



Extremism



Dr. Sulayman Nyang

Also by Prof. Nyang: [Mawlid an-Nabi \(S\)](#)

On the Status, Method and Fallout of the Global Spread of Wahhabism

Excerpts of an intellectual exchange with Professor Sulayman Nyang

Introduction

Extensive discussions are currently taking place in the media - national and international - on the role of Wahhabism in the spread of radical Islam, often times leading to violence and terrorism. In reviewing our files, we found the following outstanding elucidation of the extremist 'Islamist' movements, including the infiltration by Wahhabi thinkers and their distortion of opinions through careful funding, indoctrination and the manipulation of educational institutions.

In the course of planning The Muslim Magazine in October 1997, I was an active participant in the following discussion with Dr. Sulayman Nyang. We believe the information presented here by Professor Nyang regarding the evolution of Wahhabi influence on the world's Islamic movements will be of great value to people in understanding the current situation.

Dr. Nyang is a professor of Islamic and African Studies at Howard University and director of the Muslims in American Public Square project at Georgetown University's Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding.

Dr. Nyang has contributed articles on *Tasawwuf* and *Mawlid an-Nabi (s)* to The Muslim Magazine.

Mateen Siddiqui
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The following is the transcript of a dialogue with Professor Sulayman Nyang on the influence of Wahhabism on the Islamic movement, abridged for brevity. [The complete transcript is available in PDF format](#) [PDF](#)

DR. NYANG: I think is critical for Muslims in the United States and all over the world is to recognize the fact that in order for them to succeed in doing da`wah, and in promoting the word of Allah (swt) and the example of Prophet Muhammad (s) - they have to like each other,

otherwise you cannot be impressive. How are you going [to] tell a Christian or a Jew or non-believer that Islam is very full when he can see that you don't like your other Muslim brother. It doesn't make sense. You cannot be effective....this is where the structures work against unity. Because the structures are institutionalization of narrow interests, you see, and then you see this is where the external forces become dangerous and this is what I keep telling the Muslims in America - if the Muslims are genuinely interested in planting the seeds of Islam in America they should not allow themselves to be controlled by the forces outside them.

Q: what is the reason for the opposition to *Tasawwuf* as a spiritual discipline in Islam?

DR.NYANG: you see what is happening- if you look at the intellectual history, the social history of the Muslim organizations in America, you can see the reason why this is the case. And again it's because many of these people - if you take the MSA, which we started when we just came here. It started in '64. I came maybe one year later after they started [with] Ahmad Sakr, and all the others.

You have three elements who were instrumental in bringing about the MSA. You have those people from the subcontinent who were followers of Mawlana Maududi. Anis Ahmad and all those people - Iqbal Yunus, and all those people. Then you have people who came from the Arab world who would identify with the Iqwan al-Muslimoon (Muslim Brotherhood - Egypt). You know, Abu Gideri, Tijani. We're neighbors, you can name their names. And then those who came from Iran, who were the followers of Ayatollah Khomeini, people like Mosadeq; [or the one] who became foreign minister after the [Iranian Islamic] Revolution - people like Ibrahim Yazdi. Those elements, they were students here. These groups, the followers of Ayatollah Khomeini, those from Najaf in Iraq; the followers of Mawlana Maududi; and the followers of Sayyid Qutb, Hassan al-Banna and the Ikhwan [al-Muslimoon] - they were the ones who started the MSA in America.

Many of those people, they have a version of Islam - even though Maududi himself has some *Tasawwuf* connections, but they became very rigid in terms of their Islam, and to some extent many of them had to deal with the Salafi people. So they turned against *Tasawwuf*.

... you see what happened is - because of the politics in Arab world, at the time these people were coming in, those people who were followers of Ayatollah Khomeini - they were opposed to the Ba`ath Party in Iraq and Syria. So naturally those kids, our generation, they were older, I was the young... Many of those ...so the Ba`athists were opposed by these Muslims, because in the 50's and 60's most of the Arab kids I went to school with in America were secular.... They were Muslims, but Islam was not seen as progressive, because they were all Arab nationalists - [saying,] "Nasser, Nasser, Nasser. " That

was the other thing.

