



# Terrorism Monitor

In-Depth Analysis of the War on Terror

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## IN THIS ISSUE:

BRIEFS.....	1
IS SYRIA COOPERATING MILITARILY WITH TURKEY AGAINST THE PKK? By Wladimir van Wilgenburg.....	3
STRANGE CASE OF SUSPECTED LITHUANIAN SUICIDE BOMBER COMPLICATED BY ALLEGED ROLE OF SECURITY SERVICES By Raffaello Pantucci.....	5
SALAFISTS CHALLENGE AL-AZHAR FOR IDEOLOGICAL SUPREMACY IN EGYPT By Hani Nasira.....	7



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## NIGERIAN SECURITY COMMANDERS DISMISSED AFTER BOKO HARAM MILITANTS BLAST THEIR WAY OUT OF PRISON

Threats made in July by the new chief of northern Nigeria's Boko Haram sect were fulfilled in recent days with a mass prison breakout of incarcerated sect members and what appears to be a series of killings of security personnel by motorcycle-riding gunmen. Imam Abubakr Shekau warned of a new jihad by Boko Haram members seeking revenge for the ruthless repression of their movement in July 2009 by security services angered by Boko Haram attacks on their posts and personnel (Ansar al-Mujahideen, July 11; see also *Terrorism Monitor* Brief, July 22).

The September 7 escape of over 700 prisoners in Bauchi Prison was apparently inspired by a Boko Haram pledge that their members would not spend the Eid al-Fitr holiday in prison. Eyewitness accounts told of a daring assault by a handful of militants that went on for two hours without relief from security forces. According to these accounts, the militants had cut or shaved their habitual long beards to better infiltrate prayer gatherings close to the prison. AK-47 assault rifles were concealed under their babanrigas, a loose flowing top worn over trousers. On a signal the militants began their attack on the prison gates while trying to assure terrified residents they were on "a mission" and were not there to attack civilians. Some who were not close to the prison initially thought the gunfire was firecrackers set off to celebrate the Eid. One witness said, "There was nothing to make anyone suspicious of them. They wore normal dress and did not sport their trademark long beards. But by the time they sprang into action, it was



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clear that they were well trained. The guns looked very sophisticated and they handled them with expertise like combatants” (*Vanguard* [Lagos], September 11). Four individuals, including a policeman, a soldier and two civilians, were killed in the attack (*Nigerian Tribune*, September 12). As many as 759 prisoners escaped during the assault, of whom 123 were Boko Haram members awaiting trial on charges stemming from the July 2009 violence.

The Boko Haram unit that carried out the assault had clearly planned to take advantage of the relaxed atmosphere during the Eid festivities, striking just as the guards were preparing to break their fast. According to Bauchi Governor Isa Yuguda, “All of us were caught unaware by the attackers because they came at the time nobody was expecting, considering that we are in the holy month of Ramadan, when all true Muslims are expected to be fasting and not engage in anything that could lead to the shedding of blood.”

Following the prison break, alarm spread throughout the northern states of Bauchi, Borno, Gombe and Kano, where 25 Boko Haram suspects are being held at the Kano Central Prison. The Kano Sallah (Eid al-Fitr) celebrations were marked by a show of force by security personnel and a military convoy including a tank accompanying Kano Governor Ibrahim Shekarau to the Kano Central Mosque (*Next*, September 12). The governor of Bauchi State pledged a door to door search would be conducted to find all Boko Haram suspects (*Next* [Lagos], September 13). Security at the Gombe State Prison was also intensified in expectation of further attacks (*Vanguard*, September 10).

President Goodluck Jonathan used the mass escape as an opportunity to make sweeping changes in Nigeria’s military and police leadership, sacking Chief of Army Staff Major General Abdulrahman Dambazzau (who was in New York on official duties at the time), Inspector General of Police Ogbonna Onovo, Chief of Defense Staff Air Marshal Paul Dike, Naval Chief Vice Admiral Ishaya Ibrahim and the Director General of the State Security Service Afakriya Gadzama.

Minister of Defense Prince Adetokunbo Kayode insisted the changes were not dismissals, pointing out the two year terms of the security commanders had expired in August and the president was merely exercising his prerogative to appoint new leaders (*Vanguard*, September 10; *Nigerian Compass*, September 10). The

president made clear what he wanted from the security services, saying, “My expectations are that our armed forces and security agencies should be proactive. We must employ intelligence to nip crises in the bud even before it can occur” (*Vanguard*, September 12).

