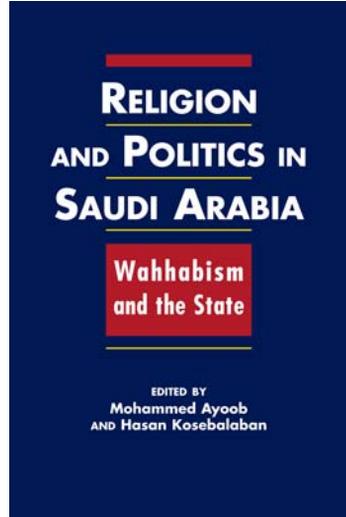


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in Saudi Arabia:  
Wahhabism and the State

edited by  
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# 1

## Introduction: Unraveling the Myths

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*Mohammed Ayooob and Hasan Kosebalaban*

The political and academic discourse that emerged in the West in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, linked the attackers' motivations to what has come to be known as Islamic "fundamentalism," and more particularly to a subcategory of this phenomenon called "Wahhabism" that has its roots in Saudi Arabia, the country from where the majority of the terrorists emanated. This discourse assumed that Islamic radicalism, as manifested in the Al-Qaida network and related groups that targeted the United States and its allies, was the product in large part of presumed Wahhabi teachings that mandated incessant hostility if not warfare by believing Muslims against all nonbelievers. Wahhabism was often portrayed in this discourse as an abstract ideology divorced from history and context. The transnational jihadist organization Al-Qaida was similarly portrayed in an ahistorical and acontextual form as an offshoot of a universal militant ideology that crossed the boundaries of time and space.

Furthermore, this discourse posited a direct relationship between Wahhabism and Al-Qaida unmediated by contextual variables. Much of such analysis ignored the fact that Al-Qaida was primarily a product of US- and Saudi-sponsored insurgency in Afghanistan against Soviet occupation, which spawned transnational jihadism by facilitating the ingathering of Islamist militants from around the world in Afghanistan and the bordering areas in Pakistan. It also ignored the fact that it was the Gulf War (1990–1991) and the accompanying US military presence on Saudi soil, aimed at protecting the kingdom from Saddam Hussein and at evicting Iraqi forces from Kuwait, that turned transnational jihadists led by Osama bin Laden against the United States. It further neglected the variable that the collapse of the Afghan state, caused by internecine warfare among insurgent groups following the Soviet withdrawal and the emergence of the Taliban with the support of Pakistan,

a US ally, led to Al-Qaida creating a state within the Afghan state and making it the base for its international operations. Finally, it overlooked the general disenchantment within the Muslim world with US policy toward the Middle East, especially Washington's unquestioning support for Israeli policies that radicalized segments of Muslim opinion and prompted a small minority among the radicals to take violent action against US interests both within and outside the United States.

Wahhabism may have formed a part of this volatile mix, but it was neither the sole nor even the primary determinant of terror attacks on the United States by transnational jihadists. Analyses reflecting the dominant discourse that equates Wahhabism with transnational jihadism, therefore, tend to be misleading by identifying a particular ideology as the root cause of a major problem while excluding the political, economic, and psychological contexts in which Islamist militancy has emerged in the Middle East and elsewhere. Furthermore, they represent a shallow understanding of the doctrine of Wahhabism itself by interpreting it as an ahistorical and acontextual phenomenon that can be transplanted from one locale to another in divergent circumstances with relative ease.

Given the dominance of this discourse in the media and much of academia, it appeared imperative that scholars familiar with the Wahhabi religio-political ideology, the history of state formation in the Arabian Peninsula, the internal political dynamics of Saudi Arabia, and the kingdom's relations with the West—especially the United States—come together to unravel the myths that have led to equating Wahhabism with Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism. This volume is the outcome of this endeavor.

