

Who are the Salafists?

HRWF (25.11.2016) - The Salafists have become known as an ultra-conservative movement in the West where it is associated with literalist, strict, and puritanical approaches to Islam and with proponents of offensive jihad as a legitimate expression of opposition to those they deem to be enemies of Islam.

Historians and academics date the inception of Salafism to late 19th-century Egypt. Salafists themselves however believe that the label "Salafiyya" existed from the first few generations of Islam and is, therefore, not a modern movement.

Their doctrine can be summed up as taking a fundamentalist approach to Islam, emulating the Prophet Muhammad and his earliest followers—al-salaf al-salih, the 'pious forefathers.' They reject religious innovation and support the implementation of Islamic law.

In legal matters, Salafists are divided between those who, in the name of independent legal judgement (ijtihad), reject strict adherence (taqlid) to the four Sunni schools of law (madhahib) and others who remain faithful to these.

Salafism is often associated to Wahhabism. Mark Durie, an Australian scholar and vicar of an Anglican Church in Melbourne, considers Wahhabism to be a stricter Saudi form of Salafism. Ahmad Moussalli, professor of political studies at the University of Beirut, tends to agree with the view that Wahhabism is a subset of Salafism, saying "As a rule, all Wahhabis are Salafists, but not all Salafists are Wahhabis."

The Salafist movement is often divided into three categories: the purists (or quietists), the activists, and the jihadists.

"Purist Salafists" focus on non-violent preaching of Islam, education, and "purification of religious beliefs and practices." They dismiss politics as "a diversion or even innovation that leads people away from Islam." They never oppose their rulers, even in autocratic regimes.

"Activist Salafists," unlike the "purists," are engaged in political processes. They advocate political reform but eschew violence. Due to numerical superiority, at times the movement has been referred to as the mainstream of the Salafist movement.

"Jihadist Salafists" began developing an interest in armed jihad during the mid-1990s. According to Mohammed M. Hafez, a specialist on foreign fighters and suicide bombers, Salafi jihadism is an "extreme form of Sunni Islamism that rejects democracy and Shia rule."

Despite some similarities, the different contemporary self-proclaimed Salafist groups often strongly disapprove of one another and deny the other's true Islamic character.

Salafists are often identified as Wahhabis in Central Asia and Russia, where they are considered terrorists or potential terrorists and prosecuted as such. In France, Belgium, Germany, and other EU countries, their ideology is associated with radical Islam, recruitment of jihadists to the Middle East, or carrying out violent actions in Europe, and is perceived as a major threat to public order and national security.

Salafism's three branches share the same totalitarian ideology, the one implemented by ISIS and other sympathetic armed movements. They share the same objective: to put in place a totalitarian system of governance imposing the standards of their interpretation of Islam on the territories and societies they (would) control.

States and civil societies concerned about or confronted by pernicious totalitarian ideologies that deny in theory and in practice the fundamentals of the international human rights system feel in a situation of self-defense and consider it is both their right and their duty to defend their values, to anticipate their possible future dangerousness and to combat them.

The international human rights community considers that jailed jihadist Salafists cannot qualify as prisoners of conscience as they use or advocate violence. As far as non-violent Salafists are concerned, some human rights movements consider that state repression is unjustified, inefficient, inappropriate, and even counter-productive and that from a legal point of view their freedom of thought, conscience and religion must be respected. Others perceive their ideology as a threat to the secular human rights system which the Salafists reject because it is not rooted in Islam and consider it must be combated.