

AN OVERVIEW OF THE BA'THIST TENDENCIES IN MAURITANIA
c. NOVEMBER, 2010

Introduction

In Mauritania, as in other Arab states, there were historically two strands of Ba' thist politics. Ba' thism were a minor factor in Mauritanian politics until roughly 1991, though their membership continues to cycle throughout Mauritanian society. From around 1981 till the present there has been a Syrian strain and from the early 1970s a stronger Iraqi variant, each supported by the embassies, cultural, student and aid programs of Syria and Iraq, with considerable variation over time. Mauritania was sufficiently far from either of the Ba' thist states that the influence of the Ba' th has been weak historically. Small numbers of Mauritanian students traveled to Syria for higher education in the mid to late 1970s; even smaller numbers of soldiers and technicians were trained in Iraq during the 1980s. The Iraqi strain was by far the most influential, well organized and consequential of the two and enjoyed more official patronage. Both strains continue to exist, though they are of limited force organizationally.

Origins of the Syrian and Iraqi Ba'th Trends in Mauritania

A Mauritanian student, like all others entering a Syrian university, would meet with a Syrian intelligence officer on enrollment. He would have his personal information collected and was usually offered membership in the Ba' th Party. According to those familiar with the times, perhaps 20% of Mauritanian students returned from Syria committed Ba' thists with others having joined out of passing interest. The majority of those who became party members did so to enjoy privileges while in Syria. On arrival home in Mauritania, these youths would go to work setting up the pyramidal clandestine structures characteristic of Ba' thist organization -- usually among secondary school boys. These Ba' thist cells grew rapidly in Mauritania's secondary schools at the same time that Iraqi Ba' thists,

Nasserists, communists and black nationalists (FLAM) were recruiting and pollinating. As Ba 'this often do, the Mauritanian Ba 'this were secretive and kept their membership secret. It is well known, though, that the Syrian set was poorly organized and lacked active patronage from the Syrian government until Ould Tayya began to normalize relations with Israel in 1995. Syrian interest in the Mauritanian situation peaked around 1999. They laid low during the purges of the middle 1980s and even lower during the purges and racial violence in the early 1990s. Their active membership never grew beyond the low thousands and they ceased to function as an organized group by the time of the Ould Tayya "transition" in the early 1990s; they were always outnumbered by the Iraqi Ba 'thists and were almost exclusively civilians. Their membership moved off into other directions, joining the establishment opposition groups (the RFD, UFP, etc.) or the Islamist tendency, as well as the PRDS. Though their organized activities are generally obscure Syrianist Ba 'this have been active in the cultural and social sphere in recent years, though not as Ba 'this per se. Mauritanians that have studied in Syria note that their debriefers knew the names of various Mauritanian tribes and clans, often knowing a visitor's family background from his last name alone. What official state support exists for the Ba 'this comes through the embassy, though it is vastly limited financially. These contacts, according to sources, come from the Syrian embassy at Nouakchott (which is soon to have a cultural center) and perhaps the various Syrian "workers" round the country. In recent years, especially since the 2005-2008 transition and democratization, the Syrian Ba 'th has made some forward moves, due to increasing interest from Damascus. In August 2010 local Ba 'this in the Syrian track were invited to a reception at the Syrian embassy where they met with Abdullah al-Ahmar (Assistant Secretary General of the Syrian Ba 'th) during his visit to Nouakchott. Al-Ahmar praised Ould Abdel Aziz's decision to break rela-

tions with Israel, saying that since doing this Ould Abdel Aziz has "came to open an area of convergence between the people and the government, as well as between Mauritania and other Arab countries, and established also strong relations between the Baath Arab Socialist Party and "the Party for the Union of the Republic [sic]". He also noted cooperation agreements in line in the cultural field especially. (Other, minor, political parties voiced their support for Bashar al-Assad in the month of his visit.)¹