It is conceived in part to situate Wahhabism concretely in time and place so that one may understand its contemporary impact in a more intellectually rigorous manner. The book tries to accomplish this task in various ways. It attempts to do so first by situating this religio-political doctrine in the specific milieu of the Arabian Peninsula, where it emerged. The goal here is to make clear the fact that Wahhabism is no mere abstraction, but has a specific history tied to a time and place. It was in eighteenth-century Najd, in the heart of the Arabian Peninsula, that Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab's alliance with the al-Saud led to the formation of the Saudi state, which in its third incarnation came to encompass most of the peninsula and became known as Saudi Arabia. The relationship between Wahhabism as a doctrine of religious reform and renewal, and its political dimension as the ideological vehicle of state formation in the Arabian Peninsula from the eighteenth century onward, is therefore very intimate. Consequently, it is a profoundly statist ideology that commands unreserved allegiance to the ruler and cannot be understood in isolation from the process of state formation in what is now Saudi Arabia. Its transnationalization is a very recent phenomenon that has in many ways stood its basic assumptions on their head. Several of the chapters in this

volume contextualize Wahhabism by addressing from different perspectives the close relationship between its theology cum ideology and the formation and legitimation of the Saudi state.

The second objective of the volume is to analyze Wahhabism within the Saudi context as a dynamic ideology that has been interpreted differently by different actors to suit their own purposes. Wahhabism is no monolith and has evolved and fractured over time as a result of its interaction with wider social, economic, and political conditions in the kingdom as well as with political and ideological trends in the broader Middle East. This is clear from the fact that while Wahhabism has traditionally acted as the main vehicle for regime legitimation in Saudi Arabia, some of its contemporary manifestations are intensely anti-status quo and have seriously threatened not only the legitimacy but also the very existence of the Saudi regime.

The siege of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in November 1979 by a group of radical Wahhabis, many of them students at the Islamic University at Medina, was the most dramatic manifestation of the ideology's anti-status quo potential. Coming as it did on the heels of the Iranian Revolution next door, this event demonstrated clearly the revolutionary potential of Wahhabism and how it could be put to good use by disgruntled elements within Saudi Arabia and in other parts of the Muslim world. Much of the opposition to the Saudi regime today, both violent and nonviolent, owes its ideological origins to the revolutionary interpretations of Wahhabi teachings by the leaders of the 1979 siege and their intellectual and theological sympathizers.

However, such opposition is also highly contextual and to a substantial extent the product of ideological hybridization. This hybridization is itself the result of Wahhabism's encounter with radical modern Islamist ideologies, such as those of Egyptian thinker and activist Sayyid Qutb, who was executed by President Gamal Abdul Nasser in 1966 for his anti-regime activities. Many of his followers fled Egypt and were given refuge in Saudi Arabia in large part because of the Saudi establishment's antipathy to Nasser's Arab nationalist rhetoric and to policies that were contradictory to Saudi interests. Several of Qutb's disciples, including his brother Muhammad Qutb, became teachers at Saudi seminaries and universities and disseminated his revolutionary ideas to their disciples. The neo-Wahhabi challenge to the Saudi regime evolved out of the mixture of Qutbist political radicalism with Saudi social conservatism and religious orthodoxy. This variant of Wahhabism, now a mortal enemy of the House of Saud, emerged out of the interaction between Wahhabi doctrine and a modern political ideology. The traditional Wahhabi religious establishment, which is allied to the Saudi regime, has also transmuted as a result of its own encounter with modernity, in the form of a Saudi state and an oil-based rentier economy that have come to dominate the political and economic life of the Arabian Peninsula. The Wahhabi religious establishment has legitimized policies of the modern Saudi

state, regarding the economy and security spheres, that would have been anathema to Wahhabi theologians a couple of generations ago.

