



Extremism

The Hidden Face of Extremism-the "New Wahhabi" Movement

By M. Darwish

The September 11 suicidal attacks against the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington raised new questions not only for the United States and the countries of the free world, but for Arab and Islamic countries as well. Moderate and fundamentalist Islamic movements have been established in Islamic and Arab countries since the beginning of the 20th century, notably Abu al-A`ala al-Mawdoudy in Pakistan, the Al-Ikhwan al Muslimoun (Muslim Brotherhood) movement in Egypt, and other extremist Islamic organizations. Al-Mawdoudy played a major role in awakening Islamic fundamentalism during the first 30 years of the 20th century.

However, the defeat of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan in war against Israel in 1967 was a turning point in the development of religious and extremist groups. The capture of Al-Haram Mosque at Mecca by Juhayman al-Qaybi and his supporters, the Ikhwan (Brothers), in Nov. 20, 1979, marked the beginning of the "new Wahhabism" which called for religious extremism and violence; what many people call terrorism today. The main source of religious extremism in the Arab and Islamic world is the first Wahhabi movement that was founded on the Najd Hill in the village of Uyayna by Shaykh Mohammed bin Abdul Wahhab.

Born in 1703, Abdul Wahhab was taught the basics of Islam by Imam Ahmad Ibn Hanbal. Shaykh Mohammed bin Abdul Wahhab established an alliance with the al-Saud family after he went to the village of Darhiya, the al-Saud's first emirate. Mohammed al-Saud, who was member of the al-Anza tribes in Najd and the Syrian desert, became prince of Darhiya in 1720. When he allied himself to Shaykh Mohammed bin Abdul-Wahhab, he acquired two important bases of power:

- Tribalism (the al-Anza tribes)
- Religious power (The support of the Wahhabis)

The history of Wahhabism started with the call of Shaykh Mohammed bin Abdul Wahhab in 1740. Since its beginning, Wahhabism relied on the ideas of a Muslim scholar, Ibn Taymiyyah, who called for a return to "real Islam", ideals taken from the Koran, the Sunna and the Hadith. (The core of Ibn Taymiyyah's work was, in turn, based on the teachings of the scholar Ibn Hanbal.) Abdul Wahhab interpreted this call as a need to return to the "fundamentals"; Islamic life as it existed in the first days of Islam in the 8th century BCE.

The essence of Ibn Taymiyya's doctrine was based on the fact that real faith should be coupled with "proper acts"; that "belief alone cannot be complete unless it is coupled with action". Thus, Shaykh Abdul Wahhab rejected what he considered as innovations to Islam--calling upon prophets for intercession, building monuments, visiting tombs, and smoking. He believed that returning to this spartan interpretation of Islam would enable Muslims to save themselves from deteriorating situation. These are the precepts followed by

Osama bin Laden and extremist Sunni Islamic movements which have appeared and proliferated in the majority of Islamic and Arab countries. (Fundamentalist Shia movements differ in theological interpretation and organizational approach.)

Wahhabism was founded and spread in the Arabian Peninsula where isolation, primitive conditions, and tribalism fostered the development of many Islamic sects. The followers of the four main Islamic sects were scattered throughout the Hijaz. The Qaramitas were located in the Qatif area, the Shi'a Imamiya in al-Ihsaa, the Zeydiyoun in Yemen, and the Shawafi'a in several areas in the region.

The presence of these sects is documented by the presence of four shrines, one for each sect, in Mecca. Prayers were led by four imams, one from each sect, until the 1930's, when such prayers were canceled by the al-Saud family and all people began to follow one imam of the Hanbali doctrine. Followers of Sufi sects, including the Sanousiah, the Idrissiah, the Qadriah, the Kilaniyah and the Bektashia also lived in the Hijaz but the al-Saud family gradually suppressed them between 1750 and 1935.

An examination of the history of the Wahhabis, who were closely allied with the al-Saud family, shows that Wahhabism called for adopting the *jihad* (Holy War), fighting any infidelity to the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam. This was the political basis for attacks on al-Ihsaa and Qatar in 1795. They also launched military campaigns, which were closer to raids than to "jihad", against Iraq between 1801 and 1810. Further attacks targeted the cities of Samawa, Souq al-Shouyoukh, Basra, Karbala and Najaf. Karbala fell to the Wahhabis in 1802, but resistance in Najaf prevented the Wahhabis from entering the town.

It is important to note that the Wahhabis had stolen the Prophet's relics in Mecca in 1803. Two years later, in keeping with its belief in Wahhabi doctrine, the al-Saud family prohibited non-Wahhabi pilgrims from fulfilling the Hajj. Throughout the decade, the al-Sauds continued a pattern of attempted conquest. Saud al-Saud invaded Karbala for the second time in 1807, but he could not occupy it. In the same year, Basra in Iraq was invaded and in 1809, Saud reached Bousra in southern Bilad al-Sham (Greater Syria).

