

Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab & the origin of the Wahhabite movement

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During the last 300 years one of the most controversial figures to emerge on the landscape of Islam is Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab. Documentation on his birth and death dates conflicts somewhat, but most of his life was lived during the 18th century from approximately 1703-1792CE. He was born in Uyayna in the Najd area of present day Saudi Arabia. He was also born into the Tamim branch of the Banu Shinan tribe. His quest for knowledge took him to Madina, Iraq, and Syria. It appears, however, that the dominant influence on his thought was that of Taqiyyiddin Ahmad ibn Taimiyya (d. 1328CE). Nevertheless, there are significant divergences from ibn Taimiyya in his own perspectives - particularly with regard to what does or does not constitute shirk (idolatry).

What is known about him too, is that he invoked the ire of two of his prominent Shaikhs in Madina, Shaikh Muhammad ibn Sulaiman al-Kurdi and Shaikh Muhammad Hayat al-Sindi. Moreover, his father, Abdul Wahhab and his brother, Sulaiman ibn Abdul Wahhab vigorously expressed their opposition to his views. In fact his brother composed a work called "al-Sawaiq al-Ilahiyya fi al-Radd 'ala al-Wahhabiyya" (Divine Flashes in the Refutation of the Wahhabis).

Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab might have remained an insignificant figure had it not been for an alliance forged between himself and a contemporary of his - the Najdi tribal chief of a small but growing urban clan in the market town of Diriyya, Muhammad ibn Saud. The alliance was cemented in two ways. First, by an essay Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab wrote to Ibn Saud entitled "Kashf al-Shubahat 'an Khaliq al-'Ard wa l-Samawaat" (Clarifying the Obscurities Surrounding the Creator of the Heavens and Earth); and second, by the marriage of the daughter of Ibn Saud to Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab. The essay was a massive attack on the Iman (faith) and Islam of Muslims stretching from his time to approximately 600 years back in history. While efforts have been made to exonerate Ibn Abdul Wahhab - discussed in the next segment - from his more grievous excesses, the evidence simply remains too overwhelming to dismiss his role in the fostering of the extremism that has since dogged the Muslim world. Nonetheless, Muhammad ibn Saud adopted this work that declared most of these Muslims infidels and unbelievers. On this fundamental premise that all Muslims - apart from themselves - were now mushrikin (polytheists) and kuffar (unbelievers) they declared the surrounding lands inhabited by Muslims as one huge Dar al-Harb (Abode of War). The Hijaz was a typical example and a typical victim.

There are, needless to say, many perspectives on this alliance. Let us look at two; one in favour, the other critical. The first one is that of the late Ismail al-Faruqi (who was killed, along with his wife, in rather unfortunate circumstances in his home). In his introduction to his own English translation of Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab's "Kitab al-Tawhid" (The Book of Divine Unity) he states:

"What was indeed extraordinary was the coincidence of the 'alim and the prince, Muhammad ibn Sa'ud, who felt the need for each other, and who saw the wedding of idea to arm as key to a new page in history. Such was the greatness of the two men that they saw the fateful wedlock of one's mind with the other's sword as a duplicate of another bay'ah or covenant entered into by the Prophet (SAAS) and the Ansar, Muslims of Madinah, at al 'Aqabah on the eve of the Hijrah. The 'alim and the prince utilized many of the same words used to seal the Prophetic covenant. The theater where all this took place was Dar'iyyah, a village in east central Arabia."

In these dramatic and romanticised terms Faruqi continues to extol, throughout his introduction, the virtues of this alliance. Moreover, he reinvents the Najd as one of the "isolated corners of the Muslim world" that has been untouched by the "encounter between the Muslim East and the Christian West taking place in Eastern Europe." They were free, as it stood, from the impact of the West on the Caliphate in Istanbul.

