WAHHABI DOCTRINE AND ITS DEVELOPMENT

David Commins
“There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God.” For centuries, this profession of faith provided the foundation for Muslim unity in the face of diverse popular religious customs such as seeking the intercession of holy men, paying respect to the graves of honored ancestors, and appealing to Sufi saints for spiritual blessings. Muslim theologians criticized popular customs as deviations from prescribed canonical prayers, but they also maintained that as long as one professed the faith and performed the ritual duties—prayer, charity, fasting, and the pilgrimage to Mecca—one counted as a Muslim. In 1740, an Arabian theologian named Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb (1702-1792) made a startling break with consensus by asserting that popular religious customs were inexcusable expressions of idolatry. His dissent sparked a controversy that has divided Muslims ever since.

The root of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s dissent lay in his bold claim that Muslims had forgotten the true meaning of “there is no god but God:” Not only all worship is owed to God, as all Muslims believe, but any word or action that implies worship for another creature makes one an idolater. Other theologians denied that seeking intercession and the like were acts of worship, but he insisted they were. He therefore felt compelled to call for the purification of religious life, which he declared had lapsed into the very same idolatrous “spiritual ignorance” the Prophet Muhammad combated a thousand years before.

In practical terms, Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s creed implied the excommunication of fellow Muslims. The Arabic term for excommunication, takfīr, has become familiar in the West because of its association with the extremist violence committed by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, whose theologians draw extensively from Wahhabi doctrine. Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s critics accused him of reckless, wrongful excommunication of Muslims. He deflected the accusation, maintaining that he carefully restricted excommunication to situations where individuals received a clear explanation of the meaning of monotheism and then rejected it.

Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb embarked on a mission to establish a domain of perfect worship, the elimination of idolatrous customs, obedience to divine law, and the exclusion of idolaters. At first, he pursued his mission by proselytizing, in accord with the customary Muslim path of calling (da’wa) to true belief. For the most part, other religious scholars condemned him. His critics coined the term “Wahhabi” to marginalize his message as the false notion of
a misguided rustic preacher. Of course, he rejected the Wahhabi label, and insisted he was reviving Islam’s true monotheism.

The Alliance with the Sa‘ūd clan

Critics were able to have him expelled from two Arabian towns before he found backing from the ruler of an oasis settlement—Muhammad ibn Sa‘ūd—giving birth to the alliance of Wahhabism and the Sa‘ūd clan. The alliance provided Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb the political support he needed to create a domain cleansed of idolatry and to expand the domain through expansionist warfare. After his death in 1792, religious leadership passed to his sons and then to later descendants who upheld Wahhabi theology and kept close ties with Saudi rulers.

From the 1740s to the early 1900s, Saudi political fortunes had their ups and downs. During periods of political strength, Wahhabi clerics used their monopoly over religious authority to construct a puritanical religious culture by suppressing dissent and excluding non-Wahhabi Muslims. Citing the religious duty to bear enmity toward infidels and friendship toward believers, Wahhabi clerics even tried to ban travel to neighboring lands such as Iraq, Syria, and Egypt, for fear that interaction with non-Wahhabi Muslims, whom they considered infidels, would lead to sympathy with them and their religious ideas. Wahhabism’s dependence on Saudi power meant that sustaining religious purity required a strong ruler. Consequently, Wahhabi clerics made obedience to the ruler a religious duty. This is in accord with the Sunni Muslim tradition that believers must obey a ruler who upholds Islam as long as a ruler does not command believers to violate Islamic law. But Wahhabism sets a high bar for “upholding Islam.” It requires a ruler to prohibit deviations from a strict definition of correct worship. It also requires a ruler to rigorously undertake the duty to “command right and forbid wrong,” a formula that envisions a society conforming to Wahhabism’s definition of right and wrong. Since the 1920s, conformity has been enforced by religious police with the authority to enforce gender segregation, the closure of shops and offices at prayer times, and public morality in general.

