

## Article

# Preaching Muslim Loyalty in France: Rhetoric and Counter-Discourse

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**Abstract:** This paper analyzes online sermons on Muslim loyalty to non-Muslims uttered by Tareq Oubrou, one of the most prominent Muslim religious authorities in France. The aim of this study is twofold. First, Oubrou's rhetoric will be examined (especially in what pertains to the opening, the hybrid format of preaching, the languages used, citations, digital tools, and the closing). Second, Oubrou's online sermons will be addressed as a counter-narrative on loyalty intended primarily to neutralize the radical Salafi discourses which forbid any form of loyalty towards non-Muslims. Oubrou utilizes online preaching: (1) to teach wider audiences of ordinary Muslims, outside of the practicing audience who attend mosques regularly, loyalty towards non-Muslims; (2) to compete for space and authoritative discourse on Islam; and (3) to prosecute radical discourses on loyalty particularly present in the virtual space as well as among undersized, albeit active, Salafi communities in France.

**Keywords:** preaching; Islam; loyalty; France

## 1. Introduction

Preaching is an important component in the Islamic ritual and religious devotion, and as such, plays a key role in the traditional religious landscape as well as in a wide range of technologies of *da'wa* (cassette, radio, TV, internet, podcasts) (Bunt 2009; Hirschkind 2012, pp. 5–21). Muslim preachers in Europe use social media to reach a wider audience, thus propagating their interpretations of Islam and upholding their religious authority (Maréchal 2018, pp. 1–49). For example, Swedish Salafi preachers, who are active on Facebook, use technology (various tools, accessibility, brevity, etc.) to stage their discourse and teach traditionalist Islamic ethics (Stjernholm 2020, pp. 132–52). Swedish Salafis also invest religious discourses on YouTube to spread the religious motifs of advice, warning, reaching paradise through renunciation, establishing a non-violent strategy, and social development to help young people in the suburbs (Olsson 2020, pp. 155–72).

Despite the significance of Islamic discourses in the French-speaking world, very little literature is available on Muslim preaching. The latter was only met with a form of relative indifference from academic circles, although a small number of scholars have conducted thorough and relevant research on French Islam online (Lamine 2015, pp. 139–56). Thus, this article aims to fill a gap in this area. One can note, however, the pioneering and valuable contributions of Michel Reeber. The latter emphasized in 1993 the para-religious functions of preaching, notably in the formation of Islamic consciousness within the diaspora in its social components, ideological aspirations, spiritual affirmations, and moral standards (Reeber 1993, pp. 210–22). In 2000, Reeber argued that the period 1981–1991 is marked in Islamic preaching by a phase of politicization, whereas from 1991 he observes a trend that insists more on religious worship and dogma as pathways to a flourishing Muslim life (Reeber 2000, pp. 185–203). That said, I disagree with Reeber about the evolution of Muslim preaching from politics to piety. As the case of Oubrou's sermons shows (the same can be said about the reformist Hassan Iquioussen expelled to Morocco or the



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many Salafist preachers banned by the French government), politics and piety, albeit distinguishable, often inter-relate in Muslim preaching and fit with each other comfortably in Friday sermons.

## 2. “The Problem” of Muslim Loyalty in France

A widely held misconception in the West is that Muslims lack norms and projects of *affectio societatis*; this misconception is nourished by two types of discourses. On the one hand, one encounters in France (and beyond) adherents to the Salafist dogma of loyalty and disavowal (*al-walā’ wa-l-barā’*), itself based on a Quranic norm which stipulates that a true Muslim should embrace loyalty to Islam and break with non-Muslims. Although the dogma of loyalty and disavowal is related to different historical and theological contexts of early Islam, which should not be taken literally and outside of this specific setting, it has been central to contemporary Salafism<sup>1</sup> (in its three forms, jihadist, traditionalist, and political), including in Europe.

