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Report

Purist Salafism in the Sahel and Its Position on the Jihadist Map

Mohamed Salem Ould Mohamed*



Countries in the African Sahel region are facing crises that appear to share a common theme, in that they are all manifestations of a new, "Salafist era". The nature of these crises raises questions about restructured politics, security mechanisms to combat Salafist organisations that are as undulating as chains of sand in the Sahara, and the religion that is used by both the Salafist-Jihadists and their enemies as a battlefield. To study the Salafist scene in this desert region, requires research into the historical and intellectual roots of the philosophy, cultural expression, and possible outcomes as phenomena of religious extremism.

It is fair to say that the Salafist movement in Algeria represents the main branch of Salafism in the African Sahel. Most, if not all, the existing Salafist movements in the region emanated from Algerian Salafism, whose militant leaders were the first instructors of armed jihadist groups.

Purist Salafism in Mauritania: Multiple Wings, One Foundation

The mid-80s witnessed a rising popularity of Salafist thought in the region. In this era, the Saudi Institute in Mauritania admitted hundreds of students, and authors with a "Wahhabi" vision increasingly appeared in public exchanges in Mauritania. The institute was launched in 1979 in Nouakchott as one of five institutes affiliated to the Imam Muhammad bin Saud University outside the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It attracted students from Mauritania and North and West African countries until it was shut down in 2003 when the former regime of President Maaouya Ould Taya accused it of spreading the Wahhabi doctrine and the culture of extremism and militancy at the height of his struggle with the Islamist movement. To study the Mauritanian case, we must distinguish between three major Salafi factions:

Purist Salafism specifically seeks to combat Sufi and heterodox movements. It calls for the strict adherence of the Qur'an and sunnah as the only sources of shari'ah. Among its most prominent advocates is Judge Ould Mohamed Abdullah (who died in October 2011) and Sheikh Mohamed Sidiya Ould Jdoud (also known as "al-Nawawi"), who was arrested repeatedly during the reign of former Mauritanian President Ould Taya. Al-Nawawi was arrested in 1994 and released at the end of the year only to be arrested once again in 2005 as part of a mass arrest that included Salafists and members of the Muslim Brotherhood. Al-Nawawi, one of the most important figures of Purist Salafism, was chosen to be Vice Chairman of the prominent Association of Muslim Scholars during its founding meeting in Kuwait in January 2010. Dr. Mohamed Ould Ahmed (known as *al-Sha'er*, or "the Poet"), who leads the Al Birre Association for Da'wah and Reform, considered the most important such group of its kind in Mauritania, was also detained repeatedly, as was Ahmed Mazid Ould Abdel Haq another prominent Purist Salafist.

Purist Salafism in Mauritania is distinguished by its close relations with Salafist bodies and individuals in Gulf countries, particularly Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. It is also famous for its continuous criticism of armed militia tactics adopted by al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, and frequently disagrees with Mauritanian Jihadists, debates between the two groups being readily available online.

Politicised Salafism is the weakest form of Salafism in Mauritania at the moment. The majority of its founders actively support ruling political regimes, and their discourse coincides with *al-madkhaliya* ("the gateway") particularly in relation to absolute loyalty to authority. Politicised Salafism and Purist Salafism share a common Wahhabi-Tayyemi ideological and scientific background. However, Politicised Salafism differs in terms of its involvement in the political process; its most famous thinker, Sheikh Ahmadou Ould Lemrabet, Imam of the Great Saudi Mosque in Mauritania, will occasionally cause widespread controversy by supporting the positions of those in authority. In early 2012, for example, he extended current President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz the title "Head of Islamic action."

Jihadi Salafism arose as numerous adherents of Salafism in Mauritania became attracted to jihad in Afghanistan, particularly during its early stages. Some were involved in combat against the Soviet occupation, and some died in battle, such as Yahiya Ould

Hamdat who was killed in Afghanistan in 2002 in an armed confrontation with the U.S. troops. To join the Taliban, Hamdat traveled to Afghanistan via Libya.

At the same time, some Mauritians have assumed high ranking positions in al Qaeda, as in the case of Mahfouz Ould al-Walid (also known as Abu Hafis al-Mauritani), who was third-in-command in the organisation. (Yusuf al-Shuli conducted a famous interview with him on Al Jazeera in the early 1990s.) In addition to Mohamadou Ould Slahi, an engineer detained in Guantanamo, there are currently more than 40 other detainees in Mauritanian prisons charged with acts of terrorism, killings, weapon possession, kidnapping and other similar offenses.

