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Report

Salafis in Sudan: Between Non-Interference and Confrontation

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The Salafi movement in Sudan has grown in recent years. Instead of traditional Salafism that had focused its activities on correcting the ways in which the Islamic faith was practised, fighting against polytheism and branding individuals as heretics, Jihadist Salafism has appeared with its branding of political leaders and entire regimes as heretical and with its resort to the use of violence. This has become increasingly clear in recent times, with Salafi groups condemning as heretics leaders of political parties, including the head of the Umma party, Sadiq al-Mahdi, Popular Congress Party leader, Hassan al-Turabi and Sudanese Communist Party leader Muhammad Ibrahim Nugud.

This paper maps Salafi movements in Sudan, discusses their evolution, the various splits and schools within the movements and the violent actions they have carried out.

Traditional Salafism: The *Ansar al-Sunnah al-Muhammadiyah* Group

Sunni Islam was introduced to Sudan very early in Islam's history and was largely dominated by the spirit of Sufism. The religious affiliation of more than sixty per cent of the people of Sudan (of a total population of 16 million people) is tied to Sufism, while Salafi groups accounted for only ten percent of the religious landscape of Sudan. Alongside the Sufis and Salafis were people unaffiliated to any of these sects as well as those belonging to groups affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood.ⁱ

Salafi ideas were brought to Sudan from the Hijaz (Saudi Arabia) through the hajj pilgrimages and not from Egypt or West Africa from which Sunni Islam and Sufism entered the country. According to Ahmed Mohammed Taher, who wrote about the Ansar al-Sunnah al-Muhammadiyah group in Sudan, the Salafi current arrived in the country through a group of Islamic scholars, most notably Abdul-Rahman ibn Hajar of Algeria (1870-1939) who lived in Sudan for a while.ⁱⁱ The effects of ibn Hajar's Salafi proselytising activities began to crystallize in Sudan in 1897. In 1936, Sheikh Yusuf Abu announced the formation of the Ansar al-Sunnah group in order to call towards Tawhid (monotheism) and true faith. In 1947, the group was authorised to establish a public centre. In 1967, the group built its first mosque which was inaugurated by Saudi King Faisal bin Abdul Aziz ibn Saud.ⁱⁱⁱ

The group did not limit its activities to proselytising but also played an active role in the political field. In the wake of Sudanese independence in 1956, the group was active in mobilising political parties behind the call for the application of an Islamic constitution based on shari'ah (Islamic law). It also participated in the Islamic Charter Front, which competed in the Sudanese general elections in 1964. In subsequent years, Ansar al-Sunnah took a clear position against the rebel movement in southern Sudan and organised a campaign to support the Sudanese armed forces. The group then created a special branch within its hierarchy called the Shari'ah-Based Policy and Research

Secretariat. It also issued a magazine titled *Al-Istijaba* (The Response), in which various political issues were discussed.^{iv}

In addition, the group realised the importance of academic centres and institutes to its proselytising activities and created a number of centres of this kind catering to Sudanese and expatriate students of different age groups. The curricula they employed were modelled on those of the University of Madinah and the University of Imam Muhammad bin Saud. Sudanese Salafis also played a role in the movements for social change. They paid special attention to women, establishing several women's centres geared towards teaching the Qur'an and household management. They also concerned themselves with voluntary charitable work, attracting financial support and charitable donations from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait for the purposes of relief work and school construction.

And like any sectarian or political group, traditional Salafism was not immune to internal conflicts and schisms that led to the emergence of several splinter groups and tendencies. Most notable among these was Jama'at al-La Jama'a (the non-group group) which split from Ansar al-Sunnah in 1990.^v This splinter organisation rejected organised action taken under the leadership of an emir or a commander and considered the act of belonging to an Islamic group (jama'a) itself a heresy. It sought to convince young people to leave the groups they belonged to; it did not believe in political action and considered its politics as being to abandon the political. It called for obedience to the ruler in power and denounced political opposition. It also did not see the formation of political parties or any form of advocacy or political pluralism in society and the state as being religiously sanctioned. This group is an extension of the school of thought associated with Mohammad Aman al-Jami and Rabi' al-Hadi al-Madkhali in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia who preached that al-intima' (belonging to a political or civil society group) was itself a heresy.^{vi}

