

# The Grozny Conference in Chechnya – Is the Salafi Movement a Rotten Fruit of Sunni Islam?

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The Salafi movement in Sunni Islam has experienced a strong jolt recently, not only in terms of a challenge to its worldview but even to its very existence. On August 25-27, an international conference held in Grozny, Chechnya, was attended by over 200 leading Muslim clerics from various Islamic schools of thought, sponsored by the president of Chechnya, **Ramzan Kadyrov** (see photo), and with the blessing of Russian President **Vladimir Putin**. Participants addressed the question, “Who are the people of the Sunna?” and determined that authentic Sunni Islam is not a militant religion that preaches violence, but rather a religion characterized by inclusion and tolerance towards the “other”. This stands in contrast to the strict interpretation by Salafi-jihadist terrorist organizations, such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, that justify the use of violence against Muslims who they do not consider to be pure Sunnis. On the surface, it is apparent that the conference was designed to undermine the ideological platform that feeds power to Salafi-jihadist terrorist organizations. However, in practice, it embodies a poignant political statement against the Salafi movement overall, even on non-violent issues, and against Saudi Arabia in particular for bearing responsibility for the radicalized thinking among young Muslims and the spread of terrorism. This was indicated by the fact that not one Salafi representative from around the world was invited to the conference.



**Ramzan Kadyrov**

This deliberate exclusion aroused a great deal of anger from followers of the Salafi movement, and especially from the religious establishment in Saudi Arabia, which interpreted it as a conceptual attack and betrayal. The London daily, “*Ray al-Yawm*”, wrote that the conference signified a colossal step designed to challenge the religious establishment in Saudi Arabia, isolate it from the Muslim world and instill the idea that terrorism is the rotten fruit of the Wahabist movement (a widespread Salafi movement in Saudi Arabia).<sup>1</sup> In response, the Wahabi religious establishment used apologetic rhetoric in order to defend its faith and derided the conference participants, who it accused of being linked to Russia, Sunni Islam’s greatest enemy, at a time when Russia is bombing Sunni population centers in Syria.

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<sup>1</sup> 2.9.16. <http://www.raialyoum.com/?p=513086>

The Salafi movement erupted into the global consciousness following the 9/11 attacks and since then it has been associated with terrorism and violence due to the membership of its followers in Al-Qaeda, which adheres to the Salafi-jihadist school of thought. The Islamic State and other Islamist terrorist organizations also belong to this conceptual stream. Even Saudi Arabia has been accused of ties to terrorism due to its cultivation and financing of Salafi-jihadist organizations' terrorism. Mention of this was made in July 2016 with the publication of a secret report by the US regarding the involvement of low-level Saudi authorities in supporting and financing several terrorist attacks.<sup>2</sup>

The Salafi movement is not monolithic; in terms of typology, it is possible to identify three types of Salafism, which share the same faith and ideology characterized by a utopian longing to recreate the spirit of Islam demonstrated by Islamic ancestors (Salaf) in every aspect of life and to impose Islamic law (shari'a), but which employ various strategies to achieve its goals: Puritanical Salafism, which views *dawah* and propaganda activities via charitable organizations, religious institutions, etc., as a tool for advancing its goals; Political Salafism, which addresses the importance of integrating into the political system and state institutions based on the idea that it will be able to enact laws that will help promote its agenda; Jihadist Salafism sanctifies the use of violence, referred to as jihad, as a vital and necessary tool to achieve its goals. The Salafi movement in Saudi Arabia is considered an additional type of Salafism and is referred to by its opponents as a Wahhabi stream, named for its founder, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, from the 18<sup>th</sup> century BC. Since the founding of the Saudi Kingdom in 1932 until today, the Salafi movement serves as its official ideology.

The conference in Chechnya, therefore, was designed to establish a common front against the radical thought of Salafi-jihadist terrorist organizations. Among the prominent conference participants were Muslim representatives such as the Grand Mufti of Egypt, **Shawki 'Allam**; the former Grand Mufti of Egypt, **Ali Gomaa**; the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, Sheikh **Ahmed al-Tayeb**; Egyptian presidential advisor and representative of the religious committee in the Egyptian Parliament, Sheikh **Usama al-Zahri**; the Grand Mufti of Damascus; the former Grand Mufti of

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<sup>2</sup> <http://intelligence.house.gov/uploadedfiles/declasspart4.pdf>

Jordan, Sheikh **Abdul al-Karim al-Khasawneh**; Sheikh **Abd al-Fattah al-Bazam**; **Sayf al-Asri**, a prominent sage from the Emirates; **Sayyid Fawdah**, a prominent sage from Jordan; senior sheikhs from the Sufi stream (a central stream of Islamic mysticism) from around the Arab world, such as Sheikh **'Ali al-Jifri**, a prominent Sufi sheikh of Yemeni origin residing in Abu Dhabi; **Mohammed al-Qahtani**, the head of the Sufi Al-Qahtani Institution from Morocco; and others.