Hamada Ould Mohamed Kheirou, the leader of the newly established *Haraket al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad fi Gharb Afriqiya* ("The Tawhid and Jihad Movement in West Africa") is considered one of the most prominent leaders of this faction of Salafism. He shares this position with a number of Nouakchott detainees. The author and poet, al-Shab Mohamed Salem al-Majlisi, is considered the most vigilant advocate and defender of the movement, as expressed in his radical writings. Displayed on several Salafist websites, his work reflects the Salafists' rejection of contemporary urban life and its democratic values. "The attempt to integrate Salafists into the democratic stream is an invalid call," he writes. "They refuse it and stand against it. A Salafist would never be inclined to answer the appeals of democracy scholars whose calls are devoid of divine law and the gift of mercy. As such, it is a duty to support shari'ah rather than just raise slogans."¹

The Jihadist phenomenon has attracted many Mauritians since 2003, which coincided with the regime of President Maaouya Ould Taya initiating a programme of complete confrontation against all Islamist movements. This only heightened the attraction of organisations such as al Qaeda for Salafist youth in Mauritania a situation abetted by the crisis in Azawad (Northern Mali), where Mauritanian leaders are active in the battlefield. According to media reports, more than 30 Mauritanian Salafists were killed in al-Qaeda hubs or during battles against the armies of Sahel countries over the past five years.

Purist Salafism in Western Africa: A Battle against Sufism and Shiism

Islam in Africa has been characterised by a unique Sufi-Maliki orientation, and marked by an unusual mix of festive authoritarianism and peaceful nature. In many cases, it took on a national identity, delaying the spread of the various Salafist wings in the Sahel and contributing to an edgy relationship with traditional Islamist symbols and institutions in African society.

In Niger and Nigeria, for example, *Jama'at Izalat al-Bida' wa Iqamat as-Sunnah* ("The Movement for the Eradication of Heresies and the Implementation of Sunnah) known simply as *Izala* (eradication), was founded in 1978 by Sheikh Ismail Idris in Nigeria. It is a Salafist movement intent on purifying contested practices such as visiting saints' tombs and other common acts engaged in by Qadiriya and Tijaniya Sufis in the Sahel. The activities of this movement later reached Niger, causing continuous controversy with Sufi groups there. *Izala* followers are well organised, and some even wear paramilitary uniforms when they supervise public activities and holiday prayers.

This movement has suffered many splits in Niger, just as in Nigeria. Initially, it included two factions: *Haraket Ihya' as-Sunnah* ("The Revival of the Sunnah Movement") led by Sheikh Abu Bakr Ibrahim, and *Haraket al-Kitab wa as-Sunnah* ("The Holy Book and the Sunnah Movement") headed by Sani dan Todo.

The two groups both reject mysticism and fight against Sufi rituals at shrines and during festivals, particularly the *mawlid* (the celebration of Prophet Mohammed's birthday). They also resist what they see as growing Shiite influence in Africa.

¹ Mohamed Salem Al-Majlisi, "Scholars and Salafism: The Bitter Reality," (A study published on the Tawhid and Jihad website on April 2009).

In Nigeria, the Salafist phenomenon has grown in importance, especially after the emergence of Boko Haram, the militant organisation that conjures up the question of the Islamist roots of violence in Africa. Sheikh Amin ad-Din Abu Bakr, the Chairman of the Islamic Da'wah Group, is considered the most prominent Salafist figure in Nigeria. Although most of the leaders of Boko Haram were his disciples, he believes that their jihad is a travesty, as neither killers know why they kill nor do those about to be killed know why they are being targeted.

In Mali, especially in Azawad, the vast desert hosts more militant Salafists than Purist Salafists. Today, the country is home to an assortment of small militant groups arriving from the Sahel, especially Mauritania, as well as to the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), the most common label for militant Salafists in Algeria for years. The group extended its control over large areas of northern Mali some years ago, taking advantage of the vacuum in the vast Sahel desert region located at the border between Mali, Mauritania, and Algeria. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, once stabilised in the Sahel (especially in Azawad) has become comprised of combatting squadrons and battalions. A brief review of these include:

The Masked Battalion led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar (also known as Belaouer), is the oldest battalion in the region and the most knowledgeable when it comes to desert routes. It is home to a large Tuareg and Arab population as well as warlord veterans that are familiar with the area and were well-known in the area's arms, drug, and fuel trade long before the emergence of Al Qaeda and *al-Jama'ah al-Islamiya* ("the Islamist Group").

The al-Furqan Squadron led by Yahya Abu al-Hamam has been the most aggressive battalion in recent years. It includes dozens of Mauritians, which explains the repeated clashes with the Mauritanian army in the battles of Hassi Sidi, Adl Bakr, and the Agadoo forest.

The Tariq ibn Ziyad Battalion led by Abdel Hamid Abu Zayd, is the most fundamentalist and radical battalion. It is also the one that benefits the most from hostage ransoms. It is a mixed battalion that includes fighters from most countries in the Sahel and the Arab Maghreb.