The group also adopted the proselytising approach of Sheikh Nasiruddin al-Albani. It is based on what he called the al-tasfiyah wa al-tazkiyah (purification) approach, by which he meant the purification of Hadith (the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) through the elimination of false and unlikely Hadith and using only the true Hadith in the education of Muslims. This group was associated with a famous incident that took place in Khartoum in which young members poured gasoline on a television set and set it on fire in public because, they said, the television had surreptitiously entered upon women in their bedrooms without permission.^{vii} Among the most prominent leaders of the group was Sheikh Hussein Khalid Ashish, a Syrian preacher who lived in Sudan since 1993.

A second splinter group was Jam'iyyat al-Kitab wa al-Sunnah al-Khayriyyah (The Charitable Society of the Book and the Sunnah). This group emerged after a dispute with the Ansar al-Sunnah leadership in 1992. It chose for itself the goals of spreading the

true faith and fighting against polytheism, superstition and the manifestations of sorcery and deceit. Among its most prominent figureheads are Ibrahim al-Hubub and Salah al-Amin.

A third splinter group of the traditional Salafis called itself Ansar al-Sunnah (al-Islah (Reform)) and announced itself publicly in July 2007.^{viii} This is the most recent group to splinter from the mother organisation. The split occurred as a result of a dispute that erupted between the chairman of Ansar al-Sunnah, Sheikh al-Hidiyyah, and his deputy, Sheikh Abu Zaid Muhammad Hamza, over the organisation's participation in the Sudanese government. As the rift grew, Sheikh al-Hidiyyah issued a statement expelling Sheikh Abu Zaid Mohammed Hamza from his position as vice president and from the organisation as a whole. The organisation also expelled a number of student leaders who were party to the dispute, as well as some of the organisation's leaders, including the renowned Sudanese preacher Sheikh Muhammad al-Amin Ismail, and Sheikh al-Din al-Tawaim. Several parties within the country and abroad with an interest in Salafi activities in Sudan actively attempted to mediate between the groups and mend the rift but they did not succeed in bridging the differences between them, despite the mediation efforts of the Awqaf (religious endowments) minister of Saudi Arabia and the religion attaché of the Saudi embassy in Sudan who enjoyed strong relations with the organisation.^{ix} This last splinter group opposes the Sudanese government and has voiced strong criticisms against other Islamic groups – particularly the Muslim Brotherhood. It also does not have alliances or relationships with any of the Sudanese political parties. The group tends towards isolation and dogmatism, with a clear penchant for takfir (declaring people and organisations as heretics).

Moderate Salafism: The Islamic Centrist Party

The Islamic Centrist Party was officially founded in October 2006, after its founder Dr. Yusuf al-Kudah, resigned from his position as secretary-general and withdrew his membership from the Ansar al-Sunnah al-Muhammadiyah group. The party regards its core message as being to remedy the repeated mistakes attributed to Islam and to review and correct what is known as political Islam; to offer, in word and deed, an intellectual and practical brighter model of Islam.^x The party rejects fanaticism and extremism in religion and burdening people with spiritual loads that exceed their capacity. It also rejects limiting the rights of citizenship to the few in Sudan with its variety of cultures, ethnicities and belief systems. The Islamic Centrist Party also rejects military coups and the use of force as a means to gain power and believes in the peaceful rotation of power through the ballot box. It calls for the development of democracy in Sudan to the point that it becomes more consistent, acceptable and realistic. It views the role of women in public life as still being weak, and believes that women must be granted full political rights so that they may carry out their duty in correcting the direction of the nation and so that they may lead the way in the process of

change and reform.^{xi} The party has no reservations about women assuming most or all leadership positions, except that of the general imamate.

