

Saudi Arabia

Wahhabi Theology in Islam

The political and cultural environment of contemporary Saudi Arabia has been influenced by a religious movement that began in central Arabia in the mid-eighteenth century. This movement, commonly known as the Wahhabi movement, grew out of the scholarship and preaching of Muhammad ibn Abd al Wahhab, a scholar of Islamic jurisprudence who had studied in Mesopotamia and the Hijaz before returning to his native Najd to preach his message of Islamic reform.

Muhammad ibn Abd al Wahhab was concerned with the way the people of Najd engaged in practices he considered polytheistic, such as praying to saints; making pilgrimages to tombs and special mosques; venerating trees, caves, and stones; and using votive and sacrificial offerings. He was also concerned by what he viewed as a laxity in adhering to Islamic law and in performing religious devotions, such as indifference to the plight of widows and orphans, adultery, lack of attention to obligatory prayers, and failure to allocate shares of inheritance fairly to women.

When Muhammad ibn Abd al Wahhab began to preach against these breaches of Islamic laws, he characterized customary practices as *jahiliya*, the same term used to describe the ignorance of Arabians before the Prophet. Initially, his preaching encountered opposition, but he eventually came under the protection of a local chieftain named Muhammad ibn Saud, with whom he formed an alliance. The endurance of the Wahhabi movement's influence may be attributed to the close association between the founder of the movement and the politically powerful Al Saud in southern Najd.

This association between the Al Saud and the Al ash Shaykh, as Muhammad ibn Abd al Wahhab and his descendants came to be known, effectively converted political loyalty into a religious obligation. According to Muhammad ibn Abd al Wahhab's teachings, a Muslim must present a *bayah*, or oath of allegiance, to a Muslim ruler during his lifetime to ensure his redemption after death. The ruler, conversely, is owed unquestioned allegiance from his people so long as he leads the community according to the laws of God. The whole purpose of the Muslim community is to become the living embodiment of God's laws, and it is the responsibility of the legitimate ruler to ensure that people know God's laws and live in conformity to them.

Muhammad ibn Saud turned his capital, Ad Diriyah, into a center for the study of religion under the guidance of Muhammad ibn Abd al Wahhab and sent missionaries to teach the reformed religion throughout the peninsula, the gulf, and into Syria and Mesopotamia. Together they began a jihad against the backsliding Muslims of the peninsula. Under the banner of religion and preaching the unity of God and obedience to the just Muslim ruler, the Al Saud by 1803 had expanded their dominion across the peninsula from Mecca to [Bahrain](#), installing teachers, schools, and the apparatus of state power.

So successful was the alliance between the Al ash Shaykh and the Al Saud that even after the Ottoman sultan had crushed Wahhabi political authority and had destroyed the Wahhabi capital of Ad Diriyah in 1818, the reformed religion remained firmly

planted in the settled districts of southern Najd and of Jabal Shammar in the north. It would become the unifying ideology in the peninsula when the Al Saud rose to power again in the next century.

Central to Muhammad ibn Abd al Wahhab's message was the essential oneness of God (*tawhid*). The movement is therefore known by its adherents as *ad dawa lil tawhid* (the call to unity), and those who follow the call are known as *ahl at tawhid* (the people of unity) or *muwahhidun* (unitarians). The word *Wahhabi* was originally used derogatorily by opponents, but has today become commonplace and is even used by some Najdi scholars of the movement.

Muhammad ibn Abd al Wahhab's emphasis on the oneness of God was asserted in contradistinction to *shirk*, or polytheism, defined as the act of associating any person or object with powers that should be attributed only to God. He condemned specific acts that he viewed as leading to *shirk*, such as votive offerings, praying at saints' tombs and at graves, and any prayer ritual in which the suppliant appeals to a third party for intercession with God. Particularly objectionable were certain religious festivals, including celebrations of the Prophet's birthday, Shia mourning ceremonies, and Sufi mysticism. Consequently, the Wahhabis forbid grave markers or tombs in burial sites and the building of any shrines that could become a locus of *shirk*.

The extensive condemnation of *shirk* is seen in the movement's iconoclasm, which persisted into the twentieth century, most notably with the conquest of At Taif in the Hijaz. A century earlier, in 1802, Wahhabi fighters raided and damaged one of the most sacred Shia shrines, the tomb of Husayn, the son of Imam Ali and grandson of the Prophet, at Karbala in Iraq. In 1804 the Wahhabis destroyed tombs in the cemetery of the holy men in Medina, which was a locus for votive offerings and prayers to the saints.

Following the legal school of Ahmad ibn Hanbal, Wahhabi ulama accept the authority only of the Quran and sunna. The Wahhabi ulama reject reinterpretation of Quran and sunna in regard to issues clearly settled by the early jurists. By rejecting the validity of reinterpretation, Wahhabi doctrine is at odds with the Muslim reformation movement of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This movement seeks to reinterpret parts of the Quran and sunna to conform with standards set by the West, most notably standards relating to gender relations, family law, and participatory democracy. However, ample scope for reinterpretation remains for Wahhabi jurists in areas not decided by the early jurists. King Fahd ibn Abd al Aziz Al Saud has repeatedly called for scholars to engage in *ijtihad* to deal with new situations confronting the modernizing kingdom.

