

A Psychological Study of Roots of Religious Violence in the Middle East

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Abstract

Today, the Middle East is in the grip of religious violence, causing the death of thousands and displacement of millions of the people of this region. To find the roots of religious violence, which has practically paralyzed lives of millions, it is necessary to study it through an interdisciplinary approach. Religious violence involves many individual and collective aspects; psychology, personality, ideology and sociopolitical milieu in which an individual is raised. Attempts have been made in this paper to study the psychological roots of religious violence in the Middle East to shed light on some of its aspects. The main question of this research is: What are the psychological roots of violence in the Middle East? The hypothesis of this paper is that biologically influenced dispositions as well as environmental forces (family, schooling and sociopolitical conditions) molded the personality of Ibn Timiyya, which in turn shaped his ideology (Salafism with excommunication as its central signifier) that heavily influenced the violent movements in the Middle East. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's discourse analysis was used to study the hypothesis. The findings show that Ibn Timiyya's ideology, with takfir as its central signifier, the sociopolitical environment of the Middle East and personality of takfiris are the roots of religious violence in the Middle East.

Keywords: Religious violence, Ibn Timiyya, takfir, ideology, psychology, Middle East

Introduction

Religious violence is one of the problems of our world today; it is not confined to the Middle East alone, rather it has targeted many innocent people in many European, African and Asian countries. It is a very complex phenomenon having several layers. Hence fight against terrorism requires knowledge of many aspects of this nasty phenomenon that is increasingly threatening the lives of many across the world. Religious violence is more dangerous than political violence because it involves many individual and collective aspects; psychology, personality, ideology and socio-political milieu in which an individual is raised. Therefore to fight religious violence one has to analyze this phenomenon from psychological as well as ideological and socio-political points of view. Religious violence is not a new phenomenon, but its dimensions have changed in our time. Hence, in order to get rid of this phenomenon one has to go to the roots of this problem. Regarding the religious violent movements in the Middle East, it is necessary to understand the thought of the founders of religious violence. In this paper, attempts have been made to study the psychology of Ibn Timiyya, who is one of main the founders of Salafism and promoter of religious violence. Wahhabism which is the ideology of Middle Eastern violent religious movements is heavily influenced by the thoughts of Ibn Timiyya. Attempts have been made in this paper to study the psychology of religious violence on the basis of Ecological systems theory or Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000) as a theoretical framework. In this theory besides psychological factors, sociopolitical conditions as well as ideological factors have been taken into consideration to study roots of religious violence in the Middle East.

Definition of Concepts

Salafism

Salafism is an ideology positing that Islam has strayed from its origins. The word "salaf" is Arabic for "predecessors" and refers to the companions of the Prophet Mohammed. The word 'Salafi' comes from the Arabic phrase, 'as-salaf as-saliheen', which refers to the first three generations of Muslims (starting with the Companions of the Prophet), otherwise known as the Pious Predecessors or Devout Ancestors (Lacy, 2009: 9). The Salaf are the pious forbearers of Islam, usually understood as the first three generations of the Muslim community (as opposed to the Khalaf, or the later generations). The Arabic adjective Salafi and the English noun Salafism taken from it are complex terms that refer to a trend in Islamic thought that places particular emphasis on a return to the piety and principles of the Salaf as the only correct understanding of Islam. The Salafi strain in Islamic thought prefers the role of hadith and the literal ways of the Salaf over historical adoptions. Although this conservative and iconoclastic trend has always existed in Islamic thought, it is most commonly identified with two periods: the burgeoning of classical Salafism with the 14th-century scholar Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), and the Salafism of the 18th-century movements: the Salafism of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792) and Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905). The orientation towards the Salaf and a textualist commitment to hadith instead of speculative reasoning characterized the ahl al-hadith movement of 9th-

century scholars like Ibn Hanbal (d. 855). Classical Salafism represented a revival of Hanbali thought in the 14th century, specifically at the hands of the very influential Hanbali scholar of Damascus, Ibn Taymiyya, and his chief acolyte, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1351) (Brwon, oxfordislamicstudies.com).

