

## 2. POLITICAL ISLAM IN EUROPE

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### **Introduction**

Europe is currently home to an extremely diverse landscape of political Islamic<sup>1</sup> movements. This diversity is even greater than in most Muslim countries, where ideological Islamic expression is often limited by the official ideology of the state. In Europe, these movements are often mobilised in defence of European Muslim interests; they work for the recognition of Islam or as its spokesperson in dealing with European states or with the majority of Muslims who are not concerned with political Islam. These movements have been present in Europe for a long while now (between 20 and 40 years for most of them) but their daily realities are still not well known to European policy-makers, neither at the European, national nor local level.

These movements only become really visible when different conflicts<sup>2</sup> emerge in the public sphere. During the various headscarf debates, the

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<sup>1</sup> Political Islam denotes the recourse to Islam as the first justification of one's political action, notably where demands are made vis-à-vis political authorities or in the methods of mobilisation and engagement proposed to Muslim communities. More specifically, these are descended from the Islamist movements of the Muslim world. They represent only a minority of people within Europe's Muslim minorities. However, their political reach and capacity to focus debates around the place of Islam in Europe often surpass the immediate circles of militants that compose them. In order not to repeat the same term, we will use 'Islamism' in this text synonymously with Political Islam.

<sup>2</sup> Amel Boubekeur and Samir Amghar (2006), "The role of Islam in Europe: Multiple Crises?", in *Islam and Tolerance in Wider Europe*, Open Society Institute, June.

questions concerning individual freedom (such as the crisis over the Salman Rushdie affair, the Danish caricatures of Mohammad, or questions of religious education) and the reaction of European Muslims to international events (such as terrorist attacks in Europe, the war in Iraq or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict), the mobilisation of political Islam has been perceived as fundamentally confrontational both in the media and in institutional discourse. But what about at the grass-roots level? In the context of secular states suspicious of religious engagements in the public sphere, Muslims who are engaged in the defence and the representation of the 'Islamic' issue in Europe are often accused of duplicity in their relationship to democracy and European citizenship. Today the framework and inspiration for the claims of these Islamist movements have much evolved.<sup>3</sup> They now tend to use forms of secular political opposition in the political European tradition. The political Islamic actors mobilised around the interests of political Islam in Europe are very diverse, however, and do not use the same methods to challenge the discourses and public policies that shape the lives of Muslims.

Today this political and publicly militant Islam only represents a minority of Muslims in Europe, but its capacity for mobilisation and the diffusion of discourse in defence of Islam often goes well beyond the circle of its regular militants. It is also this Islam that most attracts European policy-makers' attention the when dealing with questions of radicalisation, institutionalisation of Islam, juridical adaptation of Islamic codes and the defence of citizenship rights for Muslim minorities.

This presentation of the European landscape of political Islam does not aim to be exhaustive. We will concentrate on those movements that are the most active in the political sphere and whose political evolution is the most significant, such as the Islamists in exile from the Muslim world, the UIOE (Union of Islamic Organisations of Europe), the Muslim Brotherhood, the Milli Görüs and political Sufism such as the Participation and Muslim Spirituality movement or the Ahbash. Finally, we will also look at missionary and predicative movements such as the Tabligh and Salafism. We will thus not be looking at jihadist movements or at Shi'ism, nor will we deal with the cultural and ethnic management of certain Turkish, North African, Arab or Indo-Pakistani Islamic movements.

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<sup>3</sup> See below for the complete definition of Islamism.

## 2.1 Islamism, a polemical concept

Islamism is not a homogenous phenomenon, its actors are different depending on location and historical era, and the methods of action that they propose also evolve over time. Thus it has moved on from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century goal of inventing for the Muslim world a modernity autonomous from that of the West, or from wanting to put in place an Islamic state among the militants of the Arab world in the 1970s. More recently it has promoted the leadership of a competitive Islam, especially through the market.<sup>4</sup> However, it is possible to distinguish certain common origins and traits within political Islam.

Historically, Islamism was born in the Arab world towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Above all it aimed to reclaim the 'authentic' Islam of the golden age of the Prophet. Seeking to distinguish themselves clearly from 'classical' Muslims belonging to traditional societies, for whom Islam is lived passively, the promoters of this new current actively defended the precedence of Islamic principles for the whole political and social system. Islamism thus aimed to allow committed Muslims to reposition themselves vis-à-vis the West, in the wake of the abolition of the caliphate and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1924. Islamism sought to present itself as an alternative to new ideologies such as communism and Arab nationalism.<sup>5</sup> For these committed Muslims, it was also a case of halting the intellectual decline of Muslims, seen as incapable of responding to the challenges of 'modernity'.<sup>6</sup> The political identity of Islamism during the 20<sup>th</sup> century aimed to renew the living environment of Muslims in order to respond to the situation of domination, and even Westernisation of Muslim

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<sup>4</sup> Amel Boubekeur (2005), "Cool and Competitive: Muslim Culture in the West", *ISIM Review*, No. 16, autumn.

<sup>5</sup> Laurens (1993), *L'Orient arabe: arabisme et islamisme de 1798 à 1945*, A. Colin.

<sup>6</sup> See the works of various Islamist thinkers such as Mawdoudi, Sayyid Qotb, Muhammad Abduh or Rashid Rida. See also Albert Hourani (1962), *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. Nikki Keddie (1968), *An Islamic Response to Imperialism, Political and Religious Writings of Sayyid Jamal al-Din `Al-Afghani*, University of California Press. Malcolm H. Kerr (1966), *Islamic Reform: The Political and Legal Theories of Muhammad `Abduh and Rashid Rida*, University of California Press. Abdul Ala Mawdudi (1965), *The Political Theory of Islam*, Lahore.

populations.<sup>7</sup> They also sought to reorganise family structures that had been altered by colonisation and to respond to questions of modernisation and progress. The means they used were those of political and social activism, in order to impose new 'Islamic' norms that focused on, among other things, questions of identity, the relationship to Western modernity, the place of women, the relation between religion and the state and the questioning of Western imperialism in its political, economic and intellectual varieties.

