

# Some Reflections on the WahhABIyah Movement

(Excerpted from Vol. XVIII No. 2 (1995) *Hamdard Islamicus*)

by **Talip Küçükcan**

(University of Warwick in England, U.K.)

## Introduction

The Muslim World witnessed the appearance of several intellectual and religious movements which emanated from different Islamic territories in the 18th and 19th centuries. A number of social, political and religious causes provided motivation for these multifaceted movements. Decline of the Ottoman Empire and diminishing authority of the Caliph, growing political and cultural influence of Western powers throughout the Muslim World, moral laxity and superstitious accretions prevalent among believers for long, rising wave of nationalist trends to establish regional and nation states, all of these aforementioned factors and some others inspired new ideas and orientations that occurred in the Muslim World. Among these movements, the *WahhABIyah* is of considerable importance as it has long-lasting influence on the other revivalist and puritan movements. The *WahhABI* doctrine prompted some of these who had been trying for new reforms which might solve the problems of [the] Muslim World and provide a new understanding of religion.

## The WahhABI Movement

The title *WahhABI* was given to the followers of Shaykh Muhammad b. 'Abd al-WahhABI by his Muslim opponents. People to whom the *WahhABI* name was applied have rejected this opprobrious label. [1] Instead, the WahhABIs called themselves *aahl al-tawhid* (People of Unity or *MuwahhABIdun*), those who profess the doctrine of the Unity of God. [It is not that any section of Islam claims not to be a *MuwahhABId* (i.e., believer in the Unity/Oneness of God), but merely that the *WahhABIs* have appropriated to themselves this title.] - *Editor*

The founder, Muhammad b. 'Abd al-WahhABI, was born in Uyayna in Najd in 1703. His father and grandfather were Hanbalite *qadis*, thus he was brought up and educated in this tradition. He studied in famous learning centres - Medina, Basra, Baghdad, Hamadan, etc. - spending many years in travel during which he perused philosophy and Sufism. After having completed his studies, Muhammad b. 'Abd al-WahhABI returned to

Uyayna where he publicly preached his doctrines and met both success and opposition. The governor of Uyayna was asked to expel Muhammad b. 'Abd al-WahhABI as a consequence of disputes caused by his teachings. [2]

## Implications of Ibn Taymiyyah's Views For WahhABI Thought

Before examining the doctrines of Muhammad b. 'Abd al-WahhABI, I would like to analyse the influence of Ibn Taymiyyah on WahhABI thought. This analysis will throw light on the development of the WahhABI movement and its doctrinal relation with the teachings of Ibn Taymiyyah who seems to me as a prototype for Muhammad b. 'Abd al-WahhABI.

The originator of the WahhABIyah movement had been a *Sufi* adept in his youth, but later came under the influence of Ibn Taymiyyah's writings. Ibn Taymiyyah's teachings had three main implications for WahhABI doctrines:

1. *Concerning State and Religion:* According to Ibn Taymiyyah, the '*ulama*' are responsible for the protection of the Divine Law. A government is regarded as Islamic by virtue of the support it gives to Islam and to the '*ulama*'. One can accept the rule of anyone who follows the Shariah. This understanding had an important effect on the WahhABI ideology that accepted al-Sa'ud's dynasty as a legitimate and hereditary Islamic government after taking refuge in Dariyya, a territory controlled by [the] al-Sa'ud family.

2. *Concerning the Sources of True Islam:* Ibn Taymiyyah strives for the pure form of Islam in his enduring pursuit of Divine reality like Ibn Hanbal. Ibn Taymiyyah turns to the Qur'an and the Sunnah as the basis of the Divine law, refusing any accretions of later developments after the initial pristine years of the *salaf*, the first three generations of Islam. He insists on eliminating all the foreign elements which do not reflect the authentic core of Islam and the purity of Islamic teachings. The idea of going back to the Qur'an and the authentic Sunnah with

a puritanical attitude ignoring later fiqh schools was adopted and applied by Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab as against the majority of medieval scholars and rejecting *ijtihad* based on the *qiyas* (analogy or logical reasoning).

