



Ahmad: Narrative of a Tunisian Salafist

An Exploratory View of a Field Visit to Study Salafist Youth in Tunisia

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October 2014

Dr Aitemad Muhanna-Matar, Research Fellow at the LSE Middle East Centre, is currently leading on a research project looking at salafist youth in Tunisia. This is the story of Ahmad, a 30-year-old construction engineer. Ahmad is also a salafist preacher, well known in his hometown of Sfax. Aitemad met Ahmad during her first field visit to Tunisia and presents below his narrative, along with some analytical remarks. This narrative is the first of many to come, based on interviews with other young salafi men and women.

For my first pilot field visit to Tunisia in April 2014, I did not expect to conduct in-depth interviews with salafist youth, assuming it would require strenuous efforts to develop trust, especially with the harsh security measures taken against Tunisian salafi jihadist groups. Surprisingly, I found myself welcomed by a considerable number of salafist community-based organisations, and by a large number of individual salafists, men and women, none of them mentioning support or belonging to jihadi salafist groups. This could have been for security reasons or otherwise. I interviewed around 15 young men and three young women, all actively volunteering with civil society organisations established after the Tunisian uprising. Their activism focuses on charity work, religious education and capacity-building aimed at enabling young people to manage their daily lives, following Islamic beliefs and values. As I experienced in previous qualitative and ethnographic research examining moral subjectivities and practices, Tunisian salafists tended to give a collective harmonic and singular image of their salafist identity, disregarding diversity due to different individual experiences, as well as different loyalties to different sheikhs (salafist religious leaders) with their different religious interpretation.¹

Salafism, for the interviewed, is a moral guide for Muslim men and women to emulate the Prophet Mohammad and his companions in their puritanical practice of Islam. The good salafist, for them, is one who acts as the successor of God on earth pursuing the model of *al-salaf al-saleh* (the pious forefathers, or predecessors), the first three generations of Muslims who experienced first-hand the rise of Islam. The interviewed young men and women refused to openly define themselves as salafists as portrayed in mainstream national and international media and academia: sculpturalist/reformist and salafist jihadists.²

¹ See Merone, Fabio & Cavatorta, Francesco (2012) 'Salafist mouvance and sheikh-ism in the Tunisian democratic transition', Working Papers in International Studies no. 7, Centre for International Studies, Dublin City University.

² Most literature on salafism in Tunisia divides Tunisian salafists into two major groups: First, jihadists who adopt jihad as their major strategy for building an Islamic state ruled by *shari'a*. jihadist salafists are more concentrated among youth, and they belong to a jihadist salafist group called *Ansar al-sharia* which was established in April 2011.

For them, the labelling and categorisation of salafists are being used to fragment the Muslim community. Educated men, better equipped with Islamic knowledge in the Tunisian context, smartly define themselves as *multazimeen* (religiously committed Muslims), pursuing the '*aqeeda* (creed) and the *manhaj* (method, praxis and way of life) of *al-salaf al-saleh*. When the question of jihad was raised, most interviewees confirmed that it is a sacred duty against the enemies of Islam, but that it also does not have to take a violent form.

However, both the researcher and the researched are well aware that such a utopic view of 'the good salafist' is more imagined than real. It needs further in-depth field work to contextualise and historicise the relationship between the imagined view and real practice, to come up with consolidated analytical findings regarding the research objective: to understand and analyse the diverse individualised structural logic behind the choice of becoming salafist, and the intersectional factors influencing individual choices. Nevertheless, a particular research participant aroused my attention, which encouraged me to share his narrative. Presenting the personal narrative of one research participant is not intended to include extensive analysis, or offer generalisations. Rather, it is a methodological tool to showcase the importance of the narrative when exploring diverse personal experiences in relation to a particular research topic. This narrative may also help readers avoid abstract generalisations, instead encouraging them to seek to understand the complex process that salafist men go through to constitute a certain meaning of the world they live in, and to undertake certain actions that satisfy their desire of being a particular subject.

The narrative presented here is of a 30 year-old man named Ahmad³ from Sfax, an industrial city in Tunisia. His narrative reflects his personal troubles that are located in particular times and places and are an accumulation of his history. Analysing Ahmad's personal narrative can illuminate individual and collective action and meanings; constitute reality, identity and subjectivity; and as a result make a sense of the world that he and his fellow salafists live in (Riessman 1993, Laslett 1999)^{4,5}. Ahmad's personal narrative may also urge us to question the dual secular media narrative of salafism, whether presented by the West or the Arab World, and its reversal effect in making the radical salafist narrative attractive to Muslim youth. From my conversation with 18 young salafist men and women, it is not only religion that attracts young Muslim men and women to salafism, but mostly their frustration with the autocratic authoritarian and superior discourses used by secular forces at national and international levels.