Today the concept of Islamism has polemical connotations. It belongs to the language of Western political science, but it is also used in different ways by public opinion, notably in the media. Islamists themselves do not use the term but rather refer to themselves as *islami* which means 'religious' or 'Islamic'. We use the term here to refer to non-violent activism, both in Muslim and Western states, founded on a particular vision of politics, with a precise political project (not a messianic utopia), organised as a social movement or a political party, with specifically political activities and demands (demonstrations, participation in elections...) and acting within the framework of the state or in dialogue with it.

## **2.2 The initial role of Islamist militants in Europe**

Political Islam in Europe was initially strongly linked to Islamists living in exile on the continent. Certain Islamist militants from the Muslim world "went West",<sup>8</sup> above all those from the network of the Muslim Brotherhood. Under pressure from secular and authoritarian Arab regimes (Syria, Iraq and Egypt, but also Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria), numerous militants and leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood<sup>9</sup> fled to Europe in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s to escape the political repression they were subject to in their own countries. Saïd Ramadan, one of the leaders of the Muslim

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<sup>7</sup> John Esposito (1983), *Voices of Resurgent Islam*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>8</sup> Olivier Roy (2002), *L'islam mondialisé*, Paris, Le Seuil.

<sup>9</sup> The Muslim Brotherhood has its origins in an association of the same name created in Egypt in the 1930s and which, opposing the secular state, recommended the establishment of an Islamic state. This association spread rapidly in the rest of the Arab world, then to Europe in the 1970s. On the history of this movement, see Richard Mitchell (1993), *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; and Olivier Carré and Gérard Michaud (Michel Seurat) (1983), *Les Frères musulmans*, Paris: Gallimard-Julliard, collection Archives.

Brotherhood (son-in-law of Hassan el Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, and father of Tariq Ramadan, a Swiss intellectual and Muslim activist), fled Egypt in the 1960s, moving to Geneva to pursue his political activism. Issam al-Attar, the spiritual guide of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, also fled the pressure of President Hafez al-Assad's regime and settled in Aachen in Germany.

Upon their arrival in Europe the exiled leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood met with the engagement of certain Islamic students who were also from Muslim countries and had come to pursue their university studies on the continent. In France, students and Islamic refugees came together within the Islamic Student Association of France (Association des étudiants Islamiques de France - AEIF), which was created in 1963. During this period, numerous people gravitated towards this organisation and were later to occupy important positions in the Islamist movements contesting power within their own countries. Among the future Islamist leaders who were educated in Europe are Rachid Ghannouchi, currently living in the UK, who founded the future Tunisian Islamist party, Islamic Tendency Movement (Mouvement de la Tendance Islamique - MTI) at the end of the 1970s, Hassan al-Tourabi, the great sage of the Islamist military regime in Sudan between 1989 and 1999, and Ali Shari'ati, one of the masterminds of the Iranian Revolution of 1979. The AEIF did not simply operate as a militant Islamic political party, but also as an elite circle of intellectuals, publishing an academic journal and organising conferences and think tanks on the subject of the decline of intellectual Muslims in the world, in the wake of colonisation and the immigration processes that followed. In fact, meeting European Muslim immigrants with low levels of education who had come to Europe to work was quite a shock for these Islamist elites from the Arab world. The Islamist sphere of influence was thus not homogenous but was dominated by the drive to return to 'pure' cultural practices (i.e. in opposition to the more cultural form of Islam practised by the immigrants), as well as by the desire to see Muslims once again active on the global intellectual and political stage.

During the 1970s the Islamist influence in Europe grew and developed in response to the policies of the repressive authoritarian

regimes in Muslim countries,<sup>10</sup> and the arrival of contingents of students who had come to Europe to study further and who were sympathetic to the theses of political Islam. These two social groups (political refugees and students) together made up the heart of Islamism in Europe and were behind the creation of European branches of some Islamist parties from the Muslim world.

At the beginning of the 1970s, the decision of the Turkish Constitutional Council to outlaw the Rafah, an Islamist political party directed by Necmettin Erbakan, encouraged a number of its members to create Millî Görüş, meaning 'national vision' in Turkish. This organisation was initially based in Germany and France, but it soon spread to the whole of Europe via the Turkish diaspora. At the end of the 1960s, numerous militants of the Pakistani Islamist organisation founded by Abu lala Mawdudi, Jama'at islami, set up a branch in the UK.

Ten years later, a group of Tunisian students among which Ahmed Jaballah, current director of the European Institute of Human Sciences (in Paris and Chateau Chinon) in charge of training imams, were given the mission of founding a branch of Rachi Ghannouchi's Mouvement de la Tendence Islamique in France.

The overthrow of the electoral process in Algeria in 1991 which prevented the Islamic Salvation Front (Front Islamic du Salut - FIS) directed by Abassi Madani and Ali Belhadj from gaining power, led many of its leaders, militants and sympathisers to leave Algeria for Europe (Switzerland, Belgium, Germany and notably France). Once there, certain members of the FIS created the Algerian Fraternity of France (Fraternité Algérienne de France - FAF) in 1990. Directed by Algerian students, this organisation aimed to represent the FIS in France. At the same time, a certain number of FIS directors decided to organise, from September 1993, a Foreign Executive Committee of the FIS (Conseil Executif du FIS à l'étranger - CEFE). The members of the CEFE aimed to constitute an exiled Islamist opposition and to establish the movement in most European countries.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Bassma Kodmani-Darwish and May Chartouni-Dubarry (eds) (1997), *Les Etats arabes face à la contestation islamiste*, Armand Colin.