Religious Violence

“Conflict occurs when something is contested. When we couple religion with conflict, we might expect that what is contested is ideology or morality (i. e., belief). But this is not necessarily the case, and religious conflict is best described as a more complex phenomenon that engages a combination of contested domains, including power, personality, space or place, and group identity. These contested domains should not be confused with enabling factors or conditions, which, as mentioned above, can be political, social, economic, cultural and psychological. When both of these aspects are taken into consideration, we should be open to the possibility that, as a religion develops over time and/or as different enabling conditions come into play, different contested domains are accorded priority. A distinction should also be drawn between the root cause/s of the religious conflict (what is contested) and the way in which the conflict is discursively or narratively framed. That is, what a conflict is said to be about may differ significantly from what is actually being contested. We should be similarly open to the possibility that what is contested may be reframed retrospectively, just as it is also possible that what is not a conflict becomes viewed or framed as a conflict in hindsight and vice versa” (Mayer, 2016: 2-3). Religious violence refers to an activity where religion is either the subject or object of violent behavior. Religious violence is, specifically, violence that is motivated by or in reaction to religious precepts, texts, or doctrines (*Wellman and Tokuno 2004: 294*).

Takfir (Excommunication)

Takfir involves declaring fellow Muslims who do not share Salafis’ beliefs to be infidels (*kuffār*). This is one aspect of their program of purification. Often the latter are accused of beliefs or practices that Salafis deem to be reprehensible innovations (sing. *bidah*) that were unknown during the time of the Salaf (Muslim Journeys, 2016).

Pronouncement that someone is an unbeliever (*kafir*) and no longer Muslim, i.e. Takfir, is used in the modern era for sanctioning violence against leaders of Islamic states who are deemed insufficiently religious. It has become a central ideology of militant groups such as those in Egypt, which reflect the ideas of Sayyid Qutb, Mohammad bin Abdul Wahhab, Mawdudi, Ibn Taymiyyah, and Ibn Kathir. Mainstream Muslims and Islamist groups reject the concept as a doctrinal deviation (oxfordislamicstudies.com).

In English Takfir may be translated into excommunication (Latin *ex*, out of, and *communio* or *communicatio*, communion — exclusion from the communion), the principal and severest censure, is a medicinal, spiritual penalty that deprives the guilty Christian of all participation in the common blessings of ecclesiastical society. Being a penalty, it supposes guilt; and being the most serious penalty that the Church

can inflict, it naturally supposes a very grave offence (The Catholic Encyclopedia.com).

Main Question: What are the psychological roots of violence in the Middle East?

Hypothesis: Biologically influenced dispositions as well as environmental forces (family, schooling and sociopolitical conditions) molded the personality of Ibn Timiyya, which in turned shaped his ideology (Salafism with excommunication as its central signifier) that is the root of violent movements in the Middle East.

Research Method: Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s discourse analysis has been used to study the psychological roots of religious violence in the Middle East. Salafism, as formulated by Ibn Timiyya, with excommunication as its core signifier, considers anybody who does not follow Ibn Timiyya’s ideology as “other”. According to Ibn Timiyya and the advocates of violence in the Middle East today, “other” is excommunicated because he or she does not follow their ideology and hence must repent or must be killed.

Theoretical Framework: Ecological Systems Theory

Ecological systems theory or bioecological model of Urie Bronfenbrenner (1917-2005) has been used for the purpose of this study. Ecological systems theory views the person as developing within a complex system of relationships affected by multiple levels of the surrounding environment. Since the child’s biologically influenced dispositions join with environmental forces to mold development, Bronfenbrenner characterized his perspective as a bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; the theoretical framework has been borrowed from Lura E. Berk (Berk, 2003: 19-21).

Bronfenbrenner envisioned the environment as a series of nested structures, including but extending beyond the home, school, neighborhood, and workplace settings in which people spend their everyday lives. Each layer of the environment is viewed as having a powerful impact on development.

The Microsystem. The innermost level of the environment is the microsystem, which consists of activities and interaction patterns in the person’s immediate surroundings.

The Mesosystem. The second level of Bronfenbrenner’s model, the mesosystem, encompasses connections between microsystems.

The Exosystem. The exosystem is made up of social settings that do not contain the developing person but nevertheless affect experiences in immediate settings. These can be formal organizations, such as the board of directors in the individual’s workplace or community health and welfare services.

The Macrosystem. The outermost level of Bronfenbrenner’s model, the macrosystem, is not a specific context but, rather, consists of cultural values, laws,

customs, and resources.