The Mauritians who traveled to Iraq in the 1970s and 1980s were generally military men. There were perhaps tens at first and hundreds of by the time relations between Mauritania and Iraq turned sour after the first Gulf War. The first Ba' thi cells, according to their internal history (*Nidal al-Ba' th fi al-quṭr al-Muritani*),² was founded in 1968 and officially organized in 1972. The Ba' this themselves divide their existence into two periods: the foundation (1968-1982) and the deployment (1982-1990). Little details circulate about the period from 1968-70; most information available focuses on activities from the middle-1970s onward. The Ba' th had set out in earnest in the early 1970s, with the help of the Iraqi embassy, though its first clandestine congress did not take place until 1976, which established its posture towards the Syrian tendency, the Western Sahara and created its hierarchical structure. Programmatically, the early Ba' th was focused on Arabization in educational and cultural policy, nationalizing Mauritania's iron ore mines, ending slavery and increasing workers' rights (relative to foreign workers); they resisted efforts by the Ould Daddah regime to co-opt them, though they spent much time strategizing how to infil-

¹ "Comrade Alahmar to *Alsafir* Mauritanian Newspaper: Emphasis on The Restoration of Rights by Supporting The Culture of Resistance" *The Baath Message*, No. 65, 12 August, 2010. Damascus, National Leadership of the Arab Socialist Baath Party, English edition.

² *Nidal al-Ba' th fi al-quṭr al-Muritani* was published anonymously and circulated on both pro-Syrian and pro-Iraqi Ba' thi websites. It runs twenty-three pages in Arabic.

trate the Mauritanian People's Party and state institutions. After the 1978 coup, they began activities aimed at expanding among the Haratine, even distributing a pamphlet titled "The Ba 'th and the Haratine in Mauritania,"³ demanding that the junta create an anti-slavery law, writing that "Arabism is not reliant on race or color." (One should note the appeal of Arabist ideologies to many Haratine leaders.) In these early stages, the Ba 'this participated in joint efforts with the UFP and Nasserite factions. The Iraqi Ba 'thi clique's leader was Mohammed Yehdih Ould Breideleil, who was jailed in the 1982 purge (he was arrested for the first time in 1970) and released in 1984. A journalist by training, he is well known as the intellectual leader of the Ba 'thi strain in Mauritania. Often expressing himself in excellent French, he merges the cerebral and political personalities of both 'Aflaq and Bitar. He was a constant in many of the Ba 'thi transformations overtime, serving in multiple posts for brief periods in several governments.

In the early 1980s, Mauritians who had been sent to Iraq for training when the Iran-Iraq War began were offered a chance to fight on the Iraqi side, which some did, but the majority returned to Mauritania. The party faithful concentrated their efforts at infiltrating the military governments from 1978-1984 and some of its members gained positions near the junta after the volley of coups. What success they had were checked by suspicion and repression. Ould Breideleil was Information Minister under Ould Salek's junta; he was reprimanded for playing Qur'an recitations in mourning of Houari Boumediene's death instead of government programming. Ould Haidallah had appointed Ould Breideleil as the governor of Trarza in 1980 and then as secretary general of the presidency and

³ Included in a collection of Arabic-language communiqués and tracts on the party's attitude toward slavery and the Haratine, titled *al-Ba'th wal Haratin fi Muritaniyya* published anonymously and circulated from the late 1990s through the 2000s, and eventually on the Internet. The majority of the documents are from the 1980s.

dismissed him (and the rest of the civilian cabinet) after the 1981 coup attempt. Ould Haidallah had some of these Ba ' this harassed after the 1982 coup attempt; he promoted others (Ould Haidallah repressed Nasserists as well). From then on the military juntas understood the Iraqi Ba ' this, in general, as a potential threat to the regime, given their conspiratorial nature and external links; Ould Haidallah even so far as to have a group of them imprisoned for espionage in 1982 and 1983 (55 in total), including several women. These men were pardoned by Ould Tayya, who, as an Arab nationalist himself, had great admiration for Saddam Hussein and sought (and got) extensive financial and military assistance from Baghdad, especially after 1989. The extent of Mauritanian-Iraqi cooperation was such that Ould Tayya closed the Iranian embassy in a show of support (and it was not re-opened until the last decade). In 1986-1987, Iraqi Ba ' this had infiltrated the officer corps as well as the enlisted ranks by this time and Ould Tayya saw them as possible coup-plotters, as a result of the economic crisis and popular support for Arab nationalist tendencies. Some were banned from the army in 1987. In 1988, with Saddam's "green light," he expelled and banned the remaining Ba ' this from the military as a whole, 417 in all. Banned from the military, these Ba ' this went took their cells underground. Iraqi military assistance and popularity grew in the late 1980s, though, the Ba ' this founded favor with Ould Tayya in the education and cultural fields, to the great irritation of black Africans, who rightly saw these men as fervent Arabizers.