3. *Concerning Sufi Doctrines and Practices:* In the light of recent scholarly works, Ibn Taymiyyah is said to have been a Sufi of the *Qadiriyyah* Order. But he regards the idea of mystical unity with God and ecstatic aspects of Sufism as un-Islamic; therefore he rejects these teachings. It should be noted that he did not reject Sufism itself but denounced intercession, saint veneration and grave cults. [3] Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab, inspired from the above notion, developed his doctrine to such an extent that the Wahhabis are said to have opened the Prophet's mausoleum and sold or distributed its relics and jewels. [4]

### Nature of Wahhabi Doctrines

Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab wrote on various Islamic subjects such as theology, exegesis, jurisprudence and on the life of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). His works were collected and published in twelve volumes under the title of *Mu'allafat al-shaykh al-Imam Muhammad 'Abd al-Wahhab* by the Islamic University of Imam Muhammad Ibn Sa'ud.

In his works, Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab denounced a number of beliefs and practices prevailing among the Muslim society. He begins his discourse by stressing the unity of God. He underlines the doctrine of *tawhid*, God's uniqueness as omnipotent Lord of creation. He stresses the unity of God in deserving worship and absolute devotion of the servants. He regards the associations of persons or things with the Lord as a violation of the doctrine of God's Oneness. Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab condemns the intercession, *tawassul*, which was applied and practised by a large number of Muslims during their prayer to God. He warns the believers against showing excessive devotion to saints and against the use of saints' graves as places of worship for *tawassul*. He considers these external elements polytheism, *shirk*. He seeks to purify the Muslim community from any such kind of external elements by returning to the ways of the Prophet (pbuh) and the first generations of pious Muslims. Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab states that the true Islam is that of the first generations (*al-Salaf al-Salih*) and protests against all those later innovations as superstitious accretions which brought what he calls 'new gods' into Islam. As a result of this attitude to Sufi tradition, the Wahhabis felt

that it was an obligation upon them to destroy all the existing alien components. Accordingly, they attacked the graves of the Companions of the Prophet (pbuh), tombs of saints, or anything associated with popular veneration like trees or stones. An obvious example of this zealous hatred was seen when the Wahhabis plundered Karbala, a Shi'ia holy city, and destroyed Husayn's tomb. [5]

Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab rejected all kinds of innovations, defined by him as any doctrine or action not based on the Qur'an, Sunnah or on the authority of the Companions. Among the innovations are practices such as celebrating the Prophet's birth, the use of rosary, adding minarets and ornaments to mosques, etc. Following practices may lead the believer to shirk according to the Wahhabis:

1. To visit the tombs of saints to gain God's favour.
2. To introduce a name of a prophet, of a saint or of an angel into prayer.
3. Seeking intercession from any being but God.
4. Interpretation of the Qur'an by *ta'wil*.

According to Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab's system, attendance at public prayer is obligatory, smoking of tobacco is forbidden and subject to punishment, shaving the beard and the use of abusive language are also to be punished.

With regard to fundamental basis of Islam, Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab places a great emphasis on the Qur'an and the Sunnah. He attacks the blind acceptance of authority in religious matters in general, thus comes to oppose the earlier '*uluma*' who lack independent thinking. He finds it essential to go beyond the medieval authorities to the Sunnah of early generations. Rejecting *qiyas*, he recognizes only two major authorities: the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) along with the precedents and the *ijma'* of the Companions. In Wahhabi mentality, a number of concepts were given a prior importance such as *tawhid*, *shirk* and *bid'at* (innovation) mentioned above.

Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab distinguishes between *dar al-Islam* and *dar al-harb* extending the scope of *dar al-harb* to some other Muslim countries which he regards as having 'unlawful' societies. Therefore those who live in *dar al-harb* where there is no freedom have to perform *hijrah*, emigrating from every country in which *shirk* and *kufir* are apparent. Another usage of *hijrah* appears in Wahhabi texts as a spiritual understanding which necessitates keeping away from all

sinful things, forbidden by God and Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) (Helm, p. 87).