It is noteworthy that these ideas are unusually daring in the Salafi context. This may be the reason behind the low number of Salafis who have joined this party, as was the case with earlier schisms within the Ansar al-Sunnah group. The party has not expounded on the theological and jurisprudential roots of the main elements of its doctrine, elements that are far from common in the Islamist and Salafi milieu. This has led many people to view the party with apprehension, fearing that it may simply be a manifestation of a brief and temporary moment of enthusiasm on the part of Dr al-Kudah. The Islamic Centrist Party is seen by many as diluted Salafism. Al-Kudah regards the fanaticism in the takfir of others as a serious and dangerous phenomenon and views the takfir of a Muslim as akin to killing him. He says that the one who declares a group of people as heretics does not know how many souls will die as a result of his action.^{xii} Al-Kudah said, 'We are commanded [by God] to protect souls, so why do we kill them by declaring them as heretics?'^{xiii} He believes that it is not permissible for any preacher or Muslim to declare a group of people as heretics because takfir can only be carried out by courts, given the consequences of a finding of heresy such as forcing the spouse of a heretic to divorce him or her and that heretics cannot be buried in Muslim cemeteries. Al-Kudah has repeatedly affirmed the impermissibility of takfir that targets an individual or a group.

Jihadist Salafism: The Afghan stream

Until recently, the term Salafism in Sudan was tightly associated with the Ansar al-Sunnah group which worked to spread its message peacefully. This changed dramatically when other Salafi groups began to enter Sudan from Afghanistan. They were known as the Arab Afghans. Their entry into Sudan came after the end of the jihad against the Soviet Union in central Asia. Doves of these groups entered the country, Osama bin Laden among them, to settle in Sudan in the wake of what was known at the beginning of the 1990s as the open-door policy pursued by the Sudanese government.^{xiv} Under the umbrella of the Arab and Muslim People's Congress that was founded in Khartoum, various leaders of Islamic movements who had been shunned from their own groups abroad came together, including leading figures from Libyan and Egyptian Jihad groups and Muslim Brotherhood members who were in conflict with the Brotherhood's international leadership, such as Brotherhood leaders from Syria and Tunisia.

Religious extremism of the variety that was based on the takfir of rulers and the society as a whole was limited in Sudan before these developments. It was largely confined to certain areas, such as the Abu Qouta district of Jazeera state – 400 kilometres from Khartoum; the Fao district in Eastern Sudan state – 500 kilometres from Khartoum; and small pockets in Damazin – 600 kilometres southeast of Khartoum and Kosti district –

400 kilometres west of the capital, in addition to their small presence in Khartoum itself. These groups were called al-'Azalah (the isolated ones) because of their isolation from society and their abandoning it because they viewed it as a heretical and polytheist society that resorted in political matters to the tyrant and to man-made laws.

The influx of the Afghan Arabs into Sudan coincided with the return of Sudanese Sheikh Mohammad Abdul Karim who had been deported from Saudi Arabia in 1993 where he had been the imam and preacher of Al-Kawthar Mosque in Jeddah. Once settled in Sudan, Mohammed Abdul Karim began to gather a large group of young men who called themselves the Armed Islamic Front. This group attempted several military operations, including the Campo 10 massacre discussed further below.^{xv}

In the same year, 1993, Sheikh Abdel-Hay Yusuf was deported to Sudan from the United Arab Emirates. Sheikh Yusuf was an imam and preacher at the Mohammed bin Zayed mosque in Abu Dhabi. More recently, these two sheikhs were joined by Sheikh Mudathar Ahmed Ismail. All three religious leaders studied in Saudi universities and graduated and worked in the Gulf before being deported to Sudan. Until this, Salafi jihadism lacked a common organisational platform. The meeting points of its adherents were limited to principles, objectives and a view of the means to attain objectives. With the increasing frequency and intensity of the speeches made by the Sheikhs deported from the Gulf States and the availability of skills and military capabilities provided by the Afghan Arabs who came to Sudan, the Salafi takfiri movement's activities escalated.