<sup>11</sup> In its chain of command, the management of the CEFE consists of a political office directed by Rabah Kébir in Germany and vice-directorships in London, the

At the beginning of the 1980s, the use of the European political sphere was purely instrumental. The aim was to use this region of the world as a political tribune to challenge the Turkish and Arab regimes that the Islamists considered to be dictatorships. The different militants thought of their presence in Europe as the means of conceiving 'in safety' a way of reforming the authoritarian regimes of the Arab world – hypothesising that they would eventually return to these countries, once the regimes in question had been overthrown. These movements were thus used as the reserve base of multinational Islamist opposition. Europe seemed to them to be a politically free land, where militants could be trained, in anticipation of the liberalisation of the political situation in their countries so that Islamic states could be constructed there. To their opposition of the authoritarian regimes in the Arab world was added a critique of Europe denouncing the political, cultural and ethical imperialism of the West that Muslim societies were supposed to submit to. On one hand, the reading of Islam by these exiled movements was founded on the re-Islamisation of the social practices of immigrants who were seen to be perverted by Western societies (with regards to the loss of the Arabic language, religious practices and the difficult transmission of this identity to children born in Europe). On the other hand, it was founded on the politicisation of religion, presented as an all-encompassing system capable of resolving the political, social and economic problems of Muslims.

Nevertheless, the influence of Islamist discourse on immigrant populations remained marginal and only reached certain segments of the Muslim community (overseas students and Islamist refugees). This general indifference is explained by the fact that the immigrants were still closely linked to the consulates of their country of origin, which were concerned with religious matters<sup>12</sup> (construction of mosques, organisation of classes in religion or in the Arabic language). Moreover, these immigrants considered their presence in Europe as temporary, only just tolerated by the authorities

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US and Switzerland, held by Abdallah Anas, Anouar Haddam and Mourad Dhina, respectively.

<sup>12</sup> The Kingdom of Morocco has a network of Mosques in France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy and Spain. The Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs also controls a number of places of worship in France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Austria and Denmark.

who were not favourable towards political actions that might disturb the public order. In addition, the aspirations of the Islamists regarding the politicisation of religion found no favour with immigrants whose daily cultural practices were much more pragmatic. The instances of political protest regarding Islam among immigrants were therefore sporadic, limited for example to the demands of Muslim workers in certain European factories for the provision of a place of prayer in their workplace.

Confronted with this lack of success, many of those who defended the establishment of Islamic states in the Muslim world changed their argument at the beginning of the 1990s. From this point on, these organisations no longer considered Europe as the reserve base for the Islamism of Muslim countries, preparing their return to the Arab, Pakistani or Turkish political stage. They now saw themselves as structures that represented the interests of Muslim immigrants and their children in Europe, having themselves definitively renounced the objective of returning to their home countries.

### **2.3 Movements linked to the Muslim Brotherhood**

From the 1990s onwards Islamic militants abandoned the theme of the establishment of an Islamic state that resembled the Islamism of the early days and founded their claims on the representation of European Muslims. This second current of militant Islam accentuated the importance of political and social activism in their host countries, as a way of defending and representing European Muslims. In this perspective, former Islamist actors joined in the general phenomenon of re-islamisation with the emerging generations of young Muslims born in Europe, particularly students who were in a position to reach the middle classes.<sup>13</sup> In order to claim rights for European Muslims, the privileged vectors were to be the associative system and the political party. Within these associations new

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<sup>13</sup> In Europe, re-Islamisation is not Islamism in itself but rather the process of re-appropriation of an Islamic heritage. It uses the tools of Islamism to provide Muslim youth born in Europe with a feeling of religious commitment. Re-Islamisation should not be confused with the transmission of religious sentiment by parents who come from Muslim countries to their children. See Amel Boubekeur (2006), «L'islamisme comme tradition. Fatigue militante et désengagement islamiste en Occident», in Samir Amghar (ed.), *Islamismes d'Occident. État des lieux et perspectives*, Lignes de repères.

Islamic militants would create specific groups for youth, students, women, theological training and humanitarian work.

Although these structures were heavily inspired by the experiences of opposition and protest in the Arab world, the discourses had to be adapted to the very different political sensitivities of European-born Muslims. This movement militates for an integration of Muslims into the social and political landscape, for example by calling on Muslims to enrol and to vote. In this way, the organisations that belong to this tendency try to set up an 'Islamic citizenship', proposing themselves as privileged interlocutors to the public authorities, at local and national levels, on issues as diverse as religion, racism and problems of delinquency in difficult suburbs.<sup>14</sup> In wanting to define the contours of European Islam, these organisations also offer young Muslims a model of integration inspired by the British multicultural model: to be both European and Muslim at the same time - without that implying assimilation to the dominant secular ideology.

The Union of Islamic Organisations of Europe (UIOE) is a militant supranational structure founded in 1997 by a group of political refugees and Islamist students from North Africa and the Middle East. It is directed by Chakib ben Makhlof, an activist of Moroccan origin who recently succeeded Ahmed al-Rawi, a British citizen of Iraqi origin. Linked to the international organisation of the Muslim Brotherhood, the UIOE regroups close to 500 associations throughout Europe. It is active in the UK via the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB), in Switzerland via the Ligue des musulmans de Suisse (LMS), in Germany via the Islamische Gemeinschaft in Deutschland (IGD), and finally in Belgium via the Ligue interculturelle islamique de Belgique (LIIB). Of the 500 European associations federated with the UIOE, nearly 250 of them are present on French territory and are controlled by the Union of Islamic Organisations of France (UIOF), the French branch of the UIOE. The UIOF was created in 1983 by the Iraqi Mahmoud Zuhair and the Tunisian Abdallah Benmansour, and became the welcoming organisation of Islamist militants from the Arab world. The UIOF was initially strongly characterised by its Islamist parentage and was not very interested in political action in its host country. Towards the end