At the end of the conference, al-Tayeb declared that authentic Sunnis are Muslims who belong to the Ash'ari and Maturidi theological schools of faith, the four schools of thought (Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, Hanbali) and Sufism, characterized by courtesy and morality, according to him. According to al-Tayeb, throughout history Sunnis were forced to be on guard against falsifications and distortions of the religion by radical and militant groups, the first of which was the *Khawarij* (a term for an ancient Muslim sect from the 8th century BC that split from the main stream of Sunna and sanctified the use of violence against Muslims who did not fit into its worldview, and has since become a derogatory term for similar groups).

Today, the term includes Salafis who declare *takfir* on other Muslims, such as the Islamic State. According to him, the conference was considered an important and necessary turning point in correcting the dangerous distortion caused as a result of attempts to take back this



term [meaning Sunna] from the radicals and their exclusive use of the term for their needs and for the purpose of removing Muslims from Islam. <sup>3</sup>

At the end of the conference, al-Tayeb (see photo) proposed an action plan for fighting against Islamic radicals: establish a satellite channel in Russia to be entrusted with presenting the true picture of Islam to the people, and focus efforts on fighting against extremism and terrorism; increase activity on social networks and allocate resources and manpower as an appropriate solution through this platform; establish an Islamic legal center in Chechnya named "*tabsir*" (enlightenment) to be entrusted with tracking, researching, understanding and building a database

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<sup>3</sup> 2.9.16. <http://khabaragency.net/news70879.html>

of groups and organizations in order to help prevent distortions and counter radical thought; renew school activities and seminars in religious law designed to train clerics to act against distortion of thought; increase cooperation between leading religious institutions such as Al-Azhar in Egypt, Kairouan in Morocco, Al-Zaytuna in Tunisia, Hadhramaut in Yemen, including religious institutions in Russia; open learning channels for long-distance instruction in order to spread knowledge; appeal to governments to support the religious institutions that hold moderate beliefs and warn against the inherent danger of playing politics and hindering religious discourse; recommend to governments to enact laws against spreading hatred, incitement and hostility towards institutions; recommend that large Sunni religious institutions, such as Al-Azhar, provide scholarships to Muslims in Russia who want to study religious law; recommend holding the current conference often in order to achieve these goals.<sup>4</sup>

As previously mentioned, the conference itself, its participants and its decisions suffered waves of anger and criticism from Salafi circles, especially from Saudi Arabia, and sparked lively dialogue in the print media, visual media and on social networks. Hundreds of opinions on the matter were published in the Saudi press and they deemed the conference an attempt to sow division and schism in the Sunni world by “spewing” out the Salafi stream. For example, there were headlines such as, “Removing Mecca from the People of the Sunna”,<sup>5</sup> “New Harmful Conference”,<sup>6</sup> and more. Saudi publicists, such as Muhammad Al al-Sheikh, explained that the Salafi stream is not unvaried but rather is divided into several layers, and that there is a profound difference between the puritan Salafi stream that maintains loyalty to the incumbent regime and avoids rebellion against the existing order, such as the religious establishment in Saudi Arabia, and the political and jihadist Salafi stream that undermines the existing order.<sup>7</sup> Other Saudi publicists attacked the concept prevalent in the West that equates Salafism and Wahhabism with terrorism.<sup>8</sup> Other criticisms claimed that the conference was a Russian-Iranian conspiracy aimed at weakening Sunni Islam,

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<sup>4</sup> 2.9.16. <http://khabaragency.net/news70879.html>

<sup>5</sup> 7.9.16. <http://www.alhayat.com/Opinion/Mohammed-Almokhtar-Alfaal/17246581/إخراج-«مكة»-من-أهل-السنة-والجماعة>

<sup>6</sup> 3.9.16. [http://www.fj-p.com/Our\\_news\\_Details.aspx?News\\_ID=101061](http://www.fj-p.com/Our_news_Details.aspx?News_ID=101061)

<sup>7</sup> 20.9.16. <http://www.al-jazirah.com/2016/20160920/lp3.htm>

<sup>8</sup> 23.9.16. <http://www.al-jazirah.com/2016/20160923/ar1.htm>

especially the power of Saudi Arabia. Sheikh al-Qaradawi, the spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, joined in on the criticism and referred to conference participants as “clerics who follow the dictates of the ruler” and “sheikhs of shame”. According to him, “we have not heard a word from the one purported to represent the people of the Sunna in criticizing the acts of murder and slaughter of Sunnis by Iran and its agents, Hezbollah in Syria and the Houthis in Yemen and Russian”.<sup>9</sup>