Jonathan broke the traditional stranglehold of northern Muslim tribes on the military command by appointing Major General Onyeabo Azubike Ihejirika of the Eastern Ibo tribe as the new Chief of Army Staff. Ihejirika is the first Ibo to lead the military since the Ibo-supported Biafran secession war of the 1960s. The appointment was made with wide commendation from southern Nigerian governors and politicians (*Vanguard*, September 10).

The prison breakout was preceded by a series of killings of policemen in northern Nigeria by motorcycle-riding gunmen. The attacks that killed six policemen in two months were initially blamed on armed robbers (*Next*, August 26; *Nigerian Tribune*, August 27; AFP, August 27; Reuters, August 30).

The use of AK-47 assault rifles by the militants raised concerns over the flow of arms into the northern region. The President-General of the Maritime Workers Union of Nigeria accused security services of overseeing illegal arms imports through the ports. He stated, “Last week, members of Boko Haram, armed with AK47 rifles, attacked the Bauchi prison and its environs. How did they get the arms? You go to Niger Delta, come to Lagos and other parts of the country, illegal arms are everywhere and in the wrong hands” (*Vanguard*, September 12). Meanwhile in the north, security officials recently seized 52 AK-47 rifles, 1,700 rounds of ammunition and \$32,000 in cash being smuggled from Chad to the flashpoint city of Jos, where thousands of people have been killed in sectarian violence in recent years (AfrikNews, August 18).

#### AL-QAEDA IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA CLASHES WITH YEMENI MILITARY AT LAWDAR

Heavy fighting between alleged al-Qaeda forces and government troops near the town of Lawdar in Yemen’s Abyan governorate broke out on the weekend of August 21-22 following a deadly ambush by AQAP fighters, claiming a reported eight to 11 soldiers and at least 14 militants (Reuters, August 22; Sep26.net, August 21; AFP August 22). Yemeni military forces were dispatched to the district to reestablish the government’s writ.

Al-Qaeda militants and members of the secessionist Southern Mobility movement were given 24 hours to leave Lawdar or the houses they were staying in would be bombarded. Following a mass flight of civilians and the expiration of the ultimatum, more fighting broke out on August 22, as militants resisted their expulsion. Defense Minister General Muhammad Nasir Ahmad Ali was reported to be leading the security operations in Lawdar District personally (AFP, August 22).

Tribal mediation apparently failed in the conflict around Lawdar, with fatal consequences for one of those involved. A leader of the al-Fadl tribe, Shaykh Hussein Saleh Majdal, was assassinated along with his two bodyguards in an attack on the evening of September 4. The shaykh was described as leading the mediation between security forces and al-Qaeda militants (ArabNews.com, September 5; *Yemen Observer*, September 7).

Government sources have repeatedly referred to armed elements of the secessionist Southern Mobility movement as fighting alongside al-Qaeda in the struggle for Lawdar District. They described a plan by Southern Mobility leaders to assemble their followers in a march intended to break the security cordon around Lawdar (*al-Watan*, September 11). Security authorities also announced the detention of Muhammad Ahmad al-Mansub, an alleged “terrorist subversive element” who was arrested at a roadblock while in possession of documents alleged to detail the cooperation between AQAP and Southern Mobility (*al-Siyasah* [Kuwait], September 7). Southern Mobility, however, acknowledges it has activists in the region but says they are involved in “peaceful struggle” (Aden Press Online, September 12).

Although Deputy Interior Minister Saleh al-Zuari declared Lawdar District fully purged of “terrorist elements” on August 24, continuing operations revealed that the militant presence was far from vanquished. A day after al-Zuari’s statement, gunmen riding motorcycles targeted a military patrol in a public marketplace in the Zinjibar District of Abyan, killing four soldiers (*Yemen Observer*, August 28). On August 27, Yemeni troops took the worst of it in a clash with the militants near Lawdar, leaving 11 dead. Two militants were killed, including (according to security officials) the al-Qaeda second-in-command in Lawdar, Adel Saleh Hardaba (*Yemen Observer*, August 28). On the same day a 25 year-old al-Qaeda suspect was arrested in northern Abyan while on his way to Lawdar. He was found in possession of an explosives belt and told investigators

he had been assigned by al-Qaeda commander Ali Alwi al-Saqqaf to carry out a suicide bombing in Lawdar (*Yemen Observer*, September 1).

Fighting erupted again on August 31 in which another 12 militants were reported killed. The alleged leader of al-Qaeda forces in the district, Salah Ali Abdullah Al-Damani, was arrested on September 5, though sources vary as to whether he was captured in a night-time raid or seized at a checkpoint (26Sep.net, September 5).

