

Wahhabism: Out of Control?

Is Saudi Arabia playing with fire?

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What is Wahhabism? Probably few people have heard of this term before recent events. Wahhabism is a religious movement initiated by an 18th-century Islamic scholar, Mohammed ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1791). It began as a reform movement which called for the removal of all additions to Islam adopted by Muslims after the death of the Prophet Mohammad. Today it is a fundamentalist Islamic movement which enforces conservative regulations that impact all aspects of life. Some of the prohibitions include: no other object for worship than Allah (the common practice of worshipping Muslim saints was rejected); no other name than the name of Allah may enter a prayer; no smoking of tobacco; no shaving of the beard; no abusive language; rosaries are forbidden. Wahhabism regards ostentatious worship and luxurious living as evil. As a result, Wahhabi mosques are built without minarets and all forms of ornaments. Likewise, individuals are to dress simply. Wahhabis also reject the concept of secular government and laws and are therefore a threat to the governments of most Muslim countries.

Abd al-Wahhab converted the Saud tribe of Arabia to his views, and the Saudi Sheik decided it was his mission to wage holy war (jihad) against all other forms of Islam. Thus began many years of conflict with his neighbors and the Ottoman empire. Through many conquests and failures the Saud family finally became the ruling dynasty of Saudi Arabia in 1932. With billions of dollars in oil money at its disposal, Saudi Arabia and its royal family have actively promoted Wahhabism around the world.

Saudi leaders have been involved in a precarious balancing act. They generously support their conser-

vative religious establishment, but closely monitor those who threaten to turn against their regime. Saudi Arabia is one of the most restrictive Islamic countries of the Middle East, with non-Muslims prevented from practicing their faith even in private. It is the restrictive Islam of Saudi Arabia that has given birth to the radical terrorists like Osama bin Laden. Saudi money brings Muslims from around the world to Saudi Arabia to learn Arabic and the Wahhabi ways of Islam. These students then return to their countries to promote a Wahhabi style of Islam.

The Wahhabi movement has promoted its purist brand of Islam in schools, mosques and Islamic charitable organizations from North Africa to Central Asia and Malaysia. Saudi money has been involved in the funding of the Pakistani madrasahs which have indoctrinated thousands of children in a radical brand of Islam. These children often spend years doing nothing but memorizing the Qur'an.

U.S. News reports in its October 15, 2001 issue, "Pakistan's madrasahs may be grooming as many as 4.5 million mujahideen. One of the largest and most influential, the Haqqania school near Peshawar, graduated most of the present Taliban leadership. In 1997, it shut down and shipped its more than 2,800 pupils to Northern Afghanistan to fight for the Taliban in its civil war against the Northern Alliance."

While attempting to maintain a moderate image and good relations in the West, the Saudis support the very brand of fundamentalist Islam that has given rise to the terrorism that now threatens the West. Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, a professor of political science at the University of San Diego, is quoted in the October 15, 2001 issue of *U.S. News* as saying, "The rogue states [such as Iraq and Lybia] are less important in the radicalization of Islam than Saudi Arabia. . . Until now Saudi Arabia has said to the United States that what it does for the Muslim world is none of its business. But the unintended consequences [of Saudi actions] are now being visited upon the United States. We now know where the ideological fervor is coming from." Pray for wisdom for both politicians and missionaries to know how to respond to Wahhabi Saudis. 🌐