Sunni religious institutions around the world expressed solidarity with the religious establishment in Saudi Arabia and emphasized that the conference participants only represented themselves. For example, 21 different Muslim religious institutions signed the petition of support, including Arab Maghreb Scholars League, Scholars Union of Africa, Scholars and Preachers League in South and East Asia, The Islamic Shura Council in Switzerland, and more (see appendix).<sup>10</sup> Sheikh **Yasser Burhami**, a leader of the Salafi movement in Egypt, announced his intention to launch a PR campaign designed to clarify the beliefs of Sheikh Mohammad ibn Abd-al-Wahhab, the founder of Wahhabism, as an integral part of Islam and its authentic expression.<sup>11</sup>

Since the conference, there has also been a very lively discourse about it on social networks. On Twitter, for example, approximately half a million tweets were posted in this context. Salafi Web users from around the world expressed support for the religious establishment in Saudi Arabia and launched a network campaign emphasizing that the Wahhabi religious establishment continues to serve as a binding religious authority.<sup>12</sup>

A particularly scathing and harsh criticism was directed at al-Sisi’s regime in Egypt for allowing the participation of clerics at the most senior levels from Al-Azhar institution in the conference. Such harsh words had not been heard since the cold war between Abdel Nasser, the former leader of Egypt, and King Faisal, the former leader of Saudi Arabia, in the 1960’s. The response of Muhammad Al ash-Sheikh, a descendant of the founder of the Wahhabi Salafi stream in Saudi Arabia, was particularly harsh: “Sheikh al-Azhar’s participation in the Grozny Conference...forces us to change the way we relate to Egypt...for our homeland is the most

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<sup>9</sup> 2.9.16. <http://www.raialyoum.com/?p=513086>

<sup>10</sup> 4.9.16. <http://islammemo.cc/akhbar/arab/2016/09/04/303881.html>

<sup>11</sup> 27.9.16. <http://www.vetogate.com/2384380>

<sup>12</sup> مؤتمر الشيشان# ; #بيان\_كبار\_العلماء\_يمتلني

important...let Egypt's al-Sisi head towards destruction". These statements indicate a break between Al-Azhar institution and the religious establishment in Saudi Arabia, obscuring cooperation between the two in the battle against the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi-jihadist terrorism.

In response to a wave of accusations, Al-Azhar institution explained that the conference participants did not represent it, but rather only represented their own beliefs. Other clerics from Al-Azhar claimed that Saudi Arabia must relate positively to the conference since it also served the interests of the Kingdom when it comes to the conceptual aspect of fighting terrorism. Moreover, in mid-October 2016, a high-level delegation from Al-Azhar, led by Sheikh Abbas Shouman, a senior member of Al-Azhar, arrived in Saudi Arabia in order to apologize to the leaders of the Wahhabi religious establishment, including the Grand Mufti, for the conference in attempt to appease them. Shouman noted that interested parties tried to exploit the conference in order to sow the seeds of a dispute between Egypt and Saudi Arabia, but despite this rotten attempt, both countries continued to maintain a close and strong relationship, including in their struggle against radicalization. It should be noted that several members of Al-Azhar expressed reservations about Shouman's declaration, claiming that it was tainted by politicization, and they emphasized that there is a substantial gap between the thinking of Al-Azhar and that of the Wahhabi religious establishment.<sup>13</sup>

Salafis leveled harsh criticism at the Sufi stream as well, as there was already traditional hostility between the two sides. According to them, Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov sought to glorify the Sufi stream as the leading religious denomination in Russia for two main reasons: Kadyrov's affiliation with the Sufi stream and Putin's willingness to support its strengthening as he is a moderate and a traditional enemy of the Salafi stream, which is why he expressed willingness to hold the conference in Grozny and to use it to create an anti-Salafi front.<sup>14</sup> In response, Sheikh Ali al-Jafri, a prominent Sufi sheikh, explained that the Grozny Conference indeed encompassed diverse streams of thought in Islam but was not directed against the Salafi stream or Saudi Arabia,

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<sup>13</sup> 2.10.16. <http://arabi21.com/story/950642//السعودية-لصالح-السعودية> ;  
13.10.16. <http://www.elwatannews.com/news/details/1492295>

<sup>14</sup> 30.8.16. <http://www.albayan.co.uk/Article2.aspx?id=5277>

Kadyrov is described in the official media and on the social network accounts on Salafist operatives as a reveler playboy who is breaking the laws of Islam and as Putin's Pinocchio.