Any kind of political division of the *ummah* and civil war were regarded as *fitnah*, social disturbance. The first *fitnah* appeared under 'Ali's Caliphate when the Kharijites left him. Wherever a *fitnah* occurs, it must be abolished by declaring a *jihad*, holy war. The followers of Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab had been indoctrinated to believe that the opponents of the Wahhabi cause were enemies of Islam who should be fought against (Yessini, p. 64).

### **Involvement of the Wahhabis into Politics: Religion and State**

The modern history of Saudi Arabia began in the eighteenth century with the alliance between Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab, the founder of the Wahhabi movement, and Muhammad Ibn al-Sa'ud, Amir of Dariyya, son of the founder of the Saudi dynasty. When Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab was forced to leave Uyayna, he went to Dariyya where he was received by the chieftain, Muhammad Ibn al-Sa'ud, in 1745. Muhammad Ibn Al-Sa'ud accepted Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab's doctrine and undertook its defence and propagation after having agreed to the conditions that the political sovereignty should rest with Ibn al-Sa'ud, whereas religious authority should belong to Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab. The Saudi-Wahhabi alliance was further cemented by an intermarriage between the two families (Troeller, p. 13).

The Saudi-Wahhabi alliance seems to be a turning point through which the Wahhabi movement gained an official acceptance and confirmation from a strong dynasty that used religious authority of the Wahhabi doctrines as a binding force among the Arab tribes.

One of the significant aspects of this alliance in the formation of Saudi Arabian history was the fact that it led to an effective union of political-military organization and religious ideology which carried out Saudi-Wahhabi expansion. As 'Abd al-Aziz b. al-Rahman states, all the desert tribes came under the control of [the] al-Sa'ud family obeying their orders and instructions. The Wahhabi doctrines and socio-political teachings of religion enabled [the] al-Sa'ud dynasty to hold their political authority firmly for ruling the nomad tribes successfully.

The Wahhabi '*ulama*' gave explicit support and approval to the hereditary rule of the al-Sa'ud family, and the Wahhabi shaykhs utilized the concept of equality as a political tool to control the Bedouin tribes by eliminating

tribal particularism (Helm, pp. 77-79, 84).

It was principally through the Wahhabi movement that 'Abd al-'Aziz and the previous Saudi rulers had been able to transcend tribal and urban loyalties while still using their social structure as a basis for political manipulation. Membership of an Islamic community theoretically served to equalize social differentials and as the tribes embraced the Wahhabi doctrine, they came to accept the *imamete* of al-Sa'ud as leader of a legitimate state validated by Islam (*Ibid.*, p. 113).

As a far reaching effect of this cooperation, the Saudi dynasty firmly established its control in the political arena assuming certain titles indicating temporal power such as *amir*, *haakim* and *malik*, king.

### **Relations Between the Ottoman Rule and the Saudi-Wahhabi Dynasty**

Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab declared that Islam protected by the Ottoman Sultan was not the true Islam, implying that the sultan was not the legitimate leader of the *ummah*. The Wahhabis held that the Arabs were worthier than the Turks with regard to *imamete* or leadership. Thus the authority of the Ottoman rule was rejected and challenged. When the rapid expansion of the Wahhabi movement was reported to Istanbul, the Ottoman Caliph, Sultan Mahmud II, urged Muhammad 'Ali Pasha, the governor of Egypt, to drive the Wahhabis out of the holy cities. Under the Caliphal instruction, Muhammad 'Ali Pasha launched a series of military attacks on Wahhabi-controlled territories. In 1818, he reached Dariyya and captured the capital of the Wahhabi-Saudi alliance (Troeller, p. 14).

Although the Wahhabi movement was put down, its expansion did not fade away. After the recovery and restoration of the Saudi dynasty, 'Abd al-'Aziz, Son of 'Abd al-Rahman, entered Riyadh in 1901 and the Saudi dynasty regained authority while regions of Najd, Hijaz, Makkah, Madina, and Jeddah were all also occupied. After an international recognition of hereditary authority or kingship of the Saudi family, new developments in the political arena facilitated the consolidation of the Saudi-Wahhabi alliance as a nation state.