So the Ikhwan people were very marginalized among the Arab intellectual groups. And those people who were followers of Ayatollah Khomeini from Iraq and Iran, they were also marginalized, because these were young Arab, Iranian, Pakistani, Indian Muslims who were Islamic. We used to pray - there are a lot of people I know, now many of them are active, but when we were students, many of them from Africa, and many from Pakistan - they didn't want to pray. Many of them now, they are very active. And...their kids are now going to college. In those days they were just what I called "grasshopper" Muslims.

I want to say why *Tasawwuf* was rejected: most of those [Muslims] were secular...and...they came back to Islam after the Iranian Revolution. Many of them, they have kids, they're now professionals in America. They moved from secularism into Islam. And the kind of Islam they know is ISNA. And the other thing - they come back from being grasshoppers to being 'regular' Muslims. So many of them now began to realize their Muslim identity. And this coincided with the oil embargo in the Arab world, and the rise of Saudi Arabia.

So, you see, because Maududi and the Ikhwan al-Muslimoon people were supported by the Arab Gulf States in Saudi Arabia. That's why you have many of these people who are leaders now in Southern California here - they were living in the Arab world. They were doctors in the Arab world, they made money in Kuwait and in Saudi Arabia... because they fled from Egypt, from Nasser's air forces. They went to Saudi Arabia, they helped King Faisal and King Khalid.

Many of them made money, and then they came to America. They became very active in Islamic work here. Those people now, while they were refugees from Nasser in Saudi Arabia, in Qatar - they became Wahhabis. So if you're really trying to understand the root of these anti-*Tasawwuf* [concepts], you have to [study]... the intellectual history and the social history of the Muslim groups.

So those people who were Maududi supporters, those people who were Ayatollah Khomeini supporters, and those people who were supporters of the Ikhwan al-Muslimoon, who became refugees in Saudi Arabia, they became influenced by the Wahhabis. And when they came to America and they started doing da`wah they were getting money from Saudi Arabia. So those people, they opposed *Tasawwuf*. That's the intellectual history of what happened.

On why American Islamist groups reject traditional Islam

Q: Is it not correct that the majority of immigrant Muslims practice *Tasawwuf*?

DR. NYANG: Yes.

Q: ...is this [rejection of these an] effect of the old leaders of MSA still influencing the new generation?

DR. NYANG: No, no, no. That's why when you say the silent majority - they come from Muslim countries where you have *Tasawwuf* already [established]. So there's a gap between the elites who have been influenced, as I described, and the masses... There's a gap there. Most Muslim countries have been exposed to *Tasawwuf* - that's a fact in our intellectual history. There is not a single Muslim country where Islam went without the *Tasawwuf* people.

Q: And that *Tasawwuf* was a blessing that had helped to spread Islam...?

DR. NYANG: Yes, of course, that's the way it happened all over the Islamic world...

Q: Yeah, because as you see, Ibn Taymiyya has clearly supported *Tasawwuf* ... the correct *Tasawwuf*.

DR. NYANG: Yes.

Q: And [Ibn Taymiyya] was a Qadiri himself?

DR. NYANG: Yes...

Q: we also find in the Islamic tradition that different scholars, like Ibn Taymiyya, [were] Sufi, who now ... are being studied...

DR. NYANG: Yes, that's right, that's right.

Q: Even Imam Nawawi was a Sufi. Even Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani [and] Al-Haythami [were] Sufi. As-Subki was a Sufi, Adh-Dhahabi, ... were Sufi.

DR. NYANG: Yes.

Q: The Four Schools of Islam...

DR. NYANG: The major thinkers, yes. They all have Sufi ancestry.

On clearing up the false understanding of *Tasawwuf*

Q: How can we clear up the MSA understanding about *Tasawwuf*, that it is not something other than Islam, but it is [part of] Islam?

DR. NYANG: Yes, this is where the dialogue has to be initiated. And I think two processes must take place. One is, there must be dialogue with the elites - not all of them will come. Some of them, they have vested interests.

Because, see, if you are a Muslim in America and you are getting money from Saudi Arabia - I don't expect you to... - you may know the truth but you will not come, because your interest is linked... They're not going to accept that because they feel that if they do it, they will destroy their sources of funding. So those people, you don't dismiss them. You still maintain the door open. Keep the door open, because their circumstances could change, you know what I'm saying. They may fall out with the Saudis or whoever that is, and because you did not snub them or close the door against them, they may turn around and say, "Well you know brother you are right, what you were saying is correct." I mean, self interest misguided them.