but rather against the extremist interpretation of the image of Sunni Islam.<sup>15</sup>

Against the backdrop of rising tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and the struggle between the two over hegemony in the area, the Grozny conference hindered the latter's efforts to reinforce its position in the area, indicating a rift within the Sunni world. Shi'ite religious leaders are already rubbing their hands together in delight and satisfaction over the crisis in the Sunni world. Sheikh Muqtadā al-Ṣadr, an ally of Iran in Iraq and one of its strongest leaders, noted that "the Chechnya conference is the start of the moderate Sunni Spring".<sup>16</sup>

Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah in Lebanon, also praised the Grozny Conference and noted that the battle being waged in Syria "is not against the people of the Sunna but rather against Wahhabism [...] the Wahhabi is worse than the Israeli, especially because he seeks to abolish and erase the other side [...]". According to him, Wahhabism is responsible for "distorting the image of Islam".<sup>17</sup>

## Conclusion

Without a doubt, the Grozny Conference revealed a deep rift within the Sunni world and indicated great tension between the Salafi movement, led by the Wahhabi religious establishment, and moderate Muslim movements such as Sufism, in light of the belief that Salafi thought is a main factor in the radicalization of young Muslims. This is not the first time that an attempt was made to weaken the appeal of Salafi thought, as there has been a continuous effort to do so for many years already. For example, this trend was seen back in 2010 with the holding of the Meridian Conference, sponsored by Turkey, which was attended by a series of leading religious clerics. Its purpose was, among other things, to re-examine the ruling of the Salafi scholar, Ibn Taymiyah, from the 14<sup>th</sup> century BC, who permitted shedding the blood of Mongol rulers even though they were Muslims because of their non-implementation of shari'a. For followers of the Salafi-jihadist movement, that ruling serves as justification for insurgence against Muslim rulers. In order to take the edge off this problematic ruling, participants of the Meridian Conference ruled that it was correct in the context of Ibn Taymiyah's time but is no longer relevant, certainly not in the current

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<sup>15</sup> 30.9.16. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2IR-bHPKUhg>

<sup>16</sup> 19.9.16. <https://arabi21.com/story/947713/عن-شيخ-الأزهر-الصدر-يعلق-على-مؤتمر-الشيخان-ماذا-قال-عن-شيخ-الأزهر>

<sup>17</sup> 29.9.16. <http://www.hadrah.net/news1743847.html>

period.<sup>18</sup> Al-Azhar institution in Egypt is also prominent in leading the front against Salafi-jihadist thought thanks to al-Sisi's policies on the matter. Since the end of 2014, Al-Azhar has invested great efforts expressed in, among other things, the launch of a magazine for children in various languages that teaches moderate Islam, the dispatch of preachers from Al-Azhar to Western Europe in order to appeal to the youth to reject Salafi-jihadist thought, and more.<sup>19</sup>

The Grozny Conference, therefore, reflects a component of the unwavering struggle between religious authorities for a presence in the Muslim public sphere, and for recognition and legitimacy to interpret and shape Islam as they see fit, especially in light of the challenge presented by Salafi-jihadist terrorist organizations. It is also evident, therefore, that the conference signified an attempt to present an alternative to the religious authority in Mecca.

The Grozny Conference also reflects an effort by Russia's foreign policy to expand its influence in the Middle East and to fortify its standing in the Muslim world by brokering relationships with non-political players with religious influence on large Muslim communities, and by expressing a willingness to promote a moderate model of Islamic faith among the Muslim population in Russia. The large number of conference participants can be considered a success as far as Russia is concerned because it demonstrates the participants' recognition, tacit or otherwise, of Russia's role in the region.

The Saudi Kingdom's protest against the Chechen conference likely indicates the enormous pressure it is under due to the waves of criticism directed against it from the Sunni and Shi'ite worlds, and from the West and East, given its association with conceptual and practical support for Salafi-jihadist terrorist organizations. It seems that the Saudi Kingdom urgently needs to examine ways to regain the trust of other streams of thought to its official ideology and to prove that it is tolerant and open to the "other" instead of frequently lashing out at participants of the conference. Otherwise, the existing rift is liable to worsen and restrict its power.

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<sup>18</sup> Yahya Michott "Ibn Taymiyya's "New Mardin Fatwa". Is Genetically Modified Islam (GMI) Carcinogenic?", *The Muslim World*, Vol.101, April 2011, pp.130-181.

<sup>19</sup> For more information on the subject, see:

Michael Barak, "The Al-Azhar Institute – A Key Player in Shaping the Religious and Political Discourse in Egypt", *ICT*, 28.3.16. <https://www.ict.org.il/Article/1647/The-Al-Azhar-Institute>



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