

## **RADICALISM: ITS WAHHABI ROOTS AND CURRENT REPRESENTATION**

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Radicalism, in various forms, has made significant inroads in several countries of Central Asia and in the Caucasus – in particular the three countries that share the Ferghana Valley, namely Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, Chechnya, and the Russian Republic of Daghestan. Known as fundamentalism or “Wahhabism,” it poses a direct challenge to the ideal vision of a state that the newly founded nations of the region have embraced.

In addition, the broader ideology name “Wahhabism” represents a serious challenge to the theology and practice of the mainstream Sunni Islam to which most of these nations' populations adhere. Should this radicalized understanding of Islam continue to spread unchecked, radical interpretations could threaten social stability at the local, national, and regional levels and create serious geopolitical dangers to which neighboring powers, as well as the US and Europe, would have to react.

Today, throughout the world, there has been a wave of radical movements, which sometimes turn militant, whose source can be traced to the Wahhabi movement. What is this movement and how did it spread throughout the Muslim world, and now the Western world? What are its ideological differences with traditional Islam and how are these differences influencing and supporting modern day radical movements? What can be done to diminish the power of these movements in vulnerable states such as those in Central Asia and the Caucasus?

Traditional Islam views religion as a pact between man and God and therefore the domain of spirituality. In this belief, there can be no compulsion or force used in religion. From the time

of the Prophet Muhammad (s), peace and tolerance were practiced between different religious groups, with respect to distinctions in belief. Contrary to this, the “Wahhabi” ideology is built on the concept of political enforcement of religious beliefs, thus permitting no differences in faith whatsoever. In “Wahhabi” belief, faith is not necessarily an option; it is sometimes mandated by force.

### **Origins of the Wahhabi Movement**

The origins of nearly all of the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s Islamic extremist movements lie in a new Islamic theology and ideology developed in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in tribal areas of the eastern Arabian Peninsula. The source of this new stream of thought was a Muslim scholar named Muhammad ibn Abd-al Wahhab, hence the name “Wahhabism.”

The premise of this new, narrow ideology was to reject traditional scholars, scholarship and practices under the guise of “reviving the true tenets of Islam” and protecting the concept of monotheism. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab’s brand of “purification” of Islam consisted of prohibiting many traditionally accepted acts of worship, reverence of the person of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him and the pious saints, and burning books containing traditional prayers, interpretations of law and commentaries on the Qur’an and Hadith. He encouraged his followers to interpret the holy books for themselves and to act on their interpretations in light of their own understanding, regardless of their understanding of fundamental principles or lack thereof. Anyone who did not profess to this new ideology was considered outside of the realm of Islam – an apostate, disbeliever or idolater, thus

making the shedding of their blood and confiscation of their wealth permitted. In this way, he was able to secure a significant following whose legacy continues in one form or another until today.

Over time, Ibn Wahhab's ideas spread far and wide, being debated, called into question and sometimes supported. A struggle ensued between the staunchly orthodox Ottoman Empire and the "Wahhabi" tribes. The Wahhabis were put down until the eventual dismantling of the Ottoman Empire in the 1920s and the dissolution of its influence. Finding a new opportunity among the tribes, Wahhabis were able to reinstate their beliefs and assert their influence on Muslims of the Peninsula.

Gradually from 1920 until today, they were very successful in establishing an "accepted" new ideology in Islam whose essential characteristic is extreme views and interpretations, as contrasted with traditional Sunni Islam. Coming under the guise of reform of the religion, the movement gathered momentum in the last three decades with support from a number of wealthy individuals. As it has grown, the movement mutated and splintered, with the eventual outcome that some groups went to the extreme in radicalization of their beliefs.

### **Influence of Wahhabism Today**

The Wahhabi ideology is antagonistic to non-Muslims and to traditional practices including seeking intercession by means of the pious saints in Islam, accepted by traditional Sunni Islam for over 1400 years. By rejecting any form of hierarchy such as that followed by traditional Sunni schools, the Wahhabis rejected traditional rulings on a wide range of subjects, invalidated the four schools of thought and its accepted interpretations of law, as well as issued declarations of unbelief for those who disagreed.

While this new ideology prohibited many traditional Islamic forms of worship, its followers did not become overtly militant until recently. Now "Wahhabi" followers have taken up an increasingly confrontational standpoint attempting to impose

their ideology in many regions around the world. The Wahhabi mentality asserts that Islam may be reformed by means of the sword. Thus the movement has manifested itself as armed insurrections throughout the world, especially where governments are weak and unable to resist aggression effectively.

Unfortunately, this narrow ideology has appeared and flourished in Islam, but not because of Islam. Previously, Islam was always presented in a peaceful, tolerant manner. The Prophet Muhammad (s) used to present his neighbors or friends that were not Muslim with gifts and flowers, never holding a sword against them, or ever instigating a struggle or a fight. There are many events in Muslim history where the Prophet made peace treaties with non-Muslims. Islam, despite its rapid spread in its first three centuries, never imposed its beliefs on anyone, as attested by the scrolls of history.