There are two active groups in northern Mali – known to al-Qaeda as the "Emirate of the Sahara" – that embrace al-Qaeda's combat ideology (aside from the above-mentioned battalions and squadron) under the command of Algerian Nabil Makhoulfi (or "Nabil Abu al-Qamah") who succeeded Yahia Djouadi as the head of the "emirate." These two groups are:

Haraket al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad fi Gharb Afriqiya ("The Tawhid and Jihad Movement in West Africa) led by Sultan al-Azawadi and Hamada Ould Mohamed Kheirou is a newly established movement that encompasses dissident rebels from the three above-mentioned battalions and squadron, and is predominantly Arab.

Jama'at Ansar al-Din ("The Defenders of Faith Group") led by the skillful Tuareg leader, Iyad Ag Ghali, it tries to distance itself from al-Qaeda. However, those who know the hidden discourse in the Sahel believe that the group, led by the former Malian Financial Consul to Saudi Arabia, is only one of al-Qaeda's many titles. However, the face of the matter is that Jihadi Salafists have become practically the most powerful "state" in the region, and are likely to acquire more power, hegemony, and expansion.

Salafism of the Past and the Present: Connection and Disconnection

Although the Sahel region has witnessed numerous Islamic revival experiments, especially in Mauritania, Algeria, and Nigeria, it is hard to say that Purist Salafism profited significantly from any of them. It is ironic that the city of Boutilimit in southwest Mauritania, home to Salafist Baba Ould Sheikh Sidiya (1860-1924), remains the home of a number of other, more contemporary, Purist Salafist figures. While there are some

commonalities between Purist Salafism in Mauritania and that of Ould Sheikh Sidiya, there are also differences, especially regarding their theoretical aspects of Salafism.

Contemporary Salafists reject the notion of being a division of the Maliki school of thought; by contrast, Ould Sheikh Sidiya worked from within Maliki jurisprudence, and tried to reform mysticism from within the Qadiriya order to which he belonged. (close up this paragraph with next) For its part, contemporary Salafism, with its various schools, has stood strongly against any openness to Western ideas and concepts, or to political rapprochement. Ould Sheikh Sidiya, on the other hand, was more open to Western ideas and a degree of rapprochement during French colonialism period, believing a more accommodating stance could offer a partial solution to "the disorder and chaos" that had characterised the Mauritanian arena for several centuries. In fact, he adopted the idea of the "civil state" using the concept of "French secularism"² because it does not impede religion. This position does not always correspond with the views of contemporary Salafism, which calls for complete detachment between Islam and *kufr* (infidelity). Salafis often dismiss others, including regimes and societies, as "infidels" on this basis, and consider only themselves as Muslims, thus producing "thoughts and practices" of contemporary combatant Salafism.

Comparable to Ould Sheikh Sidiya is Nigerian Imam Sheikh Uthman dan Fodio (1754-1817), the founder of Jihadist Sufism in Nigeria and several of the surrounding areas. His conception of the duality of Sufism and jurisprudence, which surpassed even the views of his own teacher, Sidi Mohamed bin Sheikh Sidi al-Mukhtar al-Kinti, leader of the Sufi Qadiriyya order who significantly influenced religious reformist movements in the Islamic East [of Nigeria? RF], may have contributed to the distinct nature of his brand of Salafism. He was a Sufi sheikh who offered *wird* and instructed his followers to use the Sufi methods of the Qadiriyya Kintiyya order. Additionally, he was the head of a jihadist movement that strived to defend Islam in the region, active in protecting its geographic boundaries and the Muslim identity of its followers in Africa.

What differentiates Uthman dan Fodio, along with earlier Salafist leaders, was his ability to combine mysticism (based on purifying the soul) and conscious acts of jihad. He applied the principle of gradualism, shifting from preaching or "verbal jihad" (practiced by the movement he led for more than 30 years) to jihad by the sword and the establishment of an Islamic emirate. Very significantly, unlike contemporary Salafism, his approach sought women as active members of the society and key elements in the battle for reform.

Furthermore, the Nigerian Salafist jurist had an intricate mind capable of producing a nuanced reading of reality, as he considered Nigeria "a land of confusion – neither one of pure Islam nor one of pure *kufr*."³ Uthman dan Fodio's view was in stark contrast to the basic tenet of contemporary Salafist ideology that differentiates between the "land of Islam" and "land of *kufr*." Perhaps his death at the age of 63, and the link that his followers made with the age of the Prophet Mohammed when he died (also 63) adds a further Sufi dimension, intensifying the differences between his movement and contemporary Salafi movements. Even so, in most contemporary Islamist schools in Niger and Nigeria, the line is clearly drawn between the two traditional forms of Salafism – the one stemming from Sufism which the other considers an enemy that it can neither recognize nor accept.