### **Later Developments in the Wahhabi World**

The Wahhabi world could not remain aloof from the changing nature of world events and patterns of international relations in the modern era. New developments in different spheres of life rapidly occurred. Today the Wahhabi doctrine is supported by the political power of the state as the official form of Islam in the

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, as it has been from the outset of the Wahhabi-Saudi alliance. The members of the royal family seem to be advocates of the Wahhabi ideology. The *mufti* and the chief *qadi* come from the House of Shaykhs. The courts are largely Wahhabi in character. The spread of education and the improvement of communication systems have made it easier to transmit the Wahhabi doctrines to different segments of [the] population.

Under the influence of new developments and toleration of less-strict rulers, the Wahhabis of Saudi Arabia have shown a growing openness towards not only non-Wahhabi Muslims, but also non-Muslims. The Shi'ites of the Eastern regions used to be unwelcome residents in the eyes of the governments, but gradually they have seen their situation improve and the Wahhabi King has been an honoured guest at official functions in Shi'ite towns.

The spirit of tolerance has been extended to Christian persons and powers as well. A large number of Christians have been employed in recent years by the government. The armed forces of Arabia have been trained in the past, first by an English military mission and more recently by one from the U.S.A.

Until recently illustrations showing human face or form were taboo among the Wahhabis, though the Qur'an itself contains no sweeping prohibition of representational art. The press in Saudi Arabia is now allowed to publish photographs and drawings. The attitude toward tobacco is also changing, smoking is no longer regarded as a moral laxity deserving punishment. The organization of formal education and introduction of secular subjects into education took place in 1925. When 'Abd al-'Aziz ordered the creation of the Directorate General of Education, the '*ulama*' were opposed to the introduction of secular education, fearing that it may damage the fabric of the Wahhabi society. Nevertheless 'Abd al-'Aziz insisted on the establishment of a new educational system and carried out his plan. In the course of time scientific and technical subjects and foreign languages were included in the curriculum. Girls were allowed to have access to public education in 1959. None of these elements could have been accepted during the early period of the Wahhabi movement.

The acquisition of wealth during the past twenty or thirty years posed a serious problem for the Wahhabi society. Particularly under the period of Sa'ud's rules, the extravagance and ostentation of a very un-Wahhabi-like character tainted the atmosphere of the Saudi Court. Those who claimed that the Saudi family departed from

Islam with its wealth, occupied the Grand Mosque at Mecca in 1979, but their revolt was put down by the Saudi rule.

#### NOTES:

1. George Renz, "The Wahhabis" in A.J. Arberry (ed.), *Religion in the Middle East*, Vol. II (Cambridge, 1969), pp. 270-285.
2. *Encyclopedia of Islam* (first edition), articles on the *Wahhabiyah* and *Sanusiyah* movements, Vol. IV, p. 1087.
3. Christine Moss Helm, *The Cohesion of Saudi Arabia* (London, 1981), p. 81-82.
4. Gary Troeller, *The Birth of Saudi Arabia* (London, 1976), p. 14 - footnote: "The statement appears to be based on hearsay." Ibn Sa'd (*Tabaqat*, Eng. T.S. Moinal Haq, Karachi, 1972, Vol. II, pp. 392-98) reports that: "The Apostle of Allah (pbuh) left at the time of his death no dirham, no dinar, no slave, no handmaid and nothing except his white mule, arms and a piece of land which he left as *sadaqah*. His coat of mail had been mortgaged [pawned] for thirty *saa's* of barley with a Jew. His debts were paid by Ali b. Talib. The question of leaving behind any jewels does not arise, neither any Muslim dared to add or place something inside his mausoleum."
5. Ayman Al-Yassini, "Saudi Arabia the Kingdom of Islam" in Carlo Calarola (ed.), *Religion and Societies*, 1982, p. 64; Troeller, 1976, p. 14.
6. Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age* (Cambridge, 1983), p. 38.