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<sup>14</sup> Swiss intellectual Tariq Ramadan was one of the promoters of this 'Islamic citizenship'. This discourse principally had an effect on francophone Europe: France, Switzerland and Belgium.

of the 1980s, the organisation changed its orientation and became persuaded of the relevance and the necessity of basing its action in France. In fact, in a context of rising Islamism (especially in Algeria with the FIS), the UIOF aimed to negotiate its entry onto the French political scene as an important protest movement, weighing in heavily with regards to the place of Islamism on the international political chessboard. The Union thus sided with the high school students expelled from school in 1989 for refusing to remove their headscarves, organising demonstrations and monopolising media attention on this issue. Along the same lines, it also tried to have the French publication of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* banned. Every year the UIOF organises a huge assembly at Le Bourget in Paris, offering a four-day conference on the place of Islam in Europe, focused on the compatibility of religious practices with European social and political reality. This assembly is the largest reunion of Islamic associations at European level, with over 80,000 Muslims participating in past years. They attend conferences and request fatwas (religious decrees) from a number of sages, as well buy Islamic books and clothing.

The UIOE also possesses one of the first European university institutes with the responsibility of training imams and religious leaders: the European Institute of Human Sciences (EIHS), based in Paris. This institute regroups 300 Muslim students from all over Europe. The UIOE has also founded the European Council for Fatwa and Research (ECFR), based in Dublin. The Council brings together Muslim theologians living in Europe<sup>15</sup> and aims to define an Islamic practice that takes into account the reality of Europe in responding with fatwas to questions posed to them by Muslims.<sup>16</sup>

As the heirs of Islamism, this part of the Muslim Brotherhood movement has nonetheless evolved, especially with the emergence of young Europe-born Muslims in its ranks. The different national federations that are members of the UIOE have engaged to differing extents, and with varying degrees of success, in the representative councils for Muslims in

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<sup>15</sup> The list of European members of this Council includes four British citizens, four French, three Germans, one Irish, one Bulgarian, one Dane, one Norwegian, one Belgian and one Swiss.

<sup>16</sup> These fatwas may deal with issues as varied as: relationships, use of bank loans, Islamic banking, the consumption of certain foods, political participation, voting and politics...

European countries. Thus the French federation (UIOF) participated in the process of the institutionalisation of Islam in France and won a large number of seats in the elections of the French Council of the Muslim Religion (Conseil Français du culte musulman - CFCM)<sup>17</sup> in 2003 and 2005. Via the CFCM the current leadership of the UIOF has developed a negotiating strategy with the French political authorities in order to defend the interests of French Muslims, thus breaking with the political culture of the previous leadership, which preferred confrontation to cooperation.

Today the UIOE generally, and the UIOF in France and the LIIB in Belgium in particular, are no longer the confrontational actors they were in the 1990s. Their methods of intervention on the question of Islam have become more consensual, and more routine, which has enabled them to present themselves as socially acceptable interlocutors to the political authorities.

However, even though the UIOE remains a dominant actor in the landscape of political Islam, it is currently suffering from an increasing lack of legitimacy among young Muslims because it downplays conflictual questions, which is a consequence of its 'clientelist' relationship with governments. Thus the position of the UIOF on the French law concerning religious symbols in 2003 was very reticent, although a part of the UIOF criticised this position. The fatwa against urban violence that was issued by the UIOF, at the request of the Minister of the Interior during the November 2005 riots, thus castigating the rioters on the basis of their supposed affiliation with Islam, contributed still more to the deepening of the rupture between the Muslim Brotherhood and their base.

The second major international organisation to structure the landscape of associations that militate for the defence and integration of Muslims in Europe is the Turkish Milli Görüs (MG), founded in Germany in 1973 with its headquarters in Cologne. Whereas the UIOE regroups Arab and converted Muslim populations from around Europe, the MG is

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<sup>17</sup> The CFCM was designed as a representative body for French Muslims in dealing with the political authorities and as the body that organises and manages the Muslim religion (pilgrimages, Ramadan, burials, mosques...) in France. It was created in 2003 by Nicolas Sarkozy, the then Minister of the Interior.

essentially frequented by European members of the Turkish diaspora and their children.<sup>18</sup>

The MG was first founded in Turkey in 1969 by Necmettin Erbakan, who would later found and lead the Turkish Islamist party. In the same mould as the associations founded by exiled Islamists and inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood, the MG was implanted into Europe by militants of the Erbakan party who had fled Turkey for Switzerland and Germany in 1972, following the decision of the Constitutional Council to prohibit the Islamist group in 1971.<sup>19</sup> The MG has many branches throughout Europe, particularly where there are large Turkish communities (Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Germany, Denmark, Switzerland, Austria...). Bringing together nearly 30 associations in as many European countries, the organisation has a large network of mosques with nearly 511 places of worship, 2,137 youth, women's and student groups, 17,841 directors and over 252,000 members – which makes it without a doubt the biggest Muslim organisation in Europe.

Following the example of the UIOE, the MG provides a framework for the Turkish population of Europe via the organisation of religious and social activities. Contrary to the UIOE, however, its objective is not to gain religious leadership over all European Muslims, but rather to offer political and religious representation for the European Turkish community of nearly 4 million people. The MG is thus in competition with the Dyanet, which is the representative of the official Islam of the Turkish Minister for Religious Affairs and is responsible for dealing with the religious affairs of the Turkish community in Europe (appointing imams, setting up koranic schools...). However, the MG maintains a good relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood (UIOE), which sometimes leads them to organise common events, such as the shared electoral lists UIOF/MG during the elections of the CFCM in France.