Crises and Recruitment

As tensions with Senegal rose, Ould Tayya again came together with the Ba ' thists who saw the crisis as an opportunity to push the Arabist agenda, while Ould Tayya used the Ba ' thists to mobilize against the black African population. They gained important posts in the ministries by 1990, including execu-

tive secretary of the CMSN (Ould Breideleil) and are thought responsible for the sacking of some others . They used this period of favor to agitate the population and armed forces against blacks and they helped to set the tone of much of the government's attitude during the crisis; the government White Paper, issued at the end of the 1989 hostilities, displayed heavy Ba ' thist influence and rhetoric, laying claim to the southern bank of the Senegal River and repudiating the Senegalese. This had lasting impact on radical and racial politics in Mauritania; this experience helps to originate the use of "Ba ' thist" as an epithet and euphemism for racist Moors heard from FLAM and like-minded groups. (Another factor that helped intensify Mauritanian-Iraqi cooperation was a perception that the other Arab states were uninterested at best, notably Morocco's perceived support for Senegal in the border conflict, during which King Hassan II called Senegal "brotherly" and Mauritania "friendly," to the Mauritanians' great insult).

The Ba ' this' internal history attributes their success in this period first to "the flexibility of politics in this period, and openness of the various forces had a significant impact in enabling the Ba ' this to penetrate some of their arrangements, or at least to access their supporters and structures, thus opening the door for them to listen to the speeches of the Ba ' th." Secondly, it notes the "greater role" of "the national media of Ba ' thi Iraq, this, as well as the personal impact of Comrade Mujahid Saddam Hussein, Secretary General of the Party, and his assignment of moral and material support to the Mauritanian people during the crisis of 1989".

This was their golden age when "the Ba ' th was on the tongues of nearly everyone"; they recruited large numbers and enjoyed semi-official sanction. The importance of Iraqi aid and frequent visits from various Iraqi ministries put them in the shadow of Ould Tayya's close allies. According to a contemporary who at-

tended a meeting of one of the clandestine Ba ' th cells in Nouakchott at the time described the atmosphere: a youth (as young as 14 and as old 17) would be invited to a meeting by an elder (a 19-20 year old); they would meet at the home of one of the members, the lights out and the shades pulled; they would read aloud from the writings of Michel ' Aflaq (especially Fi Sabil al-Ba ' th), newspapers or speeches (by Saddam) gathered from the Iraqi cultural center; they would discuss the progress of the Iran-Iraq War, Palestine and other topics and perhaps eat; they would then disperse. The Ba ' this caused irritation among traditional religious and tribal leaders by recruiting girls; they did not pioneer this, though the Nasserists generally had more female members. The meetings were always held in secret and were always in small groups, perhaps fewer than ten. Such groups existed in many of the larger towns, though they often had to compete with Syrian Ba ' this and Nasserists (who enjoyed Libyan patronage). These cells would often get into fist fights with one another and Nasserists, as well as FLAM supporters when provoked. Many members of the political class today circulated in the "progressive" Arabist and leftist parties during this period. This changed when Iraq invaded Kuwait; though average Mauritani-ans supported the Iraqis, Ould Tayya found himself under pressure from the Gulf and France to move away from Iraq under the threat of aid cuts and exclusion. Because the Ba ' th had become dependent on Ould Tayya's tolerance and the Iraqi relationship, their popularity and influence dissipated in the wake of the war and was further devastated when the Iraqi embassy closed in 1994. They lost their influence in the ministries and they did not organize into a single entity after the "transition" to multiparty processes in 1992. Ould Breideleil briefly defected to Ould Tayya's PRDS, and some Ba ' this took cover in the ruling party achieving marginal security. Some formed their own colonies there or elsewhere. (These would survive the Ould Tayya years, not without repression, and some of them

have ended up in Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz's party (the Union for the Republic) or block, including Devaly Ould Cheine who served as a minister of state under Ould Taya and who fled to the Canaries during the 1988 roundups, arrested in the 2003 events for supporting Ould Haidallah.) Many of those in the small Ba 'thi underground filtered into other parties and movements, especially the Islamist tendency. A group of Ba 'this defected to the PRDS in 1993; such moves occurred periodically throughout the 1990s. By the end of the decade there was no coherent and popular Ba 'thi movement in Mauritania and this generally remains the case.

