Tackling the new Wahabi extremism
Published on Pambazuka News (https://www.pambazuka.org)

Abdul Ghelleh [1]
Thursday, November 8, 2012 - 02:00
Sub-Title: Africa’s menace for the coming years

SOMALIA: NOW AND THEN

If you believe that Somalia’s problems can be pinpointed to particular phenomena such as sea pirates or the terrorist group, Al Shabaab, you are being mistaken. Even the Somali clan politics, the warlords, the so-called spoilers of peace, the secessionists in the north and even the downright anarchists are neither the source nor the propellers of the Somalia conflict. These groups simply act as power brokers or supervisors for the uncontrollable events in the Horn of Africa country.

When the Somali state collapsed in 1991, the government’s social management institution - for cultural and religious guidance - which controlled what is permissible in the country and what is not - went with it. And with the lack of border controls following immediately the collapse of the Somali state, numerous foreign Islamic ideologies were imported into the country. The biggest and most effective of all, the Saudi Arabia’s Wahabi Islam (recently upgraded to Salafism) - which was not traditionally practiced by the African societies - found a fertile ground in the vacuum that followed the overthrow of Siyad Barre’s military government.

Moreover, it is a universally held view that at times of hardship ordinary people seek refuge in extreme forms of religion. If you live in rundown small town America, for example, or the economically deprived cities of northern England, there would certainly be a knock on your door at least once in a fortnight by a deeply religious Jehovah Witness militant, inviting you to their next meeting at church, while at the same time handing out their latest message from Jesus. And had there not been effective governments with sound economies assisted by the free - and increasingly right-wing - mainstream media in both Britain and the USA, these Christian fundamentalists would have possibly caused unimaginable destruction to society. Unfortunately, in the case of Somalia and some parts of Africa, there is no mechanism to ward off the onslaught of the Wahabi Islam extremists across the waters in the Red Sea or the global Jihadists elsewhere.

Following the disintegration of Somalia as a nation, the grief stricken Somali populace - believing that help is at hand - readily embraced the new teachings of Islam, and the incentives for the Somali people are what I call ‘cash for extremism’. Throughout the civil war in Somalia, the Saudis had never supported the security services of the relatively peaceful semi-autonomous states of the north while at the same time sending shiploads of food and Wahabi Islam literature to the South. The outcome was that the overwhelming majority of Somalis - one way or another - developed some sort of Islamic extremism. And largely unnoticed by both the Somali diaspora communities and the general population inside the country, a strange and alien religious fundamentalism was to spiral out of control, diluting and fragmenting the unique Somalia camel boys folklore and poetry-based culture. The fine and tolerant Somali society was fatally wounded.

It is in this context of the recent Somali social discourse coupled with the lack of governance institutions that is causing the atrocities and the mayhem, together with the continuing interferences by Saudi Arabs in the Sufi tradition of African Islam in the country. Many Somali people pretend that there is no case here and shy away from bringing the issue up. People’s fears, however, are well founded. In the recent Somali social and religious norms that have been incorporated into the Somali social structures, criticising or even speaking out about these sensitive but important issues can cause a lot of problems for those involved. And if someone hears that you are interested to know...
why the Somali people’s Islamic attitudes are increasingly hardening, religious based groups or even
the individual citizens can take action against such persons, without the chance for a rational
debate.

The Somali society has taken a dramatic turn for the worse over the past couple of decades. For
example, female adults attending Madarasas in their middle ages or the sixth century Arab names
that are popping up all around young Somali households. As Richard Dowden, the veteran Africa
news correspondent, summed up in the early 1990s in one of his last articles for the Independent:
‘the Somali Talibal was born soon after the overthrow of the secular dictator’.