Second, culturalist (scientific) salafists who denounce the use of violence and focus on *da'wa* to educate Tunisians on the righteous Islam. Within the second group, there are groups who advocate for political engagement and acceptance of democracy, like *Jabhat al-Islah*, while others are only involved in preaching. For more details about the structure and history of salafism in Tunisia, see Fabio Merone and Francesco Cavatora 'The Emergence of Salafism in Tunisia, in *Jadaliyya*, August 2012, available online at <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/6934/the-emergence-of-salafism-in-tunisia>, accessed in 21/06/2014.

³ Amad is the real first name of the research participant. He gave his consent to use his real name in any research papers produced. I suffice with his first name for the sake of protecting his confidentiality.

⁴ Laslett, B. 1999. "Personal Narratives as Sociology." Featured essay, *Contemporary Sociology* 28(4):391-401.

⁵ Riessman, K. Catherine (2001), 'Analysis of Personal', in *Handbook of Interviewing*, edited by J.F. Gubrium and J.A. Holstein, Sage Publications.

Who is the Revolutionary Salafist?

Ahmad is a graduate in construction engineering. He comes from a well-off family and works as a contractor for his family's construction company. His father was an ex- Ennahda prisoner (the mainstream moderate Islamist party in Tunisia) during the Ben Ali era. Ahmad spent his childhood and teenage years separated from his father, which forced him to shape his life mostly on his own. In a historical context characterised by desertification of religious knowledge and education by the two Tunisian post-independent presidents (Bourguiba and Ben-Ali),⁶ Ahmad was enthusiastic to find a base for his Islamic identity, which was threatened by the imposition of secular politics and a culture that opposes religion. He was 19 years old when he first got involved in Islamic preaching, after being uncommonly selected by older imams to lead prayers.

Ahmad adopts an ultraconservative Islamic discourse supporting sex segregation, believing that a woman's primary role is in the home. He struggles for a society only ruled by *shari'a*. At the same time, he encourages women to get involved in spreading the message of Islam. Associated with the ultraconservative Islamic discourse, he adopts enlightened ideas with regard to the need for coexistence and dialogue between people with different religious and political orientations. He is against *takfeer* (declaration of infidelity) and rejects the use of violence to achieve Islamic goals, except when all means of preaching and peaceful mobilisation are exhausted, with no repentance by oppressive non-Muslim rulers. Ahmad confidently insists on not following a salafist dresscode, such as wearing long robes and sandals for example. He does not sport a long beard either, like most salafist men. He wears modern clothes and cares about his appearance, not using his appearance as a defining characteristic of his 'salafism'. He says: 'I dress like other young men of my age. I want them to feel that I am not different to them'.

Ahmad's dynamic, pragmatic and subtle personality is illustrated in the way he defines his Islamic identity. He is salafi in his Islamic doctrine - his only ideological reference is *al-salaf al-saleh*; Ikhwan in his relational politics - he agrees with the Muslim Brotherhood's participation in institutional politics and engagement in dialogue with non-Muslims. By listening to his several sermons, I can also add that he is Sufi in his preaching method - focusing on the spiritual connection between Muslims and God, as a determinant for transforming the individuals' sense of the world. Arguably, Ahmad's multiple and fluid



⁶ See more details in Mezran, K. (2007), *Negotiation and Construction of National Identities*, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, Leiden

religious identities, as well as the discourse he has generated through his interaction with the heterogeneous Islamist/salafist community, give him a wider legitimate space for creativity and reflection. He has recently updated his preaching method to become more realistic and connected to the material world. He adopts a bottom-up faith-based development approach, claiming that social and economic vulnerability of the poor youth can be eradicated when young men and women, through their righteous faith, believe in their capacity to change their circumstances against the corrupt rulers who destroy their livelihood sources. Poverty for Ahmad is a feeling of *al-agz* (vulnerability) and it can only be eradicated when young men become *mutamaizeen* (distinguished Muslims) pursuing the heroes of *al-salaf* and those who followed in their footsteps.