The third objective of the volume is to situate Saudi Arabia's strategic and economic links with the United States in the context of the traditional Wahhabi suspicion of contact with non-Muslim polities and societies, a wariness born out of the desire to maintain the "purity" of Islamic society as practiced in the kingdom. Consequently, the Wahhabi ideology, which is a very important component of the Saudi legitimacy formula, has had great potential to act as a major brake on Saudi Arabia's economic and security engagement with the West in general and the United States in particular. However, the regime has demonstrated a great degree of deftness at balancing its ideological underpinnings with its pragmatic security and economic interests. It has been able to do so by a strict separation of the cultural and social spheres from the political, security, and economic arenas. The former are largely overseen by the Wahhabi religious establishment and made to conform to Wahhabi orthodoxy. The latter are the preserve of the House of Saud, with minimal interference from the religious establishment. In other words, the regime has provided the Wahhabi establishment with the sop of cultural and social control domestically in exchange for the latter giving up its opposition to the government's economic policies and security alliances.

This division of labor engineered by the Saudi rulers has allowed the Saudi regime to juggle the Wahhabi orthodoxy and its corollary, the maintenance of cultural insularity and social conservatism, with its strategic dependence upon the United States and, due to the kingdom's role as a major energy exporter, its very close economic relationship with Western industrialized states. The Saudi regime was able to balance these contradictory concerns quite well until 1979, keeping the religious establishment satisfied, the citizenry largely apolitical, and security and economic matters securely in the hands of the ruling house. However, the seizure of the Grand Mosque that year seriously challenged the status quo. It forced the regime to make further concessions to the Wahhabi establishment in the social and cultural spheres in order to buy time for things to settle down. This accommodation worked until 1990, when the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait brought significant numbers of US troops into the kingdom, thus upsetting the balance and setting off the chain of events that culminated in the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, D.C., on September 11, 2001.

The terrorist attacks, in which fifteen of the nineteen terrorists involved allegedly came from Saudi Arabia, created a major backlash within the United States against Saudi Arabia and Wahhabism, which was perceived as the ideological wellspring for the attack. It brought Saudi Arabia's domestic policies, including its school curriculum, under close scrutiny in the United States and, for the first time, the kingdom's social and cultural practices, including the status of women, became a public concern in Washington. Until

that time, Saudi Arabia, as a close strategic ally in the Middle East and a major energy producer and supplier, had been by and large immune from criticism in the United States. The backlash that followed September 11 was thus a dramatic break from the more or less pleasant relationship that had prevailed in the past. Given this apparent shift in the nature of US-Saudi relations following September 11, this volume attempts to analyze the impact of the terrorist attacks as well as that of Wahhabi orthodoxy on this crucial relationship, bringing together both the ideological and the pragmatic variables that have a bearing on it.

Much of the existing scholarly literature on Wahhabism is overly technical, covering isolated aspects of the subject in detail while assuming that the reader has adequate background knowledge to put such analysis in perspective. The popular literature on Wahhabism is overly journalistic, treating the subject matter in a sensational way and without adequate historical depth. Typically, such books on Wahhabism are also one-sided, in that they reflect the particular viewpoints of their authors. The present volume is an attempt to provide a forum for scholarly yet accessible discussion of Wahhabism and Saudi Arabia by bringing together distinct perspectives of leading scholars and analysts who study and write on the issue.

The contributors to this volume represent a great diversity of views. Explanations provided by some of the chapter authors run contrary to those provided by others. Some emphasize the element of religious reform, integral to Wahhabism, as part of an overall effort for reform and renewal in the Muslim world in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, while others concentrate on more specific conditions in the Arabian Peninsula as the primary explanatory variables for the emergence of the Wahhabi movement in that particular locale. On the whole, the volume aims to provide a balanced perspective on the phenomenon in order to help the reader locate the current situation within a solid historical and political context.

The volume is organized into four parts. Part 1 explores the rise of Wahhabism as a movement for religious reform and renewal, situating it in the overall context of reform movements in the Muslim world in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as well as in the context of the specific political, social, and economic conditions in the Najd region of central Arabia, where the movement emerged and took root.