By September 7, AQAP fighters were reported to have largely, but not entirely, pulled out of Lawdar and were heading to nearby Ma’rib and Shabwah governorates, both current hotbeds of anti-government militancy. The director-general of Lawdar District, Ahmad Ahmad Ali al-Qafish, told journalists that the fighters included Saudi, Pakistani, Egyptian, Syrian and Somali elements, though this could not be confirmed (*al-Siyasah* [Kuwait], September 7). Defense Ministry sources reported three foreigners were discovered amongst the militants slain in the fighting of August 20-21 (Sep26.net, August 21).

## Is Syria Cooperating Militarily with Turkey Against the PKK?

By Wladimir van Wilgenburg

Recent media reports suggest that a new phase of Syrian-Turkish military cooperation has begun against Kurdish militants of the Parti Karkerani Kurdistan (PKK - Kurdistan Workers Party) in Syria. However, a closer examination of the rapprochement between Damascus and Ankara and their respective policies on Kurdish nationalism reveals accounts of greater military cooperation may be premature.

In the past, Syria has supported the PKK against Turkey and allowed the PKK to recruit Syrian Kurds to fight against Turkey. [1] However, this changed after Syria decided to force PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan out of the country in 1998, when Turkey threatened to invade Syria. After 1998, Syria started to crack down on

remaining PKK networks and forged better ties with Turkey. On Öcalan's orders, most PKK rebels moved to the Qandil Mountains of northern Iraq.

The PKK created the ethnic-Kurdish Partiya Yekiti ya Demokratîk (PYD - Party of Democratic Union) in Syria in September 2003. This party was targeted by the Syrian state, as were other Kurdish political parties in Syria. Hundreds of its members were arrested and PYD meetings were repressed by Syrian security forces. Some PYD supporters were killed during PYD-organized Kurdish New Year celebrations in the town of al-Raqqa near Aleppo in March 2010. [2] Despite this, Öcalan, the currently imprisoned PKK leader, remains positive about Syria, suggesting "Syria will not take part in the annihilation concept of the Kurds," in a statement published by a pro-PKK news agency (Ajansa Nuceyan a Firate [ANF], June 18).

Syria maintains good ties with Turkey out of concern over Kurdish nationalism, perceived as a threat in both countries. Syria especially fears that the new Kurdish autonomous region in Iraq could affect its own Syrian Kurds. [3] Unrest in the north-eastern Syrian city of al-Qamishli in 2004 convinced Damascus to take harsher measures against Kurdish nationalists. Kurds are the largest ethnic minority in Syria, with their community of 3 million forming 16% of the population. The Syrian government is highly critical of federalism in Iraq, and prefers a strong central Iraqi government. Unlike Turkey and Iran, Syria does not have a consulate in the Kurdistan region of northern Iraq.

Ties between the two nations have also grown due to the increasingly assertive foreign policy of Turkey's ruling Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP - Justice and Development Party). The Turkish-Syrian rapprochement began before the Islamist AKP came to power in 2002. Previously in 1999, Syria had signed the Adana Treaty on security cooperation with Turkey. [4] The seven years of rapprochement under the AKP have brought about a significant strengthening of Syrian-Turkish ties. [5] This has resulted in visa-free travel between Syria and Turkey and joint cabinet-level meetings. These good relations have created positive changes for the Kurds in Syria, since Kurds in both countries no longer need visas for cross-border visits. [6]

Last summer media reports suggested there was new Syrian-Turkish security cooperation against the PKK. According to the state-run Anatolian News Agency (ANA, a.k.a. Anadolu Ajansı), 400 PKK members were arrested in the Syrian cities of Aleppo, Kamishli, Afrin,

al-Hasaka and Ar-Raqqa and 11 PKK fighters were killed in joint Turkish-Syrian operations at the end of June 2010 (ANA, July 1). In addition, sanctions were taken against Kurdish families supporting the PKK. The *New York Times* described this as a sign of growing Syrian cooperation with Turkey (July 1). There were also claims that Israeli-made Heron drones from Turkey were used against the PKK in Syria (*Gazete Vatan*, July 23). At the same time, Turkish media talked about clashes between the PKK and Shi'a militants in Lebanon (*Hürriyet*, July 13). But Turkish security analyst Emrullah Uslu thinks it is unlikely that Herons would be used in Syria. [7] The PKK has no armed presence in Syria or Lebanon.

