

Rise of the Wahabi Movement

The Wahabi school of thought originated with a religious leader by the name of Mohammed Ibn Abd al-Wahab (1703-1791), the Wahabis preach a return to the basic Islam of the seventh century, and rejected most of the alterations that Islam had undergone in the eleven centuries since. His call was not purely religious, however. Islam was the Arabian Peninsula's greatest contribution, while many of the prior amendments were not of Arabic origin. Their Ottoman rulers were responsible for the majority of the later innovations, which were decidedly urban. The Islamic community in Arabia also felt a large influence from the equally land-hungry Shiite Safavids. The only thing preventing a Safavid invasion and subsequent Shiite domination of Islam was the Ottoman presence in the region. Wahabism became a nationalistic movement through its associating pure Islam with a purely Arabic culture. In rejecting the heresy of the more recent modifications, the Arabs could also reject the cultures from which they came.

The Wahabi movement emerged during the nineteenth century in the Arabian Peninsula. It's founder and namesake, Mohammed Ibn Abd Al-Wahab, was an Islamic scholar of the Nejd province. He spent some time in the city of Mecca, where he studied Islamic law as befitted his family's standing as hereditary judges. While there, al-Wahab observed much that he would later denounce as anti-Islamic, most notably prayer directed at saints and "holy objects" and the legalistic hairsplitting among the leading scholars. Neither of these practices originated in the Arabian Peninsula, nor with the Prophet Mohammed, which prompted al-Wahab to deem them blasphemy. He began to preach against such actions on the grounds that they were un-Islamic, but met with little success until he formed an alliance with a Nejd ruler, Mohammed Ibn Saud, in seventeen hundred and forty-four.

While in Mecca, Al-Wahab trained in the Hanbali school of Islamic law, which is the most austere of the four disciplines of Sunni law. More specifically, al-Wahab studied the teachings of Ibn Taymiyya, a theologian of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. Ibn Taymiyya advocated a return to seventh-century Islam, which was more primitive but closer to the Koran. As Islam requires that all Moslems who can afford it go on a pilgrimage to Mecca, al-Wahab also encountered the multiple variations of Islam that had evolved over the eleven centuries since its advent. Al-Wahab strongly disapproved of the majority of these variations, as he maintained that if the Koran or the Sunna does not mention them, they were heresy. He especially disapproved of the high Islamic culture that arose in culturally sophisticated urban areas. Many of these new alterations had their roots in the Indo-European Ottoman Empire, which controlled much of the Arab world at the time, and was therefore doubly disliked.

Encouraged by the reformist scholars under which he studied, al-Wahab began a public crusade against what he called heretic innovations. The greatest of these were the worship at tombs, prayers for the intercession of holy men and not directly to God Himself, the worship of trees, rock formations, and other such "holy objects," minor pilgrimages, the belief in Mohammed as a religious power and complex initiation rituals. Al-Wahab declared these customs as polytheism, the greatest sin of Islam, and

began built up a small following advocating a return to the Islam of the time of the Prophet Mohammed.

Upon completing his studies, al-Wahab returned to Uyayna, the Najd province from whence he came. So long as his father lived, al-Wahab encountered few difficulties, although his strict teachings made him unpopular. After his father died, however, al-Wahab lost what little support he had. Initially Uthman Ibn Mu'ammār, the ruler of Uyayna, afforded al-Wahab his protection, but al-Wahab soon lost that after sentencing a woman who had committed adultery to death in seventeen hundred and forty-five. Banu Khalid, a chief of an outlying region, demanded al-Wahab's death and threatened the interruption of all taxes unless Ibn Mu'ammār met his demands. Ibn Mu'ammār did not kill Al-Wahab, instead he exiled al-Wahab and forbade his return.

From Uyayna al-Wahab made his way to the desert town Dariyya, where he formed an alliance with its ruler, Mohammed Ibn Saud, which al-Wahab further strengthened by marrying a daughter of Ibn Saud. This alliance marks the true beginnings of Wahabism as a religious-political force. Three primary periods of Wahabi expansion exist. The first of these lasted for approximately seventy years after the initial alliance and consisted of three intervals. The second is merely the time of reconstruction after defeat at the hands of the Ottomans in eighteen hundred and eighteen, while the third is also divisible, this time into two intervals, and concerns the formation of the modern Saudi state.