In Chapter 2, Natana DeLong-Bas bases her explanations of the rise of Wahhabism on original Wahhabi texts, especially the writings of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. Her central thesis is that ibn Abd al-Wahhab was not as close-minded and rigid as he is often made out to have been. She argues that he was actually quite a tolerant figure for his times and, contrary to common belief, desisted from issuing the edict of *shirk* (associating others with God) against Muslims who did not agree with his strict interpretations of religion. She sees this strand of tolerance in contemporary

Wahhabi thinking as well, and makes an argument that the conventional wisdom that equates Wahhabism with inflexible literalism and fundamentalism is incorrect. Her argument has major contemporary implications, suggesting that Wahhabi ideology could not have been principally responsible for driving the September 11 terrorists to do what they did.

In Chapter 3, Khalid al-Dakhil underplays the religious nature of the Wahhabi movement and emphasizes its political dimension instead. He locates it in the context of the socioeconomic transformations in the Arabian Peninsula, particularly the urban settlement accompanied by detribalization that took place in central Arabia beginning in the sixteenth century. He argues that this in turn facilitated and legitimized the further centralization of political authority and thus enhanced the state-making project in Najd under the aegis of the House of Saud. Al-Dakhil's contribution is also significant in that he represents a generation of Saudi-born social scientists who are now more than ever ready to examine their own country's history through the lenses of critical thinking. It thus provides an insider's view of the relationship between Wahhabism and state formation in Arabia, which is very different from the conventional wisdom espoused by many scholars, Saudi and non-Saudi alike.

In Chapter 4, David Commins discusses the history of the interaction between the Wahhabi religious movement and the ebb and flow of Saudi military and political power. He also examines the early reactions to Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab's religious ideas by scholars within the Arabian Peninsula, including the denunciation of those ideas by Muhammad's own brother, Sulayman ibn Abd al-Wahhab, and analyzes contemporary interactions between the Wahhabi doctrine and radical Islamism. Commins provides interesting comparisons between the early scholarly responses to Wahhabism, when it was a dynamic doctrine of political opposition at the end of the eighteenth century, and Wahhabism's own reaction to the new radical Islamism, which has become a doctrine of the Saudi political establishment in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Part 2 of the volume begins by concentrating on the process of state making and the expansion of Saudi power, first in Najd and then in other parts of the peninsula, most especially Hijaz, the cradle of Islam, where the religion's holiest sites are located. John Habib and William Ochsenwald analyze strategies adopted by Abd al-Aziz ibn Abd al-Rahman al-Saud, known in the West as ibn Saud, in the creation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the tensions they generated with his loyal, but at the same time most fundamentalist, supporters, known as the Ikhwan. In Chapter 5, Habib concentrates on ibn Saud's attempt to domesticate the radicals while keeping the Wahhabi religious establishment on his side, thus highlighting the fact that, in the final analysis, the Wahhabi religious establishment accepted its subsidiary role vis-à-vis the state. In Chapter 6, Ochsenwald relates the story of the expansion of the Saudi state into Hijaz and its incorporation, not

without some pain, of the Islamic holy sites of Mecca and Medina. The themes addressed in both chapters have contemporary resonance in terms of the current tensions between radical Wahhabis and the House of Saud, reminiscent of ibn Saud's struggle with the Ikhwan, and of the subterranean Hijazi dissatisfaction with Saudi-Najdi political dominance over the Saudi political system.

Gwenn Okruhlik and Toby Jones address the central tensions within the Saudi kingdom today. In Chapter 7, Okruhlik concentrates on the contradiction between the exclusive definition of Saudi identity in Wahhabi and Najdi terms, and an inclusive definition of citizenship that incorporates all the people of the kingdom, including the Shias and the Hijazis. The latter, she argues, is essential for the creation of a modern Saudi state that can count upon the loyalty of most if not all of its citizens. In Chapter 8, Jones highlights the tension between two contrary trends that have emanated from within Wahhabism: the politically docile stance of the Wahhabi establishment, based on its acceptance of the primacy of Saudi temporal power, and the purist and oppositional tendency, in its various forms, demonstrated by the *sahwa* (literally "awakening"), a term used to refer to younger ulama, among others, who are critical of the Saudi regime. This has pitted "Wahhabism from below" against "Wahhabism from above," with the former challenging the legitimacy both of the House of Saud and of the religious establishment. These two chapters together lay bare the contradictions within the Saudi polity and point toward what may be impending systemic crises within the kingdom.