Ahmad has a revolutionary development view in his struggle for social justice, albeit it drawing from a theological source. He thinks that the influential preacher, or religious educator, should be able to speak the language of others and be capable of linking his/her religious preaching, or virtues, with people's real life (*fqh el waqi*, jurisprudence of reality) confirming that the righteous faith is what unites Muslims to resist against all forms of



prejudice and social injustice. Ahmad also has a pragmatic viewpoint to combine modernity with salafism. He says that pursuing *al-salaf* and their Islamic moral guidance is not contradictory to modernity. Salafists, for Ahmad, are only against modern thought and practice that oppose moral values of Islam. For example, he mentioned that through the free-market economy, values of tolerance and support to the poor have become absent. Also, in his view, the market economy commercialises women instead of liberating them. Hence, Ahmad believes that Muslims should adapt to the modern world, as long as it does not contradict their religious morality.

Ahmad pursues the concept of 'the practical application of ideals' developed by the early pragmatic Christian thinker, Williams James (1902) in his book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.⁷ Following James' theory, Ahmad has succeeded in consolidating his salafist subjectivity, as an ideal mode of practice, by nurturing himself on religious knowledge and practice rooted in his cognition and feelings, and by being reflective on the practical application of ideals to create or recreate social and cultural norms. This is illustrated in his invented pioneering and widely popularised idea of

⁷ James, William (2002), *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. *Electronic Classics Series*, Jim Manis, Faculty Editor, Hazleton, The Pennsylvania State University;

preaching in Tunisian traditional cafés, gradually abandoning the idea of preaching in mosques. He makes several informal visits to traditional cafés, where socially and economically marginalised young men usually spend their leisure time. He sits and socialises with them, talks about their problems, while calling them towards Islamic ideals in a simple, realistic and friendly manner. He encourages young men to think about the meaning of life, similar to what he did, instead of wasting their time playing cards, smoking or getting involved in *fahisha* (misconduct). So far, Ahmad has succeeded in creating his own style of preaching, attracting a large number of young men and women.



In a short period of time, Ahmad has become one of the most influential preachers in Sfax. He is regularly invited by a number of Islamic associations across the country to give lectures, workshops and to lead other civic activities, mostly targeting young people and children. He is also contracted by *Insan*, a salafist TV channel, to broadcast his preaching. In addition, he distributes his religious lectures and speeches on CDs for free to the public.

Throughout my field visit, I noticed that almost everyone in Sfax, young or old, men or women, knows Ahmad and enjoys his Islamic speeches. One interviewee, a young single woman, modestly expressed her wish to marry someone like Ahmad.

Answering my question about his personality before he became salafist, Ahmad said:

Even before I became committed to the message of Islamic preaching, I was always searching for *tamayuz* (singularity), rejecting the dominant discourses imposed on me, and seeking recognition from others, whoever they are. I was always looking to be the leader of the group. From my early age, my friends knew that I have distinguished capacities and leadership characteristics. Like other young men, I made many mistakes when I was young but I have now repaired them all. I always believe in my will and capability to do everything I am set to do, distinctively. I have the skills and the techniques to convince others of my ideas. This is my genuine personality, which has contributed to my success in my roles, not only as a *da'ya* (a preacher), but also in my professional and personal life.

The association between some narcissistic features of Ahmad's character, who has a powerful image of self, and his strong desire to gain social recognition has balanced his personality and added to its aesthetic nature. Narcissism in Ahmad's personality does not create tension or aggressiveness

towards the other, including those who oppressed him, as in Lacan's psychoanalytic theory.⁸ His particular interactive model of religiosity has contributed to reducing any possible tension between his image of self and the image/s of other. Instead, Ahmad's particular mode of subjection has attracted a large number of young men who are also in search for their own identity and subjectivity, notwithstanding their different individual experiences and capacities.

The Process of Becoming Salafist

Replying to my question: How have you become a salafist, and how do you differ from other salafists? Ahmad was remarkable, historicising and contextualising the process of becoming salafist for himself and others. He says:

As a 15-year-old, I was very curious to learn more about my religion and to practice it. My father was an Ennahda prisoner and I used to visit him in jail with my mother, who was forced to remove her veil by the police. All my family members, including women, were arrested and tortured by the police, accusing them of being Islamists; Ben-Ali was judging Muslims based on their intentions. These oppressive events that I experienced during my childhood and teenage years created a sense of outrage towards the Ben Ali regime within me, which pushed me to seek more knowledge of my religion from family members and friends. A few friends and I, all having experienced the same oppression from the regime, became interested to learn more about Islam, the Islam that Ben-Ali feared. One day, we were arrested, and were accused of being *khaliya jihadya* (a jihadist group). As a reaction, we tried to understand what jihadist groups actually are, who their members are and what they do? In our early 20s, we were a blank page, knowing nothing about salafism, or jihadism, only committed to practicing our prayers, but the security forces, ironically, enlightened us about the existence of salafism and jihadism.