Perhaps the earliest study in Europe on Muslim loyalty to non-Muslim states was published by Shadid and van Koningsveld in 1996 (in the context of the *Satanic Verses* controversy of 1989 and the Gulf War in 1990–1991); this study highlights how Muslim jurists in Great Britain call Muslims to abide by the laws of the state and show loyalty to the land and the Crown by virtue of the citizenship contract, even if Great Britain were at war with Muslims (Shadid and van Koningsveld 1996, p. 104). In the aftermath of 9/11, Islam was designated as a geopolitical “enemy” of the US foreign policy, and the Salafi discourses of loyalty and disavowal of the West have found visibility and more adherents within radical Muslim milieus (Kepel and Milelli 2005, pp. 310–63). In 2007, Frederic Volpi showed how jihadists in Europe through individualized approaches to religiosity undermine the construction of pacts of loyalty between Muslims and European states (Volpi 2007, pp. 451–70). A year later, Joas Wagemakers explored how Salafism views Islam as religiously and politically threatened, which would require Salafists to be loyal to God and Islam and to disavow everything else (Wagemakers 2009, pp. 1–22). In 2014, Uriya Shavit distinguished Salafist perceptions of loyalty that require Muslims to refrain from befriending or loving non-Muslims, or imitating their beliefs and customs, from those of reformists who hold that the dogma of loyalty and disavowal applies only to non-Muslims who fight Muslims (Shavit 2014, pp. 67–88). In 2015, Said Hassan identified three distinct legal positions within the fatwas of Muslim jurists on the issue of a Muslim subject’s loyalty to a non-Muslim state: the alienation position, the conciliation position, and the commitment position whereby Salafis promote the alienation thesis (Hassan 2015, pp. 516–39). In 2019, Suzanne Olsson studied the alienation position as being endorsed by traditionalist Salafis in Sweden who distance themselves from society while aspiring to convert it (Olsson 2019, pp. 55–72). At the same time, Damir-Geilsdorf et al. investigated a group of Salafis in Germany whose ideas of individual loyalty and disavowal intersect with issues of identity, belonging, inclusion, and exclusion, which are strongly intertwined with the realities of everyday life (Damir-Geilsdorf et al. 2019, p. 124).

On the other hand, lack of trust in Muslim loyalty draws on isolated events, such as football affinities (in which Moroccans or Algerians show affinities towards their national teams of origin rather than France), ethno-national affinities (the loyalty of some Muslims to religious or political organizations established in the Muslim world) or terrorist acts committed by Muslims in France in the recent years. These events, then, generate a suspecting French public discourse, governmental and non-governmental, which accuses Muslims of disloyalty. Most of these events, albeit signaling a failure of integration (whose responsibility lies with various political and social agents), are to be seen mainly as the result of the geopolitical securitization of Islam in the West (Cesari 2012, pp. 430–49).

By way of illustration, in 2015, after the Charlie Hebdo shooting in Paris, the deputy mayor of Nice, Christian Estrosi, said that there are “fifth columns” of Islamists in France, to which Dalil Boubakeur, Rector of the Great Mosque in Paris, a significant Islamic organization, replied “the citizenship and loyalty of Muslims in France cannot be questioned

and that far from constituting any kind of ‘fifth column’, the Muslims of France, in their vast majority, are deeply attached to the nation and defend the values of the Republic”.<sup>2</sup> This pattern of suspicion of disloyalty cast by French politicians and officials on Muslims spawned responses by Muslims to prove their loyalties. Over the past 30 years, Muslim reformist voices such as Tareq Oubrou have consistently written or uttered religious sermons to highlight Muslim loyalty to non-Muslims.

### 3. Tareq Oubrou: The Making of a Religious Authority in France

T. Oubrou (born on 31 October 1959 in Taroudant, southern Morocco) is a French imam and theologian of Moroccan origin, rector of the Grand Mosque of Bordeaux. As a child, he attended a Catholic nursery school. In 1968, after passing his baccalaureate in experimental sciences, he obtained a scholarship to study in France and enrolled at the University of Bordeaux in biology to prepare for medical studies. He left his biology studies after two years because he gradually devoted himself to religion, to the reading of Islamic texts and thought, and to his local Muslim community. His theological and exegetical training is that of a self-taught scholar as he did not enroll in any imam training program (as many French imams do in Morocco, Turkey, or Saudi Arabia). In the 1980s, he became an itinerant imam and officiated in several French cities. At that time, he met figures of the Muslim Brotherhood in France and was influenced by the texts of the founder of this movement in Egypt, Ḥasan al-Bannā (1906–1949). Oubrou was touched by the ethical and spiritual dimensions of al-Bannā’s authority rather than by the political movement of the Muslim Brotherhood itself. He became a member of the *Union des Organisations Islamiques de France*, the UOIF, which is close to the Muslim Brotherhood, and became involved in organized religious action while continuing his religious and intellectual path in a fairly autonomous manner. In 1991, the Muslim Federation of Gironde hired him as imam in Bordeaux.<sup>3</sup>

Oubrou benefits from a quite high visibility in the media, especially since the terrorist attacks of March 2012 in France, and appears regularly on the program *Islam* on France 2. He is building his legitimacy as a soothing and convincing imam with a sense of humor. His stance can be said to be reformist in the sense that he intends to renew the reading of the religious texts in light of the European context. His concept of minority Sharia aims to emphasize Muslim ethics and faith over Islamic law and the rigid practice of Islamic teachings. He also openly displays his support for secularism and secularization. Furthermore, Oubrou actively contributes to inter-religious dialogue and offers willingly recommendations to French political authorities. He is highly regarded by the Muslim public, especially within Maghrebian communities, who are in search of reconciling life in France and Muslim spirituality.