Through this reinvention the stage is set for the Najd to appear as a carbon copy of the "isolatedness" of Arabia during the time of the Prophet (SAW). The stage is set, in other words, for an acceptance of a renewed and purified version of Islam as a mirror image of the time of the Prophet (SAW). This facile attempt of Faruqi's simply does not work. The social conditions prevalent during the time of Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab's Najd and those of the Najd during the time of the Prophet (SAW) and the Kharajite rebellion against Sayyidina Ali were not significantly different. It would have been more appropriate and more instructive for Faruqi to compare these two conditions rather than that of Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab's Najd and the conditions prevalent in the Hijaz at the time of the Prophet (SAW). For example, we know that Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab emanates from the same clan that formed the most powerful base of the Kharajites during the time of Sayyidina Ali, namely, the Banu Tamim. It would, therefore, have been of immense interest to examine any ideological linkages that might have existed between the Kharajites of then and the ideological conditions prevailing in the Najd during Muhammad Abdul Wahhab's time. After all - and this is one of their great virtues - Arabian tribal life is known for its integrity in oral traditions. Moreover, both the principles and consequences of his version of "Tawhid" were almost identical to those of the Kharajites. We shall return to these themes and their impact on 20th century Islam later.

Let us look at another more critical view. In his "Islam and Modernities" Aziz al-Azmeh states:

"The most direct aspect of the social alliance between divines and Saudi princes is the direct political role of the former. Though it may be true that the original compact between Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab and Muhammad b. Sa'ud at Dar'iyyah, the first Saudi capital, was the one in which the divine was the 'senior partner', this is only so in the sense that it was he who was in charge of the legal system. Yet the pre-eminence of the Al Shaykh, the descendants of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, in the legal and religious institutions of successive Saudi states is a

factor connected with both their position in family alliances and their capacity to formally charter transfers of power."

Further on he observes:

"By requiring subjection in principle to the authority whose voice is Wahhabism, this doctrine simultaneously renders these subjects open to the dictation of cultural and societal relations whose ground and condition are this authority. In short, Wahhabite fundamentalism puts forward a model whose task is to subject local societies with their customs, authorities, devotions, and other particularities to a general process of acculturation which prepares them for membership in the commonwealth whose linchpin and exclusive raison d'etre is the absolute dominance of the house of Sa'ud."

This, in my opinion, is a far more accurate interpretation of the realities of Wahhabite politics than Faruqi's romanticised version of a renewed and liberating form of Islam emerging from the untainted and untouched soil of an "isolated" Najd.

Nevertheless, the politics in the Arabian Peninsula are not as simple as both its detractors and supporters often imagine. Wahhabism itself has undergone a number of revisions; and with revisions come conflict. This is clearly indicated by the present tension between the Saudi state - which promotes itself as a moderate form of Wahhabism - and its more extremist Wahhabite opposition in the form of Dr Safar al-Hawali and his supporters on the one hand, and the Muhajirun movement stationed in London on the other. In addition the Wahhabites and the Tabligh Jama'at - which has the Kitab al-Tawhid of Muhammad Abdul Wahhab as its founding inspiration - are also anathema to one another.

It is not Wahhabism that sustains the present Saudi state. It's a strong economy fuelled by oil and massive foreign interests that maintains its integrity. Meanwhile the Wahhabite propaganda machinery persists in trying to "acculturate" the rest of the Muslim world into acceptance of its "purified" version. While we are definitely not blind to the politics of the situation, our chief concern remains to examine the impact of Wahhabism on 20th century Islam and Muslims.

In the next segment we shall look at the rise of Wahhabite power and the principles that informed that movement.

The actual unfolding of the much-vaunted "monotheism" of Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab had none of the sublimity ascribed to it by Ismail Faruqi in his introduction to Ibn Abdul Wahhab's Kitab al-Tawhid. From the outset the emergence of Wahhabism was distinctly violent and ferocious in form. Given the nature of their brand of Tawhid (better described as a form of "monomania" rather than monotheism) it was not surprising that amongst the first acts inspired by their pious wrath was the desecration of shrines. Under the leadership of Saud b. Abdul Aziz these desecrations took place in Makkah and Madinah during the years 1803 and 1805 respectively. Prior to that, in 1802, they captured Kербala that houses the shrine of Sayyidina Husayn (RA). In 1805 - after

fifteen years of warfare - a somewhat tired Sharif of Makkah, Ghalib, entered into a negotiated settlement with Ibn Saud who went on to rule the Hijaz until 1813.