What Future Does Salafism Have in the Sahel after Processes of National Reconciliation?

The Algerian Salafist experience represents a positive template for reincorporating contemporary Salafist movements in the Sahel region back into their societies. Drawing on Algerian practices, the concept of reconciliation arose and facilitated the policy of

² Dr. Mohamed Al-Hassan Ould Abadi, "Between Politics and Religion: Jurisprudential Inheritance of Mauritania," <7 April 2004>.

³ Mohamed al-Mokhtar al-Shinqiti, *Al-Bennaa Journal*, No. 3 <12 November 2010>.

dialogue and pardons adopted by President Abdel Aziz Bouteflika, and the subsequent "return of thousands of fighters" from the mountains to peaceful action., Salafist scholars, prisoners, and ex-combatants were all involved in this reconciliation process and contributed to the achievement of its objectives.

In Mauritania, , there has been no ideological reconciliation process attempted on behalf of the purist Salafist faction, even though the majority of its leaders have at times issued strong statements against fighting groups in the region.⁴ Indeed, senior Salafist leader, Ahmed Mazid Ould Abdel Haq, in a statement to the media, announced that reducing repression against the Islamist trend in Mauritania and initiating dialogue with radical youth, through the intercession of Salafi scholars and other socially significant figures, could end the violence. Furthermore, Ould Abdel Haq has said that the Arab revolutions will push all Islamic trends, including the Salafists, to reconsider their positions on both authority and society.⁵

Dialogue between Mauritanian scholars and a number of Salafist prisoners has contributed to the latter declaring their withdrawal from the route of militancy. In return, authorities released 35, and offered them financial rewards in an effort to integrate them into the society. Salafist Abdallahi Ould Sidiya was one of those who contributed most to this process, pushing the pace of dialogue, and ensuring it reached a successful conclusion.

In Mali, militant organisations likewise are likely to have begun reassessing how their ideology can be best expressed in practice, though it is impossible at this point to predict whether they will be favour democratic and peaceful coexistence with neighbouring countries. Several factors are in play:

1. In most cases, the reconciliation of Salafist members in Mali's neighbouring countries took place in prisons and through dialogue with scholars backed by the authorities. This has not pertained or been available in Azawad or in al-Qaeda's new state as the fighters there have enjoyed successive victories, which has only strengthened their belief in their ideological vision.
2. Since armed organisations, some of which belong to al-Qaeda, and others to the Tuareg, occupied a third of Mali as a strategic target to lure Westerners onto their land, they have engaged in open confrontation with a number of Western powers as well as neighbouring countries.

Nonetheless two other factors make ideological reconciliation possible:

1. The deep penetration of al-Qaeda in Azawad's social fabric due to the practice of intermarriage between the daughters of the local population, and the organisation's leaders and fighters. What is more, the situation is marked by a high number of Tuareg recruits, all of which will require a new approach to communication and integration.
2. Alliance between the nationalist forces in Azawad and the Salafist organisation, *Ansar al-Din*, considered a Tuareg version of al-Qaeda, which makes national demands in religious language. However, the current *Ansar al-Din*, which is headed by one of the most important Tuareg political leaders, and the Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, will likely diffuse the extremism of "national Salafism" without, however, eradicating it completely.

In Niger and Nigeria, the level of tension, the weakness of the state, the intended marginalisation of Muslims, the undesirable handling of minority problems, and the

⁴ Mohamed Ould Ahmed al-Sha'er, "Advice on Jihad in Muslim Countries," <http://www.alwatanrim.net/vb/showthread.php?t=9384> <12 March 2009>.

⁵ Ahmed Mazid Ould Abdel Haq, "The Future of the Salafist Trend," (Interview with Islam Online).

complication of ideas and weapons (due to the Libyan crisis), may all lead to the delay of any reconciliation process, certainly for the moment.

Conclusion

- Purist Salafism in the Sahel and the Maghreb as a whole stems from the eastern Salafist movement, especially the movement of Imam Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab and its different branches, influenced by jurisprudence of Ibn Taymiyyah.
- The crisis in Algeria was the first spark that spread excommunication and retaliatory bombings in the region.
- Purist Salafism is not a single form of interpretation or practice, and often takes on the nature of the location and its social manners. In Mauritania, it is still very Arab and involves very little, if any, Africans .
- It is still difficult to determine whether Purist Salafism represents a marginal 'backyard' of extremism, or the primary branch of increasingly combatant organisations. It is likewise difficult to detach theologically based Salafist thought from the production of justifications for Islamist militants' "attacks."

*Mauritanian writer and journalist

Al Jazeera Center for Studies

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*Please note that all references are in Arabic except for the last.