and it represents just the beginning of my academic route. I am thus willing to keep on studying this subject in order to search for non-stereotyped answers. Future research might uncover new social and political consequences of radicalization; as such consequences will become clearer as the effects of the Salafi-Jihadi radicalism become more pronounced. I welcome all the suggestions in order to improve my work.

Acknowledgments

During my first trip to Tunisia in 2014, I met Khalil, who told me his story: he is from Sidi Bouzid, the notorious village where the revolution started in 2011. As a matter of common knowledge it is not a center of culture, just a tiny village in the heart of the country, 270 km south from Tunis. Khalil considers himself a lucky man because his parents gave him the chance to study art and design in Tunis, where he lives in modest conditions. He does not like to go back home because there is no future for young people like him in Sidi Bouzid, nevertheless Khalil told me he had a good time when he was younger in his home-town, hanging out with a group of nonconformist adolescents like him, Salafis. I did not know anything about Salafis except for the labels of religious fanatics and terrorists on the newspapers, so I asked for more details.

Khalil told me that under the regime of Ben Ali, religious groups and activism were strongly repressed, resulted in considerable popular frustration. The widespread sense of anger and deprivation brought closer common people and Salafis, since ordinary citizens and pious Muslims shared the same oppression. Consequently, many young people were attracted by the Salafis' approach to Islam - a subversive one - which exploited the post-revolutionary rage and the enthusiasm. Therefore, Salafis were considered 'cool' and against the tide. I got curious about Salafis, and I decided to learn something about them.

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- <http://www.awqaf.gov.ae/Waqf.aspx?Lang=EN&SectionID=13&RefID=857> As it is reported on the General Authority of Islamic Affairs & Endowments' website: "In Islamic terms, waqf refers to a religious endowment, a voluntary and irrevocable dedication of one's wealth or a portion of it - in cash or kind (such as a house or a garden), and its disbursement for shariah compliant projects (such as mosques or religious schools...)." Moreover, there is a "Difference between Waqf and Charity: Waqf is a permanent donation. Once a waqf is created, it can never be donated as a gift, inherited, or sold. Disbursement of its returns is done in accordance with the endower's wishes . Charity, on the other hand, is a broader concept; it encompasses alms, grant, inheritance, loan, waqf..."
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