The PKK's news agency described accounts of both incidents as "lies" by the Turkish state (ANF, July 17). PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan remarked he does not believe Syria would kill Kurds (ANF, July 18). PKK spokesperson Roj Welat told Jamestown that Turkey is providing misinformation to the public in order to convince Syria to work with Turkey against the PKK. [8] He stated, "There were no such clashes between Syrian military forces and the PKK. Of course they are arresting Kurds and oppressing Kurdish people in Syria, but there have been no such clashes as the Turkish media claims."

PYD member Shirwan Hassan confirmed a total of 400 PYD supporters have been arrested in Syria in the last three years but not just in the last summer, as reported. [9] During the last Newroz event in Ar-Raqqa, several PYD members were arrested. Other Kurdish politicians like Sherko Abbas and Kurdistan Democratic Party Syria (KDP-S) secretary Ebu Sabir say not only PKK members were arrested in the recent years, confirming there are frequent arrests of Kurdish political activists in Syria. [10]

Syrian President Assad indicated that he did not know anything about the alleged military operations, but said that security meetings with Turkey are not new and happen on a regular basis. The Syrian leader said that his country could give amnesty to "1,500 Syrian-origin terrorists within the PKK" to contribute to a solution of the Kurdish issue in Turkey (*Today's Zaman*, July 17). Assad has been clear that military means alone will not solve the Kurdish issue, stating, "We embrace anyone who lays down arms because our goal is not to take revenge but to end terrorism. We cannot end terrorism by hunting terrorists. Because every terrorist killed is replaced by another one" (*Today's Zaman*, July September 17).

It seems as though reports of a wave of arrests of 400 people and military operations against the PKK have been exaggerated. Syria is neither obtaining military support from the Turkish army against the PKK nor is Turkey pressuring Syria to do more against the PKK, although political and security cooperation continues to expand. It is likely that in the future Syrian-Turkish cooperation will continue, especially after the recent rise in tension between Turkey and Israel. Syria and Turkey will need such cooperation to curtail the threat posed by Kurdish nationalism, which has typically taken advantage of cross-border refugees in Syria and Iraq when pressured by the Turkish military.

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#### Notes:

1. Human Rights Watch, "Group Denial: Repression of Kurdish Political and Cultural Rights in Syria," <http://www.hrw.org/en/node/86735>.
2. "Three young Kurds shot dead, 41 injured at a Newroz event in Syria," International Support Kurds in Syria Association, March 21, <http://supportkurds.org/news/three-young-kurds-shot-dead-41-injured-at-a-newroz-event-in-syria/>.
3. F. Stephen Larrabee, "Turkey Rediscovered the Middle East," *Foreign Affairs* 86(4), July/August 2007, pp.103-114.
4. Author's interview with PKK spokesperson Roj Welat, August 2, 2010.
5. Human Rights Watch, *op cit*.
6. Author's interview with Syrian Kurdish journalist Sirwan H. Berko, July 28, 2010.
7. Author's interview with Turkish security analyst Emrullah Uslu, July 28 2010.
8. Soner Cagaptay, "AKP reshuffles Turkey's neighbors," Middle East Strategy at Harvard (MESH), October 26, 2009, <http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/mesh/2009/10/akp-reshuffles-turkeys-neighbors/>.
9. Author's interview with a PYD member who is responsible for external contacts of the PYD in the Netherlands, September 2, 2010.
10. Author's interview with KDP-S secretary in Iraq, August 14 and Dr. Sherkoh Abbas, President of the Kurdistan National Assembly of Syria, August 1, 2010.

## Strange Case of Suspected Lithuanian Suicide Bomber Complicated by Alleged Role of Security Services

*By Raffaello Pantucci*

Buried in this year's Europol report on terrorism trends was a reference to "a 20 year-old Lithuanian woman" who was "arrested before she traveled to Russia to commit a suicide attack there. She had converted to Islam and was self-radicalized via the internet" (for the report, see *Terrorism Monitor*, June 4). [1] This rather conclusive narrative provided to Europol by Lithuania's security forces was seemingly contradicted in early August when the suspect, Egle Kusaite, was released from custody by a court of appeals pending a trial whose date has not yet been set (Baltic News Service, August 6).

The strange case of Egle Kusaite first came to public attention in late April/early May 2010 when security forces were obliged to reveal information about her in open court after nearly six months in custody (AP, May 4). Having admitted that she was in custody, prosecutor Justas Laucius told the court that "Egle Kusaite performed illegal actions, and was likely ordered by someone to go to Russia and blow herself up at a military object" (AP, May 4). Laucius later defined the target as "a strategic site," namely "a military barracks holding Russian troops who had fought in Chechnya" (*Kauno Diena* (Kaunas), July 20).

