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Fighting for the Soul of Islam: A Battle of the Paymasters

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

A gathering of prominent Sunni Muslim leaders in the Chechen capital of Grozny that appeared to have effectively excommunicated Saudi-backed ultra-conservatism potentially opens not only a theological but also a geopolitical rift in the Muslim world. The conference, sponsored and attended by some of Saudi Arabia's closest allies, suggests that Saudi funding of ultra-conservative worldviews may be meeting its match in more liberal interpretations of Islam backed by the United Arab Emirates and Russia.

Commentary

CHECHEN STRONGMAN Ramzan Kadyrov, an Islamist with close ties to Russian President Vladimir Putin, recently convened some of Islam's most prominent leaders to determine the theologically and politically explosive question of who is a Sunni Muslim. Professing to be a Sufi, a more mystical interpretation of Islam, Kadyrov lacks the religious credentials beyond his native Chechnya where he was recently re-elected with 98 percent of the vote.

Kadyrov's ability to bring together an illustrious group of Muslim scholars highlights successful behind-the-scenes manoeuvring by the United Arab Emirates to counter Salafism despite the UAE's close collaboration with Saudi Arabia as a member of the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and in the war in Yemen. It also shines a light on Russian efforts to cultivate Muslim religious leaders.

A Frontal Assault

Participating in the Grozny conference were, among others, the imam of the Al-

Azhar Grand Mosque in Cairo, Ahmed El- Tayeb; Egyptian Grand Mufti Shawki Allam; former Egyptian Grand Mufti and Sufi authority Ali Gomaa, a strident supporter of Egyptian general-turned-president Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi; Al Sisi's religious affairs advisor, Usama al-Azhari; the mufti of Damascus Abdul Fattah al-Bizm, a close confidante of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad; and influential Yemeni cleric Habib Ali Jifri, head of the Abu Dhabi-based Islamic Tabah Foundation who has close ties to UAE Crown Prince Mohammed ibn Zayed al-Nahyan.

In a frontal assault on Saudi-backed ultra-conservative movements such as Wahhabism, Salafism and Deobandism, the conference charged that the label Sunni had been hijacked by heretics whose deviant practices distorted Islam. In defining Sunni Islam, the conference explicitly excluded Wahhabism, the Saudi state's adopted version of Islam, as well as Salafism and Deobandism from its definition. The assault is all the more significant given that Saudi Arabia has over the last four decades invested tens of billions of dollars into promoting globally ultra-conservative interpretations of Islam.

The conference suggests that the UAE, together with Russia, is succeeding in countering the Saudi effort that has enabled ultra-conservatism to make significant inroads into Muslim communities across the globe. The heavy Egyptian presence suggests further that the UAE, which together with Saudi Arabia is Egypt's foremost financier, has effectively driven a wedge between the kingdom and the Arab world's most populous state.

It also serves as evidence that Russian efforts to woo mainstream Muslim as well as Islamist leaders have begun to pay off despite Moscow's support of the Assad regime in Syria. In a political fete, Russia managed to gather four years ago leaders of a host of Islamist stripes, including Saudi-backed Salafists, Muslim Brothers and Lebanon's Shiite Hezbollah at one table. Russian officials have stressed that conservative Russian Orthodox values are similar if not identical to puritan Islamic ones.

Deep-seated Aversion

The Grozny conference was co-organised by the Tabah Foundation, the sponsor of the Senior Scholars Council, a group that aims to recapture Islamic discourse that many non-Salafis assert has been hijacked by Saudi largesse. The Council was also created to counter the Doha-based International Union of Muslim Scholars, headed by Sheikh Yusuf Qaradawi, widely viewed as a spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood.

UAE backing for anti-Salafi initiatives and opposition to the Brotherhood, even though it does not adhere to Salafi ideology, is rooted in Prince Mohammed's deep-seated aversion to political Islam. The crown prince is credited with having persuaded the late Saudi King Abdullah to ban the Brotherhood as a terrorist organisation.

Prince Mohammed has been troubled by suggestions that King Salman since acceding to the throne may be less strident in his opposition to the Brotherhood. Mohammed also differs with King Salman's son, Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed

bin Salman, on the conduct of the war in Yemen and tacit cooperation on the ground in Yemen with groups associated with Al Qaeda.

The participation in Grozny of Egypt's Sheikh El-Tayeb suggests that substantial Saudi funding of large numbers of Al Azhar's scholars as well as the kingdom's multi-billion dollar backing of Al Sisi since his toppling in a military coup in 2013 of Mohammed Morsi, a Muslim Brother and Egypt's first and only democratically elected leader, has not bought the kingdom the kind of religious and political loyalty it expected.

Our Brothers?

A prominent Islamic legal scholar, who rejected a nomination for Saudi Arabia's prestigious King Faisal International Prize, recalls El-Tayeb effusively thanking the kingdom during panels in recent years for its numerous donations to Al Azhar. Al Azhar scholars were said to have competed "frantically" for sabbaticals in the kingdom that could last anywhere from one to 20 years, paid substantially better, and raised a scholar's status.

"Many of my friends and family praise Abdul Wahab in their writing," the scholar said referring to Mohammed ibn Abdul Wahhab, the 18th century religious leader whose puritan interpretation of Islam became the basis for the power sharing agreement between the ruling Al Saud family and the country's religious establishment. "They shrug their shoulders when I ask them privately if they are serious... When I asked El-Tayeb why Al Azhar was not seeing changes and avoidance of dogma, he said: 'my hands are tied.'

To illustrate Saudi inroads, the scholar recalled being present when several years ago Muhammad Sayyid Tantawy, a former grand mufti and predecessor of El-Tayeb as imam of the Al Azhar mosque, was interviewed about Saudi funding. "What's wrong with that?" the scholar recalls Tantawy as saying. Irritated by the question, he pulled a check for US\$100,000 from a drawer and slapped it against his forehead. "Alhamdulillah (Praise be to God), they are our brothers," the scholar quoted Tantawy as saying.

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