From Hargeisa to Kismayo, alien and strange sounding names such as Abu Zubayr, Zumaya and Bint
Khuwayja have replaced the popular and fashionable Somali names like Robleh, Raageh and Rhoda.
The huge surplus of mosques that are being built across the country at the expense of hospitals and
schools can’t be questioned either. And if you dared ask such questions (a relative is nowadays the
safest option when asking) the answer you will get is simple: ‘We have become better Muslims; we
were ignorant about our religion’.

Paradoxically, when I was growing up in Somalia, even though it was mandatory that all the kids in
the towns read the Quran, actually we did not understand its meaning. The main reason for this was
that most religious teachers were not qualified to interpret the Qur’an from Arabic to Somali. All the
kids were expected to read the thirty chapters of the Qur’an at least once before starting formal
school education.

Throughout our childhood, we did not notice any changes or something untoward to the traditional
narrative of Somali Islam. Some of the cleverer kids were able to read it twice over in as many
months. We loved citing passages of the Qur’an when playing in the hills and valleys during the rainy
season; it was intriguing and fascinating to read the Qur’an and funny sounding lines were repeated
again and again until fully memorised. Difficult verses were avoided in case the other kids noticed
your mumbling. But if you were found out, the teacher compelled you to pronounce the words aloud.
It was fun and time consuming. Some of the kids would later acquire their lifetime nicknames from
those difficult-to-read verses such as the famous and regular BBC Somali Service cultural and
traditional commentator, Idaajaa.

Religious schooling was to end on or just before primary school start date at the age of six or seven.
However, a combined single Arabic and religious class continued right up to the end of secondary
school. But after that it was optional for students to specialise for a religious degree at university. If
you wanted to be religious expert or a Sheikh at a mosque, it was a choice that you had to make in
adulthood.

In those days, ideological conflicts among the Somali society’s Sufi religious leaders were minimal
and confined to Mosques. Extremism was unheard of; perhaps it did not exist at all. There were no
students returning to Quranic Madarassas, and those staying on who were the same age as us were
teed and looked down as not being intelligent enough because they did not finish their religious
education in time. Unfortunately, an irreversible change has taken place in Somalia.

IS MALI FAST BECOMING THE NEXT SOMALIA?

I often compared Somalia to Afghanistan. Both societies have their own languages and Arabic, the
language of the Quran, is not widely spoken in these countries. Less than one per cent of Somalis
considered themselves to be fluent in Arabic in the early 1980s; and 0.2 per cent Afghans were
thought to have basic knowledge of Arabic. Afghanistan is in South Asia and Somalia is in Africa.
Both countries have been engulfed in endless violent conflict for many decades (centuries in the
case of Afghanistan). Afghanistan is located to the north of the Arabian Peninsula where Islam
originated while Somalia is just to the south of it.

Afghanistan has a history of foreign interventions; in fact the Afghans continued to battle foreign
armies from the 19th century to the present day. And the Great Game between the British and the
Russians in 19th century Afghanistan is being superseded by what seems to be a new Great Game
currently played out between radical Islamists, the Taliban and the West. Recent reports suggest
that there would be no viable state in Afghanistan after the foreign troops leave the country in 2014, with the possibility of further unrest. It could be argued that Somalia has just started her own battle (though smaller in scale) with foreign armies which are getting into the third decade. But the similarities, if they can be called such, end there.

Afghanistan is geographically and traditionally South Asian and does not, apart from being a fellow Muslim country, claim to have social and blood ties with the Arabs. But Mali and Somalia are in Africa, and for several reasons, Somalia can be a classic case study for the present Malian conflict.

A large Somali clan prides itself of being related to the Yemani Arabs; another says it is descended from the Sunni Iraqi Arabs. And in comparison, the Kel Ansar tribe in Mali believes that they are descended directly from Prophet Muhammad. In fact it is this myth which Malians and Somalis entertain that reinforces their misplaced belief that they are part of the Arab world, without fully understanding the Arab language or culture. Every year tens of thousands of Malians and Somalis visit Saudi Arabia and the UAE for Hajj and for trade in Dubai. But both Malians and Somalis are oblivious to the local politics and cultures in the Arab world. Even those who frequently visit or work in the Gulf overlook the fact that Wahabi Islam is strictly controlled in Saudi Arabia and that in downtown Dubai, African Soukous and Western pop are deafeningly playing into the early hours of the morning in the nightclubs across the city. Are they not Muslim too?