It's not that they don't have the intellectual understanding... Your interest blinds you to reality, you cannot see it.

There are people like that, those people who have vested interest in the way the Wahhabi hierarchy in Saudi Arabia doles out money to them. And that's not only in America - it's ...all over the world. You see Rabita [Rabitat al-`aalam al-islami, The Muslim World League, Makkah, Saudi Arabia] people - they give money to them.

The Wahhabi - [and] people who are inspired by the Wahhabi, or influenced by the Wahhabi - will never accept *Tasawwuf*, even if they are intellectually convinced about the validity and the strength of *Tasawwuf* because of their material interest. And this is very clear in the United States....

On American Islamist groups rejection of *Tasawwuf*

Q: If the silent majority is *Ahl as-Sunnah wal-Jama'at* and few are from outside *Ahl as-Sunnah wal-Jama'at*? why is there that fear of the word "*Tasawwuf*"? Why are they so irritated when the issue of *Tasawwuf* comes up?

DR. NYANG: You know, the thing is this: I was a diplomat in Saudi Arabia in the 70's, twenty-two years ago... What I observed over there in Saudi Arabia, is the fact that the Saudi ruling family itself is not united on this issue of Wahhabism.

...you see what has happened is at one point in time, their father or grandfather, Abdul Aziz, was able to use the Ikhwan, which grew out of the movement created by, you know, like the amir, you know, so-called Saudi Greats, and Muhammad ibn Saud, [and] Abdul Wahhab, Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab. That alliance between the crown and the pen, you know, in Saudi Arabia, has led to the Aali-Shaykh family...You see, and the Al-Saud family. That's why the Aali-Shaykh, you know that very well, Aali-Shaykh family becomes the Minister of Education since the beginning of the kingdom.

On rejection of Wahhabism in its homeland

DR. NYANG: Now, what has happened really is the royal family may not care about Wahhabism any more. Because this is one of the reasons why - if you go to Riyadh or Jeddah, you take a taxi, they still listen to music. Whereas Wahhabis used to say, "no music." [You see] cigars... They put it on TV. If they are Wahhabis, they are opposed to that. In the past, no music in Saudi Arabia. You see, you can see that even among the royal family, this old idea of Wahhabism, rigid Wahhabism, is fading away.

OK, the silent majority, the first they are *Ahl Jama'at was-Sunnah*, that's what they are in Saudi Arabia, especially in Hijaz. People they do *Mawlid an-Nabi* in Medina.

DR. NYANG: They do! So the reality is really that the elites have a vested interest in keeping the facade - it's all facade - there is no substance to it in Saudi Arabia. It's facade because, you see, the prestige internationally depends on Wahhabism. The great irony in Saudi Arabia is that Wahhabism is more important as a tool of foreign policy than as an instrument of internal government policy. ..

And you have some groups now from overseas who have a vested interest in clinging on to that. You see, because the groups that are in America, if they get money from the Wahhabi's government, they re-inforce the external policy, even though, domestically they didn't have much substance to it... it has nothing to do with Islam or anything else. It's just mere power and how to get power and keep power.

On Wahhabi incitement to violence in Africa

Q: Now we see that in many African countries like Kenya, Senegal, Djibouti, Somalia - they begin big fights and clashes between the Muslims because the majority there are following *Ahl as-Sunnah wal-Jama'at* and *Tasawwuf*. Is this indeed correct?

DR. NYANG: That's right.

Q: And now with this new ideology that's coming in from the Wahhabis - you are finding that clashes are increasing?

DR. NYANG: Yes.

Q: In many *masajid* (mosques), there have been many killings there for who will be in authority between the Wahhabis or still in the hands of the *Ahl as-Sunnah wal-Jama'at*.

DR. NYANG: Yes... In recent times what has happened is when the Rabita began to fight on behalf of the Saudi family with Nasserites, they were looking for allies in the region. And these groups of people became actively involved. So these Wahhabis had their own people. You

see, so those people, they get money. If you are an imam in Mombasa, for example, and the Rabita sends you a check - in Africa it's a lot of money. They send them about \$800 a month. It's a lot of money over there... So, you are on the payroll of Rabita...it makes you live a middle-class lifestyle in Kenya. So, you are an imam and you know every month you get a check and then you may even be member of the Global Islamic Council of Imams or Mosques.

