

# Don't play into the hands of extremists

By **YOUSSEF M. IBRAHIM**

NEW YORK - There are people inside the American defence establishment - the most powerful, technologically- sophisticated military in the history of mankind - who believe that the greatest threat they face today may come from followers of an early 18th-century religious extremist who called for a renewal of Islamic spirit, moral cleansing and the stripping away of all innovations to Islam since the seventh century. Those disciples are known as Wahabis.

Their namesake would have vanished into obscurity but for an act of political savvy that assured his followers influence over what has become one of the world's wealthiest, most pivotal regions.

In 1745, the religious leader Mohammad Abdul Wahab forged an alliance with Mohammad Saud, the principal tribal leader of a large portion of the Arabian peninsula.

The former wanted to propagate his brand of Islamic orthodoxy. The latter wanted to unite tribes and secure political command, becoming the founder of the Al-Saud dynasty that still rules what is now known as Saudi Arabia.

## **WAHABISM AND STRIFE**

SINCE the Sept 11 attacks, perpetrated by people who came mostly from Saudi Arabia, Wahabism has entered the vocabulary of American policy-makers as almost synonymous with death, destruction and terror.

Moreover, Wahabi teachings and influence in Riyadh have coloured the American image of Saudi Arabia, threatening to move it from the category of a friend helping to stabilise oil prices and the region to one of a foe alien to American values and bent on hurting Americans.

Less obvious, however, is that the Sept 11 attacks have also strained ties between the Wahabis and Arab governments. The alliance between the House of Saud - wealthy, cosmopolitan, and increasingly Western in tastes and habits - and the proponents of an austere form of Islam based on a literal interpretation of the Quran is becoming harder to sustain.

An increasing number of newspaper commentators, regional leaders and Saudi officials are daring to speak up against the backward Wahabi vision of society. And Gulf governments are taking a tougher line against extremists once thought to be useful, or at least relatively harmless.

Instead of representing growing Wahabi power, the Sept 11 attacks and their aftermath in Afghanistan may signal the peak of Wahabi influence, and a turning point in Arab attitudes towards such extremists.

These nuances are important for the United States as it wages its war against terror and tries to identify its foes. The Bush administration must better distinguish between Islam and the real enemy - radical extremists within Islam.

Otherwise the US risks a collision with 1.2 billion Muslims around the world who do not appreciate being demonised - as Saudi officials felt they were the other day by a report leaked to The Washington Post - just because they disagree with American policies in the Middle East or American plans to invade Iraq.

It is true that the links between Saudi rulers and Wahabi followers have been real and durable. The pact of mutual convenience, made more than 250 years ago, continues. The Saudi minister of religion is always a member of the Al-Sheikh family, descendants of Mohammad Abdul Wahab.

Moreover, links between the religious leader and the House of Saud have been sealed with multiple marriages. The Wahabis' sway over mosques has ebbed and flowed, but they possess their own notorious religious police and have extended their reach via networks of schools throughout the Muslim world.

It is difficult to pinpoint the boundaries of Wahabism. It is not a religion or an offshoot of Islam. Its followers are not a tribe or ethnic group, and they prefer to identify themselves as muwahiddun, which means 'the unifiers'.

It is, however, extremely austere and rigid. It tolerates little dialogue and less interpretation. It frowns on idolatry, tombstones or the veneration of statues and artworks.

Wahabis forbid smoking, shaving of beards, abusive language, rosaries and many rights for women. They regard all those who do not practise their form of Islam, including other Muslims, as heathens and enemies.

Their prominence is a relatively recent phenomenon. During the 1950s, Cairo, infused with the nationalism of Mr Gamal Abdel Nasser, was the intellectual centre of the Arab world. But the massive Israeli victory over Arab armies in the 1967 war dealt a blow to Mr Nasser's prestige. Islamic religious leaders stepped into that ideological vacuum.

When the big oil money of the 1970s started flooding the Gulf region, the balance in religious matters shifted away from the progressive Levantine version of Islam that existed in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Algeria, to the Wahabis' rigid tendencies.

As millions of Egyptian, Moroccan, Pakistani and other guest workers poured into Saudi Arabia, they returned home with both money and a new religion.

Egypt started to tip over. Mr Anwar Sadat, the former Egyptian leader who had struck his own alliance with the fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood to fight the remnants of Nasserism, was killed by it.

Later, there were at least five attempts by Islamic extremists against the life of his successor, Mr Hosni Mubarak.

The war against the Soviet forces in Afghanistan gave radical Islam a chance to deploy its military prowess. Wahabis in Saudi Arabia and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt profited, fattening their ranks with new recruits and their coffers with new contributions.

At that time, the American government considered the Saudis' links with these groups useful. With the encouragement of the Carter and Reagan administrations, the Saudis funded the jihad against the Soviet forces jointly with the CIA.

Ironically, the money that brought Wahabis power throughout the Arab world has also widened the gap between Wahabis and Arab societies. Increasingly, the Wahabi outlook is detested by the Saudi ruling elite, the growing middle class and the vast, powerful business community in Saudi Arabia.

The attack on the US by Al-Qaeda may spell the beginning of the end of this brand of radical Islamic extremism, as people in the region deal with the harm that Osama bin Laden, a Wahabi disciple, has done to the reputation and welfare of Muslims around the world.

The entire Saudi religious establishment is under pressure from both the royal family and the Saudi public.

For the first time, artists, politicians and pundits are criticising openly the clergy in Egypt, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Malaysia and throughout the world of Islam.

### **END OF EXTREMIST ISLAM?**

THE historic alliance between the Saudis and Wahabis may be coming apart - unless the United States intervenes with unreasonable demands for instant reforms couched in barely disguised racial slurs.

Instant anything in Saudi Arabia or the conservative world of Islam is impossible.

The simple-speak propagated by the Bush White House has mixed mainstream Islam with Wahabism into a confusing mishmash. The two are different.

True, Arab governments coddled the fundamentalists. But so did the US, giving a green card to Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman in recognition of his service in rounding up volunteers in Egypt to fight the Soviet forces. He ended up with a life sentence for conspiring to blow up the Lincoln Tunnel and the World Trade Center.

I would argue that just as the 1967 war spelt the end of Nasserism, the Sept 11 attacks mark the beginning of the end of radical extremist Islam in all its varieties.

The money from Islamic charities is drying up. After Sept 11, the 'swamps' that provided recruits are drying up, too, so much so that two Islamic groups in Egypt, Jihad and Al-Gamaa Al-Islamiya, have announced that they are abandoning the armed struggle.

In Saudi Arabia, half the population of 18 million sees Wahabism as oppressive. The same goes for the people of Egypt, Jordan and Kuwait.

That does not translate automatically into loving the United States. Sept 11 has given Americans an opening, though.

Millions of Muslims who belong to the secular middle and business classes and the governing elites also detest Muslim fundamentalists. But they equally detest US Middle East policy.

It is time to bond with them on fighting fundamentalism without demanding that they subscribe to every American policy. America's friends there, the secularists, need to be offered a way to bond with America instead of being presented with simplistic choices of black and white.

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