Arrested on October 29, 2009 as she tried to board a plane with a new passport, a one-way ticket and \$500 she had obtained from radicals for the trip, Kusaite was picked up as part of an intelligence-led operation and has been in Vilnius' Lukiskes Prison ever since (Baltic News Service, June 11; *Baltic Times*, July 28). According to the Russian press, Kusaite had been on Lithuanian security's radar for some time as a result of "anti-Russian messages" she had been posting online (RussiaToday, May 4). Kusaite had repeatedly applied for visas to enter Russia, and was in online contact with extremists in Azerbaijan, the United Kingdom and Uzbekistan as well as a cell in Russia (Baltic News Service, May 4). She had also downloaded manuals about making explosives, which were found in her possession alongside maps of the Moscow underground system as she attempted to board the plane to Russia.

In 2007, the then 18 year-old Kusaite had been reported missing by her family. According to a former teacher, she had developed a close relationship with a man from the North Caucasus, whom she later married in Germany (AP, May 4; Kavkazcenter.com, May 4). Her husband apparently returned to Chechnya and was killed in the fighting, allegedly providing Kusaite with personal motivation to become involved in the conflict (Baltic News Service, August 5). Kusaite's mother, Virginija Kusiene, claimed she had been obsessed with Chechens, conversing with individuals online before running away to Germany where she had lived in a Chechen couple's flat "in a room without windows and furniture except for a dirty mattress where she would spend entire days" (Baltic Report, August 6). According to the suspect's mother, Kusaite lived in her home town of Klaipeda in a flat rented by the Lithuanian State Security Department after her return from Germany and associated with Muslim fundamentalists who were, in reality, agents of the security service (Baltic Times, July 28).

Having been detained by security forces, Kusaite confessed in June "that her goal was to go to Russia and then Chechnya, where she would have performed a suicide bombing in a public area." It was also revealed that a Chechen brother and sister detained in Russia had admitted to providing her with guidance, offering training and sending her the \$500 required for the trip to Russia (Baltic News Service, June 11). The mother of the two Russians admitted the three were in touch, but suggested that Kusaite and her daughter talked only of "girly things" during their internet conversation (Baltic News Service, July 19). On the other hand Kusaite's family denied her confession altogether, declaring that it had been forced – something she herself now claims (Baltic News Service, August 5).

This is not the only inconsistency with the case, which has stirred up a fierce internal debate in Lithuania about its counterterrorism policy. When the case was first announced, Russian forces denied all knowledge of it, though it had been simultaneously reported that individuals in Russia had been detained and that the arrest was a joint Lithuanian-Russian operation (Interfax, May 5; AP, May 4). Lithuanian forces also claimed to have connived with the Russian Embassy to have Kusaite's visa application rejected in an attempt to prevent her from going to Russia, suggesting some level of prior contact with Russian authorities (Baltic News Service, June 10).

Lithuanian human rights activists including European Parliament MP Darius Kuolys have even suggested State Security Department operatives tried to convince Kusaite to undertake a suicide bombing in Egypt (Baltic Times, July 28). The activists also claimed that Kusaite had been in the security services thrall for around two years, apparently working as some sort of agent for them. This was confirmed by Lithuanian press sources contacted by *Terrorism Monitor* who suggested that the case has been complicated by the fact that she had worked in some capacity for the security services. Her family claimed that she had undergone physical and psychological abuse while in custody and that Russian agents had been involved in beating her while in Lithuanian custody, a charge the suspect later repeated in court (Baltic News Service, June 22; *Baltic Times*, July 28). On the way to her July 20 court appearance, Kusaite shouted to journalists, "I was beaten by three Russians!" (15min.lt [Lithuania], July 26). An investigation into the charges determined the Russians had acted only as observers during the interrogation.

The Kusaite case comes in the wake of a separate case in which it is claimed a Lithuanian agent had attempted to gain information on a Chechen family suspected of radical activity through their foster daughter, whom he had gotten pregnant and then forced to plant listening devices (Baltic News Service, May 12).

Amidst claims that the prosecutor in Kusaite's case had intimidated the defendant, the court gave way to public and political pressure and dismissed the lead prosecutor (Baltic News Service, July 22). Just over two weeks later the decision was made to allow Ms. Kusaite to leave prison pending her trial, though her documents were seized and she is obliged to report regularly to a police station (Baltic News Service, August 6). It is currently unclear when her trial will be held, though a decision is expected imminently. However, given her alleged involvement with the security services and the fact that she was effectively held in secret detention for approximately six months, a conviction is far from a foregone conclusion. In the meantime, the case highlights the ongoing anxiety that exists among European security services regarding the potential for the North Caucasus to act as a drawing force for aspiring young jihadis.