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<sup>18</sup> For a wider view of the history of Turkish Islamism in Europe, see Ural Manço, "Les organisations islamiques dans l'immigration turque en Europe et en Belgique", in Felice Dassetto (ed.) (1997), *Facettes de l'islam belge*, Bruylant-Academia.

<sup>19</sup> For the description of the evolution of Islamist movements in Turkey, see Jean Marcou (2004), "Islamisme et post-islamisme en Turquie", *Revue Internationale de Politique comparée*, Vol. 11, No. 4.

Originally the MG was very influenced by its Islamist and nationalist heritage and it emphasised objectives based on political and social issues specific to Turkey and its community in Europe. However, in the middle of the 1990s the organisation was obliged to reposition itself in order to appeal to the European-born younger generations of Turkish origin. Taking its inspiration from the UIOE, the MG developed a discourse on the necessity for the Muslim populations of integrating into European society. Their means of action for enlarging their influence in Europe, previously only oriented towards political militancy, were also modernised. In fact, the MG now possesses Islamic banks, clothing brands, radio stations and magazines throughout Europe. In order to demonstrate their openness, the head of the Dutch branch of the MG even went so far as to the lengths of organise a football game between young militants and members of the gay community, which provoked strong opposition within the traditionalist Turkish community.

It should also be noted that in 2000 a schism occurred between the French branch of the 'young MG' and their parent organisation, as the former decided to place emphasis on the 'Europeanisation' of their political identity. The new organisation has a network that covers all of Europe, is called the Cojep League of Popular Education (Ligue cojépienne d'éducation populaire - LICEP).<sup>20</sup> It is behind the creation of a network of young Turkish businessmen in Europe and is also active in public debates and lobbying concerning Turkey's accession to the EU.

## 2.4 Political Sufism

Sufism in Europe is usually seen as the antithesis of political Islam and linked to a peaceful, tolerant, non-politicised and almost folkloric type of religiosity. Sufism has always played an important role in politics, however, especially during the colonisation processes in the Middle East and Africa. Indeed, its political activities, networks and demands have always been implemented through the powerful structures of Sufi brotherhoods.

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<sup>20</sup> Samim Akgonul (2006), "Millî Görüş: institution religieuse minoritaire et mouvement politique transnational (France et Allemagne)", in Samir Amghar (ed.), *Islamismes d'Occident. État des lieux et perspectives*, Lignes de repères.

For around 15 years now, and since the decline of the traditional hegemony of the major Islamist movements (like the Muslim Brotherhood), the political role of Sufism has become more and more important in the landscape of political Islam in Europe. These movements could also be called neo-Sufism.<sup>21</sup>

In their relations to European public actors, these neo-Sufi movements have the advantage of being less stigmatised and their visibility or commitment to public life appears to be less problematic. However, as with the other movements and tendencies linked to political Islam, Sufi actors are claiming specific rights, and have their well-identified 'project' of society as well as their enemies.

The association Participation and Muslim Spirituality (Participation et Spiritualité Musulmane - PSM), established in 2000, is characterised by the originality of its doctrinal heritage. Although its methods of mobilisation are inspired by political Islam, it claims Sufism as an orientation. The PSM is the European emanation of an unofficial Moroccan movement of both Sufi and Islamist tendency: the Al'Adl wa-Ihsan party, founded by Abdessalam Yassine in 1987. The PSM was initiated by Moroccan students who were pursuing further study in Europe at the beginning of the 1990s, and experienced a certain development during the years 2000; it is today one of the most active European associations of political Islam. It is active in countries with a large Moroccan immigrant population (France, Belgium, Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, but also in North America). Much more discreet in its activities than the associations previously mentioned, the PSM principally recruits among the emerging re-Islamised middle class, who are disappointed by the overly bureaucratic discourses of the older associations like the UIOE. It is an attractive movement because its method of militancy is quite unique in Europe. It functions like a refuge for its members. It does not ask them to commit to an exclusive militant membership, but encourages them to take on political roles at the local level and to invest themselves in associations that defend citizens' rights. Nor does it require its members to make specific reference to the movement in the public sphere. In France, the PSM was actively involved in protesting against the law pertaining to religious symbols at

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<sup>21</sup> Sean O'Fahey and Bernd Radtke (1993), "Neo-Sufism Reconsidered", *Der Islam*, IX.

school, through the 'One School for All' action, which became a protest movement that united both Muslim and secular associations.

The spiritual side of the movement is another reason for its success, through the organisation of evening prayer meetings for members, and the transmission of religious experiences shared exclusively among group members such as the religious explanation of dreams and the recital of incantations for the well-being of the group. The question of religious sentiment having been somewhat attenuated by the political strategy of the UIOE and its obsession with the relationship with the political authorities, the PSM seems to offer an Islamic structure that allows for the combination of spiritual life with political aspirations, and this remains quite revolutionary. The key to the success of the PSM lies internally in the very important relationship of trust with the figure of the Sheikh (the guide), especially for the Sufi methods, and externally in the freedom of manoeuvrability within the secular state. Although they do not control many mosques in Europe, the influence of this movement is continuing to increase, thanks to preaching that is effective but not polemical (conferences, camping, courses, music festivals...).