Under this modern ideological extremism, Islam's essential principle of tolerance has been abolished. The Holy Qur'an mentions repeatedly that there is no compulsion in religion and that all people are free to practice any religion they like. Those of the Wahhabi ideology selectively apply verses of the Holy Qur'an to support their ideology, whose basis is to impose its beliefs upon everyone, Muslim and non-Muslim alike.

### **Theory in Practice: Declaration of War against Governments**

Just as the spread of Wahhabism flourished outside of the Arabian Peninsula after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, it now poses a significant challenge to the region of the former Soviet Union. While these countries were "protected" from all types of religious influence under Soviet rule, the fall of the Soviet Empire and the vacuum of religious teaching made this area fertile ground for the spread of this new ideology.

Wahhabi belief provides the religious and ideological underpinnings to enable militant movements to take up arms against existing

governments if they deem the need arises. Though these movements are ideological in nature, they easily resort to armed struggle. While most governments are able to reconcile and reach compromises -- as one may easily compromise with a moderate Muslim -- extremists reject any kind of compromise, insisting on their way and no other. They have tunnel vision, believing in a duty and message to deliver.

The extremists who have turned militant declare war against anyone with viewpoints contrary to theirs; thus, declaration of war against a government is commonplace. In Egypt, they oppose their government. Similarly in Jordan, they oppose their government. In Syria, Pakistan, Algeria, and many other countries "Wahhabi-minded" groups oppose their governments as they have begun to do in the Caucasus and Central Asia. The approach of these movements is to infiltrate mosques, Islamic teaching centers, and charitable organizations from where they indoctrinate religiously oriented people with their ideas and methods. They forcefully impose their views on weak societies, in hopes of conquering one and establishing a base for further control. They justify their militant acts and illegal means of financing their cause by claiming to wage a "jihad" for the preservation of Islam.

Today, we have many examples of this phenomenon, whether it is individuals declaring war on America, or vigilante groups coming against their governments in Central Asia. This contradicts the explicit teaching of the Prophet Muhammad, not to oppose a ruler as long as he does not prevent the performance of prayer, even if he commits injustice. Thus, those of the Wahhabi mentality use Islam when it suits them and likewise, contravene it at their convenience.

### **Using Islam to Justify Prohibited Actions**

The term "Islamic" is grossly abused by extremists who attribute to the religion all kinds of rulings, which in fact contradict the essence of the religion in spirit and in particulars. Among them is the fatwa that justifies the use of terror tactics such as suicide

bombings of civilians and attacks against non-combatants in marketplaces, schools, offices, and places of worship. Similarly they have issued a fatwa legitimizing the use of drug money to finance their campaign, despite the fact that narcotics are strictly forbidden in Islam.

Islamic extremists have ruled permissible and recommended the production of drugs and their sale on the streets of Muslim and non-Muslim nations. With such illicit monies, these extremist groups finance the development of their global network, purchase weapons and supplies, and build their front organizations, which represent them under the guise of Islamic activism.

### **Containing the Spread and Growth of Extremism**

It is very well known that certain networks have flourished in many countries throughout the world. Small but well-financed militant movements arise, coming against their government and the common people, instigating conflict. The danger lies when an outside government supports such extremist movements under the false impression that this constitutes preserving religious freedom.

In Uzbekistan, for example, rather than legitimize these vigilante groups as part of the religious fabric of the society, there should be system of checks to insure the government is not fostering the growth and spread of radical movements, whose stated goal is elimination of the legitimate government by any means, including armed struggle. There are known groups who are not permitted in many of the Middle Eastern countries, thus, it is unreasonable to single out Uzbekistan as being required to recognize these same groups as a legitimate religious party. There must be some type of code of ethics devised to differentiate legitimate religious groups from those who use the threat of force to impose their ideology.

The problem of extremism exists not only in far distant countries, but in the US as well. It can be dealt with more effectively if the West better

understands Islam and builds bridges with moderate Muslim individuals and nations. To support “religious freedom” abroad without having knowledge of whom one is supporting (i.e., an extremist movement) is an irrational misuse of the laws protecting the religious rights of individuals.

To understand such movements, one must understand the scope of Islam and the psychology of Muslims, since what we are seeing today is an ideological movement turned militant. It is important to note that the Wahhabi ideology itself is extreme in its interpretation and can turn militant over time. Why is this form of thinking attractive to some Muslims? What are the political agendas behind “religious” movements? How are holy books used to justify illegal actions performed in the name of the religion? Education is a key factor in containing and countering the spread of this type of extremism and its associated movements.

It would be highly beneficial if a think tank or research institute were to be formed in order that government officials, researchers, and media understand Islam on a deeper level, rather than making rash generalizations based on superficial understandings. To truly understand the world Islamist extremist movement, one must realize it is not just a social phenomenon as so many theorists mistakenly assume, but is a full-fledged ideological war of words and weapons alike.