And from 2007 - about the year that the Somali Al Shabaab came into existence - Mali has been going through similar transformation. Like the areas of Somalia controlled by Al Shabaab, music is banned in large parts of northern Mali and anyone found dancing or smoking risks being flogged in public. Thieves got their hands cut off. In the city of Goa in August this year, a heavily bearded Islamist spokesman declared: ‘We don’t want the music of Satan. Quranic verses must replace. Sharia demands it’, he decreed. As in Somalia before it, Mali’s new Al Shabaab, which is being protected and supported by the global Al Qaeda, is taking firm root in the desert where world famous music concerts used to be held.

Reading about the destruction of the independence monument in Timbuktu this week by the Malian extremists, I did not share the Western media outcry, for I know more difficulties lie ahead for the people of Mali. To this day, apart from a couple of meetings organised by the French President, Francois Hollande, and US Secretary Hilary Clinton in Paris and Algiers respectively over the past few days, no concrete plan has been put in place in confronting the new and alarming developments in Mali. It seems that Mali has been left to her own devices.

THE US POLICY MISTAKES – OR RATHER MISHAPS?

Following the Al Qaeda attacks in the American cities of Washington and New York in 2001, the US declared ‘War on Terror’. And subsequently, the Bush government increased its defense budget to record levels and engaged reactionary and offensive policies against largely imagined enemies, killing and maiming millions of innocent people around the world.

In my view, the US response was disproportionate to the reckless actions of a small number of boys from the Arab world that neither owned fighter jets nor controlled regular armies. Men and boys armed with little more than AK47s and sporting mere thick beard and ropes and were hiding in caves couldn’t have conceivably destroyed the world’s only superpower and her robust democracy.

Instead, the effective and pragmatic way to confront the new developments after the Taliban was overthrown (a campaign supported by the global citizens) was to embark on a worldwide democratisation program, with stern warning to dictatorial regimes that the West was seriously against their desire to stay on in power.

Global extremism prevention programs with material support for those states that indicate support for the program could have been set up to win the hearts and minds of people whom the West saw as being against them. In fact last years’ Arab spring was almost imminent and the conditions ripe at the time. But were the Western leaders ready for such a peaceful campaign against brutal dictators? Whether they wanted or not, oil got in the way. But no one was fooled.
Western policy makers, particularly the US, are often reactive to events in Africa but they are reluctant to address the immediate and workable solutions to the root cause of Africa’s ten-year-old and rapidly growing Islamic militancy. Let me give you an example: the US Fifth Fleet which is stationed few miles across the bridge that connects Saudi Arabia with Bahrain looks the other way while Wahabi extremism activities are being exported by the Saudis with impunity. On the other hand, the US Africa Command which is based in nearby Djibouti spends huge amounts of resources to apprehend and detain, and possibly rendition, young African travellers in the region, many of them with no links to terrorism. But can detaining a teenager here and there resolve the problem?

While in Djibouti earlier this year I sent a tweet to AFRICOM, the US Africa Command: ‘Why equip the African troops, the Amisom? Instead you should have built the capacity of the upcoming Somali government forces’. The reply I received was typical of the US-American approach to the so called ‘War on Terror’: ‘Thanks for your comments’, they promptly tweeted back. ‘We are supporting the Amisom mission to assist Somalia. Policy issues are best answered by the State Dept.’ I thought that the US State Department’s policy officers are embedded in the US army while serving overseas. The US case since 9/11: it’s morally questionable, politically insane and militarily reckless.