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Note:

1. *TE-SAT 2010: EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report*, April 28, 2010, available at: [http://www.europol.europa.eu/publications/EU\\_Terrorism\\_Situation\\_and\\_Trend\\_Report\\_TE-SAT/TE-SAT2010.pdf](http://www.europol.europa.eu/publications/EU_Terrorism_Situation_and_Trend_Report_TE-SAT/TE-SAT2010.pdf), p.15.

## Salafists Challenge al-Azhar for Ideological Supremacy in Egypt

By Hani Nasira

Having emerged from a period of religiously inspired terrorist violence in the 1990s, Egypt has since been regarded as a regional bulwark against Islamist militancy in the Arab Middle East. However, a new ideological struggle is emerging between the religious scholars of Cairo's al-Azhar University (Sunni Islam's preeminent institution of scholarship and religious rulings) and Egypt's growing Salafist movement, largely concentrated in the Mediterranean coastal city of Alexandria.

Recently, al-Azhar's Shaykh (leader) equated the threat posed by Salafism to the danger posed to Islam by secularism, Marxism and Christian missionaries. Views expressed in a recent interview with current al-Azhar Shaykh Dr. Ahmad al-Tayeb were only one indication of the ongoing conflict between al-Azhar and Salafist movements in Egypt, especially with the attempts of al-Tayeb to revive al-Azhar's role as a central and effective player in the management and guidance of religious affairs not only in Egypt but throughout the Islamic world (*al-Abram Daily*, July 10; *al-Abram Weekly*, August 19-25). The interview included harsh criticism of the Wahhabi-based Salafist currents, with al-Tayeb declaring a campaign against Salafism, which he deems alien to Egypt and funded by foreign countries. Describing Salafists and their activities, al-Tayeb said, "In the absence of al-Azhar's role, Salafists and other foreign sects have become active, with Wahhabism trying to fill the vacuum, leading to the spread of Saudi *fiqh* [religious jurisprudence] at the expense of moderate *fiqh*."

Raising the Ire of the Salafists

Al-Tayeb's interview provoked commentary from Salafist internet forums in Egypt, with one activist angrily stating, "How could you (al-Tayeb) put what you called Wahhabists in the same sentence with anti-Islam people like Christian missionaries and Marxists?" [2] Another activist in the same forum called al-Tayeb's remarks a war on the rising Salafist currents in Egypt "expected from [an] al-Azhar Shaykh with Sufist inclinations." The activists further described both al-Tayeb and Egypt's Mufti, Dr. Ali Goma'a, as "advocates of turbaned scholars," whose popularity is diminishing compared to the rising fame of Salafist shaykhs such as the Alexandria School figures and Shaykhs Muhammad Hassan, Abu Ishaq al-Hoyaini and Muhammad Hussein Yaqub. [3] That argument deepened so much so that some rumored about al-Tayeb's plan to expel scholars with Salafist inclinations from al-Azhar University. Al-Tayeb, however, denied that would be the case (*al-Osbou Weekly*, July 29).

It is vital here to point out that this was not the first time al-Tayeb has attacked Salafists since assuming his post as al-Azhar Grand Shaykh on March 19, 2010. He launched a scathing attack on them during an April interview with al-Arabiya News Channel. Al-Tayeb accused them of sophistry, saying Salafist thinking is alien to Islam, having a pedigree of less than 200 years. Al-Tayeb added during the TV interview that he was "concerned such thinking might spread in Egypt, as al-Azhar and moderate thinking dominate Islamic life in Egypt" (al-Arabiya, April 2).

The 200-year reference refers to the Wahhabist movement, which is the origin of all Salafist currents in Egypt and the Muslim world at large. This reference highlights the historical dispute between Wahhabism and al-Azhar, which has been growing since Ibrahim Pasha (1789-1848), son of Egypt's ruler Muhammad Ali Pasha and one of the most formidable generals of his time, destroyed the capital of the Wahhabists in the Arabian Peninsula in 1818 and captured Saudi rulers and scholars of Wahhabism, sending some of them into exile in Egypt and others to the Ottoman capital of Istanbul. [4]

It is safe to say that the relationship between al-Azhar and the Salafists has been antagonistic since the beginning. In the 1930s al-Azhar teachers expelled Saudi student Abdallah al-Qusaymi (died 1994) for Wahhabist inclinations and criticism of one of al-Azhar's scholars.