Dependence on a strong ruler to preserve religious purity has the paradoxical effect of requiring Wahhabi clerics to yield when a ruler decides that expediency calls for breaking with the clerics’ sense of right and wrong. At such moments, the clerics typically resist before reaching a compromise. That was the pattern when rulers first admitted infidel Westerners for the sake of developing oil resources in the 1930s, and when they introduced television and schools for girls in the 1960s. The clerics did their best to limit the impact of these changes. If the ruler would no longer support the ban on allowing infidels to live in Saudi Arabia, they would be confined to residential enclaves in order to minimize interaction that might cor-

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rupt Saudi ways. If the ruler insisted on allowing television, then the clerics would have censorship powers over programming. And if the ruler opened schools for girls, then the clerics would be put in charge of them.

**The Relationship with Shiism**

How to deal with Saudi Arabia’s Shiite minority is a question that pits political expediency against religious purity. Crafting a lasting compromise has proven elusive because of complexities embedded in history, theology, geography, and politics.

The division between Sunnis and Shiites goes back to early Muslim history. After the death of the Prophet, Muslims could not agree on how to choose leader. In Shiite belief, the Prophet made clear that leadership would pass to his kinsman Ali and his male descendants, known as “imams.” In Sunni belief, leadership is decided through consensus. Over time, theological differences deepened the gap between Shiites and Sunnis. Shiites came to believe that the imams possessed unique insight into the meaning of revelation, turning them into infallible guides to understanding and following God’s will. Shiism endows the imams with something akin to apostolic authority. By contrast, Sunnis vested authority to discern the meaning of revelation in the collective wisdom of religious scholars, deemed “the heirs of the Prophet.” In addition, Shiites believe that the imams have a special standing with God that allows them to intercede with God on behalf of faithful believers. Hence, Shiite religious life includes prayers seeking the intercession of the imams and celebrations honoring the imams. In the eyes of Wahhabis, it is all pure idolatry.

Apart from Wahhabism’s doctrinal enmity toward Shiism, geography and politics shape the Saudi government’s handling of the Shiite minority. Most Shiites live in the eastern province along the Persian Gulf—the precise location of the country’s enormous oil fields. The extraction and export of oil is essential to Saudi prosperity, therefore episodic Shiite unrest poses enormous risks to the national economy.

Furthermore, the Shiites of Saudi Arabia form part of a Shiite zone in the Persian Gulf region encompassing coreligionists in Bahrain, Kuwait, Iraq and Iran. The rise of modern national governments under Sunni rulers in all those countries, except Iran, has fostered a common sense of grievance among Shiites facing sectarian discrimination. In response, Shiite communities spawned transnational movements devoted to defending their interests.

Against this complex background, Saudi rulers have generally struck a compromise between Wahhabi doctrine that would suppress Shiism and the need for stability that would be threatened by implementing Wahhabi doctrine. The compromise allows Shiites to wor-
ship in their own mosques but forbids public celebration of their holy days. At the same time, the compromise gives the Wahhabi establishment free rein in mosque sermons and school classrooms to condemn Shiism as infidels secretly plotting to undermine Islam.

The oppressive religious climate translates into pervasive discrimination. Shiites find themselves at a disadvantage when seeking government jobs in an economy where the public sector is the main source of employment for Saudi nationals. Since the 1970s oil boom, the government has invested enormous sums to raise the material standard of living throughout the country, except in Shiite neighborhoods, towns, and villages. To make matters worse, after the Iranian revolution of 1979 brought to power an officially Shiite government, Saudi Shiites became suspected of harboring loyalty to a hostile foreign power. Consequently, Shiite protests in 1979 and 2011 were dismissed as subversion inspired by the Iranian government. The first set of protests led the Saudi government to pledge to address grievances, but the more recent unrest met sheer repression.

**Proselytizing**

What Western and Muslim critics call “the export of Wahhabism” is a pejorative term for proselytizing. In the 1700s, Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb dispatched epistles to religious scholars in Arabia, Syria, Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco, calling on them to support his mission. He encountered nearly unanimous rejection. **Wahhabi proselytizing** did not begin to find a receptive audience until the 1920s, when the founder of the modern Saudi state, ‘Abd al-Azīz ibn Sa‘ūd, subsidized the distribution of Wahhabi treatises by a publishing house in Egypt.