One of the political axes of the PSM comes from the transposition of the Moroccan political situation to Europe (the Al'Adl wa-l'hsan party, from which comes the PSM, is not recognised in Morocco and regularly undergoes waves of violent repression). In addition, Nadia Yassine, the daughter of Sheik Yassine, who is currently the figurehead of the movement, comes to France regularly to give conferences on the compatibility of Islam and the dynamics of political modernisation, almost exclusively emphasising questions relating to democracy and human rights. It is also responsible for an association for the defence of human rights that has no reference to Islam, the Alliance for Freedom and Dignity (AFD), which is responsible for organising some of Nadia Yassine's European conferences. Finally, during the periods of repression against the central organisation in Morocco, the European members of PSM worked actively to spread information, once again without reference to religion but under the banner of the 'defence of human rights'.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Amel Boubekeur and Samir Amghar (2006), "Islamist Parties in the Maghreb and their Connections with Europe: Growing Influences and the Dynamics of Democratization", *Euromesco report*, November.

At the beginning of the 1960s in Lebanon, a theologian of Ethiopian origin, Sheik Abdallah al-Habachi, founded the Association of Islamic Charitable Projects (AICP) which is more commonly known as the Ahabash.<sup>23</sup> This movement has existed since the 1980s in Europe and has its headquarters in Paris. The movement spread throughout Europe thanks to the religious activism of Lebanese students studying in Europe, and political refugees here to escape the civil war in Lebanon. The Ahabash claims to be a Sufi movement and defends a political reading of Islam. Today they are active in more than 15 European countries (France, Germany, Switzerland, Denmark...), and even in Australia where the son of the movement's founder, Abderrahman Al Habachi, supervises the activities. They have several centres in the US, notably in Philadelphia, as well as in Ukraine where they have a large mosque in Kiev.

In France, where the association emerged in 1991, several public figures belong, or have belonged, to the movement, such as the rapper Kéry James (whose last two albums sold over 150,000 copies) or Abd Samad Moussaoui (the brother of Zacarias, one of the presumed authors of the September 11 attacks in 2001). In Switzerland the movement is older; its establishment dates from the end of the 1970s. Here, under the auspices of Lebanese students studying at the University of Lausanne, an association was created called the Centre Islamique de Lausanne (CIL). In just a few years the movement became the official representative body for Muslims of that region. It is the principal interlocutor of the Swiss authorities and is solicited to appoint chaplains in prisons and hospitals.

In Lebanon the movement has been used by the Syrian regime to contain the growing influence of Islamists in that country.<sup>24</sup> In Europe, anti-Islamist rhetoric is also one of the ways public opinion is mobilised by the Ahabash, especially after the September 11 attacks. In reality, this group fights for the ideological monopoly of European Islam, as much among young Muslims as with the public authorities. In presenting itself as the incarnation of Sufi and moderate Islam, the Ahabash attempt to play the 'defence against Islamism' card. Each year, the French branch of the AICP

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<sup>23</sup> A. Nizar Hamzeh and R. Hrair Dekmejian (1996), "A Sufi response to political Islamism: Al-ahbash of Lebanon", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, No. 28.

<sup>24</sup> Mustafa Kabha and Erlich Haggai (2006), "Al-Ahabash and Wahhabiyya interpretations of Islam", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 38(4).

organises an evening meal during Ramadan in the Salons of UNESCO in Paris, where they affirm before an array of international Muslim officials and European political personalities their moderate reading of Islam and their condemnation of Islamism. This initiative proves, among other things, that they are not exempt from political motivations, even if it is more discreet. They also often collaborate with European authorities that appreciate their opposition to the other tendencies of political Islam in Europe. On several occasions Abd Samad Moussaoui has condemned the religious jihadist experience of his brother on television, whilst simultaneously ensuring the promotion of his own more moderate movement.<sup>25</sup> Finally, it must be added that the movement organises regular demonstrations in support of the Syrian presence in Lebanon.

## **2.5 Missionary and predicative movements: The Tabligh and the Salafis**

Whereas Turkish and Arab Islamic militants extol the defence and recognition of social and cultural rights for Muslims in Europe, and political Sufis fight for the conquest of power in their countries of origin (Morocco and Lebanon), the third feature of the European militant Islamic landscape, represented by the Tabligh and Salafists, has a more predicative and missionary logic. This third group of movements is characterised by a strong missionary activity that seeks to bring back to Islamic practices those who have turned away from them. Taking the Prophet as their example, these movements seek to enliven religious life, encouraging knowledge of the Koran and of the *hadiths* (sayings of the Prophet). They offer their members a pious vision of the world, which is founded on a concept of society in which the islamisation of the whole of humanity is an inescapable element. Thus, their concern is neither the establishment of the Islamic state, as was the case for the exiled Islamists, nor the defence of European Muslim interests, as is the case for the UIOE and the Milli Görüs, but rather a messianic vision that consists of bringing straying believers back to Islam. They seek to breathe a 'pure' Islamic conscience back into Muslims, through a return to the religious practice of the Prophet, a practice purified of any addition since the koranic revelation and the

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<sup>25</sup>Abd Samad Moussaoui and Florence Bouquillat (2002), *Zacarias Moussaoui, Mon frère*, Denoël – Impacts.

prophetic apostolate. Their framework of political protest is historically fixed by the Prophet's example and thus, by consequence, maladjusted to the profane reality of contemporary Europe. Thus, the hope for social justice is postponed until the day of the Last Judgement in a millenarian fashion, this day being when the true Muslims return en masse to the pure practice of Islam. For them, protest should be passive and founded on the quiet strength of numbers that they are currently acquiring. They believe that through predication a social movement can be created that will overthrow the hierarchical organisation of the world and give Islam the predominant place that it deserves. These movements are thus not directly concerned with politics, but are rather concerned about correcting belief and religious practices through Islamic education, with a global reform in sight. This means a literal application of the koranic message that insists on the unity of God, a principle that is not respected, according to them, by Muslims and which is behind the political and social decadence of the umma (the community of believers).