Until the early 1970s, there was only one Salafist scholar teaching at the Faculty of Theology at al-Azhar University. Shaykh Professor Muhammad Khalil Harras (died 1975) was the first Salafist to present a Ph.D. thesis to al-Azhar University's then Shaykh Ibn Taymiyah (1263-1328), an inspiration to the Salafist movement. Harras was also head of the Salafist Ansar al-Sunnah al-Muhammadiyah Society (founded 1926) for some time and also worked as a teacher in Saudi Arabia. Harras was one of Ayman al-Zawahiri's direct mentors, as mentioned by al-Qaeda's second-in-command himself in his work *The Aquittal*, wherein Bin Laden's lieutenant said he used to visit Harras constantly in al-Gharbiya Governorate in Egypt's Delta. [5]

### Mapping Salafism in Egypt

Salafist expansion in Egypt was not feasible before the late 1970s. But the so-called "Islamist Awakening" following the 1967 Arab defeat at the hands of Israel saw some Egyptian youth, especially in Alexandria, following the teachings of Saudi scholars and advocates of Wahhabism, while focusing on following in the footsteps of the Salaf, the "pious ancestors" (i.e. the first three generations of Islam). Other influences include the works of Ibn Taymiyyah on the principle of *tawhid* (the unity of God) and the teachings of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and his successors. The core message of these teachings seeks to purge Islamic faith of Ash'ari theologies, the Sufist sanctification of saints and the practice of visiting graves of holy men in search of intercession. The movement is committed to fighting doctrines and sects with messages believed to be deviant in the view of the Wahhabists. [6]

The leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood, after being released from prison in the late 1970s, were able to contain many of the youth radicalized by the Islamic Awakening in Cairo and Minya, attracting them to the ranks of the Brotherhood instead. The case in Alexandria was different, however, as the Islamist youth there refused to join the Muslim Brotherhood, deemed too moderate and Ash'ari-based by the radical youth. The same happened with the newly born jihadist brigades represented by the founders of al-Gama'a al-Islamiya (GI - Egyptian Islamic Group) in Upper Egypt and the jihadist group, led by Muhammad Abd al-Salam Farag, that assassinated President Anwar al-Sadat in 1981.

While the Muslim Brotherhood and jihadists share the same goal of establishing an Islamic state and applying

Shari'a, the main concern of the Salafists is correcting the Islamic faith and purging from it heresies and practices alien to Islam. Salafist youth have sought religious knowledge at the hands of Salafist preachers in Saudi Arabia (Abd al-Aziz ibn Baz, Muhammad bin Saleh bin Othaymein, Rabie' bin Hadi al-Madkhali, Abd al-Rahman al-Barak, etc), in Jordan (Nasredeen al-Albany) and in Yemen (Muqbil bin Hady al-Wadi'y). Books written by Salafist scholars have been supported by the Saudi government to the extent that some works are given away for free.

The imprisonment of jihadists in Egypt during the 1990s and the constant search of the Muslim Brotherhood for political gains have given the latter movement the chance to expand its presence and gain more ground across the country, especially in the northern and middle governorates. The presence of Salafists in Upper Egypt is still weak due to the strong domination of Sufism there. The Salafist presence in Egypt has been further cemented lately through Salafist religious satellite channels such as al-Rahma (Mercy), al-Annas (People), al-Majd (Glory), al-Hikmah (Wisdom) and al-Fajr (Dawn). [7] In addition, Salafists have been using other methods including establishing mosque-based social groups with a Salafist nature, such as the Ansar al-Sunnah al-Muhammadiyah Society, founded in 1926 by Shaykh Muhammad Hamid al-Fiqy (1892-1959), and al-Gam'ia al-Shar'ia, established by Shaykh Mahmoud Khattab al-Sobky in 1912.

However, the most remarkable emergence of Egyptian Salafists affected by Saudi Wahhabism occurred in Alexandria in the late 1970s when the Alexandrian Salafist School was established, with some of the most prominent Salafist scholars in Egypt hailing from it. Some of these scholars are students of the Wahhabi call in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, including Shaykhs Muhammad bin Ismail al-Moqaddim, Yasser Burhamy, Sa'id Abd al-Azeem, Ahmad Farid and Abd al-Moneim al-Shahhat. [8] These scholars have been taught by shaykhs such as Yemen's Muqbil bin Hady al-Wadi'y and Saudi Arabia's Abd al-Aziz Ibn Baz and Muhammad bin Saleh bin Othaymein.