So far, Tareq Oubrou has published twelve books, the majority of which are written in the form of interviews, which means that the understanding of his thought appears to be both very stimulating, regularly approached from different angles, but also rather scattered, not to mention that it continues to evolve over time. In 2002, he published (with the sociologist Leïla Babès), *Loi d’Allah, loi des hommes. Liberté, égalités et femmes en islam* (*Law of God, Law of Men. Freedom, Equality and Women in Islam*), which made his reformist perspective known to the French public, especially on gender issues (Oubrou and Babès 2002). Four years later, he published a theological opusculé entitled *L’unicité de Dieu-des noms et attributs divins* (*The Oneness of God. Divine Names and Attributes*), primarily intended as an introduction to Muslim dogma for an audience of Muslim believers (Oubrou 2006). In 2009, he was interviewed by the anthropologist Cédric Baylocq and the Islamologist Michaël Privot in a book entitled *Profession imâm* (*Profession imâm*) in which he adopted a liberal stance on Islamic ethics (Oubrou et al. 2009). Then, it was Samuel Liéven’s turn to interview him for a book published under the title *Un imam en colère* (*An Angry Imam*), in 2012, in which he denounced the failure of social integration and the attitude of leaders in the Muslim world (Oubrou and Liéven 2012). The following year, he published his interviews with the journalist Antoine d’Abundo and the Catholic priest Christophe Roucou, director of the SRI (Service of Relations with Islam in France) under the title *Le*

*prêtre et l'imam (The Priest and the Imam)*, centered on interfaith relations (Oubrou et al. 2013). In 2014, he coauthored *La vocation de la terre sainte: un juif, un chrétien, un musulman s'interrogent (The Vocation of the Holy Land: a Jew, a Christian and a Muslim in Dialogue)* with the rabbi David Meyer and Father Michel Rénaud (Oubrou et al. 2014). Oubrou published in 2015 a short book entitled *Le Coran, clés de lecture (The Quran, Keys to Reading)*, where he displays a continuity with the reformist exegesis of the Quran: for him, the Quran is a divine communication at a distance, distinguishing between the ontological and the historical meaning of the word of God, promoting democratic access to the Text (Oubrou 2015). In 2016, he published his book, which serves as an introduction to Islam, under the title *Ce que vous ne savez pas sur l'islam: répondre aux préjugés des musulmans et des non-musulmans (What You Don't Know about Islam: Responding to Muslim and non-Muslim Prejudices)*, using a writing style very close to orality, in which he mainly opposes Salafism (Oubrou 2016). In 2017, he returned to in-depth interviews, with the publication of his dialogue with journalist Marie-Françoise Colombani (editorialist at ELLE magazine) under the title *La féministe et l'imam (The Feminist and the Imam)* on the compatibility of gender equality with Islam (Oubrou and Colombani 2017). In 2019, Oubrou published *Appel à la réconciliation: foi musulmane et valeurs de la République française (Call for Reconciliation: Muslim Faith and Values of the French Republic)* (Oubrou 2019a). The same year, he published *Le Coran pour les Nuls en 50 notions clés (The Quran for Dummies in 50 Key Concepts)* which briefly explains the Quranic notions of God, faith, tolerance, etc. (Oubrou 2019b). His latest work is *Quelle place pour l'Islam dans la République? (What Place for Islam in the Republic?)*, was published in 2021, arguing from a theological perspective for the compatibility of Islam and the French Republic (Oubrou 2021). In addition, he has published numerous articles on Sharia, Muslim ethics and theology, and CDs of his Friday sermons. Oubrou's open-minded interpretation of Islamic law and ethics has been highlighted by researchers for almost twenty years now (Caeiro 2005, pp. 48–49; Baylocq 2008, pp. 281–308; Maréchal 2009, pp. 136–39; Hashas 2014, pp. 365–85; Baylocq 2018, pp. 277–93; Dazey 2019, pp. 74–93).

#### 4. Two Online Sermons on Muslim Loyalty: Corpus and Context

Oubrou is equally active in the domains of intellectual life (publishing books and articles), religious–social life (organizing a large Muslim community in Bordeaux), and online preaching, through a massive corpus of internet religious material, mostly available on YouTube.<sup>4</sup> His sermons cover various religious and non-religious aspects of Muslim presence in France, from rituals to ethics and from beliefs to public concerns. On the topic of loyalty, Oubrou delivered two sermons in 2019 and 2021, respectively.