A Dynamic, Ever-Changing System. The environment is not a static force that affects people in a uniform way. Instead, it is dynamic and ever-changing. Whenever individuals add or let go of roles or settings in their lives, the breadth of their microsystems changes. These shifts in contexts – or ecological transitions, as Bronfenbrenner called them – are often important turning points in development. Starting school, entering the workforce, marrying, becoming a parent, getting divorced, moving, and retiring are examples.

Bronfenbrenner referred to the temporal dimension of his model as the chronosystem (the prefix *chrono* means “time”).

Life changes can be imposed externally. Alternatively, they can arise from within the person, since individuals select, modify, and create many of their own settings and experiences. How they do so depends on their age; their physical, intellectual, and personality characteristics; and their environmental opportunities.

Therefore, in ecological systems theory, people are products and producers of their environments, so both people and their environments form a network of interdependent effects (Berk, 2003: 19-21).

Discussion

Within this framework, religious violence that dominates the Middle East today is the product of the environment (particularly the ideological environment) as well as they produce the violent environment around them. Since most of these groups are the product of Wahhabism and Salafism and these two ideologies are in turn heavily influenced by ideas of Ibn Timiyya, attempts have been made in this paper to review the life and teachings of Ibn Timiyya within the framework of Bronfenbrenner theory. In this regard, his life has been briefly reviewed and then his anthropology, cosmology, epistemology and methodology reviewed. It is argued that Ibn Timiyya is the product of his environment as mentioned by Bronfenbrenner, but he also tried to change his environment. Salafi violent movements are the product of their environment that is heavily under the influence of Ibn Timiyya’s ideology, which breeds violence.

Ibn Timiyya’s life

Taqi al-Din Ahmad bin Abdulhalim Harrani Dameshqi Hanbali known as Ibn Timiyya was born in 661 Hegira in a religious family in Harran, Syria. His father was a seminary teacher and a judge. Due to Mongol attacks, his family fled to Damascus when Ahmad was six year old. His father was a judge and a preacher in Damascus until 682 Hegira when he passed away. Heir to his father, he inherited his father’s position. But he made many controversial statements, giving rise to protest of Sunni scholars. He was several times imprisoned for his remarks. When he travelled to Egypt at the age of 44, the same conversations and scenes were repeated. He passed away in his last jail at the age of 67 due to illness (728 Hegira). He had a hard life and

never married (see, Alikhani, 2011).

He was influenced by his teachers, including his father Ahmad Muqadasi (d. 688 Hegira), Seifuddin Hanbali (b. 669 Hegira), and Abdurrahman Hanbali (b. 682 Hegira). Ibn Timiyya was a combatant theologian and his protests were not confined only to theological controversies, rather he was a political dissident who was also active in military combat. He was a Hanbalite jurist, who was influenced by the teachings of Ibn Hanbal and relied on his theology (ideology) for his political activism (Qaderi, 2015: 104).

His ideas were developed and spread mainly by his disciples. His disciples copied his books and distributed them among the people and continued their endeavors after his death. However, many Sunni and Shia scholars opposed him (Javadi, 2003; Habibi, 2011).

Political, Social Environment

The world of Islam faced many untoward developments during the lifetime of Ibn Timiyya. Power politics and struggle among the emirs and kings as well as foreign attacks and natural disasters had created miserable social, political and economic conditions. Ignorance and poverty had engulfed the society, illegal or irrational means of livelihood spread, and people earned their livelihood through “wrong means” (Alikhani, 278). Under the Ummayyad rule, sectarian ideas spread in Harran and Damascus. Such ideas gradually prepared the grounds for excommunication and religious violence. Anti-Shia ideas are ample in the thought of Ibn Timiyya (Alizadeh Mousavi, 2014: 219).

Besides anti-Shia ideas and spread of mystical groups during this period, two other developments left their impacts on the ideas of Muslim thinkers including Ibn Timiyya. First, the Crusades (489-690 Hegira). The wars eroded the stamina of Muslims and left millions of people dead and huge destructions (Alizadeh Mousavi, 2014: 220). Second, the Mongol invasions. These two wars encountered the Muslims with new issues and problems for which the Muslim thinkers had to provide answers.

