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Salafi in Virtual and Physical Reality

PHILIP HALLDÉN

Many of the people who have been arrested around the world during the past two years suspected of being members of al-Qa'ida or affiliated organizations, have taken pride in belonging to the so-called Salafi movement. The designation may cause some confusion in view of the fact that the term 'Salafi' is also known, in older academic parlance, to denote a school of thought associated with 'modernist' reformers such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-1897) and Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905). These reformers, if ever mentioned at all, are likely to be shunned by the contemporary Salafist. Today, 'Salafism' is more often used in reference to a quite different brand of Islamic thought and practice, a brand that is practically identical to what has otherwise been known as 'Wahhabism', i.e. the form of Sunni Islam that constitutes the 'state religion' of Saudi Arabia. A second source of confusion is that while the adherents of this variety of Salafism are united in their respect for Ibn Hanbal (d. 855), Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) and Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792), they have come to disagree on important points and issues, particularly on the issue of jihad. The Salafi 'movement' is comprised of several more or less contradictory wings and tendencies, even within the borders of Saudi Arabia. To put it simply, a distinction should be made between a jihad-oriented wing and other more 'moderate' wings. Al-Qa'ida and its supporters represent the former tendency, while various groups that advocate order and stability instead of revolutionary jihad—although they may vary in their position towards the Saudi regime—make up the latter tendency.

The differences and disagreements within Salafism have come to the fore during the last two years and more acutely than ever after the suicide attacks in Riyadh on 12 May 2003 which killed more than thirty people including eight Americans, and the attack that devastated the Muhaya compound in Riyadh on 9 November 2003. Deep rifts within Saudi society have come to the surface. The May attack revealed, not surprisingly, the existence of an active jihad-oriented network within the borders of Saudi Arabia. Many of those suspected of being involved were arrested or killed in clashes with Saudi police and security forces during the summer. The campaign also affected intellectuals who provided the jihadists with ideological support, including some rather prominent ulama. Two of the most well-known among those arrested were sheikh Ali bin Khudayr al-Khudayr (b. ca. 1955) and sheikh Nasir bin Hamad al-Fahd (b. 1968), both disciples of the late sheikh Hamoud bin Uqla al-Shuaybi, the most famous and uncompromising supporter of Taliban and al-Qa'ida in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia until his death in January 2002.

The campaign also had repercussions on the Internet. Both al-Khudayr and al-Fahd had until May 2003 maintained their own personal websites where their articles and *fatwas* were available (<http://www.alkhoder.com> and <http://www.al-fhd.com>). Since May neither has functioned properly and has obviously not been updated.¹ But perhaps more important to the internet based al-Qa'ida-supporters was when a hitherto unknown man called Yusuf al-Ayyiri was shot dead in the northern region of Hail after trying to escape from a security checkpoint by car. The incident was re-



<http://www.alneda.com>, viewed 17 July 2002

ported by international media where there was much speculation that al-Ayyiri was carrying a letter from Usama bin Laden on his dead body. Al-Ayyiri's 'martyrdom' was widely discussed on Arabic mailing lists (*muntadayat*) on the internet.² An audio recording of what amounts to his 'famous last words', speaking about the duty of jihad and comparing the present-day situation with the era of the crusades and the Mongol invasions of the 13th century, was also available on some of these lists.³ The case in point is that Yusuf al-Ayyiri was subsequently identified as the secret webmaster of 'Alneda.com' or *Markaz al-Dirasat wa al-Buhuth al-Islamiyya* (The Center for Islamic Studies and Research). If true, the incident marks a turning point in the history of 'al-Qa'ida' on the Web. The website formerly known as 'Alneda.com' has been one—if not the most—sought-after of all the sites believed to be 'affiliated' with al-Qa'ida. The original domain (<http://www.alneda.com>) was lost already in July 2002 and it has sometimes been assumed that it disappeared. The site, which constantly changed its web addresses, continued to function until May 2003. Its webmaster was able to keep the site alive by 'hijacking' subdirectories on other websites. However, the physical death of Yusuf al-Ayyiri at the end of May coincided with what now seems to have been the final 'virtual death' of the website. One cannot be completely certain about the matter; disinformation and rumours are easily planted and spread in the ongoing 'netwar'. The important thing so far is that the website formerly known as 'Alneda.com' has not resurfaced since its disappearance in May. What happened in Saudi Arabia in the aftermath of the bombings in May most certainly amounts to serious losses for the jihad-oriented Salafi network in the Arabian Peninsula as well as on the Internet.

The more recent November attack as well as the clashes in Mecca and other places between security forces and suspected militants prior to this attack are evidence that the battle against terror in the land of Islam's holiest places is not over.⁴

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Notes

1. Most of the material that was available at <http://www.alkhoder.com> before the arrests in May was filed electronically by the author.
2. Filed material from <http://forum.fwaed.net>, <http://www.palsm.com>, <http://alsaha2.fares.net>, <http://www.qal3ah.biz> etc. at the beginning of June, 2003.
3. Realplayer-files downloaded from <http://alsaha2.fares.net> and <http://www.qal3ah.biz> on June 12, 2003.
4. There are indications that the perpetrators of the 9 November attack may be losing supporters, even among hardliners such as sheikh Ali bin Khudayr al-Khudayr. One week after the attack the sheikh, who has been in detention since late May, suddenly appeared in person on Saudi television apologizing for some of the fatwas which supposedly incited violence in the past. The matter immediately spurred lively discussions among the sheikh's fans and followers on the web. Nasir al-Fahd has also recanted previous statements (see (<http://www.arabnews.com/?page=1§ion=0&article=35473&d=23&m=11&y=2003> (in English); http://www.alwatan.com.sa/daily/2003-11-23/first_page/first_page01.htm (in Arabic)).