The Ba'th in Opposition Politics

Those who kept on as Ba 'this in the 1991-2005 period formed the minor Parti d'Avant-Garde Nationale (Attalia) under Ould Breideleil, though the party was banned in 1999, after criticizing the government for opening relations with Israel; in the same month Ould Tayya severed diplomatic relations with Iraq. The internal narrative about the 1990s is one of "physical and psychological torture," "elements of the leadership slumping toward the bosom of the ruling regime, a decision rejected privately by the third and fourth generation," whose members took clandestine roles in other political parties and movements. Most interestingly, they admit that the party was unprepared for the transition to the multi-party system and suffer "difficult circumstances" as a result. The 1991-2005 period was generally one of light co-optation and repression. On multiple occasions they were rounded up, arrested and jailed in large numbers, especially in 1995, though they released a year later. Ould Breideleil was arrested with in 1996, when he was secretary general of parliament, with several other Ba 'this and acquitted. In 1997 they joined the Front of Opposition Parties (FPP), with Ould Boulkheir's APP and several other opposition parties. They were aggressively opposed to the opening of relations with Israel in 1999; that led to more

repression and their being banned. They again reorganized (unofficially) into Nahoud, headed by Mohamed Ould Abdellahi Ould Eyye and agitated around the 2003 invasion of Iraq, which led to still more repression and arrests for forming illegally and because of Ould Tayya's now closer relations with the United States. This was a key period in the early stages of Ould Tayya's ultimate downfall and the anti-Ba ' thi crackdown came around the same time as Saleh Ould Hanena's attempted coup; some have noted that an important component in Ould Hanena's maneuver was a tank unit that included many alleged Ba ' this and used Iraqi tanks. This is the dominant narrative among many in the west but bears clarification.

Ould Hanena himself was not and is not a Ba ' thi. And the cabal around him was not motivated by deep loyalty to Saddam Hussein. In the moment, Ould Tayya tried to play the coup with the terrorism card, using it to justify crackdowns on Islamists (Ould Hanena also had links to Islamists, especially the Ikhwanis who backed him for the presidency in 2007) and other opposition elements -- as well as Ould Hanena's Oulad Nasser tribe -- though he had started much of this before. He did arrest Ba ' this following the plot but the core group were not Ba ' this; and by this time practically all of the Ba ' thists had been purged from the armed force and soldiers were fired on suspicion of just knowing Ba ' this. It is unlikely that the tank unit mentioned included Ba ' this, despite the Iraqi origin of its hardware. Important Ba ' this were part of Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidallah's presidential bids in 2003 and 2007 (Ould Haidallah is not a Ba ' thi). When he was arrested after the election, so were these Ba ' this who had supported his candidacy. Their motive for supporting Haidallah was not ideological, though; they were opposed to Ould Tayya and had no interest in Ould Daddah, the other major candidate and out of tribal solidarity (note that many of the Ba ' th's prominent leaders hail from the north of the country, where its many of its ear-

liest cells were established (notably at Atar, Nouadhibou, Akjoujt and Zouerate). In any case, the political motivations behind the 2003 movement were mostly insider disagreements, rather than ideological ones. And it should be noted that Ould Tayya played the coup as a move by Islamists and Ba ' this as a way of strengthening western, especially American, support and much western analysis and media attention took this as fact; the men involved in 2003 plot were themselves generally of the Nasserist bent with important support from Islamists.