The first interval of the first period was a time of tribal warfare. The Wahabis justified this inter-Moslem fighting by refusing to acknowledge their non-Wahabi enemies as true Moslems. Their main rival was their close neighbor, Riyadh. The Wahabis battled Riyadh from seventeen hundred and forty-six until seventeen hundred and seventy-three, when they captured it conclusively. Sometime around seventeen hundred and sixty-five the warfare began to spread as allies of vanquished tribes attempted to avenge their partners' defeats. The Wahabis encountered difficulties at first, but soon resumed their ever-growing patterns of expansion. This period also had the effect of ending virtually all infighting among the Wahabi tribes. They abandoned raiding one another in favor of spreading Wahabism, which had the combined effect of increasing their religious convictions through constant reinforcement while forming a more effective fighting force.

It was around then that Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud succeeded his father, Mohammed Ibn Saud. Abdul Aziz oversaw the second third of the first period. Fighting continued, but it was primarily directed towards the consolidation of power already gained rather than the outward drive of Mohammed Ibn Saud's rule. The political side of Wahabi movement became especially apparent in seventeen hundred and eighty-eight, when the Wahabi provinces, strongly encouraged by Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud and Mohammed Ibn Abd al-Wahab, swore an oath of allegiance to Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud's son, Amir.

Once Abdul Aziz established a powerful political base within his domain, he was willing to look beyond the Arabian Peninsula. The Wahabis' rapid expansion attracted the notice of its ultimate enemy, the Ottoman Empire, which enjoyed nominal

sovereignty over the region. The Ottomans were further despised on a religious basis, for the Indo-European culture of the Ottoman Empire was greatly influential in the transformation of Islam into the complex belief system the Wahabis viewed as blasphemy. The Ottomans first moved against the Wahabis in seventeen hundred and ninety-seven, under Sheikh Thuwayni. Thuwayni was assassinated early on, however, and the expedition disintegrated. It was now that the third division of the first period began in force and the Wahabis directed their energies towards further expansion once more.

The Wahabis defeated another Ottoman-supported force in seventeen hundred and seventy-eight, followed by a general lull until eighteen hundred and two, when Amir Ibn Saud lead the Wahabis into Southern Iraq. The Wahabis hoped to reach Karbala, the burial place of the Shiite Imam Hussein and the site of a prominent Shiite shrine. Karbala was and remains until this day a drawing point for much which the Wahabis forbade, specifically the worship of saints and minor pilgrimages. The Wahabis sacked Karbala completely, and with it Southern Iraq. Around this time the Wahabis also turned their attention to the Hijaz and the two Holy Cities located there. The Wahabis took Medina in eighteen hundred and five, and Mecca in the following year. As in Southern Iraq, the Wahabis engaged in comprehensive looting and the destruction of shrines. The only tomb spared the Wahabis' destruction was that of the Prophet Mohammed. The Wahabis did not disturb the tomb in any way, nor did they accord it any respect.

Up until this point the much-weakened Ottomans had deemed the desert areas controlled by the Wahabis not worth the cost of an invasion of the necessary scope, but after eighteen hundred and six, circumstances gave them little choice in the matter. The Ottoman Sultan claimed the titles of Caliph and "Protector of the Two Holy Cities," and as such he could not allow the Wahabis to control Mecca and Medina without a great loss of power both within the Empire and without it. Further compounding the problem was the Wahabi's siege of Baghdad, site of the Abbasiyd Caliphate and of great significance to Sunni Islam. When the Wahabis refused to allow the Damascus Pilgrimage reach Mecca in eighteen hundred and seven and subsequently invaded Southern Syria, they left the Ottoman Empire no choice but to respond.

In 1811 the Ottoman Empire sent their governor in Egypt, Mohammed Ali, into the Arabian Peninsula for the express purpose of conquering the Wahabis. At the outset of the expedition, the Egyptians met with little success, but by 1818 they could confidently claim to have broken the Wahabi power. The time following this is the second period in the history of a Wahabi state. A smaller Saud kingdom existed from eighteen hundred and twenty until eighteen hundred and ninety-one, but with little impact. Wahabism might have died out altogether if not for its pro-Arab basis. Their conquerors were of an alien culture and of a different form of Islam. By asserting the superiority of their religion the Wahabis were in effect asserting the superiority of their culture over an alien one. It was this psychological appeal that kept Wahabism vital until the advent of the modern Saudi state, and it is this same appeal that keeps Wahabism a vital force in Saudi Arabia today.