It was only in the 1960s that proselytizing in its current form took shape, largely thanks to political expediency. In response to the popularity and dynamism of secular Arab nationalist regimes, Saudi Arabia put together an international coalition of Muslim governments claiming to represent loyalty to Islam. Wahhabi clerics saw an opportunity to create organizations to spread their doctrine and they helped launch pan-Islamic organizations such as the Muslim World League and the World Assembly of Muslim Youth. These organizations converted Saudi Arabia’s oil revenues into religious influence by funding schools, mosques, charities, and medical clinics under the supervision of Saudi clerics and religious allies throughout the Muslim world and the Muslim diaspora in the West. The effect of Wahhabism’s spread has been to inject tensions between Muslims over the arrival of a doctrine that breeds a mood of intolerance where a pluralist spirit had long prevailed.

The proselytizing campaign has been amplified by cooperation with Islamic activists and organizations that do not embrace Wahhabi
doctrine but share its hostility toward the spread of Western customs and the call for solidarity to defend endangered Muslim communities in places such as Palestine and Kashmir. Transnational Muslim cooperation reached a high point when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979 in order to stabilize a shaky Marxist regime.

The governments of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan worked with activist groups to organize, fund, and equip Afghan rebels and Muslim volunteers to resist Soviet forces. The United States viewed Afghanistan through the lens of Cold War rivalry with the Soviet Union and threw its support to the cause. The Afghan war’s aftermath, however, saw the opening of new fronts for jihad in Bosnia, Chechnya, Tajikistan, and elsewhere that were more alarming to the West. The 1990s saw the emergence of a new kind Islamic militance that blended Wahhabi proselytizing with armed resistance to threats against Muslim communities. This new militance would become known as Salafi jihadism.

Salafism

Wahhabis commonly describe themselves as “Salafis,” that is, Muslims dedicated to reviving Islam’s original beliefs and practices. Shedding the “Wahhabi” label and assuming the “Salafi” mantle makes it easier for Saudi Arabia’s religious message to resonate in the Muslim world: “Wahhabi” calls to mind a controversial doctrine that appeared in the 1700s, so it seems like a recent invention whereas “Salafi” calls to mind the original Muslim community—salaf means “ancestors.”

Parsing the terms Salafi and Wahhabi is tricky, but it comes down to theology and law. They share the same definition of monotheism that seeks to purify worship and that condemns Shiism, Sufism, and so forth. Salafis, however, consider Wahhabis to be in error when it comes to Islamic law. The disagreement stems from Wahhabism’s affiliation with Hanbalism, one of the four historic legal traditions in Sunni Islam. Salafis reject affiliation with any of the legal schools on the grounds that they represent historical developments long after the first Muslim generation. Disagreement over Islamic law does not stand in the way of collaboration for the sake of spreading Salafi/Wahhabi theology. But the ranks of Salafis themselves are divided over the conditions for waging jihad, with Saudi clerics on the side of restraint because of their position that only a ruler may declare jihad.

Jihad

Wahhabism follows the general consensus in Sunni Islamic law that defines two kinds of jihad. (There is a Sufi tradition that defines military jihad as a lesser form and that defines “spiritual jihad” as a greater form. Wahhabism does not recognize spiritual jihad). In offensive jihad, the ruler calls on idolaters to embrace Islam, and if they refuse, then he is to launch a military campaign to bring them under Islamic rule. In defensive jihad, the ruler
leads a military campaign to protect Muslims from enemy attack. Whether offensive or defensive, according to Sunni Islamic law, only the ruler may authorize a military campaign. Saudi Arabia’s support for anti-Soviet insurgents in Afghanistan during the 1980s was justified as defensive jihad because a non-Muslim enemy, the Soviet Union, had invaded a Muslim country.

**Wahhabism does not condone three innovations in jihad associated with Salafi jihadism.** First, when Muslims come under the rule of an apostate, they are to wage jihad to overthrow the government. For example, in Algeria, the Armed Islamic Group waged jihad during the 1990s to overthrow the government for failing to rule according to Islamic law. Second, defensive jihad should be extended from fighting a foreign invader to fighting foreign domination. For example, al-Qaeda waged jihad against the United States because of Washington’s support for Israel and secular regimes that oppress Muslims. Third, the authority to command jihad is not restricted to a ruler when conditions warrant jihad and the ruler fails to do his part; then, ordinary Muslims may assume the authority.