A new Salafi current began to emerge in Sudan, called Jihadist Salafism because it combined the doctrinal content and approach of Salafism and organisational models from Muslim Brotherhood organisations. Their motto emerged as 'Salafism in doctrine, modernity in confrontation.' (As a term, Salafism entails working to restore the rectitude of al-Salaf al-Saleh, the righteous predecessors who led the Muslims during the golden age of Islam, during and just after the era of the Prophet Muhammad.) As a result, Sudan witnessed several cases of bloody violence between the Salafis themselves which later extended outwards towards other groups.

Jihadist Salafism: *Fatwas* (Religious edicts) of *Takfir*

Alongside the fiery speeches which jihadist Salafis delivered from mosque pulpits, through cassette tape recordings and in the public squares, there were also fatwas of takfir, edicts issued by Salafi sheikhs denouncing high level personalities and organisations as heretics and denouncing certain events as heresies. In 1995, for example, a cassette tape was distributed entitled 'The execution of a heretic'. It was a fatwa by Sheikh Mohammad Abdul Karim declaring Dr. Hassan al-Turabi as a heretic and demanding his execution.^{xvi} Shortly thereafter, other fatwas were issued declaring the heresy of anyone who joined the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) led by the

late John Garang, one fatwa that declared the National Congress Party government as a secular one, and one that declared participation in the country's elections a heresy because the electoral process was itself a heresy.

In 2006, the jihadist Salafis called for the killing of journalist Mohamed Taha Mohamed Ahmed, accusing him of apostasy, blasphemy and heresy. During the journalist's trial, Salafi activists demonstrated around the courthouse, carrying signs that read 'execute the heretic'.^{xvii}

Jihadist Salafi clerics issued fatwas declaring the heresy of Shi'ism, considering them not as having left the fold of Islam, but as having never entered it to begin with. They called for Shi'as to be placed in holes where they were not to be touched because of their uncleanness. This was accompanied by a demand to shut down the Iranian embassy in Khartoum and the collection and burning of Shi'a books on display in a wing of the 2006 Khartoum Book Fair.^{xviii} In early 2007 they demanded the killing of British teacher Gillian Gibbons – a teacher in a Sudanese school – accusing her of insulting the Prophet Muhammad. They renewed their declaration of Turabi as a heretic because he had issued a fatwa allowing women to lead men in prayer and to deliver the sermons at Friday prayers. A takfir fatwa was also issued against Sadiq al-Mahdi, head of the opposition Umma Party and imam of the Sudanese Ansar religious sect, because he had declared that women had equal inheritance rights with men.^{xix} In September 2009, during the inauguration of the Communist Party headquarters in Khartoum, clashes erupted between Communists and some Salafis. This led the Salafis to declare the Communists as heretics and to demand that the Communist Party's activities be banned.

Jihadist Salafism: The Jurisprudence of confrontation

One of the earliest events marking the rise of takfiri Salafism in Sudan took place in Jazeera state in an area called Camp 10. The event occurred at the end of 1993 and involved a group of young followers of Sheikh Muhammad Abdul Karim who believed in declaring rulers as heretics and those who recognised the 'idolatrous tyrant's' authority as heretics as well. Sheikh Abdul Karim saw the acceptance of government-issued documents such as passports, citizenship cards, identity cards and the use of paper currency as manifestations of the recognition of the tyrant and such acts were also branded as heresies. Sheikh Abdul Karim's young followers walked on foot to Camp 10 in Jazeera state, 400 kilometres from Khartoum, in order to distance themselves from heresy and polytheism.^{xx} Upon their arrival at Camp, a village resident reported them to the authorities, resulting in a police operation demanding their surrender. Following their view that obedience to the state police was a heresy, they refused and a clash ensued, leading to the death of the emir of the group and a number of his followers, along with members of the Sudanese police force.