It is modern Saudi Arabia and its formation that comprises the third period of Wahabi political power. Like the first period, this one can be subdivided, this time into halves. The first interval began in nineteen hundred and two, when Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud II lead forty of his men on a daring attack against Riyadh. Ibn Saud captured Riyadh and proceeded to use it a base to re-establish a Wahabi Kingdom. Once again the purity of religion became a political rallying cry. Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud explained his attempts to regain his family's holdings as religious, for "as a Wahabi, he could never accept the Ottoman Sultan's claim to the Caliphate, for the Turkish perversions of the Koran were abominable." This period ended in nineteen hundred and thirty-four, with the declaration of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia under the leadership of Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud, who became the first King since the man's whose namesake was children were.

The second half of the third Wahabi period is still in effect today. Saudi Arabia is very much a product of its Wahabi history. The Saudi flag bears the crossed swords of the Saud and al-Wahab houses, but is dominated by the fundamental declaration of Islam; "There is no god but God." The Saudis take pride in their Islamic heritage and traditions, and often make use of them in the political realm. Religion is the basis of most everything in Saudi Arabia, from national identity, to politics, to primary schools. In the face of increasing modernization, Saudi's increasingly rely on their religion as a way to distinguish themselves from other countries. Much of what they have can be found in most any developed country, and most of it is not of Arab origin. The excellent roads were built by foreign workers and the excellent hospitals overwhelmingly staffed by foreign doctors. One thing that none of these people can have is pure Islam. Islam is a wholly Arabian creation, and the Saudi take pride in staying "truest to form." It is for this reason that violent reactions ensue whenever the government moves towards liberalization. Liberalization implies the superiority of the Western culture, and to the Saudis, their cultures and their beliefs are of utmost importance.

Wahabism had relaxed some since the time of Mohammed Ibn Abd al-Wahab and Mohammed Ibn Saud, but for the most part the Wahabi doctrine remains is much same as it was upon conception. The first period of relaxation occurred from approximately nineteen hundred and twenty to nineteen hundred and thirty. The Ikhwan ("Brotherhood") soldiers of Abdul Aziz resisted Abdul Aziz's attempts to form the more urban state that he needed in order to play a role in the world arena. Abdul Aziz managed to retain enough support to defeat them, however, and when Mecca and Medina were conquered in nineteen hundred and twenty-five, they were spared looting to the extent that they had endure during the last Wahabi occupation. A second period began during the reign of King Faisal Ibn Saud, who is responsible for Saudi Arabia's existence as a modern state. Faisal supported many of his reforms with the Koran, but he also did away with much that was impractical, such as a prohibition on interest-garnering banking. This trend towards liberalization is no longer so strong a force, however, as the outcry against it began to threaten the power Saudi of the Saudi royal family, which bases its legitimacy on the Wahabi doctrine.

There are six defining precepts in Wahabism, about which al-Wahab wrote in his book *The Three Fundamentals*. They are the Tawhid, (the unity of God), the

Tawassul (Intercession), Ziyarat al-Qubur (visitations of graves and erections of tombs), Takfir (the charge of disbelief), Bid'ah (innovation), and Ijtihad and Taqlid (original legal opinions and the imitation of tradition). Wahabism also includes its own procedures for discussing doctrinal issues. Like much of the Arabian Peninsula, the Wahabis were Hanafi, but they are not constrained to follow Hanafi law if they felt it to be contrary to the original Islam. They designed methods of deciding any philosophical questions that might arise with achieving the greatest similarity to seventh-century Islam in mind.

The core of Wahabism is the Tawhid, or Unity of God. The Unity of God is the basis upon which Islam is founded. This is by no means a solely Wahabi belief, but the main basis upon which Islam exists. The Koran says of God's Unity "God has not taken to Himself any son, nor is there any god with Him." Al-Wahab believed that the unity of God manifested itself in three ways. The first, the Tawhid al-Rububiyah, is the assertion of a monotheistic universe. God and God alone is the World's creation and its destruction. The second assertion is the Tawhid al-Asma Wa-al-Sifat, which translates as the unity of names and attributes. This is the belief that concerns what type of God rules on high, and not just the assertion of His existence. Wahabis view God as benevolent, omnipotent and omnipresent. The Koran says of God, "He is God the One God, the Everlasting Refuge, who has not begotten, nor has been begotten and equal to him is not anyone."