Ideology and Appeal

It deserves mention that many of the youth who had been Ba ' thi foot soldiers and recruiters in the 1980s filtered into the Islamist groups in the 1990s and 2000s. The nexus was not just Israel; the Islamist discourse touches the same pieces of Arab identity that Ba ' thism does, especially in the Mauritanian context. For these activists, Arabism and Islamism defend and promote similar components of Arab-Muslim identity and communitarian tendencies; the key difference is in the Ba ' thi emphasis on the Arab nation as opposed to the Islamic one. This is not to conflate either ideology but to speak to the important overlap in world view between Arabism and Islamism that existed in the minds of many Ba ' this turned Islamists. Further, from a practical standpoint Islamist and Ba ' thi activists often have common cause in education and cultural policies, both favoring Arabization. At the same time, though, this is not the general flow of things: Ba ' this generally tend to be secular in outlook, Nasserists somewhat less so. Those drawn to the Arabist tendency without a secularist predisposition often select into the Nasserist camp, which has no set dogma where religion is concerned in the way the Ba ' th does. Furthermore, the internal discourse among many Mauritanian Ba ' this speaks of a "strategic alliance" with "progressive forces," the parties of the historic and recent left and their efforts

to influence state policy indirectly through other factions, their "flexibility in dealing with political partners". The Ba 'this' occasional alliance with smaller Islamist factions speaks to this outlook.

In the post-2008 period Sawab, a small Ba 'thi party of the Iraqi trend, had supported the coup and Ould Abdel Aziz's candidacy for president. In early 2009, Ould Abdel Aziz's campaign broke contact with them; their leader, Abdessalam Ould Horma then announced his support for Ahmed Ould Daddah that February. Ould Breideleil is one of the party's chief ideologues. Sawab generally operates with the Nationalist Islamic Action Front, a coalition of small Arab nationalist parties, which includes Nasserists and Islamists (including Ould Henena's party), with some support from Libya. Sawab focuses much of its efforts on education and cultural policy; the phasing out of French with Arabic and more attention for national languages. They support aggressive anti-slavery laws and educational programs for freed slaves. Their rhetoric is conciliatory and multicultural; their youth recruits include many "arabisants," students educated in Arabic who often feel themselves to be at a disadvantage because of the privileges held by their "francisant" peers. Many of these young activists were involved in the language protests in the high schools and at Nouakchott University in the early summer, which at times devolved into violence. The party has been of use to Ould Abdel Aziz in helping to facilitate cooperation with Morocco and Libya, its chiefs (with others in the Nationalist coalition) making periodic visits to Rabat and Tripoli. The party's opponents have labeled it bigoted and chauvinistic, especially in terms of its positioning on the language issue and the refugee question. Its links to the historical Ba 'th make many suspicious of its motivations and ambitions; at the same time two decades of anti-Ba 'th messaging between Ould Tayya and other ideological and political tenancies make it difficult for the party to reach out to the mainstream. On the one hand, the last three years has

made the populist elements of its platform redundant (as with the Islamist parties); what remains are language questions and questions of social equality, especially where the Haratine and black African populations are concerned. These are controversial among all segments of the politically relevant elite and the middle classes.

In particular, their fears of Francophone influence in the country are often perceived as stand ins for "négrification" and a desire to maintain and further cement Arab supremacy over the country's institutions. At the same time, Francophone (and Francophile) Arabs view this as a threat to a beneficial status quo that functions as a bargain between Arab and black elites, in which the state holds up an Arab identity while the widespread use of French allows both Arabs and black Africans access to centers of rent distribution, employment and status. And among many black Mauritians, the argument in favor of "Arabic and the national languages" over French as a "neutral" lingua franca (as it functions in multiple west African states) is frequently seen as little more than code for Arab dominance. Yet the Ba' this are not unique in their approach to the language question: this is the position of Tawassoul (the Ikhwan) and the bulk of other nationalist or Islamist parties in the country, and one that is popular among a large chunk of the educated youth.

National identity is an area of strong contestation in Mauritania, thus presenting the radical movements the modest ideological movements with an ideological and social outlet and basis for recruitment. Language and race (and the way they relate to social status and mobility) are major motivators behind ideological politics in Mauritania. The "Haratine question," for instance, is a subject of hot contention between black and Arab nationalists in Mauritania. The Haratine compose perhaps 40% of the country's population. The descendants of black

slaves, they "belong" to Arab tribes and speak Hassaniyah as their native tongue. The few Haratine political leaders who have come to prominence have done so in coalition with larger parties, generally with their foot in the anti-slavery camp. At a mass level, the major political parties often rely on their leaders' ability to leverage tribal connections to turn out large numbers of related Haratine voters. In black nationalist discourse, the Haratine are "blacks," by their color and their origins; in Arabist thinking they are Arabs by culture, civilization and language. The appeal of Nasserism and Ba ' thism to some Haratine is that these transcendent ideologies deliberately dispel color and social discrimination against them within the dominant culture.