##### 4.1. Sermon 1 (2019)

The first sermon is entitled *Les notions d'alliance et de désaveu en islam (The notions of loyalty and disavowal in Islam)*. This sermon is relatively short (4 min and 54 s) and was published on YouTube on 11 January 2019, generating, as of March 2023, 1238 views. Oubrou uttered this sermon in response to a request by the platform Nooronline, which compiles testimonies, expertise and tools for prevention and fight against “jihadist” ideology.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the context here is that of the securitization of loyalty as French radical Islamists consider loyalty to Islam to mean ripping apart from non-Muslims. Conversely, some French officials, ideologues and media outlets suspect many Muslims to hold such views. For this reason, Oubrou undertakes the difficult task of clarifying the notion of loyalty–disloyalty to both Muslim and non-Muslim audiences, although the primary audience for this sermon is Muslim. In this sermon, Oubrou was presented as Grand Imam of Bordeaux, probably to emphasize the authoritativeness of his discourse as theologian as well as his local legitimacy (being anchored in Bordeaux), implying the need for a religious discourse sufficiently authoritative in terms of the ethos of the preacher while geographically close to his audience, who might be tempted to embrace the jihadist ideology.

#### 4.2. Sermon 2 (2021)

The second sermon is entitled *La fidélité et la loyauté (Faithfulness and loyalty)*. It was presented by Tareq Oubrou as a Friday sermon at the Mosque El-Houda in Bordeaux on 25 June 2021, two-and-a-half years after the first sermon. This sermon has a modest number of views of 505 views until March 2023. It is longer (20 min and 37 s) than the first, which fits into the context of a structured Friday sermon; Friday sermons address the community weekly in relatively longer manners (that can last longer than an hour for many preachers, jeopardizing effective persuasion as the audience might become bored. More effective preachers opt for less than half an hour).<sup>6</sup> The context of this sermon is that of a quest to instill the Islamic virtue of loyalty in Muslim social and political practice. Rather than focusing on the ongoing struggle against jihadist ideology, this sermon encourages loyalty in all aspects of Islamic life, from everyday transactions to the obligations of citizenship. Oubrou is introduced here as *shaykh*, an Arabic term to indicate his rank as a pious and respected religious scholar. Being a *shaykh* indicates also being an elder, embodying the paternal authority of a leader who cares for the community. This religious title justifies discourse as moral advice while being Grand Imam of Bordeaux underlines legitimacy. In sermon 2, Oubrou is dressed in traditional Muslim clothes with a Turban following the pattern of imams in the Levant and Egypt. This fits well with the title of *shaykh*, as Oubrou stands in the pulpit in his mosque, staging his role as a traditional figure of authority. This contrasts with his dress in sermon 1, in which he wears a suit and a tie.

#### 5. Oubrou's Rhetoric

This section identifies the main rhetorical tools used by Oubrou in his two sermons on loyalty. Focus will be particularly put on the opening, the format of preaching, languages used, citations, digital tools, and the closing. Let us begin with the opening. In sermon 1, Oubrou started his communication by a terminological clarification of the notions of loyalty, *walā'*, and disavowal, *barā'*, explaining the meaning of these terms in classical Arabic. In sermon 2, Oubrou opens his sermon with a very brief invocation (praising God and blessing Muhammad). Then, he immediately engages his audience with a statement on Islam as a religion that is tied to, but did not invent, universal virtue, since morality is an innate part of human nature (*fiṭra*). In both cases, Oubrou did not have recourse to the traditional long openings still at work in the sermons of most imams and preachers (including the Salafi preachers who compete with Oubrou). The difference, however, between the two sermons is notable: in sermon 1, he opens his speech as a religious scholar who wishes to persuade Muslims (and indirectly non-Muslims) of Muslim loyalty to non-Muslims as citizens, while in sermon 2 he speaks as a religious guide whose purpose is to teach and correct Muslims who hold false conceptions on loyalty.

In both sermons, the languages mobilized are classical Arabic and French. However, in sermon 1, which is intended to clarify the notions of loyalty and disloyalty, he uses Arabic sparingly; apart from few names of the Arab tribes he cites, Oubrou employs three technical religious terms: *walā'* (loyalty), *barā'* (disavowal), and *wathīqa* (pact); he also mentions a fragment of Quran 8:72 in which Muslims are enjoined to respect their treaties with non-Muslims rather than defend Muslims who are under non-Muslim rule.<sup>7</sup>