The third and most significant assertion of Tawhid is the Tawhid al-Ilahiya. This is the designation of worship to God alone. Over the centuries since Mohammed it had become common practice to direct prayers towards the Prophet and other saints rather than directly God, as well as to certain "holy objects." Al-Wahab preached against this and other related practices, which he denounced as pagan. In his main treatise, *The Three Fundamentals*, al-Wahab warned the Islamic world, "Mud cannot save you. Pray to God and God alone." To the Wahabis, this is the same as polytheism, the greatest sin of Islam. Wahabism maintains that neither Mohammed nor any other saint is God. For the Wahabis, Mohammed is God's apostle, and the saints enlightened men, but neither has any spiritual powers, and cannot answer prayers. Initially al-Wahab condoned prayer at the tombs of saints as a pious act, but he soon reversed his stance, citing a fear that prayer for the souls of saints had become prayer to the souls of saints. It is for this reason that the Wahabis prefer to call themselves the *Muwahhidun*, or Unitarians. To call themselves after a man would be glorifying a man, a deadly sin, as to do so would deflect one's attention from contemplation of God.

Closely related to the Tawhid al-Ilahiya is the Tawassul, or intercession. For the Wahabis, the principle *Ibadah* (worship) refers to all deeds, enacted or merely thought, that God desires and commands. Al-Wahab wrote that to seek protection from anyone but God, be it from a tree or from a saint, is a form of paganism, nor can succor come from anyone but God. Intercession is impossible, as only God who can permit it, and it is His pleasure with the supplicant that is the defining factor. Any soul intervening for the supplicant is itself dependent on God, and any action of theirs is therefore equally dependent.

The Wahabi interpretation of the Tawassul greatly influenced the Wahabis' practices concerning the Ziyarat al- Qubur, which is the visitation of graves and erection of tombs. Al-Wahab forbade engaging in such activities, as to do so would be allowing oneself to be distracted from the glory of God in favor of polytheism. He did not only ban all such activities in the future, he also advocated the destruction of already-existing tombs and shrines, in order to prevent any unbelievers from praying there. Wahabism dictates that all burial sites be at ground level and devoid of all ornamentation. Those who persist in doing so are unbelievers, and are therefore subject to the Takfir, the charge of unbelief. If one is found to be a non-believer, then a jihad and one's subsequent death are the only just response.

Another key issue was that of the Bid'ah. Islam defines Bid'ah as innovation, and for the Wahabis acceptance of such is the exception rather than the rule as it is in many other divisions of Islam. Bid'ah is defined as any Islamic belief or ritual not originating in the Koran, the Sunna, or the traditions of the Prophet Mohammed's time. The primary Bid'ah that the Wahabis opposed was innovations concerning ritual and the worship of saints. They discarded as Bid'ah practices such as celebrating the prophet's and other holy men's birthday, initiation rituals, and designating objects such as rocks and trees as holy. In some cases Bid'ah may be sanctioned, but only after ascertaining that it is within the true spirit of early Islam.

Whenever reviewing Islamic doctrine, the Wahabis rely upon the Ijtihad and the Taqlid. These are the original legal opinions and imitation of Islamic tradition. The Wahabis believe that God commanded them to obey only Him, and to follow the teachings of the Prophet Mohammed. This complete adherence to the Koran and traditional lifestyle of the Prophet entails repudiation of all interpretations of law not directly supported by the Koran or the Sunna, even those of their own strict Hanbali law.

The procedure as to ascertaining the legitimacy of any innovations is a rather straightforward one. The Ulema or any other council of Wahabi scholars' first searches the Koran and Sunna for support or opposition, and base conclusions on what they find there. If there is no mention of the question under discussion, the Ulema then looks for a consensus of the Prophet's companions and the Ijma (consensus) of scholars who rigorously follow the Koran. Unlike many other Islamic doctrines, the complete adherence to the Koran that Wahabism includes a repudiation of most Koranic interpretations not of the seventh century. This includes all four schools of Islamic law, even their own Hanbali form, provided the Ulema finds the interpretations in question contradictory to the Koran or Sunna.

The history of Wahabism is the history of Saudi Arabia. Oil provides Saudi Arabia with power, but it is "pure" Islam and its culture that grants Saudi Arabia its prestige. Islam is the defining core of Saudi Arabia, and without it Saudi Arabia is just a developed nation like any other, with no real detriments but no outstanding accomplishments either. It is for this reason that Wahabism has found such support in the Arabian Peninsula. It is equated with true Islam but also with the Arab culture, and so in upholding Wahabism modern-day Wahabis are championing their own

cultural consequence, and it is to defend that sense of consequence that many modern Wahabis oppose modernization.

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