Moreover, these movements are opposed to all 'westernised' forms of political participation by Muslim populations within European societies, because such participation would be contrary to Islam. Democracy is assimilated to the replacement of God, because European deputies legislate in the name of values that are not those of the sharia (Islamic law). Thus, in Europe these movements promote an attitude of withdrawal from the official political stage even though it directly concerns European Muslims. For these movements and contrary to the opinions of the Islamic militants who defend European Muslims, the future of Islam on the continent cannot be reduced to a process of negotiation with the state. The primacy of Islam over all other systems, especially secular ones, prevents them from considering themselves as participants in a non-Muslim political system. Thus they offer an interpretation of the world that explains Islam as the solution to all evil. Although they are apolitical, they maintain an element of symbolic protest through this attitude of withdrawal, due to the disappointing living conditions of Muslim Europeans (religious and social discrimination, economic exclusion, the everyday immorality of the public space...). Advocating a religiosity based on the rejection of the dominant values of society and the necessity of living one's faith in private, they do not demonstrate any violence. This religiosity often allows young Muslims with family, school or personal problems (particularly those from difficult suburbs), to develop a sense of atonement for their previous lack of religiosity. It also allows them an alternative to violence produced by the frustration at daily experiences of discrimination and exclusion in Europe.

Islam will ultimately compensate the oppressed, explain the followers. This feeling of oppression is reinforced by the stigmatisation that is associated with their participation in the movement, either in the public space because of their physical appearance (long beard, total veil and clothing from the Middle East), for which the media labels them a nest of 'suicide bombers', or even by the incomprehension of their friends and family.

The Tabligh, which means to bring the message, was created in 1880 at Merwat, not far from Dehli. Its founder, Muhammad Ilyas, responding to the desire for re-Islamisation among the local population which he esteemed to be only superficially Islamised, sought to preserve Indian Islamic identity through religious predication, in opposition to the English colonial presence and the Hindu majority. Before its arrival in Europe, this movement had a significant influence on the Indian sub-continent, such that many people were Islamised or re-Islamised through contact with the proselytism of the Tabligh. In 1944, upon the death of the founder, Ilyas' son decided to internationalise the organisation by taking it out of India and setting up permanent missions in the rest of the world. At the beginning of the 1950s it set up branches along the main pilgrimage routes in the Middle East and in East Africa. In the 1960s it spread to West Africa and South East Asia. In just a few years the Tabligh had, following in the footsteps of the Muslim Brotherhood, become a multinational religious organisation. Wherever it operated it practised a systematic policy of regulating Islamic activity by controlling the construction of mosques and other predicative activities.

The internationalisation of the movement, which led to its presence in almost 100 countries, was a result of the leaders' desire to spread their message in a universal fashion. It was also a result of the fact that in the 1940s the movement had reached its peak in India and in order to continue its development it was necessary to recruit a new clientele in other parts of the world. In the 1960s the movement turned towards Europe as a new land of predication, through the intermediary of the Indo-Pakistani community in the UK. The first Tabligh missions were set up in the UK at the same time as the first immigrants arrived from the Indian sub-continent, as some of them were members of the Tabligh. They set up their headquarters at Dewsbury in Yorkshire and from there, with the help of missionary activists from India, the movement expanded across Europe -

above all in those countries with Muslim immigrant populations at the time (Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany and France).<sup>26</sup> Other European countries such as Spain, Switzerland and Italy would only experience the predication of the Tabligh from the 1980s, with the arrival of Muslim immigrants. In France, although the movement was present as early as 1968 it was only officially organised in 1972 with the creation of a Muslim association called Faith and Practice (Foi et Pratique). Imbued with communitarian logic, the members of this movement did not recognise the dominant values of French society, such as pluralism or secularism. This lack of recognition brought indifference rather than any attempt to challenge or reject these values. In Belgium, the Tabligh progressively became an important Islamic actor from its foundation in 1974.

Religious predication is at the heart of the activity of the Tabligh: in groups of four or five they travel Europe, and the world, calling on people to come to Islam (*khuruj fi sabillillah* – preaching on the path of God). As a religious obligation, each disciple must spend between three days and four months proselytising on predicative missions in Europe or in the rest of the world. Their protest is symbolic, as in the rejection of the dominant aesthetic norms: a militant Tabligh characteristically wears a long robe (*qamiss*), a skullcap and has a beard. Each militant conforms to a great moral rigour. The Tabligh does not concern itself with the daily problems of young Muslims beyond their spiritual needs. Membership is conceived as a passage, more or less long, to the eventual goal of the militant re-Islamisation of the self. This passage may however, lead unsatisfied individuals to question the quietist nature of the Tabligh and to engage in violent political action once out of the movement. This was notably the case of Khaled Khelkal, former member of the French Tabligh who was responsible for the 1995 bombings in the Paris metro, as was also the case for the attacks in Casablanca in 2003, which were organised by former members of the European Tabligh.

Salafism makes reference to the *salaf*, the pious ancestors incarnated by the three generations of Muslims that succeeded the Prophet and who

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<sup>26</sup> Felice Dassetto (1988), “L’organisation du Tabligh en Belgique”, in T. Gersholm and Y.G. Lithman (eds), *The New Islamic Presence in Western Europe*, London, New York: Felice Dassetto (1988), *Le Tabligh en Belgique. Diffuser l’islam sur les traces du prophète*, Academia Sybidi Papers, 2. Moustapha A. Diop (1994), “Structuration d’un réseau: la Jamaat Tabligh (Société pour la Propagation de la Foi)”, *Revue européenne des migrations internationales*, Vol. 10, No. 1.

represent the golden age of Islam. It is strongly inspired by the national Saudi religious doctrine: Wahhabism, named after its founder: Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab.<sup>27</sup> The adepts of this movement seek to base their daily life on the example of these three generations. Salafism came to Europe at the beginning of the 1990s thanks to the predication of graduates of Saudi Islamic Universities, as well as the proselytism of former militants and sympathisers of the Salafi wing of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), the Algerian Islamist party that settled on the continent in the 1990s, notably in the UK, France and Belgium.