Additionally, individual Salafist advocates, such as Abu Ishaq al-Hoyaini, have also been active in spreading Salafist theories throughout Egypt. Al-Hoyaini studied under the late Shaykh Nasredeen al-Albany (died 1999), considered one of the pillars of the contemporary Salafist call, with many Salafist schools in Egypt, Saudi

Arabia and Yemen bearing his mark and following his teachings. [9] Al-Hoyaini is the most famous among al-Bany's followers in Egypt.

Other individual Salafists include Shaykh Muhammad Hassan and Muhammad Hussein Yaqub, both very famous preachers in Egypt, with experience in teaching and preaching in some Gulf countries. [10]

One of the leading Salafist currents in Egypt is based on the thought of Saudi Shaykhs Muhammad Aman al-Gamy and Rabei' bin Hadi al-Madkhali. This current believes in absolute obedience to political authority and rejects political activities by religious groups, especially the Muslim Brotherhood. Advocates of this current, concentrated in the Mediterranean coast Buhayra Governorate, criticize Islamic political movements and attack their practices and beliefs. Prominent within that current is Shaykh Mahmoud Lotfi Amer, head of the local Ansar al-Sunnah branch.

### Conclusion

Naturally, all the Salafists have rejected the criticism of the Shaykh al-Azhar. In general, we may summarize the Salafists' own criticism of al-Azhar under three headings:

- Al-Azhar adopts the Ash'ari doctrine and rejects the Salafist doctrine.
- Some of al-Azhar's Shaykhs have Sufist inclinations, notably the current Grand Shaykh (al-Tayeb).
- The (limited) tolerance of religious minorities such as the Christians and Shi'a, as reflected in the authorization given by the late Shaykh Mahmud Shaltut (Shaykh al-Azhar, 1958-1963) for the Shiite Ja'afary doctrine to be taught at al-Azhar alongside the four Sunni doctrines and the fatwa issued by the late Shaykh al-Tantawy legalizing donations by Muslims for churches. [11]

For the above reasons, Salafists refuse to acknowledge al-Azhar as the supreme Sunni institution of religious scholarship. They even call on al-Azhar to abandon the Ash'ari doctrine and espouse the Salafist doctrine in response to al-Tayeb's criticism of Salafists. [12] Some individual Salafists, like al-Hoyaini, have attacked the institution harshly, describing al-Azhar as "dead"

because of the actions and behaviors of the late and current shaykhs. [13] All in all, Salafist advocates and activists are furious at al-Tayeb's statements, declaring that such criticism is only another ring in the chain of war against Islam and Salafism, whose influence is growing in Egypt.

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### Notes:

1. Wahhabism is a conservative Sunni sect based on the teachings of Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, a 17th century scholar from what is today known as Saudi Arabia. Al-Wahhab advocated purging Islam of what he considered innovations. Wahhabism is now the dominant form of Islam in Saudi Arabia.
2. <http://www.forsanelhaq.com/showthread.php?t=171418>.
3. <http://www.forsanelhaq.com/showthread.php?t=171418>.
4. For the campaign, see Andrew McGregor, *A Military History of Modern Egypt: From the Ottoman Conquest to the Ramadan War*, Westport Conn., 2006, pp.62-64.
5. Ayman Al-Zawahiri, *The Acquittal*, 2008, p.5.
6. The Ash'ari theology was developed in the early days of Islam by Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari (d. 936 AD). In May, 2010 al-Tayeb gave a speech on the merits of al-Ash'ari to the alumni of al-Azhar. He was joined by Ali Goma'a, Egypt's Grand Mufti, in saying a divided Islamic nation beset by radicalism and violence needs an approach like that of al-Ash'ari, who emphasized moderation and tolerance (*al-Masry al-Youm* [Cairo], May 9).
7. Basil al-Nayreb, "A look on Islamic Satellite Channels," <http://www.forsanelhaq.com/showthread.php?p=1195429#post1195429>.
8. Their writings and ideas can be read at a Salafist web-forum: <http://www.anasalafy.com>.
9. Ibid.
10. For Shaykh Muhammed Hassan, see [http://www.alalbany.net/albany\\_serah.php](http://www.alalbany.net/albany_serah.php) and <http://mohamedhassan.org/index.aspx>. For Muhammad Hussein Yaqub, see <http://www.yaqob.com/>.
11. <http://www.anasalafy.com/play.php?catsmktba=18903>.
12. Ibid.
13. <http://alheweny.org/aws/play.php?catsmktba=663>.