The year 1811 marked the beginning of a new phase in the history of Wahhabism. The movement was gaining ground, and had become a threat to existing governments in and around Arabia. When the Ottoman Sultanate failed to suppress the Wahhabi movement, it urged Mohammed Ali Bath, the Egyptian Ottoman ruler, to organize military campaigns in order to crush it. The first Egyptian campaign was led by Toson, Mohammed Ali Bath's son, who entered Taif and Mecca in 1813. Other Egyptian campaigns took place later with equal success. The Wahhabis were defeated in Asir, and a campaign led by Ibrahim Basha in 1816 resulted in the surrender and total destruction of Darhiya (the capital of Wahhabism and the al-Saud family). Between 1834 and 1838, the Egyptian Ottoman ruler, Mohammed Ali Basha, took over the control of Arabia.

The Wahhabi movement was still very much alive, however, due to the continuous support of the British (through the emirs of al-Saud family). The British had a vested interest in the continued destabilization of the Ottoman Empire, and saw the Wahhabis as a vehicle to that end. The Empire's support for the cause lasted for about half a century. During this period (1850-1900), the Ottomans countered by supporting the al-Rashids, traditional rivals of Wahhabism and the al-Saud family.

The Ikhwan movement, a militant extension of Wahhabism, was founded in

1913. Wahhabism flourished in the oases of the Arabian Peninsula where established villages gave them a permanent base of support and supply. The radical Ikhwan movement preached and fought the jihad in the harsh areas of nomads and tribes, where primitive tribal law and desert warfare was a way of life.

The Ikhwan shave mustaches and grow long beards in accordance with the Sunna which states beards must not be shaved. (This is what we see today in all fundamentalist movements in Egypt, the Gulf countries, Lebanon, Palestine and Algeria.) They deny modernity, and believe telephones, cars, and watches are aspects of satanic sorcery. They prohibit innocent games for children and refrain from planting flowers and tending to gardens. Abdul-Aziz al-Saud, the founder of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, utilized the Ikhwan religious movement as a private army, and a means to secure the backing of some of Najd's strongest nomad tribes, such as Utayba, Matir and Ajman. In 1916, he ordered nomad tribes that were under his control to join the Ikhwan and embrace Wahhabism. He integrated the nomad tribes into his power base by settling them in villages ("Hegiras", so named after the exodus of the Prophet) which were substantially financed by Great Britain. (Great Britain at this time saw the Arabian Gulf as the key to the protection of trade routes to India, and had not yet realized the full potential of the area's oil reserves) Once settled, Abdul Aziz bought the cooperation of the tribal shaykhs with offers of houses in Riyadh, money, clothes, and food.

Between 1913 and 1916, the Ikhwan engaged in two battles against the Al-Sauds rivals, the al-Rashids, engaging them at Jirab and al-Ihsaa. The Ikhwan were defeated in both battles. Under the banner of jihad, the Ikhwan, supported by British funds and arms, attacked the Hael area where they finally defeated the al-Rashids. The British backed the elimination of the al-Rashids because of military and political alliance with the Ottoman Sultanate. The Ikhwan were being used by both Abdul Aziz and the British because of reputation as fierce warriors. The danger of the movement was its equally fierce desire to spread militant version of Islam throughout the region, regardless of political boundaries.

The Ikhwan attacked Kuwait in 1921, where they were defeated at the battle of Jihra. Kuwaiti Shaykh Salem al-Sabbah refused to capitulate to the Ikhwan and adopt the Wahhabi faith; Great Britain intervened by bombing the Ikhwan's strongholds and warning them to pull out of Kuwait, which they did. In the summer of 1922, the Ikhwan penetrated the Jordanian territories and got close to Amman. But Jordan drove them back, again with Great Britain's military assistance. The British realized the danger posed by a militant faction gaining a powerful stronghold in the Arabian Peninsula, particularly in Kuwait, and saw the need to keep the Ikhwan under tight control, as did Abdul Aziz.

In an attempt to counter balance the Ikhwan's influence, sometime after 1920 the concept of "mutawa'a" was established for the purpose of religious education. The Mutaweh's most important task was to guide people to religious obligations (ta'at), and sought to promote a more moderate version of Islam. Abdul Aziz was well aware that he could not continue to gain the continued financial and political support of the outside world (notably Britain) if the Ikhwan movement gained control. But the movement flourished as the illiterate, and some say ignorant, religious men of the Ikhwan gained access to the larger population of the villages and taught them the rigorous Islam that was preached by Shaykh Mohammed bin Abdul Wahhab.

In 1924, another conflict on the Peninsula intensifies. The Hashemite ruler of Mecca and Medina, Sherif Hussein bin Ali, prohibited the Ikhwan from the Hajj, claiming he wanted to protect other pilgrims from aggressions. In response,

Abdul-Rahman al-Saud (the father of Abdul-Aziz) convened a conference of Wahhabi scholars and the tribal shaykhs in Riyadh. The al-Sauds needed to oust the Hashemites from Mecca in order to consolidate hold over the Kingdom, and have access to the lucrative income from the pilgrimage. The conference therefore decided that the Ikhwan being prohibited from the Hajj was a sufficient reason to declare war. Immediately after, the Ikhwan attacked Taif, then marched on Mecca on November 16, 1924.