Having no desire to engage in society and having no political project other than the messianic expectation of divine justice, Salafism controls numerous mosques (in Madrid, Copenhagen, Geneva, Brussels, the suburbs around Paris...), and like the Tabligh, they defend an apolitical non-violent vision of Islam, based on the will to mechanically align life with the fatwas of Saudi religious authorities. The current success of Salafism among young Muslims in Europe can be partly explained by a feeling of disappointment at the failure of re-Islamisation movements such as the UIOE.<sup>28</sup> Salafis criticise these movements for wanting to defend European Muslims using Western political categories and wanting to reform Islam in line with Western modernity. Thus they consider the majority of the political concessions and evolutions on questions of identity that have been obtained by these movements as unacceptable alterations of the koranic reference and the tradition of the Prophet. Salafis also reproach these currents of the Muslim Brotherhood for having accepted to negotiate with the state, especially on the different projects regarding the institutionalisation of Islam. The emergence of Salafism in Europe must be interpreted as the refusal of an excessive politicisation of Islam according to European standards, and a critique of the integration of values seen to be foreign to Islam, such as democracy and citizenship, into Islamic heritage. Negotiations between public authorities and militant Muslims have thus supposedly led to a banalisation of Islamic discourse, diluting its potential

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<sup>27</sup> On the historical path and current dynamics of Wahhabism, see Madawi Al-Rasheed (2007), *Contesting the Saudi State: Islamic Voices from a New Generation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>28</sup> Samir Amghar (2006), "Le salafisme en Europe: la mouvance polymorphe d'une radicalisation", *Politique étrangère*, 1.

for protest and leaving room for Salafism, whose potential for effective protest and opposition has however yet to be tested. For many followers it has become the means of regenerating a mythology for an ageing Islamism. We are describing here the 'pious' tendency of Salafism. We return in the next chapter to a more detailed treatment of Salafism and its own different tendencies.

## **Conclusions**

European political Islam is a varied movement composed of multiple strains. Overplaying the religious variable without taking into account the complex relationships that these different militant groups have with their political environments, national and international, would mean considering political Islam as a homogenous group, which is not the case. The different militant groups can be distinguished by the political methods they mobilise in the defence of Islam.

Thus the Sufi movements remain closely linked to and are controlled by the structures in their countries of origin (notably Morocco and Lebanon), whereas for those militant groups close to the Muslim Brotherhood and Milli Görüs, the rupture with their home countries has led them to refocus on Europe and adapt to its political culture. These latter groups act like political lobbies, seeking to influence European states by resorting to methods of engagement sanctioned by European legislation such as demonstrations, petitions or calls for economic boycotts. These actors work within a dialectical political framework where dynamics of negotiation and mutual influence interact with civil society and European political authorities. Finally, movements that are more withdrawn from the secular dimension of political Islam, such as Salafism or the Tabligh, voluntarily place themselves outside the framework of the state when it comes to negotiations about the rights of European Muslims. Their protest is manifested by their symbolic estrangement from the dominant values of society such as voting or the citizenship of a country they consider to be merely a host country, thus constantly affirming the primacy of an idealised religious micro-community over any other form of social organisation.

Overall, one can discern a form of political participation that is relatively serene emerging from among a large number of militant Muslims, notably in comparison with the minority of violent jihadists. Those who developed an interest in politics during the major crises concerning Islam, such as the headscarf affair in France or the Danish

cartoons of Mohammad, have mostly done so not in exclusive reference to religion but to European law, in soliciting the national jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights. The cultural and religious 'otherness' emphasised by Islamism is no longer the privileged means of expressing contestation. During these crises the overwhelming majority of militant political Islamists asserted the European values of freedom of religion as the basis for their political demands, rather than the idea of a Western-based hatred of Islam. For committed Muslims, change would no longer come via the contestations of outsiders who only react to their own marginalisation. Establishing a relationship of opposition with the majority would no longer be, in the same way, the only means of obtaining visibility. Today their prime concern is the need to renew and update their political discourses, which have only scarcely been efficient up until now, and which are emblematic of the supposedly intrinsically oppositional nature of Islam. The issue for these militant Muslims henceforth is to find new ways of expressing their religiosity in the public sphere, without that being interpreted as an opposition to European values. These new discourses will also test, for committed Muslims and public authorities alike, their capacity to adapt to the political evolution of European society. A renewal of the spirit of committed Islam, where the reference to Islam in the context of political claims is not a disqualification, seems thus to be a major development of European political Islam.

Recourse to radical forms of political Islam, particularly by young people, is often the expression of a lack of political representation and participation by those who are excluded and socially and culturally discriminated against. On the other hand the mainstreaming of the political participation of these militants (through voting, participation in local political life, membership of political parties) will allow for a greater identification with national and European interests, with their citizenship leading them *de facto* to look beyond those questions only relevant to political Islam. In other words, these militants should be induced to participate in the construction of European society via the methods used by all European citizens. An increasing focus by militant Muslims on the general concerns of the society in which they live will disqualify the logic of opposition that leads to violence and the rejection of state institutions.

Moreover, greater political coordination between member states on the question of political Islam now seems to be called for, in light of the often trans-European nature of these movements, although it is true that

the national contexts are of great importance. In order to understand what is at stake in the question of political Islam in Europe, the roots of present tensions and emerging conflicts must also be seen as European roots corresponding to particular national realities. The responses to these conflicts should therefore be considered by European institutions not as a matter of intercultural dialogue as was the case during the episode of the cartoons of Mohammad, but as a European political responsibility to European citizens. The place of European Islam and immigrant communities needs to be made visible in the cultural, political and historical heritage of Europe.