Nevertheless, the unremitting attempts of the Wahhabites to control, not only the Arabian Peninsula, but also its surrounding areas including Iraq, Syria, Oman, and Yemen, was cause for massive concern to the Ottomans. The Ottomans, who, at the time, had admittedly little to be said in their favour, felt that they had had enough. Muhammad Ali of Egypt and his son Ibrahim Pasha were assigned by the Ottomans to remove the Wahhabites from the Hijaz. This they did in 1813. In 1818 Ibrahim Pasha attacked and devastated Dar'iyah. The Wahhabites withdrew from Dar'iyah, and, under the leadership of Turki, set up their new capital in Riyadh. This Muslim internecine fighting, however, was not to stop there.

It was during this period too that the Wahhabis committed one of the worst atrocities in recent Muslim memory. That atrocity, recorded in many works, was the massacre of Muslims in Taif. This is one incident that many with Wahhabite inclinations would like to see buried. While it is not unIslamic to forgive the worst of barbarities, to forget them - or, even worse - to consciously want to bury them, is to strip oneself of human integrity and morality. We might as well start by claiming that atrocities elsewhere in the world do not happen. As Muslims we need to be bold enough to face our own indecencies and even bolder in examining its causes.

Nevertheless, it must not be assumed that these Wahhabite attacks on Muslims either averse to or expounding a different interpretation of Islam implied that they were completely united in their own quest. On the contrary, like all forms of political adventurism where power is the sole candidate there is bound to be voracious infighting. A typical example of this infighting occurred after the death of Faysal b. Turki in 1865. Between 1865 and 1877 there was an astonishing eight changes of political leadership in the house of Saud. This reckless pursuit for power was probably spurred on by the fact that Muhammad Abdul Wahhab's position was that political leadership was legitimate no matter what the means employed to gain such leadership. The ends, according to his dictum, were everything; the means simply irrelevant - even if those means were meant to be writ in blood. 1891, however, saw the expulsion of the Sauds from Riyadh. The one responsible for this was Muhammad al-Rashid of Hail who vehemently opposed Wahhabite doctrine. The Sauds took refuge in Kuwait. In 1901 there was a change of fortune for the Sauds. Abdul Aziz b. Saud led a party of forty in a daring raid on the governor of Riyadh.

The raid was a success and the governor killed while on his way to the Masjid to perform Fajr prayers. With this Riyadh once again fell to the Sauds. Abdul Aziz was appointed king, consolidated the Najd, and steadily started to increase the scope of his power. In 1924 he captured the Hijaz, then the Asir region, until he finally consolidated the boundaries of present day Saudi Arabia. The blessings of oil were on their side that was discovered in Dhahran in 1938. Abdul Aziz signed an agreement with the USA-based Standard Oil of California to exploit the newly found oil reserves. Despite the destructive

nature of Wahhabism, Abdul Aziz was, nonetheless, an insightful leader that managed to return a measure of security to a country that was by then the victims of all sorts of social dangers. Not least of them being the hazardous nature of the Hajj that had its pilgrims plagued by a variety of highwaymen that derived their annual sustenance from pillaging the hard-earned wealth of those pilgrims. He also had a tough time introducing telephones to wary Bedouins who were initially convinced that these were instruments of Satan.

Returning to the theme of Wahhabism per se, recent research appears to have revealed a degree of conflict between the positions of Abdul Wahhab himself.

A few years back the Imam Muhammad bin Saud University in Riyadh made available a number of letters written by Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab that appear to contradict the excessive nature of his declarations of kufr and shirk on those who do not espouse his cause or views. The culprit - according to the letters of Ibn Abdul Wahhab - who spread these nefarious views, was one called Sulaiman b. Suhaim. I will recount one of the letters in full as it is quoted by Sayyid Muhammad Alawi al-Maliki in his book "Mafahim Yajib an Tusahhah."

Abdul Wahhab states:

"Let it not be unknown to you (the people of Qasim) that the letter of Sulaiman b. Suhaim has reached your hands and that some people who profess to be Ulama have indeed accepted and believed the contents of the letter. Allah knows that that person has fabricated and invented a number of lies against me. I have never said those things and most of those opinions have not even occurred to me."