THE WAY FORWARD

Through Boko Haram in Nigeria, Al Shabaab in Somalia and more recently Ansar Udine in Mali, the oil rich Gulf Arab religious zealots - who are unable to practice their own Wahabi Islam (westernized and socialite rulers there hold firm control of Wahabi activities) - export un-Islamic and deadly literature to destinations across Africa, destroying the world’s original cultures and traditions in that process. Printed in Pakistan and paid for by Arab money, some of these materials make their way to Western inner cities, radicalizing impressionable young men and women who are born to immigrant families from Africa and Asia. If this proxy and covert activities by the petrol-dollars of the Gulf Arabs are allowed to persist, others in Africa will follow suit. Already Kenya and Ethiopia are shaky and vulnerable.

Africa’s culture and way of life must be protected from Arab influence. The fragile African governments were never able to adequately control the inflow of dubious Arab petrol-cash trickling into the continent over the past couple of decades. But the harm it causes to society becomes obvious when serious problems occur in the system or when the states are weakened by corruption and bad governance. And with the increased militancy and the Arab anger inside Arabia itself, the spillage into Africa will increase dramatically in the coming years.

I believe that the military campaign alone will not solve the problems caused by radical Islam in Somalia and elsewhere. Without denying them social space within the population, squeezing the militant groups out of urban areas and into the countryside is a strategy which is a nonstarter, as is happening in Somalia at present. Al Shabaab’s militias have honed their skills for many years while hiding from the Ethiopians in the hills and other remote places, and in the absence of social programs in the major towns, they would just hang around to buy more time for the international community to get exhausted and finally give up.

After liberating major cities from terrorist organisations, cultural rehabilitation projects must follow immediately and the society’s original way of life restored quickly. Musicians, singers, artists and journalists should be protected and supported; in fact they should be far more protected than the politicians. And to get a firm grip and be on top of the situation, ‘Social Development’ departments must be the priority for the new governments in the Islamic-militant-disturbed countries, and it should have the largest budget after the security services, at least for the next ten years.

Meanwhile, the international community should take urgent notice of the similarities between the simmering conflict in Mali and that of Somalia if we are to save the rich tradition of this music loving society before it is too late. The striking similarities between Somalia and Mali, if ignored, will result in our peril.

And finally, with the London Conference on Somalia held earlier this year, Britain has stolen the limelight from the US. And the good news is that ‘African blood and Western money’, as the
Guardian put it, seem to be working in Somalia, at least on the military front. But to bring to a successful conclusion to the Somalia quagmire and to other African hot-spots, the leading individual countries such as Turkey and Britain should maintain their independence from the toothless United Nations in directing their policies for ‘the Somalia Stabilization Program.

And while ECOWAS, the Economic Community of West Africa, has stronger capacity than their counterparts in East African, urgent logistical and material support should be extended to those countries in order to confront the new Shabaab in Mali before they destabilize the West coast of the continent.

* BROUGHT TO YOU BY PAMBAZUKA NEWS

* Please do not take Pambazuka for granted! Become a Friend of Pambazuka [2] and make a donation NOW to help keep Pambazuka FREE and INDEPENDENT!

* Please send comments to editor[at]pambazuka[dot]org [3] or comment online at Pambazuka News [4].

* The author, Somali Analyst Mr. Abdul Ghelleh can be directly reached via e-mail: abdulghelleh[at]gmail.com

**Categories:** Features [5]
**Issue Number:** 605 [6]
**Article Image Caption | Source:** A F

*The author, Somali Analyst Mr. Abdul Ghelleh can be directly reached via e-mail: abdulghelleh[at]gmail.com*

**Article Summary:**
Islamic militancy has taken root in various parts of Africa over the past decade. This problem will not be solved by the US-driven war on terror. The roots of this virulent streak of Islam need to be understood and tackled.

**Category:** Governance [7]

**Source URL:** https://www.pambazuka.org/node/82945

**Links:**
[1] https://www.pambazuka.org/taxonomy/term/8222
[3] mailto:editor@pambazuka.org