In sermon 2, Oubrou is more disposed to cite the Quranic verses (7 times) as well as the Prophetic traditions (4 times) in classical Arabic. He also uses Arabic terms extensively (*fiṭra*, natural disposition, *iḥsān*, moral perfection, etc.). This rhetorical device saturates sermon 2, marking a difference in using Arabic between sermons 1 and 2, which can be explained by the specific context of each sermon. While in sermon 1 he acts as a religious scholar using the authority of reason to distinguish the usage of religious terms of loyalty by virtue of their context, in sermon 2, he addresses a Muslim audience in a mosque as a religious guide whose authority ought to be backed up by traditions. Oubrou intended to build a strong case against disloyalty and, to succeed in this task, he needed to use the most authoritative references for a Muslim audience, namely the Quranic verses and Prophetic traditions. Thus, context matters here as sermon 2 was uttered as part of the religious ritual

of the Friday prayer, in which piety, in addition to the message itself, lies in listening to and engaging with religious discourse (the Quran and Muhammad's tradition).

In connection to the digital tools mobilized in these two sermons, sermon 1 is a brief performance in which Oubrou faces the camera intensely, with a background of a library of classical Islamic books. It begins with the logo of the producer Nooronline in two seconds, immediately zooming to Oubrou as he raises the main question of his speech. This sermon privileges effectiveness over performance as it aims to fight Islamist radicalization in France. Sermon 2 begins with oriental music (drums) played for seven seconds, accompanying the logo of the producer, the Muslim Federation of Gironde (the main Muslim organization in Bordeaux and its area), to set the scene for the video. The camera takes two angles alternately. One is closer emphasizing the face and the emotions shown by Oubrou while speaking. The second angle presents the preacher from afar while standing in the pulpit, to highlight the charisma and the authority of the speaker. In the background of this sermon, an Andalusian–Moroccan mosaic on the wall of the mosque can be seen, symbolizing Muslim aesthetics, identity, and space.

Finally, regarding the closing, in sermon 1, Oubrou closes his speech with a strong statement, emotionally uttered, viz. that “the contract of citizenship imposes on everyone to form one group against the external enemy even if the latter is Muslim”. Here, the message, which consists in mobilizing against radical Islamism (ISIS is implicitly identified as the external enemy) is emphasized over performance. Sermon 2 ends with a religious prayer in classical Arabic, usually used to close Friday prayers and religious exhortations, known as the Abrahamic prayer (in which blessings are called on the Prophets Muhammad and Abraham and their families). This sermon ends in a “ritualistic fashion”, which gives the message more structure and weight.

## 6. A Muslim Counter-Narrative on Loyalty

Oubrou's discourse on loyalty represents the Muslim reformist stance, which has been quite audible in the Muslim European Francophone space (France, Belgium, Switzerland), in the past two decades. Major Muslim reformists such as T. Ramadan, A. Bidar, M. Zenati, and A. Mamoun, among others, have promoted the building of a community of destiny and loyalty between Muslims and non-Muslims. These discourses on loyalty operate as counter-narratives to communitarian and other congested conceptions conveyed by radical religious interpretations that dominate Muslim traditionalist circles (illustrated by the dogma of loyalty and disavowal of non-Muslims endorsed by Salafism).

### 6.1. *The Salafi Discourse of Loyalty and Disavowal*

Radical discourses on disavowal of non-Muslims in France have been adopted by French-speaking Salafis for decades. These discourses are produced and diffused through various channels. However, a dominating pattern of disseminating this Salafi discourse consists in two steps. In the first step, Saudi Salafi books and sermons on loyalty and disavowal are translated into French and largely diffused in the libraries in France. In particular, *Alliance et désaveu en islam (Loyalty and Disavowal in Islam)* by Ṣāliḥ al-Fawzān, arguably the most authoritative Saudi Salafi cleric today, constitutes a main reference in Salafi attitudes towards non-Muslims in Europe. Then, Salafi preachers take these discourses outside of their Saudi context and address their European Muslim communities via online sermons, commenting on and discussing these Salafi writings and sermons as if they were universal.<sup>8</sup> Let us have a close look at al-Fawzān's book. The latter puts non-Muslims, regardless of their faith or philosophy, in the category of people “who a sincere Muslim should hate and for whom one should have true enmity, without being tainted by any love or alliance. These are the absolute disbelievers, among the godless, the polytheists, the hypocrites, the renegades, and the atheists, without any distinction” (al-Fawzān n.d., p. 15). This credo makes it impossible to love, ally with, trust, or be friendly with non-Muslims. Furthermore, al-Fawzān states that this credo bans cooperation with non-Muslims in employment (unless Muslims occupy superior positions) or in wars; this

credo also should prevent a Muslim from using a non-Muslim name, praising non-Muslims, exalting their civilization and culture, being amazed by their ethics and skills, discarding their false beliefs and corrupt religion, participating in their festivals, wishing them well or attending their celebrations, following their calendars, especially those that record their rites and celebrations such as the Gregorian calendar, granting them positions in government, employing them as confidants and advisors, helping them, rescuing them from Muslims, defending them, traveling to their countries for entertainment and enjoyment, residing in their countries, and not leaving them for a Muslim country, trying to resemble them in dress, language and similar behavior (*al-Fawzân n.d.*, pp. 4–9). The least that can be said about this discourse is that it nurtures enmity and hatred for French society, forbidding all forms of interaction (*Adraoui 2017*, pp. 649–58).