For the radical Hartani, mainstream parties and movements give lip service to emancipation but act to maintain the status quo. The radical movements do away whole sale with the the problem, rejecting gradualism and eliminate the numbers game that plays a tug of war over the Haratine in order to justify or legitimize the political ambitions of the black African and Arab elites. In reality the radical nationalist tendency has an effect to play into that very mix by accepting its terms and defining politics in terms of (Arab) identity, arguably with the Haratine as a decisive element in the struggle. Among politically active Haratine, there is a pragmatism that tends away from radicalism or dogma and attempts to leverage all of these forces toward further emancipation. For that reason, the Ba ' th has been somewhat less successful than the Nasserist tendency in recruiting Haratine. Additionally, Haratine leaders spend much time trying to get elements of the religious establishment to more forcefully reject "Islamic" justifications for the continuation slavery, and as a result the Ba ' th's secularism make it somewhat less useful as an organizing or galvanizing principle; on top of that, Nasserism enjoys broader sympathy among the Arab politi-

cal class and is thus more successful as a means of making common cause for a marginalized group.

Three North African Ba'thist Parties

The chart below provides brief profiles of the Ba 'thist parties in three North African countries (Tunisia, Mauritania and Sudan), the names and pictures of their leaders and party insignias. Information about Ba 'th parties in Morocco, Algeria, Egypt and Libya active since 2000 could not be found at the time of writing.

North African Ba'th Parties

SELECT NORTH AFRICAN BA'TH PARTIES: Tunisia, Mauritania, Sudan

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Country	Party	Orientation	Key Leadership Figures	Image [Leader]	Image [Party]	Notes
Tunisia	Ba'th Movement/حركة البعث	Arab nationalist, socialist; Iraqi Ba'thist, Saddamist	Othmane Belhadj Amor (Secretary General) Boudjemma Danani (Asst. Sec. Gen.) El-Hadi Methlouthi (Official studies/culture)			Operated clandestinely under Bourguiba and Ben Ali; persecuted and banned prior to January, 2011 uprising; first Ba'th cell founded among university students in 1959, participated in student, labor and human rights groups/movements in the late 1960s; especially focused on Arabization (promoting a "rational reading of the Arabo-Islamic heritage"); denied recognition in 1988; party headquarters were raided and confiscated by the government in 1993; officially recognized by interim government in January, 2011; first party constituent congress held 3-5 June, 2011 with eight point platform summary circulating; party leaders complain of exclusion from transitional government meetings, media and other outlets
Mauritania	Sawab Party/حزب الصواب	Arab nationalist; socialist; Iraqi (some Syrian influence) Ba'thist; Libyan links	Abdessalam Ould Horma (President) Mohammed Yehdih Ould Breideleil			Roots in the Mauritanian Ba'th student movement of the late 1960s (initially a combination of the Syrian and Iraqi tendencies with the Iraqi eventually becoming most dominant), which operated largely in secret until the early 1980s; strong presence in military (before 1980s and early 1990s purges) and among arabisants; tolerated especially during 1989-1991 and enjoyed support from Saddam Hussein's Iraq; evolved over several iterations in the 1990s under Ould Taya; persecuted in early 2000s for opposition to relations with Israel; current party founded in 2007 (?); formed pro-Qadhafi alliance with the Nasserist HATEM party and other Arab nationalist, Islamist parties in 2009/2010; heavily focused on language and education policy
Sudan	Sudanese Ba'th Party/حزب البعث العربي الاشتراكي القطر السوداني	Arab nationalist; socialist; Iraqi Ba'thist	Mohamed Ali Jadiena (Secretary General)			Roots in the Arab Nationalist Movement; historically persecuted and tolerated according to central government's relations with Iraq, tolerated following the first Gulf War; emphasis on religion as core component of Arab identity; active student movement; historically close to close to Iraq and Libya; historically an opposition party aligned with other northern progressive, unionist parties, such as the Sudanese Communist Party, Democratic Unionist Party, etc.; currently opposition party in [north] Sudan; the party suffered from major internal divisions during the 1990s (especially 1996-1997), splitting the party into four factions; national crises in 2000s Sudan led to some reconciliation but the party remains heavily weakened