

The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia

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• THE MIDDLE EAST •



Introduction

In the early 1740s, Muslim religious scholars in Mecca took note of a new doctrine coming out of Central Arabia.¹ The author of that doctrine, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, declared that Muslims had reverted to idolatry. Naturally, the religious scholars (*ulama*) took exception and wrote treatises attacking his views as well as his qualifications to comment on theology. As the controversy between Wahhabism and its critics unfolded, the latter formed an explanation for the 'errant' doctrine's origin that found its way into standard histories. It goes something like this.

Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab came from a remote backwater of Arabia where the tradition of scholastic learning was shallow. A handful of *ulama* studied at cosmopolitan centres like Cairo or Damascus and then returned to Najd (Central Arabia), where their knowledge was magnified by the depth of ignorance surrounding them among an illiterate population of townsmen and nomads. Members of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's lineage, including his grandfather, father and brother, belonged to this unsophisticated but earnest cluster of *ulama*. As long as they followed the lead of more learned colleagues in Syria and Egypt, the townsmen of Najd benefited from their guidance on ritual, family law and property transactions. Sheikh

Muhammad followed the family tradition of religious study, but he misunderstood passages in the Qur'an and the Prophet's tradition (*Sunna*), leading him to break with the mainstream of Muslim thought. Some of the more fanciful descriptions of his life stem from an effort to depict him as a deviant thinker. For example, an early nineteenth-century biography reports that he spent a number of years studying in Iranian towns, which would have been centres of Shiite learning as opposed to the Ottoman Empire's tradition of Sunni learning. Perhaps the author wished to imply that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab had absorbed heretical (from an Ottoman viewpoint) tendencies from Iran's Shiite scholars. Some Muslim authors averred that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's views were not the result of an innocent intellectual mistake but an intentional distortion of Islam that suited his thirst for power. Thus, he considered genuine Muslims to be infidels, whose life, property and honour were fair game for his and the Saudi dynasty's expansionist wars. He was able to stir up religious enthusiasm because he was living in the midst of ignorant nomads, easily swayed by a clever preacher and eager to plunder settlements and towns. Apart from the obviously tendentious character of this view, it is utterly mistaken about the relationship between Arabian nomadic tribes and the Wahhabi movement, which in fact regarded nomads as ignorant barbarians in need of religious instruction.²

Of course, the Wahhabis have a very different view of their own history. They might encapsulate it in a Prophetic tradition where Muhammad said, 'Islam first appeared as a stranger and will one day return as a stranger.' By this is meant that when Muhammad first preached in seventh-century Mecca, the idea that people owed all worship and devotion to one God was utterly foreign to the Arabs. Islam was not merely strange. It was contrary to the beliefs, customs, mentality and desires of Muhammad's audience. After years of courageous and determined effort, Muhammad gained many followers, forged them into a community and mobilized them to prevail in a political and military struggle for supremacy in Arabia. But, according to the Hadith, Muhammad foretold a time when Islam would become as alien to mankind as it had been when he began his mission. Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab believed that he lived during such a time. And it was not merely a matter of finding lax adherence among the rustic inhabitants of his native Najd, for he travelled to and spent time in the cosmopolitan Holy Cities, Mecca and Medina, the latter especially renowned as a centre of religious

learning that attracted pupils and scholars from the breadth of the Muslim world, from Morocco to the East Indies. Wherever he went, he found that people had lapsed into religious ignorance, *jahiliyya*, a barbaric state wherein they did not recognize their violation of the imperative to devote all worship to God alone.³ Sheikh Muhammad concluded that Islam was as much a stranger in his time as it had been eleven centuries earlier when God had first revealed the Qur'an. His call (*da'wa*), the essence of the Wahhabi mission, was to revive pure devotion of worship to God alone. For Muslims who agree with this account, 'Wahhabism' is merely a rebirth of Islam at the end of a period of decadence. The paradigm of religious decline and revival is a common one in Muslim thought. In this respect, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab conformed to a cultural model of a reformist preacher. Moreover, his correspondence and the Wahhabi chronicles depict him as arriving at his convictions on his own, indeed, through inspiration, not under the influence of any teacher he encountered in his travels. The controversy between Wahhabis and other Muslims centres on his standing as an inspired reformer performing a necessary task or as an eccentric man whose deficient educational formation made him stray from the mainstream and form a sectarian movement.

Historians need not choose sides in the argument between Wahhabis and their foes. But historians love to argue and I might start some arguments with a new framework for making sense of Wahhabism. It is time to push past questions about its origins and the emphasis on its relationship to the Saudi dynasty, as significant as they are.⁴ Whatever historical forces caused its emergence, Wahhabism has been around long enough to make one wonder about the secrets of its endurance during a transformative phase of history. It is not merely a matter of dynastic support. True, the doctrine's initial establishment required that support because Wahhabism overturned an ancient tradition of religious learning and that was achieved, in part, by force. Many ulama left their homes in Najd and resettled in southern Iraq, where they incited Ottoman ulama to wage a propaganda war against the Wahhabi doctrine. In turn, Wahhabi sheikhs discouraged travel to Ottoman lands, whose inhabitants they deemed idolaters, and subjected visitors to close scrutiny for hints of doctrinal contamination. The uprooting of the old scholastic tradition and the quarantine on travel made it possible for Wahhabism to attain a monopoly on religious thought and practice in most of Najd. Thus, by the mid 1800s, the Wahhabi mission formed a regional religious

culture with its own doctrine, canon, leadership, cadre of ulama and centre of learning. Its dependence on dynastic power had diminished so that when Al Saud collapsed in the 1880s and 1890s, the mission did not collapse with it. True, Najd's new rulers did not make a show of supporting the doctrine; but they did not try to suppress it either. Wahhabism was not merely the dominant doctrine in Najd. It was practically the only one.