## 6.2. Oubrou's Counter-Discourse on Loyalty

In sermon 1, Oubrou discredits the Salafi interpretation of loyalty and disavowal as he argues that this Quranic principle defines two distinct domains.<sup>9</sup> First, it points to the domain of faith; in this respect, all loyalty and religious alliances are prohibited as one cannot be a Muslim and a Christian or Jew at the same time. So, the Quranic passages which forbid this alliance with Jews and Christians should be understood in their theological meaning as a prohibition of any form of religious syncretism. Second, political alliance is allowed according to the interest of the Muslim community. Oubrou argues that the Prophet Muhammad signed a pact of peace called the Covenant of Medina or the Constitution of Medina with the Jews of Medina where the Jewish community and the Muslim community constitute a single political community. Medina was a city-state in which citizens (or rather the members of the various Muslim and Jewish tribes who lived in Medina) with different religions shared the same new political alliance, united against outside enemies.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, Oubrou maintains that political loyalty takes priority over religious loyalty. He cites another example from the Quranic context when Muslims who lived in Medina (after 622) had no political alliance with Muslims who lived in Mecca and were banned from protecting them or showing political loyalty to them as they signed a political treaty with the polytheists of Mecca.<sup>11</sup> This allows Oubrou to emphasize a distinction between the spiritual *umma* (Muslim community) and the political *umma* (political loyalty–citizenship) whereby the second precedes the first, as the political *umma* is a binding contract of citizenship which obliges everyone to unite against the external enemy even if this external enemy is Muslim.<sup>12</sup>

In sermon 2, Oubrou begins by stating that loyalty is a universal and a Quranic value, one of the non-negotiable virtues, which consists in respecting one's commitments. Then, he criticizes many Muslims for whom loyalty is insignificant in their practice of Islamic ethics. This is a rhetorical accusation of moral laxity among some Muslims rather than a finger-pointing of disloyalty. Oubrou also warns Muslims to avoid defending Muslims because they are Muslims. He cites a Quranic injunction which forbade the early Muslim community to defend Muslims who betrayed non-Muslims. Oubrou mobilizes the context of the injunction, which is about a Muslim who accused a Jew of having stolen a shield when it was the Muslim himself who stole it.<sup>13</sup> Oubrou explains that one who betrays the others betrays his own values because one should defend the truth, which must be supreme, and not Muslims qua Muslims. Accordingly, loyalty operates as moral consistency, imposing itself on Muslims and non-Muslims alike as there are no double standards to be applied differently in Muslim relationships with Muslims and non-Muslims.<sup>14</sup>

Subsequently, Oubrou calls Muslims to rid themselves of disloyalty. In this regard, he cites the Quranic verse 8:27<sup>15</sup> to state that betraying trust is betraying one's values, and God's and his Prophet's trust. It is even more serious if this betrayal is committed deliberately with complete consciousness and knowledge of the consequences. Oubrou also quotes the Prophet Muhammad, who calls Muslims to "render back the trust to the one who entrusted it to you, and not betray those who betray you".<sup>16</sup> Oubrou also had recourse to a Prophetic tradition which considers among the symptoms of hypocritical

behavior to lie when speaking and to betray when being trusted.<sup>17</sup> Oubrou warns that betrayal destroys friendship and all types of relationships as nothing can be accomplished in this case, whether at family level or in Muslim relationships with society and humanity.<sup>18</sup>

Oubrou specifically targets jihadists, stating that some Muslims believe they defend Islam while they are betraying themselves, Islam, and others. In reality, these Muslims only defend their subjective interpretation of Islam and their egos, looking for vengeance and entertaining hatred. Oubrou then goes to what he thinks is the root of the problem of disloyalty among some Muslims: pagan Arabs tended to have excessive loyalties to their tribes, displaying a great degree of fanaticism, rather than expressing loyalty to higher values, beyond their clans. For this reason, Islamic ethics proposed to transform Arab tribes from tribalism and narrow communitarianism to the respect of values and universal commitments whatever the religion of the others is. Thus, Islam calls above all to respect one's commitments regarding others' lives and property (this is an implicit critique of terrorism and urban violence, which are responsible for killing people and destroying infrastructure). Oubrou highlights the contract of citizenship as a commitment each French Muslim should respect; this contract stipulates that Muslims were offered the citizenship by a nation and a state (France) and they took the decision to become French, while being aware of the consequences of such commitment and the limits it puts on their freedoms. He concludes by asserting that being loyal to one's commitments is an Islamic moral obligation and not a mere recommendation. He based this final argument on two Quranic verses, (5:1)<sup>19</sup> and (76:7)<sup>20</sup>, which enjoin Muslims to respect their contracts and vows and promise them felicity should they do so.