The defeat of the Muslims in the Crusades and the Mongol invasions created lots of problems for the World of Islam. With the conquest of Baghdad by the Mongols and massacre of the Caliph by them, it was for the first time that the World of Islam was left without a caliph. The collapse of the Islamic Caliphate, faced the Sunni Muslim thinkers with the crisis of legitimacy, particularly in theory. The question that preoccupied them was: “What type of system is legitimate as a government system in the absence of the institution of caliphate?” (Alizadeh Mousavi, 2014: 220). The war also led to the massacre, famine, insecurity, and many social problems. Hence, the Muslim thinkers began to ask: What are the reasons for the weakness of Muslims? Many Muslim thinkers, including Ibn Timiyya, tried to provide answer to this question. The biased and hurried answers to the said question planted the seeds of sectarian differences and religious violence. For instance, the answers that Ibn Timiyya provided to the above question were: taking distance from the virtuous ancestors (Salaf Saleh); the Shias and the mystics are the main reasons for backwardness of the World of Islam. Ibn Timiyya practically took some actions to confront them. These practical measures included “expelling a group of Esoteric

Nasiri Shias from the mountains in the suburb of Damascus. Ibn Timiyya maintained that the Shias were the spies and supporters of the Tatars and corrupted the region” (Alikhani, 2011: 280). In 669 Hegira, Ibn Timiyya along with some of his friends, used to go to people’s houses, breaking their dishes, pouring out their wines and censuring or arresting the owners. People welcomed his measures, for they thought that the Quranic decrees were implemented and the conditions of the Prophet’s era were being revived. In 704 Hegira, a mystic called Mujahid Ibrahim Qahtani was summoned by Ibn Timiyya. He asked his men to shave Qahtani’s hairs, cut his nails and also trim his mustaches that had covered his lips. He asked him to repent and stop eating or smoking what (hashish) would damage intellect (Alikhani, 2011:280-281). This was considered a very bold measure during those days.

During this period, many religious scholars were appointed to top governmental positions by rulers and enjoyed many economic benefits. Ibn Timiyya strongly opposed such positions and personally did not accept any position. He also was opposed to receiving any gift from the rulers and hence freely expressed his viewpoints without any fear. This added to his popularity.

Ibn Timiyya’s Cosmology

In his cosmological approach, Ibn Timiyya does not divide the universe into sensible and insensible ones, rather he maintains that the universe is all sensible, but at the same time since the universe is divided into the unseen (invisible) and seen (visible), in the Quran, he too accepts this division. Following the Salfis, he is an advocate of literal interpretation of the scripture (Alizadeh Mousavi, 2014: 277). Hence, in his method, he is Traditionalist. He conceives in the form of a material and sensible being (for details see: Sobhani (2010). Ebrahimi Dinani maintains “those who pay attention only to the sensible in God’s book of creation, in His Book of Guidance also they pay attention only to the literal aspects or textualist interpretations and do not go beyond this stage.” (Ebrahimi Dinani, 2004: 55).

Ibn Timiyya maintains that a self-existent, invisible being, who cannot be pointed at does not exist inside and outside the universe and is only a creation of man’s mind (Alizadeh Mousavi, 2014: 278). But since he cannot deny the existence of God and because of his lack of knowledge of philosophical and rational principles, he tries to find a reason for invisibility of God: “All things and affairs are of two kinds: Some of them are visible, but some are invisible. What causes the difference between the visible and invisible is not a non-existential issue; for visibility is an existential issue and visible too is among beings.” (Alizadeh Mousavi, 2014: 278). He argues that whatever is more perfect in the universe is more qualified to be visible. He concludes: “Since the Intransitive Being is the most perfect in respect of being, hence He is farthest to non-being; therefore, He is the most qualified for being visible. If we don’t see Him, it is because our eyes are not able to see Him; it does not mean that seeing Him is by itself impossible.” (Alizadeh Mousavi, 2014: 278)

In his book, *Sharh Isharat*, Khawjeh Nasir Tusi states: Such people (like Ibn Timiyya) who are always dominated by the power of illusion, put invisible in place of visible and consequently impose the rules of visible on them. They don’t pay attention to the point that sense itself is an insensible issue and that man cannot

understand his own sense through sense. Although Ibn Timiyya tried to be very clever in his theological discussions, since he was alien and hostile to philosophy, he could not evade contradictions and incongruous statements regarding the principles of faith (Ebrahimi Dinani, 2004: 61-62).