They have a mosque in Saudi Arabia. Every year you go for this annual meeting of imams from around the world. And you meet there - you meet all the people from Pakistan, from Thailand, from Malaysia. You can then go for `umra [the lesser pilgrimage to Mecca]. It gives you prestige in your community. Because you see, they say the imam is going to see the Imam of Mecca. That's prestige, you see, it's prestige. The newspaper will say that Imam Ahmed Abdullah [an imaginary imam] will be going to Mecca to attend the Global Council of Masjids (mosques).

Prestige. If we have money, you do it in America, too... If they get an invitation, they come from Kenya, yea I'm going to America to join the Muslims. You see? Prestige for them. That's what's happening! This is what is happening! So those guys, they got caught up in this international network of Wahhabis, so when they come to Kenya, they will fight anybody who talks *Tasawwuf*...

Even though in Saudi Arabia, the royal family is not united on Wahhabism anymore. These people are more holier than thou. Ha ha ha. This is what is happening! Politicization of Islam. And the creation of the profit motive in sectarianism. See what I'm saying? It becomes commercial. What you were saying earlier in the conversation. People will say, "What can I get from this Islam?" Islam now is good for them, it's modernized. You see what I am saying? This is what is happening...?

On how the Ikhwan al-Muslimoon and Wahhabi interests became linked

Q: What is your future vision of Islam in the world - will the belief of Muslims through fourteen hundred years be changed slightly toward the new ideology of Muhammad bin Abdul Wahab?

DR. NYANG: No, ...I don't think so... many of the Egyptian intellectuals who were with the Ikhwan al-Muslimoon of Hasan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb migrated to Saudi Arabia. And they are the ones - the intellectuals - that's why I told you that the Saudis don't have the intellectual ability - they are the ones who helped the Saudi Arabians to establish what? Rabita.

The Rabita was created only to fight the Egyptians Nasserites.... And then the Saudis, benefiting from the Egyptian intellectuals, people like Mahmoud Tawfiq...

[who] all went to Riyadh and they created the *Rabita*. And the Egyptians, the Lebanese, and the Syrians and Iraqi intellectuals who were Ikhwanis - they fled to Saudi Arabia. And they're the ones who created the intellectual infrastructure for the royal family in Saudi Arabia.

So, you have the Majlis in Egypt and you have the Rabita. And the Rabita would now become a very important instrument for the royal family in Saudi Arabia, not only to fight the Nasserites, but to expand Saudi influence in the Muslim world. Then the Saudis' businessmen,...all those different families that are in Riyadh and in Jeddah - the *Hijazis* - they put their money together and they established Jami` at Abdul Aziz University, which was a private university, but then, later on, taken over. Because of the rivalry between the Egyptians and the Saudis, that private university became... It's been widely written about. So when you talk about how Wahhabi thought became dominant, this Saudi influence - they didn't have intellectual know-how.

On Bilal Philips

DR. NYANG: Bilal Philips, of course, you know, he left Saudi Arabia. He was there - he was with Dar al-Ifta. ...He was a protégé of Sheikh Bin Baz. And Sheikh Bin Baz gave him thousands... hundreds of thousands of dollars from them... He's a very young man, you know, like he went there and you know, ostensibly to study Arabic, and he did study Arabic very well. You have Imam Muhammad ibn Saud University in Riyadh and - so he became a protégé of Shaykh Bin Baz. Bin Baz has a lot of money so he gave him a lot of money, you know.

When they had those problems with so-called "Islamic fundamentalists" in Saudi Arabia - that was when the secular forces - because in Saudi Arabia you have a strong group of people who were - they call them the Southern California Mafia. These are Saudi Arabians who are secular nationalists, and they are still here in America. And they went back home - they're not interested in *Tasawwuf*, they're not interested in Wahhabism - they're interested in Saudi nationalism. Many of them were Ba`athists or Nasserites, and these guys - they saw people like Bilal Philips as troublemakers, because they are encouraging the radicals. That's why they kicked him out - so he went to Dubai. That's why he went to Dubai, and that's why he ended up in the Philippines - even married to a Filipino girl...