These two events were a major turning point in the history of the Ikhwan, who had come out of the Najd Desert to clash with the outside world. Disagreements began to arise between Abdul-Aziz and the Ikhwan, mainly after the movement insisted on occupying Jidda by force. The Wahhabis, and consequently the Ikhwan, considered that any one not practicing militant view of Islam was an infidel; this included fellow Muslims who inhabited the Hijaz and Najd, as well as Christians, Jews, and foreigners. Wahhabis accused Abdul-Aziz of supporting infidels (the British), and being lenient in religious issues.

These political struggles and conflicts of interest between the puritanical Wahhabis and the al-Saud family in the thirties played a major role in the birth of militant movements rooted in Wahhabism which disagreed with Saudi Arabia's official policy, then and now. The dangerous rise of these factions gained definition in 1926 at the Artawiyah conference, held by the Ikhwan and allied tribes. The conference criticized the following specific actions of Abdul-Aziz:

- Having friendly relationships with the British (foreign infidels) and concluding agreements with them.
- Establishing himself as monarch (Abdul Aziz proclaimed the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia). Islam prohibits monarchy.
- Using perfume and living in palaces.
- Collecting taxes from Muslims.
- Turning a blind eye to the Shia Muslims of al-Ihsaa.
- Allowing the tribes of Iraq and Eastern Jordan to graze cattle in Muslim pastures.

Abdul-Aziz responded by convening the Riyadh conference in 1927. The conference considered the Ikhwan's resolutions in Artawiyah to be anti-religious. It also said the Mujahadeen were "khawarej" (apostates) whose killing and robbing was illegitimate. Faisal al-Dawish, one of the Ikhwan's leaders, then proclaimed a jihad, which he extended to Iraq. The Ikhwan continued to cross the borders of Iraq and Jordan until Abdul-Aziz had no choice but to declare war. On March 30, 1929, he engaged in the battle of Sibilla, with the support of the British. By May the tide of battle had turned against Abdul Aziz, as the tribes of Ajman, Matir, (Dawish) and Utayba revolted against the al-Saud family. During this revolution, the Ikhwan joined the tribes in plundering and pillaging. In November, the British mediated an end to the conflict, and the eventual surrender of the Ikhwan. Great Britain understood the value of Saudi Arabia's energy resources, and had in Abdul Aziz a pliable and cash-starved ally. The Ikhwan had no place in this scenario. Between 1931 and 1934, the majority of the Ikhwan's leaders died while in prison or were killed.

In retrospect, we see that Wahhabism established rules of behavior for the Ikhwan and other fundamentalist organizations. It also taught them to adopt fanatic, negative and dangerous positions. They refuse to listen to music, sing, make poetry, listen to poets, or wear elegant clothes. They do not wear jewelry nor use perfume. They consider anyone who does not follow these strictures as

unbelievers-including other Muslims. Between 1935 and 1940, the Ikhwan killed three Muslim consuls in Jidda because they had imitated Western dressing habits and manners. The consuls were those of Russia, Iran and Java. They also refused all taxes imposed by the Saudi state in its formative years.

Though reduced in power, the Ikhwan continued to protest against Abdul-Aziz, berating him in 1945 to 1950 for having sent his son Saud to Egypt for medical treatment, branding Egypt the "country of infidels." They also objected to the historic visit of his son Faisal to Europe, saying it was "a country of even more infidels." They urged him to prohibit the tribes of Iraq and Jordan from grazing cattle in Saudi lands, because such tribes were infidels prohibited from entering the lands of Muslims. The Ikhwan also urged Abdul Aziz to refrain from having commercial relations with Iraq and Jordan because of infidel status.

Despite the repression of the militant Ikhwan, the Wahhabi's experience under the leadership of al-Saud family in Arabia from the 18th century until the present proved it is possible for modern-day states to be based on religion. We should note that the Islamic state in Saudi Arabia has always been a mixture of two powers: the Wahhabi Islam (ulemma) and the tribal (political) authority represented by the al-Saud family. In this way it differs from the structure of the Islamic Taliban rule in Afghanistan, or the Shia structure of elected representatives in Iran.

Just as the ancestral Wahhabis treated the inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula, Iraq and Bilad al-Sham (Greater Syria) with rigor during the 18th and 19th centuries, we see this austerity appearing now in all Islamic environments where "new Wahhabism" is developing. New Wahhabism preaches hatred toward foreigners (the West), and Jews, and is closer to the Ikhwan militancy of the past than the more moderate Wahhabi majority present in Saudi Arabia.

This framework allows us to understand the life of the "new Wahhabi" communities which are spread in the form of small and steadily expanding communities. Renouncing worldly pleasures, aspiring to the life to come, living in austerity, worshipping, abstaining from living in luxury and self-indulgence are praised values in such communities.

The new Wahhabism, which is linked to the "Arab Afghans" phenomenon, is extant in the Arab world--mainly in Egypt, Algeria, Palestine, Iraq, Syria, Jordan and Gulf countries. In these countries and elsewhere, new Wahhabis prepare themselves to play a social and political role both in and outside communities.

<http://www.eastwestrecord.com/articles/theNewWahhabMovement.asp>