We were turned salafist by Ben Ali's police and its tough anti-terrorist regulations. The first time I heard about salafism was in their interrogation rooms. I was surprised when the interrogator accused me of being a salafist, due to the way I prayed. I replied: 'Believe me I first heard this word from you.' I was then arrested several times later in the 2000s. During one of these arrests, I was asked by the interrogator: 'When did you decide to assassinate Ben Ali?' I laughed, thinking he was making fun of me for being young and unable to take on such a big task, assassinating the president. Then he asked me yet another question: 'When did you bomb the governor's office?' It was the interrogators themselves who unintentionally taught us how to struggle against their oppression.

Supporting the Foucauldian theory, the ethical salafist subjectivity of Ahmad and his friends is a by-product of their subjugation by the oppressive regime during the Ben Ali era, whereby suppression creates the necessity for producing new knowledge and truth that resist the dominant ones (Foucault, 1994:290).⁹

⁸ Julien Phillippe (1994), *Jacques Lacan's Return to Freud: The real, the symbolic and the imaginary*, translated by Devrea Beck Simui (pp.34).

⁹ Foucault, Michel. The Ethics of Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom. In *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*,

In Ahmad's words: 'We were in a position to choose: either to be submissive to the oppressive regime, which was hostile to our religious and national identity, thus avoiding pain and suffering while gaining power; or to resist the regime by searching for the truth and the appropriate means to de-regularise it along with its oppressive discourse'. Ahmad and his companions chose the second option, without necessarily caring about its consequences.

Ahmad adds:

During the Ben-Ali regime, and its severe oppressive policies against Islamists and any aspects of Islamic education, it was natural for young men, including myself, to take action to defend our religion and religious identity. My friends and I researched salafism online: what it means and how effective it is to defeat an oppressive regime. We formed a group of religious young men, able to educate others about the real Islam and to mobilise people against Ben-Ali's regime, which did not allow us to practice our faith freely.

At the same time, we heard on TV and read online about the killing of our Muslim brothers in Afghanistan, Iraq, Chechnya and Palestine by Western forces, which were Ben Ali's allies. Knowing that war was being waged against 'real Islam' by Western and national forces created a sense of responsibility amongst us to defend our religion.

Before the revolution, when Islamic preaching was forbidden by Ben Ali, I, like my friends, was very interested in jihad. The idea of jihad was the only option to unload our anger against torture suffered on the hands of the security forces. We learnt even more about jihad in prison and through watching videos about jihadists who sacrifice for their religion. In 2009, two years before the start of the Tunisian revolution, we questioned: Is our work limited to Islamic preaching, or it is part of a bigger national project? This created a divide amongst the salafist youth, who were until then only involved in Islamic preaching and charity work in Tunisia.

Before the revolution, we were not influenced by any sheikhs: we chose our path based on our personal experiences. After the revolution happened, a few of us maintained a realistic view and decided not to get involved in jihad; but the majority, less equipped with Islamic knowledge and without the necessary talent and skills of communicating with the public, selected the quicker route of jihad - undertaking immediate violent actions of revenge against the enemies of Islam. I do understand the point of view of the latter group. These young men were under pressure both from the regime and their families. Parents, fearing arrest and torture, limited their children's access to computers and the internet, and stopped them from getting involved in Islamic preaching. As a result, these young men were very frustrated, and the only option to free themselves from all forms of pressure was to search for jihad abroad, in Afghanistan and Iraq, for example. It was a way to escape Tunisia, which lacked the most basic freedoms. Getting involved in jihad in other countries was not

only a religious duty for them, it was also a fulfilment of their fantasy of being heroic, which they couldn't achieve in any other way.

From personal experience with some jihadists, I know that many of the salafist jihadists are opportunistic. Some of them are used as a tool by the regime, or other external forces, to defeat moderate Islamists who have gained power democratically, like Ennahda. A few others choose jihad as a personal revenge against security forces that unlawfully tortured them. Most jihadists who I know come from a violent background and are not well educated in Islam, thus using jihad as a means to discharge their violence and deviation. Those unskilled and less experienced jihadists have disadvantaged those who denounced violence and called for peaceful Islamic preaching. Yet, security forces did not, and still do not, differentiate between the two groups, and treat us with equal cruelty.