The thing is this, you see, the people who were *Ahl at-Tasawwuf*... must have an intellectual understanding of what is happening. Like we are doing now - what's happening globally. And then you develop strategies.

On the Wahhabi takeover of Islam in Sri Lanka

DR. NYANG: You see, in Sri Lanka, you're right... those people who are locals - they have their personal interests,

"what can Islam do for me in Sri Lanka?" So those imams, those khatibs, and all those people in the masajids who have vested interests - they know that they may be outnumbered locally by the people who follow *Tasawwuf*, but they could use their government, where the government in Sri Lanka is now faced with a problem.

...the Muslims who are now struggling for power among themselves - those who are opposed to the Sufis, they try to get the Saudis to bring money to the Sri Lankans. That's the game that they're playing! So you see, if I want to win against the Sufis in Sri Lanka, I'd form two alliances. I'd form an alliance with the Wahhabis, and I'd form an alliance with the government. And I'd tell my Wahhabi friends, "Send money to these guys, because they are fighting the war against the Tamils." You see what I'm saying? And this way they benefit.

On correcting the Muslims' understanding of doctrine

DR. NYANG: The most important thing is to build structures. That's why America becomes a very important theatre here. What has to happen here is the people who are interested in really promoting Islam and away from these government structures that have narrow blinders, you plant the seeds here among the young people...

Q: How do you give them the information?

DR. NYANG: Well, books like this is one [Encyclopedia of Islamic Doctrine]. And then you organize seminars. And then you begin to create catalysts - you have regional seminars, you have annual seminars, conference - annual conference, regional seminars - East Coast, West Coast, southern part like Florida. And then you also begin to create catalysts for da'wah and reinforcement. Then you have dialogue. Because you see, in order for the Muslim groups that are genuinely interested in promoting Islam - they have to do da'wah and dialogue. But these are two different strategies.

... I feel adequate to dialogue with Christians, because if I sit down with Christians, I may know more about Christianity than they do... they say, "Yeah, ... He's secure as a Muslim, but he's willing to dialogue with us." Those people now you make them your emissaries.... But if you just put your stuff out like Muslims who are in their cocoon... these are *kuffars* [unbelievers]. What kind of message is that? If you don't like *kuffar* why are you here? Go back to your Muslim world!

Q: One question ...what you have discussed with other groups, but have these subjects about *Tasawwuf* and so on, have they been discussed or questioned...?

DR. NYANG: ...the question of *Tasawwuf* has not come up in the way we are discussing. It always comes in the context of - they don't deal with genuine *Tasawwuf* - they

deal with what I call "distorted *Tasawwuf*" ? you know, what I call "popcorn Sufis"... I coined this term 15 years ago. ...[they have a group] holding hands and saying "Allah, Allah, Allah", and she's not a Muslim - then she must be a 'popcorn Sufi'.
So you see, that trivialization of *Tasawwuf* has become the major instrument they use against ...

On Islamic acceptability of *Tasawwuf* and *Mawlid*

Q: Professor Sulayman Nyang, do you think that *Tasawwuf* is correct Islamically?

DR. NYANG: Well, yes - there are various references in the Qur'an which suggest that you have the mystical dimension of Islam. I mean, you know, we can see that very clearly. You know, when the people who are Salafi or Wahhabi reinterpret *nafs ul-ammara bi su*, *nafs ul-lawwamma*, *nafs ul-mutma'iyana*, they may interpret these concepts in their own relative manner - but they cannot deny the fact that these are stages in the spiritual evolution of *insan*. They cannot deny that...

In our intellectual tradition - Imam al-Ghazali is a classical example of someone who was well-grounded in terms of the intellectual currents of his time. ... That has to happen. That's why I'm saying that this book [Encyclopedia of Islamic Doctrine] here will be part of that intellectual debate.

Q: *Insha'llah* (God Willing). It has many references...

DR. NYANG: Yes... Well, they call me Sufi! So I mean, you know, ... these people call me Sufi anyway.

Q: [Can you] say Sulayman Nyang accepts celebration of *Milad an-Nabi* (s)?

DR. NYANG: Well, I gave lectures to the Agha Khan people, celebrating *Milad*... So I would not have been there if I didn't.

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