

Extremists in a Moderate Land

By Carole O'Leary

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"The Wahabis," Mullah Ahmed Suwayri told me vehemently, "are stealing our youth and brainwashing them."

Mullah Ahmed was one of five senior Sunni Muslim clerics I met with last month at the Islamic Scholars Union in Iraqi Kurdistan -- the safe haven for Kurds created after the Persian Gulf War in 1991. Like the other mullahs, Ahmed was concerned about the spread of extremist Wahabi Islam in a region whose inhabitants have traditionally practiced a moderate and tolerant form of Sunni Islam. Just how moderate was shown when these elderly clerics greeted me, an unrelated woman, by shaking my hand -- a gesture that would be unthinkable to many religious Muslim men.

"Islam and Judaism and Christianity have flourished together in this region for more than 1,400 years," said Mullah Mohammad Akrey, the most senior cleric in the group. "These Wahabis are not Muslims and do not represent Islam."

I had returned to Iraqi Kurdistan to see how its 10-year-old experiment in democracy and pluralism was doing. I found it thriving. Not only Kurds, but people in the minority Turkoman, Assyrian and Chaldean communities used the same phrase -- "We are living in a golden age" -- to tell me about their lives.

But it also became apparent that the spread of Wahabism, whose most famous adherent is Osama bin Laden, should be taken seriously. While the West has little reason to feel threatened by traditional Islam, the events of Sept. 11 demonstrate that we have much to fear from Wahabism.

Even many Muslims consider Wahabism an extremist sect, but its followers -- who include Saudi Arabia's ruling House of Saud -- insist they are simply practicing the "true" Islam. Wahabism gained a foothold in the Muslim world in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution in 1979, as the Saudis, tacitly encouraged by the United States and its allies, used their enormous financial resources to ensure that radical Shia Islam did not spread to the Sunni Muslim world. In order to check Iranian influence in Pakistan, for example, the Saudis financed the establishment of Wahabi madrassas, or Islamic schools. As many Americans learned in the aftermath of 9/11, it was in those Pakistani madrassas that the Taliban movement was born.

Ironically, it was the establishment of the Kurdish safe haven that opened the door for Saudi religious charities to gain a foothold in Iraqi Kurdistan. Today,

traditional Kurdish Sunni mullahs estimate that as many as 1,000 Saudi-financed mosques, promoting Wahabi ideals, have been established in the region since 1991. I don't think that is an exaggeration: During my visit, I traveled extensively in the Barzan, Sidakhan and Barwari regions. Everywhere I went were mosques easily identifiable as Saudi-financed -- stamped neatly on their whitewashed walls were the Roman letters IIRO and the Arabic words for International Islamic Relief Organization, a Saudi charity linked by U.S. investigators to support for al Qaeda. Other new mosques, I was told, had been built by the Saudi-financed Islamic Kurdish League.

On a visit to Sheik Shishu, leader of the Harki tribe, I met a young Kurdish imam who espoused what a Kurdish journalist who heard his sermon described as "typical Wahabi vitriol." When I asked him about the spread of Wahabism, however, the imam responded with an enigmatic smile and the rhetorical question, "What is Wahabism?" and, "There is no Wahabism, only true Islam." These were phrases I had heard many times from my Saudi students in the United States.

I asked the imam about an attack that occurred in March at Gali Ali Beg, a family picnic venue popular because of its breathtaking waterfall: A bomb killed a 6-year-old boy and injured several members of his family. The Kurdistan regional authorities, and most Kurds, believe the bomb was set by Wahabi-inspired fundamentalists who were offended because men and women mingle there. Would such an attack, I asked, be justifiable under Islam? Careful not to explicitly condone the killing, the imam responded by telling me that true Muslims "don't approve of men and women together in public places."

Assyrian and Chaldean Christians whom I interviewed said they feared the influence of Wahabism. Christian women normally do not cover their hair, but some have recently been attacked, apparently for their bare heads -- in some cases with acid. Christian-owned liquor stores and beauty parlors, tolerated by most Kurdish Muslims, have been bombed.

At the Islamic Scholars Union, the mullahs told me that their countrymen had accepted the Saudi mosques for a simple reason -- they couldn't afford to build their own. But Mullah Talat Mantiq bitterly pointed out that in the years before the establishment of the U.N. Oil for Food Program in 1996, when people in the region were starving, the Saudis were building mosques -- but were not, however, donating food, clothing or medicine.

Mullah Mohammad Akrey gave me a copy of a book he had written and published himself, making the case that Wahabism does not represent Islam. He priced the book at just 20 dinars -- about \$1.15 -- so anyone could afford it. But his

plan backfired. According to the mullah, Wahabis bought up every copy in Irbil -- and burned them all.

Mullah Mohammad asked me to relay a message: "Tell the U.S. to help the moderate Muslims in Saudi Arabia and to stop the export of Wahabism by the regime."

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