With regards to the future of salafism in Tunisia, Ahmad says:

As a result of the harsh crackdown on jihadist salafism from security forces, many salafists have reconsidered their radical views and become reformists. What I am advocating for is to postpone jihad for a later phase, and to focus now on changing society through Islamic education and mobilisation. If those who fight Islam and Islamists do not back down, then it is a religious duty for all Muslims to fight them back. In the current circumstances, we need to learn from everyone, regardless of their political or ideological backgrounds. We also need to create a model of civil society where all Tunisians live together, and respect each other. The Prophet Mohammad consulted an agnostic man, why don't we do the same. Another message I would like to convey to those who want to defeat jihadism, is that jihadism only flourishes when committed Muslims are forbidden from practicing their faith. My reformist salafist approach is still experimental, but I am ready for any political changes, then, if the doors for Islamic preaching close, I will find another way to spread the message of Islam, which is the meaning of my existence.

Regarding dialogue with secular forces, Ahmad repeatedly mentioned during the interviews that conflict in Tunisian society can only be resolved through coexistence between different political and ideological groups, giving each group the freedom to mobilise for its ideology without coercion. People should also have the freedom to choose their ideological inclination. Mutual dialogue with seculars, or 'non-believers', as Ahmad refers to them, is important to create social cohesion. However, dialogue for Ahmad has to be on equal basis: 'seculars have to listen to us the same way I listen to them. They have to abandon their superiority'. Ahmad, reflecting on his experience of dialogue with seculars, says:

'When I have a conversation with seculars, my message always includes a sense of love, but their response is rather demeaning, perceiving me as an anti-modern ignorant. This is what actually angers me most, and pushes me back to focus on educating poor people and not waste my time with elites. I am myself confident about my religious discourse and my popular influence, which is my major source of power to achieve my goal of spreading the message of Islam.'

Analytical remarks

Ahmad's personal narrative challenges the homogenising harmonic image of salafists and salafism presented in Western media (Al Raffie 2012)¹⁰, which portrays them as different, not fitting within the normative patterns of life. Ahmad's narrative shows that he and his fellows, including those who believe in and practice jihad, generate their diverse dynamics and techniques to shape the mode of subjection they desire. Whether this mode endangers other people's lives and the overall stability and security of society, depends, according to psychologists, on the way each individual construes the meanings of his/her life in relation to his/her particular life experiences (Winter 2013).¹¹

The major argument revealed from Ahmad's narrative is that becoming a salafist is most probably similar to becoming Christian, Jewish, atheist or Buddhist. It is the outcome of interplay between different individual life experiences; a particular dynamic interaction between the self-image and the images of others and the surrounding social environment; and the logic that each individual uses to construct meanings and actions.

Becoming a salafist, as it appears in Ahmad's narrative, is a mode of subjection resulting from a one's problematisation of the dominant truth, discourse, or relation to power, which urges the person to search for the meaning of his/her existence, and to submit to new convictions and rules resisting the dominant narrative that entails exploitation, dehumanisation and injustice. Using Foucault's theory, becoming salafist can be seen as 'a stylisation of oneself' aiming 'to realise a certain kind of state of happiness, purity, wisdom and perfection' (Foucault 1984: 63)¹² in harmony with a particular discursive tradition or ideology. Within this understanding, these young men shouldn't be prevented from becoming salafists or blamed for it. They struggle and sacrifice in order to turn their truth into a normative collective pattern of life, assuming that people of the post-modern world do no longer follow a singular truth, or a singular pattern of life, as long as these different truths and patterns do not exist by coercion.

In addition, Ahmad's narrative indicates that a salafist mode of subjection is not fixed, and it does not cease to construct and reconstruct itself, responding to changing contexts and individual experiences. Self-reconstruction, as Ahmad's narrative indicates, is conditioned with a space of freedom for a salafist to exercise his/her agency and to learn from his/her experiences, and the experiences of others. When freedom is restricted, the possibility for reconstruction narrows, widening the possibility of further violence and war. Salafists need to be given the space to exercise their salafist mode of subjection, while being challenged to reconstruct it through life experiences, forcing them to rethink, react, and further critique their ideology in order to maintain their social existence and continuity. Provision of freedom for salafist groups to practice their ideology, to influence each other's attitudes, and to get a chance to be listened to and recognised by others, is the effective long-term strategy for de-radicalising salafism.

¹⁰ Al Raffie, Dina (2012), Whose Hearts and Minds? Narratives and Counter-Narratives of Salafi jihadism, *Journal of Terrorism Research*, Volume 3, Issue 2.

¹¹ Winter, D., & Tschudi, Finn. (2014). Construing the "perfect knight": a personal construct investigation of mass murder. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, in press.

¹² Foucault, M. (1984[1969]) 'What is an Author?', in P. Rabinow (ed.) *The Foucault Reader: An Introduction to Foucault's Thought*. New York: Penguin Books.