Ibn Timiyya's Anthropology

Ibn Timiyya's ideal man is retrogressive, fully obedient of the Text (which he considers as correct Text) and God. In his viewpoint, man must follow the Traditions (hadith). Man is not entitled to use his reason to challenge the traditions allegedly handed down from Prophet in case they contradict reason. His man lacks volition and freewill. In his book, *Dar' Ta'arud al-'Aql wa al-Naql* (Averting the Conflict between Reason and [religious] Tradition), Ibn Timiyya discusses the contradiction between reason and Tradition, saying: "According to Mu'tazilites, God has created man and granted him freewill. The meaning of freewill is that if man decides to do so and so act, he will do it, and, if he decides to do another act, he will do it. It means that man is a being who does one of the two acts on his own free will. Questioning the Mu'tazilites, he asks: By freewill do we mean that God has granted man with the competency of freewill, or, is he free to do so and so act? If the Mu'tazilites accepted the first definition of freewill, they would face a problem: man's freewill regarding two equal acts will inevitably need a cause. If they accept the second definition, one should say that man's will is choosing a definite act determined by God, but done by man." (Ebrahimi Dinani, 2004: 83; Ebrahimi Dinani, 2016).

Ibn Timiyya is traditionalist in his epistemology and methodology. Hence in his epistemic system, man is allowed to use his reason only within the limits of the Tradition. In other words, Tradition is superior to reasons or is preferred to reason. It means that in his viewpoint reason is legitimate so far as it is acknowledged by the Tradition. In his viewpoint, man becomes meaningful in the field of action and hence he is opposed to whatever is outside the realm of practice, including reason, philosophy and logic. The instruction of man's action is fixed by the Tradition and there is an excellent role model for his action in the real world, i.e. virtuous ancestor (Salaf Saleh).

Ibn Timiyya's Method and Epistemology

Ibn Timiyya considers Tradition unalterable in all fields. Moreover, he maintains that reason has no role in explanation of metaphysics. He established his method on three pillars: 1 – opposition to philosophy and logic; 2 – literal interpretation of the scripture; and 3 – Authoritativeness of the *Quran* and Sunnah of the Prophet and the early Muslim community (Alizadeh Mousavi, alizadehmoosavi.ir).

In his method, Ibn Timiyya is strongly opposed to philosophy and logic, considering philosophy some generalities without any fruit lacking any truth behind them. According to him, philosophy caused atheism among the Muslims when it was introduced and spread among them. Hence, he wrote the following books on the rejection of logic and philosophy: 1 – *Al-Radd Ala-al-Maneqieen* (Rejection of Logicists); 2 – *Bayan Muwafiqat Sarih al-Ma'qul Li-al-Sahih al-Manqul*; 3 – *Naqd*

al-Mantiq (Criticism of Logic); 4 – Al-Radd Ala Falsafah Ibn Rush (Rejection of Ibn Rushd’s Philosophy); 5 – Dar’ Ta’arud al-‘Aql wa al-Naql ("Averting the Conflict between Reason and [religious] Tradition").

Regarding the sources of epistemology, Ibn Timiyya acknowledges only the Tradition and does not consider any role for reason regarding metaphysical subjects. The Salafi method is total attention to authoritativeness of the *Quran* and Sunnah of the Prophet and the early Muslim community. In semantology, he lays emphasis on literal interpretation of Scripture and rejects hermeneutics of Sacred Text. These postulates lead to belief in a human-like God and a simulative understanding regarding the quiddity, names and attributes of God.

His main doctrine was the supremacy and authoritativeness of the *Quran* and Sunnah of the Prophet and the early Muslim community. He encouraged a literal interpretation of scripture and condemned the popular practices of saint worship and pilgrimages to saints’ tombs as worship of other than God. He rejected theology, philosophy, and metaphysical Sufism, although he encouraged pietistic Sufism. Ibn Timiyya Tied Islam to politics and state formation and made a sharp distinction between Islam and non-Islam, noting the difference between a public proclamation of Islam and actions that are inconsistent with Islamic teachings and values. He strongly influenced later thinkers such as Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, Hasan al-Banna , and Sayyid Qutb . His authority has been used by some twentieth-century Islamist groups to declare jihad against ruling governments (oxfordislamicstudies.com).

As a result, the followers of this thought and those of Abd al-Wahhab and Qutb are so dogmatic that they only consider themselves right and others wrong. Ibn Timiyya “is not only opposed to philosophy, but also to logic” (Ebrahimi Dinani, 2004: 13-14).