### 7. The Limits of a Reformist Discourse on Loyalty

Oubrou challenges the Salafi view on loyalty as subjective and selective. Yet, the same can be said about his own approach. The literalist approach taken by traditionalist Salafis is far from being a naïve reading; by breaking with society, Salafi groups and religious scholars wish to preserve Muslim identity (supposedly pure) from outside influences and establish control and authority over Muslims. Conversely, Oubrou's contextualist understanding of Muslim texts on loyalty responds to the will of many Muslims to be part of French society. It intelligently reads Muslim scripture, sometimes even projecting contemporary values (such as citizenship) on past events, and envisaging religion as universal ethics. The Quran, however, contains at the same time injunctions of breaking with the ante-Muslim society (seen as polytheistic, tyrannical, and chaotic) and rebuilding a new society (which should be monotheistic, just, and orderly). While Salafis look primarily to the first part (of breaking with society), Oubrou leans further to the second part (building a new one). Each of these interpretations has its own sympathizers within the Muslim communities, and none of them could be labeled as more Islamic than the other.

A second limit of Oubrou's reformist discourse is that the Prophet's political alliance with Jews was temporary and changed later into an open hostility. As political alliances do not last, doubts arise about whether distinguishing a spiritual *umma* from a political *umma* is possible at all in the long run. While in liberal societies multiple and/or critical loyalties are acceptable forms of political engagements in a functioning civil society, strong attachments to a spiritual community might conflict with the construction of a political *umma*. Although Oubrou encourages the building of *affectio societatis* in order to establish connections with the rest of society (beyond Muslim community anchors) and to assert the modalities of articulation of sensibilities of making a common society, through proximities or even interpersonal or societal loyalties, his ethics do not teach the evolution from community (*Gemeinschaft*) to society (*Gesellschaft*) (Tönnies 2010).

### 8. Conclusions

This paper analyzes two sermons on loyalty by Tareq Oubrou, a leading Muslim authority in France, pronounced in 2019 and 2021. I first contextualize the two sermons in the security setting in France as public suspicion of Muslims and the highly mediated



radical Islamist ideology about disloyalty to non-Muslims weaken trust between Muslims and non-Muslims. Oubrou's rhetoric makes use of the digital tools to produce a persuasive discourse, accessible on social media, in which performance is second to effectiveness. The opening, the languages used, the arguments and technology he mobilized are shown to indicate that his preaching is concerned mostly with producing an authoritative discourse on loyalty to non-Muslims. His discourse competes with the Salafi discourse of disavowal of non-Muslims (which draws on a literal and out-of-context reading of the Muslim tradition), and thus operates as a reformist counter-discourse, which necessitates constantly the reasserting of its legitimacy and authority.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Salafism covers a large spectrum of groups and religious scholars who sometimes hold divergent positions. The term Salafism translates the Arabic term *salafīyya*; it is a current of thought which claims to follow the path of the pious ancestors (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*). In general, a distinction is made between traditionalist Salafism, political Salafism, and jihadist Salafism. In traditionalist Salafism, the emphasis is put on rigorous practices, the transmission of *ḥadīth* and a literalist attitude towards the texts. Political Salafism is a pragmatic trend that organizes itself into parties, participates in elections and challenges the modernization of societies (e.g., the al-Nur party in Egypt or al-Asala in Bahrain). Finally, jihadist or radical Salafism advocates armed combat in order to establish an Islamic state. Its supporters are also very virulent towards other Muslims and the West. In Europe, Salafism is a new phenomenon that dates back to the early 1980s. In the Arab–Muslim world—outside the Gulf countries—it began to take off in the 1970s (Wiktorowicz 2001; Meijer 2009). In this article, reference to Salafism is specific to traditionalist Salafism (unless otherwise indicated), which maintains a rigid position on loyalty and disavowal.

<sup>2</sup> «Cinquièmes colonnes»: la Grande Mosquée de Paris tacle Estrosi. Available online: [https://www.saphirnews.com/Cinquiemmes-colonnes-la-Grande-Mosquee-de-Paris-tacle-Estrosi\\_a20725.html](https://www.saphirnews.com/Cinquiemmes-colonnes-la-Grande-Mosquee-de-Paris-tacle-Estrosi_a20725.html) (accessed on: 12 March 2023).