**The Awakening Movement**

During the Arab Cold War in the 1950s and 1960s, Saudi Arabia forged an alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood against secular and leftist forces led by Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser. To consolidate power, Nasser banned the Muslim Brotherhood, jailed hundreds of its members, and drove others into exile. Saudi Arabia gave refuge to Muslim Brotherhood members fleeing persecution in Egypt and other countries like Sudan and Syria. The Saudis did not allow them to create an official branch, but they were able to spread a spirit of political activism at odds with Wahhabism’s doctrine of obedience to rulers. In the 1960s and 1970s, young Saudis blending the Brotherhood’s activist ethos with Wahhabi theology emerged to oppose a modest but vocal liberal trend.

In the 1980s, the Wahhabi-Muslim Brotherhood synthesis emerged as a full-blown movement calling itself the Awakening (sahwa). The Awakening appealed to younger Saudi clerics alarmed at inroads of Western culture. It erupted into a robust protest movement in 1990-91 when the government invited thousands of Western troops to shield it against possible attack by Iraq after its invasion of neighboring Kuwait. The government tamped down the protests by jailing the most outspoken Awakening clerics and distributing patronage and resources loyalist clerics.

**The Crown Prince**

In 2017, King Salman shuffled the line of succession and elevated his young son Muhammad (b. 1985) to crown prince. To strengthen his position for the royal succession, Muhammad bin Salman took steps to win popular support from young Saudis. His claim that he is a new kind of leader attuned to the outlook and needs of Saudi youth may merely reflect generational affinity. But with nearly sixty percent of the population under age 30, court-
ing this massive constituency has also the ring of political expediency.

Whether driven by affinity or expediency, Crown Prince Muhammad has exhibited sympathy with young Saudis dissatisfied with Wahhabi-inspired restrictions. Arguing that the country deviated from religious moderation in the 1980s, he proclaimed it was time to relax restrictions on cinemas and lift the ban on women driving motor vehicles. How far he will or can go in liberalizing the social climate remains to be seen. In 2019, the government revoked regulations requiring women to obtain permission from male guardians to travel abroad, but did not alter other male guardianship rules that place women under the authority of male relatives, and patriarchal laws governing marriage, divorce, and custody remain in place.

Expediency and Wahhabi doctrine have aligned in the crown prince’s promotion of a crusade against Shiism. He has embraced the idea that Iran is leading a Shiite plot to destroy Sunni Islam, with assistance from Shiites in Yemen, Syria, and Iraq, and yes, members of Saudi Arabia’s own Shiite minority. The narrative ignores Shiism’s own diversity rooted in divisions dating to early Islamic times. Yemen’s Zaidi Shiites (the Houthi movement) and Syria’s Alawis (supposedly represented by the regime of Bashar al-Asad) do not share theology, law, or religious leadership with Iran’s Twelver Shiites. Nevertheless, the narrative has proven effective in generating support from Sunni regimes in the region and at home, where the specter of a Shiite conspiracy is used to justify suppressing dissent and protest. In April 2019, more than thirty Shiites were put to death—their alleged crimes included spying for Iran.

The Resilience of Wahhabism

In a sense, Wahhabism demands that one focus worship on God in the face of a tempting illusion—the illusion that mortal creatures have the capacity to intercede with God in order to offer relief from suffering in this life and salvation in the next. One might imagine this illusion as a sign of God’s bountiful mercy that blesses the world with exemplary men possessing spiritual powers offering access to the Creator. But Wahhabi doctrine insists the profession of faith, there is no god but God, strips away the illusion and leaves anybody beholden to it on the side of unbelief. While dependence on Saudi rulers has put limits on what Wahhabi clerics can command and forbid, over time, the clerics have been able to safeguard and proselytize Wahhabism’s core doctrine.

The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Oasis International Foundation.

David Commins

David Commins is Professor of History at the Dickinson College, USA. His research interests include the modern history of the Middle East, with a special focus on Islamic thought and political movements. His most recent book is Islam in Saudi Arabia (2015). He has also published: The Gulf States: A Modern History (2014), The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia (2009), Historical Dictionary of Syria (2013).