Psychological Roots of Violence in the Middle East

According to Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model, violence in Ibn Timiyya’s thought has its roots in his psyche, family background, schooling (ideology), personal life, as well as socio-political environment in which he was brought up. Hence, his schooling, his personal life and the socio-economic conditions of his time were the main factors affecting the formation of his personality traits, turning him into a militant theologian, who easily preached and practiced political, sectarian violence. Excommunication was the core signifier of his ideology that prepared the grounds for religious violence. There is a sequence in his ideology that finally leads to religious violence: He excommunicates anybody who does not follow his ideology. Such a person is his ideological ‘other’. The other, particularly a Muslim, who follows other Islamic Sects than Hanbali sect, should repent because he or she does rites and rituals which Ibn Timiyya considers as ‘innovation’ (see: Sharifat, Abdulhamid, 2014). An innovator is an infidel, who will face two options: repentance; or getting killed. This is the sequence that in Ibn Timiyya’s discourse leads to religious violence. Another signifier of Ibn Timiyya’s discourse is the necessity of establishment of Islamic government. If there is no powerful government, religion is endangered, and if government does not follow the laws derived from revelation, it becomes tyrannical (Yaarshater, 1976 :468). This signifier is what groups like Daesh and Jibhat ul-Nusra

rely on in order to resort to force and kill 'others'. But, it is not enough; to behead a human being and kill other fellow human beings requires a peculiar personality. The takiris today are brought up under the influence of Ibn Timiyya's ideology, which turns them into people who are ready to indulge in religious violence.

Psychology of religious violence: Excommunication, root of religious violence

Excommunication and religious violence are the natural outcome of Ibn Timiyya's thought and ideology. He excommunicates anybody who is opposed to his ideas, thus considering them apostate. For instance, according to Ibn Timiyya negligence in offering daily prayers and participating in jihad causes infidelity and in case the negligent Muslim does not repent, he should be beheaded (Alikhani, 2011: 287). In his viewpoints such persons who oppose his ideas must in the first place repent otherwise their killing not only becomes permissible, but obligatory. It is not necessary to be a jurisprudent to excommunicate others. The moment someone commits an act that Ibn Timiyya does not allow, such a person is excommunicated, is an apostate and an infidel. If he or she does not repent, then killing him or her becomes obligatory. In Ibn Timiyya's viewpoint, all Shias, Mystics and Sunnis who do not perform their religious rites are apostate and infidel. For instance, a Muslim who does not say his daily prayers must be killed if he does not repent. This is one of the main sources of religious violence that the Daesh and other violent Muslim groups recourse to in order to shed the blood of others.

Conclusion

Ibn Timiyya's epistemology, cosmology and method, his opposition to philosophy and logic, his literal interpretation of the scripture and his rigid reliance on the Tradition made him a self-centered figure who rejected all readings of the Text and interpreted the Tradition in a manner to serve his purpose. But it was through excommunication, as core signifier of his ideology, that he preached and practiced religious violence. In other words, Ibn Timiyya, in the first place formulated his own Salafi thought by reliance on the Tradition and literal interpretation of the scripture. In the next step he introduced a set of rites and rituals practiced by Muslims (such as popular practices of saint worship and pilgrimages to saints' tombs) as innovation (*bid'a*), which he said were religiously impermissible. In the next step, he announced that those who practiced what he said were impermissible were infidels, unless they repented and stopped performing those practices. If they did not repent and continued to perform the said rites and rituals, then he said they should be killed. This is how sectarian and religious violence was preached and promoted by Ibn Timiyya.

Today's Salafi movements in the Middle East also follow the same pattern (See: Sheikh Ahmad, 2005). They classify the people into faithful and infidel. The faithful are the ones who follow them and the rest are infidels. In many places where they have gained political power, they have committed most heinous atrocities against the leaders and followers of 'others'; in many cases even beheading them in cold blood. To behead a human being requires a very peculiar personality. The takfiris seem to have been brought up in specific sociopolitical and religious environment

and ideology, making them enough cruel to commit such heinous acts. The current violent religious movements are also under the influence of the same factors that shaped the personality of Ibn Timiyya, who personally took part in religious violence, i.e. ideology and sociopolitical environment. So far as ideology is concerned, they follow the teachings of Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab and Ibn Timiyya, particularly two principles: Takfir (excommunication) and necessity of formation of an “Islamic” state. The socio-political conditions in the Middle East are also similar to the time of Ibn Timiyya because there is chaos and disorder, which is a congenial ground for them to recruit their members and engage in political, sectarian violence.

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