<sup>3</sup> Carte d'identité, <http://tareqoubrou.com/biographie/> (accessed on: 12 March 2023).

<sup>4</sup> His audiovisual material on his website offers hundreds of videos (sermons, courses, seminars, etc.), <https://tareqoubrou.com> (accessed on: 12 March 2023). His official YouTube channel contains 374 videos. He also published videos on other channels. His official YouTube channel presents Oubrou as the Grand Imam of Bordeaux, theologian, jurist, and a Muslim scholar from France. Oubrou's official channel has 5.66 K subscribers as of 12 March 2023. This is almost anecdotal compared to the 2.35 M subscribers of the traditionalist French Salafi preacher Rachid Eljay (perhaps the most popular Salafi and Muslim preacher in France). Prior to his demise, Tariq Ramadan was the only reformist voice to compete in popularity with Salafi preachers in France.

<sup>5</sup> Les notions d'alliance et de désaveu en islam, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vnlRiNBmH9o> (accessed on: 12 March 2023).

<sup>6</sup> La fidélité et la loyauté, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6FZ3hnPNA8g> (accessed on: 12 March 2023).

<sup>7</sup> Quran 8: 72 ("Indeed, those who have believed and emigrated and fought with their wealth and lives in the cause of Allah and those who gave shelter and aided—they are allies of one another. But those who believed and did not emigrate—for you there is no guardianship of them until they emigrate. And if they seek help of you for the religion, then you must help, except against a people between yourselves and whom [there] is a treaty. And Allah is seeing of what you do", <https://corpus.quran.com/translation.jsp?chapter=8&verse=72> (accessed on: 12 March 2023).

<sup>8</sup> See for example two prominent traditionalist Salafi preachers, Vincent Souleymane and Samy Philippe Chaouche, discussing loyalty and disavowal: Vincent Souleymane, Live: l'alliance et le désaveu, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xg1F14JHXNY> (accessed on: 12 March 2023). Samy Philippe Chaouche, Les Trois Fondements—Cours 4: L'alliance et le désaveu, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F7WdmYec29Q> (accessed on: 12 March 2023).

<sup>9</sup> Especially, Quran 5:51, which says: "O you who have believed, do not take the Jews and the Christians as allies. They are [in fact] allies of one another. And whoever is an ally to them among you – then indeed, he is [one] of them. Indeed, Allah guides not the wrongdoing people.", <https://corpus.quran.com/translation.jsp?chapter=5&verse=51> (accessed on: 12 March 2023). Sahih International translates it as "allies". Some versions translate the term of *awliyā'* as friends, intimate friends or protectors.

<sup>10</sup> See note 5 above.

<sup>11</sup> In reference to Quran 8:72 ("Indeed, those who have believed and emigrated and fought with their wealth and lives in the cause of Allah and those who gave shelter and aided—they are allies of one another. But those who believed and did not

emigrate—for you there is no guardianship of them until they emigrate. And if they seek help of you for the religion, then you must help, except against a people between yourselves and whom is a treaty. And Allah is seeing of what you do”), <https://corpus.quran.com/translation.jsp?chapter=8&verse=72> (accessed on: 12 March 2023).

12 *Idem.*

13 The Quran 4:105–107 (“Indeed, We have revealed to you, [O Muhammad], the Book in truth so you may judge between the people by that which Allah has shown you. And do not be for the deceitful an advocate. And seek forgiveness of Allah. Indeed, Allah is ever Forgiving and Merciful. And do not argue on behalf of those who deceive themselves. Indeed, Allah loves not one who is a habitually sinful deceiver.”), <https://corpus.quran.com/translation.jsp?chapter=4&verse=107> (accessed on: 12 March 2023).

14 See note 6 above.

15 Quran 8:27 (“O you who have believed, do not betray Allah and the Messenger or betray your trusts while you know [the consequence]”), <https://corpus.quran.com/translation.jsp?chapter=8&verse=27> (accessed on: 12 March 2023).

16 Jāmi’ al-Tirmidhī 1264, <https://sunnah.com/tirmidhi:1264> (accessed on: 12 March 2023).

17 Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 6095, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:6095> (accessed on: 12 March 2023).

18 See note 6 above.

19 Quran 5:1 (“O you who have believed, fulfill [all] contracts.”), <https://corpus.quran.com/translation.jsp?chapter=5&verse=1> (accessed on: 12 March 2023).

20 Quran 76:7 (“They [are those who] fulfill [their] vows and fear a Day whose evil will be widespread.”), <https://corpus.quran.com/translation.jsp?chapter=76&verse=7> (accessed on: 12 March 2023).

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