In the summer of 1994, a cell of jihadist Salafis under the leadership of Abdul Rahman Al-Khulaifi, a Libyan national who had come to Sudan after the jihad in Afghanistan and one of Osama bin Laden's personal bodyguards, carried out a massacre of Ansar al-Sunnah members in Omdurman in Khartoum state. The jihadists attacked a crowd of worshipers, opening fire on those praying in the main mosque of the Ansar al-Sunnah group and killing twenty-seven worshipers and wounding more than thirty. In 1997, after a verbal altercation, there was a clash between a group of jihadist Salafi militants and a group of Ansar al-Sunnah members in an Ansar al-Sunnah mosque in Wad Madani, the capital city of Jazeera state about 198 kilometres south of Khartoum. Three members of Ansar al-Sunnah were killed and others were injured. In 2000, another massacre of Ansar al-Sunnah members took place when a takfiri youth named Abbas al-Baqer along with three others fired a volley of bullets at worshipers during prayer killing twenty people and wounding fifty others. Abbas al-Baqer was a Sudanese national who had joined the jihad in Afghanistan, then gone to Libya before settling in Sudan. During the New Year celebrations in 2008, a group of young takfiris killed U.S. diplomat John Granville and his driver. One of those accused of participating in this killing was the son of one of the sheikhs of the Ansar al-Sunnah group who was also an officer in the Sudanese armed forces.

One of the latest Salafi clashes was the bloody confrontations that took place between them and a group of Sufis during the mawlid (birthday of the Prophet Muhammad) celebrations in Sudan on 31st January 2012. Dozens of people were injured before the Sudanese police arrived at the scene to stop the fighting. Beyond the known differences between the two groups on the permissibility and religious legitimacy of the celebration, this specific clash took place in the context of rising tensions between the two groups that arose after unknown persons dug up and burned the tomb of a Sufi on 2nd December 2011. The exhumed body was that of Sheikh Idris oud al-Arbab who had been buried in the Ailafun suburb about thirty kilometres south of Khartoum. The Sufi sects had accused the Salafi groups of desecrating and burning the tomb; the Salafis had denied any involvement, but the relationship between the two groups became increasingly tense leading up to the assault on the mawlid on 31st January 2012.

Salafi Foreign Relations

Traditional Salafism in Sudan has splintered on the basis of differences about cooperation with government authority. Emerging from this schism was a current that has opposed such cooperation and another that has accepted it and participated in different branches of government and state apparatuses. These differences have been sharpened and deepened with the entry of Salafi jihadists on the religious and political scene. The relationship between jihadist groups and the government have fluctuated over time. In the first phase that extended from 1990 until 2000, the jihadist Salafis were considered to be in the trench of those opposing relations with government,

especially given jihadist attacks on the government and its policies. Their oppositional stance towards the Sudanese government was directly related to Hassan al-Turabi's close relations to the government and their enmity towards him. Once the division within the ranks of the ruling Islamic movement had taken place and al-Turabi was distanced from his position of influence in the government, the jihadist Salafi groups drew closer to the government. The period following the 11 September 2001 attacks on the United States witnessed a certain latency in jihadist Salafi activity in Sudan. The special measures for combating 'terrorism' and the pursuit of al-Qa'ida that emerged and the increasing pressure on Sudan to cooperate with the United States against 'terrorism' led to a certain kind of détente between the Salafi groups and the Sudanese regime.

In terms of foreign relations, the traditional Salafi Ansar al-Sunnah al-Muhammadiyah group is considered to have strong relations with the Saudi Arabian regime that supports and finances its activities. As such, the traditional Salafis are in contact and coordinate with their Salafi counterparts in all Islamic countries. The jihadist Salafis combine a current that took part in the fighting in Afghanistan and another that, in its time abroad (in the Gulf countries), adopted a great deal from various extremist Salafi schools.

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^{xii} Mohammed al-Amin Abdul Nabi; *The Takfiris of Sudan: The Other Face of al-Qaeda*; Mohammed al-Amin Abdul Nabi blog; 30/05/2010.

^{xiii} *ibid*.

^{xiv} *Al-Qaeda in Sudan: New Launching Grounds*. The archives of the Sudanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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^{xvi}Ibid.

^{xvii}Dr. Saleh al-Zein Othman; Sudan: The growing Jihadist Salafist Movement; Dar Al-Husi for Printing and Publishing; Omdurman: Sudan; first edition; 2009; p 45.

^{xviii}Ibid, p 117.

^{xix} Ibid; p 156.

^{xx} Al-Qaeda in Sudan; *op cit*.