The Wahhabi movement in Najd was unique in two respects: first, the ulama of Najd interpreted the Quran and sunna very literally and often with a view toward reinforcing parochial Najdi practices; second, the political and religious leadership exercised its collective political will to enforce conformity in behavior. Muhammad ibn Abd al Wahhab asserted that there were three objectives for Islamic government and society; these objectives have been reaffirmed over the succeeding two centuries in missionary literature, sermons, *fatwa* rulings, and in Wahhabi explications of religious doctrine. According to Muhammad ibn Abd al Wahhab the objectives were "to believe in Allah, enjoin good behavior, and forbid wrongdoing."

Under Al Saud rule, governments, especially during the Wahhabi revival in the 1920s, have shown their capacity and readiness to enforce compliance with Islamic laws and interpretations of Islamic values on themselves and others. The literal interpretations of what constitutes right behavior according to the Quran and hadith have given the Wahhabis the sobriquet of "Muslim Calvinists." To the Wahhabis, for example, performance of prayer that is punctual, ritually correct, and communally performed not only is urged but publicly required of men. Consumption of wine is forbidden to the believer because wine is literally forbidden in the Quran.

Under the Wahhabis, however, the ban extended to all intoxicating drinks and other stimulants, including tobacco. Modest dress is prescribed for both men and women in accordance with the Quran, but the Wahhabis specify the type of clothing that should be worn, especially by women, and forbid the wearing of silk and gold, although the latter ban has been enforced only sporadically. Music and dancing have also been forbidden by the Wahhabis at times, as have loud laughter and demonstrative weeping, particularly at funerals.

The Wahhabi emphasis on conformity makes of external appearance and behavior a visible expression of inward faith. Therefore, whether one conforms in dress, in prayer, or in a host of other activities becomes a public statement of whether one is a true Muslim. Because adherence to the true faith is demonstrable in tangible ways, the Muslim community can visibly judge the quality of a person's faith by observing that person's actions. In this sense, public opinion becomes a regulator of individual behavior. Therefore, within the Wahhabi community, which is striving to be the collective embodiment of God's laws, it is the responsibility of each Muslim to look after the behavior of his neighbor and to admonish him if he goes astray.

To ensure that the community of the faithful will "enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong," morals enforcers known as *mutawwiin* (literally, "those who volunteer or obey") have been integral to the Wahhabi movement since its inception. *Mutawwiin* have served as missionaries, as enforcers of public morals, and as "public ministers of the religion" who preach in the Friday mosque. Pursuing their duties in Jiddah in 1806, the *mutawwiin* were observed to be "constables for the punctuality of prayers . . . with an enormous staff in their hand, [who] were ordered to shout, to scold and to drag people by the shoulders to force them to take part in public prayers, five times a day." In addition to enforcing male attendance at public prayer, the *mutawwiin* also have been responsible for supervising the closing of shops at prayer time, for looking out for infractions of public morality such as playing music, smoking, drinking alcohol, having hair that is too long (men) or uncovered (women), and dressing immodestly.

In the first quarter of the century, promoting Wahhabism was an asset to Abd al Aziz in forging cohesion among the tribal peoples and districts of the peninsula. By reviving the notion of a community of believers, united by their submission to God, Wahhabism helped to forge a sense of common identity that was to supersede parochial loyalties. By abolishing the tribute paid by inferior tribes to militarily superior tribes, Abd al Aziz undercut traditional hierarchies of power and made devotion to Islam and to himself as the rightly guided Islamic ruler the glue that would hold his kingdom together. In the early 1990s, unity in Islam of the Muslim *umma* (community) under Al Saud leadership was the basis for the legitimacy of the Saudi state.

The promotion of Islam as embracing every aspect of life accounted in large measure for the success of Wahhabi ideology in inspiring the zealotry of the Ikhwan movement. Beginning in 1912, agricultural communities called hujra (collective pl.) were settled by beduin who came to believe that in settling on the land they were fulfilling the prerequisite for leading Muslim lives; they were making a hiira, "the journey from the land of unbelief to the land of belief."

It is still unclear whether the Ikhwan settlements were initiated by Abd al Aziz or whether he co-opted the movement once it had begun, but the settlements became military cantonments in the service of Abd al Aziz's consolidation of power. Although the Ikhwan had very limited success in agriculture, they could rely on a variety of subsidies derived from raids under the aegis of Abd al Aziz and provisions disbursed directly from his storehouses in Riyadh.

As newly converted Wahhabi Muslims, the Ikhwan were fanatical in imposing their zealotry for correct behavior on others. They enforced rigid separation of the sexes in their villages, for example, and strict attention to prayers, and used violence in attempting to impose Wahhabi restrictions on others. Their fanaticism forged them into a formidable fighting force, and with Ikhwan assistance, Abd al Aziz extended the borders of his kingdom into the Eastern Province, Hail, and the Hijaz. Ultimately, the fanaticism of the Ikhwan undermined their usefulness, and they had to be reckoned with; the Ikhwan Rebellion (1928-30) marked their eclipse.

In the 1990s, Saudi leadership did not emphasize its identity as inheritor of the Wahhabi legacy as such, nor did the descendants of Muhammad ibn Abd al Wahhab, the Al ash Shaykh, continue to hold the highest posts in the religious bureaucracy. Wahhabi influence in Saudi Arabia, however, remained tangible in the physical conformity in dress, in public deportment, and in public prayer. Most significantly, the Wahhabi legacy was manifest in the social ethos that presumed government responsibility for the collective moral ordering of society, from the behavior of individuals, to institutions, to businesses, to the government itself.