Part 3 of the volume addresses the impact of Wahhabism on Saudi foreign policy, specifically how it has affected the critical relationship between Saudi Arabia and the United States. In Chapter 9, Thomas Lippman determines that US-Saudi relations have by and large evolved autonomously of Wahhabi influences and have been based on *raison d'état* and more particularly on the calculations of regime survival by the House of Saud. In Chapter 10, Gregory Gause highlights, among other things, the fact that the Wahhabi establishment has almost always done the Saudis' bidding when it comes to security and political issues, including such controversial decisions as the deployment of US forces in the kingdom in the 1990s. He argues that, consequently, it appears that Wahhabism in its official form has had little or no impact on the Saudi regime's close relationship with the United States, despite certain Wahhabi injunctions regarding the impermissibility of dealing with non-Muslim powers. While these conclusions may have held true so far, recent events make one wonder whether the course of US-Saudi relations will continue to be as smooth as it has been in the past if either evolutionary or revolutionary changes take place within the Saudi system that radically shift the balance of social power domestically.

In Part 4, John Voll provides an overall assessment of the place of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab's ideas in the movements for reform and renewal

in the Muslim world beginning from the eighteenth century, and of the long-term impact of the Wahhabi tradition on this process. He distinguishes between two genres of writings about Wahhabism, one that tends to be grounded in history and context, and one that defines the movement in a “mythic” manner, either extolling its virtues or, more commonly in Western writings, portraying it as a negative and reactionary ideology. While Voll traces the history of this second genre to colonial times, when the term “Wahhabi” was used to denigrate and delegitimize resistance to European domination of Muslim lands, it has achieved contemporary resonance since the 1990s, particularly in the wake of September 11, 2001. The term “Wahhabi” has now taken on a generic meaning and is applied to all sorts of Muslim groups and movements that are viewed negatively in the West for one reason or another. These include not only Al-Qaida, which is virulently opposed to Wahhabi institutions and leadership, but also the transnational missionary movement Tablighi Jamaat and the transnational political movement Hizb al-Tahrir, both of which have been condemned by the Wahhabi establishment. Voll’s chapter brings together historical facts and contemporary concerns about Wahhabism to demonstrate the fuzzy nature of much of recent writings about this religious-political ideology. It demonstrates forcefully why a volume such as this is essential to counter the lack of informed debate and discussion about Wahhabism, Saudi Arabia, and US-Saudi relations.

Overall, the volume brings out elements of continuity and change in the narratives of Wahhabism and the Saudi state. It also lays bare tensions, both actual and potential, within the kingdom, as well as in the realm of Saudi relations with the United States. Both sets of tensions seem to be coming to a head as “Wahhabism from below” challenges “Wahhabism from above” and as the strategic importance of Saudi energy reserves becomes ever more obvious. With Wahhabism, the legitimating ideology of the Saudi regime, failing to provide a mechanism for regime change, escalating tensions are likely to lead to political instability that will have an impact far beyond the borders of Saudi Arabia.

If this conclusion is correct, then US policymakers need to seriously reassess their commitment to the House of Saud. If the Saudi regime falls or even becomes unstable, most of Washington’s calculations regarding the oil-rich Gulf region will be thrown into disarray and scenarios of the past might be replayed, such as the events that followed the overthrow of the Shah of Iran in 1979 by what came to be called an “Islamic” revolution. This is but one of many issues the volume raises, directly or indirectly, that need serious consideration.