If Wahhabism isolated itself from the rest of the Muslim world and other Muslims regarded it as a heretical innovation, how did it attain so much influence outside Saudi Arabia in the twentieth century? A sequence of developments created an opening in the wall separating Wahhabis and other Muslims. In the late nineteenth century, an Islamic revivalist tendency appeared in the Arab East and India. The revivalists had much in common with the Wahhabis. Although not identical, these doctrinal cousins were dedicated to resisting western cultural influences, so differences were submerged and contacts cultivated. Most significantly, revivalists published works to revise Wahhabism's reputation in the eyes of the Muslim world. The next step in the rapprochement came in the first decades of the twentieth century when the founder of Saudi Arabia's modern kingdom, Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud, took steps to integrate his realm into regional and global political and economic systems. In pursuit of that policy, he suppressed the mission's most zealous current, employed non-Saudi Arabs as advisers and invited Americans to develop his land's reservoirs of petroleum. Wahhabi ulama disapproved of the foreigners' arrival but were powerless to block it. Ibn Saud's pragmatism and political independence at a time when European powers exercised direct rule over most Arab lands raised his kingdom's stature. During the same era, popular religious organizations such as the Muslim Brothers surfaced in Egypt and spread to other Arab countries, widening the revivalist niche that viewed Wahhabism with favour. In the 1960s and 1970s, Al Saud adopted an Islamic foreign policy and created religious institutions to proselytize abroad. In that effort, the Wahhabis joined hands with the Muslim Brothers and revivalist organizations in Pakistan. As a result of that alliance, Wahhabism reached new heights of influence far beyond the confines of its historic homeland. The anti-Soviet Afghan jihad of the 1980s represented the peak of Wahhabi-revivalist collaboration and triumph.

Throughout the decades of rapprochement between Wahhabism and Islamic revivalist movements, it seemed that the Wahhabi

mission's connection to the Muslim world was a one-way street, with Saudi ulama propagating the Najdi doctrine abroad and retaining its monopoly at home. But Saudi Arabia's integration into regional politics and its need for expatriate workers to manage the modern sector of its economy exposed it to the full range of Arab political and religious tendencies. Given the popularity of nationalist and leftist parties in the 1950s and 1960s, it made perfect sense to ally with conservative religious organizations like the Muslim Brothers. The decision to offer asylum to Muslim Brothers fleeing persecution at the hands of secular Arab regimes was part of an effort to consolidate the bastion of Islam against atheist currents. No one could have foreseen that the Muslim Brothers would successfully spread their ideas in the kingdom and erode Wahhabism's hegemony. As long as Muslim revivalists supported Al Saud, their doctrinal differences with Wahhabism could be muted and the extent of revivalist inroads into Saudi religious culture undetected. Wahhabism's soft spot was its political doctrine, which dictates obedience to a ruler unless he commands a believer to violate Islamic law. This puts Wahhabi religious scholars in the position of either defending rulers or offering quiet, behind the scenes criticism. Muslim revivalists have no compunction about openly denouncing rulers or even striving to depose them. The economic downturn of the 1980s and the infiltration of western culture soured many Saudi citizens' views of their rulers' leadership. Revivalist thought offered a platform for political dissent missing in Wahhabism. The alliance between doctrinal cousins shattered in 1990 when Riyadh responded to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait by requesting military assistance from the USA. The kingdom's erstwhile revivalist friends suddenly turned into sharp critics, accusing Al Saud of betraying Islam by inviting infidel troops to occupy the land of the holy places. Saudi dissidents, who had assimilated the revivalist ideology, echoed that criticism and accused the Wahhabi leadership as well of betraying Islam for the sake of an illegitimate dynasty. Dissidents preached to receptive ears at mosques and recordings of their sermons found a large market. Wahhabi hegemony faced its most serious challenge since the early nineteenth century. In the following decade, Wahhabi religious leaders tepidly defended Al Saud against the angry bromides of dissident preachers, confident of their popular backing.

The 11 September 2001 attacks on the USA led to intense scrutiny of Wahhabism and its global influence. The involvement of Saudi

citizens in the attacks and suspicions that Saudi institutions helped fund al-Qaeda led many to conclude that Wahhabism contributed to anti-western violence and therefore to call on the Saudi government to reduce its influence. But were Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda the fruit of Wahhabi schools in Saudi Arabia? How could that be the case when bin Laden considered Al Saud traitors who must be overthrown? In the autumn of 2001, a Wahhabi cleric appeared on a Saudi television news programme to explain why killing civilians is prohibited in Islam and why Osama bin Laden could not proclaim a jihad (that power is held by the sovereign). Young men called the station and defied the Wahhabi cleric: the 11 September attacks were part of a righteous jihad against the West; bin Laden was the 'commander of believers' and therefore perfectly justified in launching a jihad.

In 2003–2004, Saudi cities were the scene of a wave of suicide bombings, killings of westerners and gun battles between Saudi security forces and militants. Was this mayhem the outcome of revivalism's inroads in the kingdom, a sign of Wahhabism's diminished authority? Or were Wahhabis divided between loyalists to the dynasty and zealots who had jettisoned traditional political theory? In that event, we would be witnessing its fragmentation. Furthermore, members of Al Saud decided it might be time to trim Wahhabism's domination by holding a series of National Dialogues that included Shiites, Sufis, liberal reformers and professional women. At present, the indications are not good for true believers in Wahhabi doctrine. But as its history demonstrates, the doctrine has survived crises before. The question that history cannot answer is what will be Wahhabism's future.