Amongst the views appearing in that letter are the following:

- That I have invalidated the four Madhabs
- That for 600 years all Muslims have been unbelievers
- That I have appropriated the right of absolute ijtihad to myself
- That I am against taqlid (adopting the opinions of other schools of thought)
- That I have stated "differences of opinion amongst the Ulama is a curse"
- That I have made Kafir those who practice intercession with the Salihin (people known for their piety)
- That I have pronounced a verdict of kufr on al-Busiri (of Qasida Burdah fame) because he has referred to the Prophet in his Qasida as "O most venerated of creation"
- That I have said: "Had I had the opportunity then I would have destroyed the shrine over the Prophet (SAW)
- That had I had the opportunity then I would have removed the Mizab (spout) of the Kaba and replaced it with a wooden one
- That I have declared haram visitations to the grave of the Prophet (SAW)
- That I find reprehensible visitations to the graves of the parents of Muhammad (SAW)

- That I have made Kafir those who swear in the name of other than Allah
- That I charged with kufr both Ibn al-Farid and Ibn Arabi
- That I have burnt the Dalail al-Kharat and the Rawid al-Riyahin and that I have referred to the Rawid al-Riyahin as the Rawid al-Shayatin.

My response to all of these allegations is the Qur'anic verse:

“Glory to Allah. This is indeed a serious slander!” (24:16)

These statements of Muhammad Abdul Wahhab appear to fly in the face of the contents of his book mentioned in a previous segment of this series "Kashf al-Shubahat". In the interests of scholarly fairness one would like to accept this. But there are a number of things that demand explanation.

First - even if we remove Ibn Abdul Wahhab from the equation - is Wahhabism's historical unfolding. Their approach, which is largely determined by their takfir of others, has resulted in massive dislocations of Muslims and the shedding of Muslim blood. This approach, coupled with the severity and extremism with which they deal with others, confirms the thesis that they are fundamentally a neo-Kharajite movement.

Second is the reality of Wahhabism as represented by their institutions today. At Madinah University, for example - and I do not imply by this that all their graduates are people who lack critical discernment - it is virtually impossible to express the views as they are apparently articulated by Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab in the above-quoted letter.

Third is the non-availability of these letters in published form in Saudi Arabia. Even the "Mafahim" of Sayyid Muhammad is not available for public consumption. The natural question is why? For whose sake and towards what end is such intellectual suppression being perpetrated? There are, however, many who believe that it is not the present-day Saudi government that is the dominant influence in the suppression of these types of literature. Given the representative nature of lecturers at Umm al-Qura University (where I graduated) there might be some credibility in this view. In fact Dr Safar al-Hawali was vehemently opposed to the appointment of many of these lecturers. They even tried to organise a protest against the textbooks prescribed at the College of Shari'ah. It is apparent, therefore, that there is a growing schism between those who want to espouse a moderated and modified version of Wahhabism - which is difficult since the roots of this movement are extremist - and those amongst the Wahhabite 'ulama and their followers who espouse the original and more paranoid versions. The socio-political forces in that country are somewhat more complex, as I mentioned previously, than they apparently appear.

Nonetheless, and despite the nature of the debates surrounding Ibn Abdul Wahhab's views, his position seemed to have been sufficiently extremist, or deviant, to ignite the worst concerns of his father, brother, and teachers. One of his teachers, mentioned earlier, Shaikh Muhammad ibn Sulaiman al-Kurdi had the following to say:

“O Ibn Abdul Wahhab, I advise you, for the sake of Allahu Ta’ala, to hold your tongue against the Muslims...You have no right to label the majority of Muslims as blasphemers while you yourself have deviated from the majority of Muslims. In fact it is more reasonable to regard the one who deviates from the majority as a blasphemer than to regard the Muslims as a nation as blasphemers...”

The catastrophe that has been Wahhabism, and the extensive manner in which it came to dominate Islamic discourse throughout the 20th century, stand in stark vindication of those who expressed their concerns during his time.

It is against this reality as a backdrop that we will examine the impact of Wahhabism on 20th century Islam. In this regard Faruqi was quite correct when he observed that the movement of Muhammad Abdul Wahhab "spread like wildfire throughout the Muslim world. Practically every corner was affected, but the movement assumed different names and forms in different parts of the world.

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