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Discursive Confrontation of Neo-Salafi Currents in Identity-Based Confrontation with the Islamic Republic of Iran

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Extended Abstract

Takfiri Salafis, as one of the long-standing intellectual schools in Islamic history, have consistently confronted the Islamic world with numerous upheavals and problems. From within this current emerged Neo-Salafism, which, through the discursive confrontation of “Takfir” (excommunication), created an identity-based confrontation with the Islamic Republic of Iran. **(Problem Statement)** The necessity of understanding this intellectual school and the groups arising from it, such as ISIS, leads to the importance of unity in the Islamic world. **(Necessity)** Various theories can be applied to the consequences of Salafi-Takfirism; since Salafi-Takfirism possesses the elements of a discourse, it can be analyzed within the framework of the «Discourse Theory» of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Accordingly, this research answers

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the question: “On what discursive confrontations are Neo-Salafi currents based for their identity-based confrontation with the Islamic Republic of Iran?” The paradigm governing this research is qualitative and has proceeded by adopting a descriptive-analytical method utilizing library and documentary data. The research hypothesis answers: “The Neo-Salafi school of thought, which considers itself indebted to the ideas of Ibn Taymiyyah and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, is the ideological origin of contemporary extremist groups that identify themselves through the ‘othering’ of Shi’ism and consider this confrontation to be the ‘Greater Jihad.’” The findings of the research show that political Salafism threatens national interests to the extent that the most important “ideological” components of the Islamic Revolution, such as reducing Shi’a-Sunni and Arab-Non-Arab divides, and conversely, emphasizing the Islam-Zionism conflict, are threatened by Salafis.

Problem Statement and Necessity: Takfiri Salafis, as a historical current in the Islamic world, have always been a factor of instability and conflict. The emergence of Neo-Salafi currents in the contemporary era and the actions of groups like ISIS reveal the necessity of understanding the ideology and objectives of these currents for preserving the unity of the Islamic world.

Theoretical Framework: This research utilizes the “Discourse Theory” of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe to analyze the subject. Based on this, discourses gain identity in confrontation with each other, and key concepts of this theory include “Nodal Point (Central Signifier)”, “Articulation”, “Othering”, “Antagonism”, and “Chain of Equivalence”. The Neo-Salafi discourse fosters its cohesion and continuity through othering and creating an “Other” (Shi’a/Iran).

Intellectual Foundations of Neo-Salafism: The intellectual origin of this current goes back to Ibn Taymiyyah, who laid the theoretical foundations for excommunicating others by expanding the concept of disbelief (Kufr) and restricting the concept of faith (Iman). Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab revived this thought in the 12th century AH (18th century CE) and transformed it into a political-military movement. Contemporary Neo-Salafis (Takfiri-Jihadist), inspired by these two, have adopted a more extreme approach.

Research Findings: The research findings are presented along four axes:

1. Components of the Salafi-Takfiri Discourse in the Othering of Shi’ism: The

ontology of this discourse is based on a rigid duality (Self/Islam vs. Other/Disbelief). Following the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, “Shi’ism” was reinforced as the primary Other and identity-builder for the Neo-Salafi discourse. Using the “Chain of Equivalence”, they overlook differences among Salafi groups (such as al-Qaeda and ISIS) and unite them against the common enemy (Shi’ism).

2. Identity-Based Confrontation of the Neo-Salafis: Confrontation with Shi’ism is not merely a religious difference but the main factor for the continuity and identity cohesion of these currents. The victory of the Islamic Revolution of Iran as a Shi’a power transformed this confrontation into an ideological and geopolitical challenge. Neo-Salafis, by excommunicating Shi’a, forbid any interaction with them and have engaged in practical opposition to Iran’s influence in the region.

3. The Nodal Point of Neo-Salafism in Confrontation with Shi’a Islam: The nodal point of this discourse is «Return to the Pious Predecessors (al-Salaf al-Salih) through Takfiri-Jihadi means». This nodal point articulates elements such as the implementation of Sharia (with an extremist interpretation), excommunication of Shi’a, offensive jihad, and opposition to non-Salafi governments. The Islamic Republic of Iran is represented as the «Superior Other» of this discourse, simultaneously symbolizing «Shi’a heresy (Bid’ah)”, “non-Divine government” (due to Velayat-e Faqih), and “regional expansionism”.

4. Discursive Confrontation and Its Manifestations: This confrontation has been pursued in practice by various Neo-Salafi groups:

- **Al-Qaeda:** Formed with a focus on Shi’a othering and with direct/indirect support from powers like the USA, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan to act against the influence of Iran and Shi’a.

- **Taliban:** With origins in the Deobandi school (influenced by Wahhabism), are strongly anti-Shi’a. Saudi Arabia’s goal in supporting the Taliban was to create a pivotal point in competing with Iran’s influence in Afghanistan and Central Asia.

- **ISIS (Daesh):** Shi’a-phobia was the central axis of this group’s ideology and actions. They emerged through the widespread excommunication of Shi’a and by leveraging political projects of foreign powers (e.g., plans for Iraq’s partition) and carried out massacres of Shi’a. ISIS considered the Islamic Republic of Iran

its main enemy.

- **ISIS-Khorasan (IS-K):** As a remnant of ISIS in Afghanistan and Pakistan, continues terrorist attacks against Shi'a and aims to re-establish the Caliphate in the historical geography of Khorasan.

Conclusion Takfiri Neo-Salafi currents, by othering Shi'ism and the Islamic Republic of Iran, have engaged in an identity-based and discursive confrontation with it. This confrontation is rooted in the ideological foundations of Ibn Taymiyyah and Abd al-Wahhab and has been reinforced by the geopolitical objectives of regional and extra-regional powers. The discursive confrontation of these currents is based on the nodal point of "Return to the Salaf through Takfiri-Jihadi methods" and the creation of an anti-Shi'a and anti-Iranian "Chain of Equivalence" that introduces Iran as the epicenter of deviation and the main threat to the Islamic world. Understanding this discourse is essential for comprehending regional developments and neutralizing its threats.

Key words: Discursive Confrontation, Neo-Salafi Currents, Identity-Based Confrontation, Islamic Republic of Iran.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in conducting this research study.