CHAPTER TEN

WAHHABIS, SUFIS AND SALAFIS IN EARLY
TWENTIETH CENTURY DAMASCUS

David Commins

For the past two centuries, observers of the Muslim world have frequently traced religious purification campaigns to Wahhabi influence. For instance, British authorities in nineteenth-century India perceived Wahhabi-tinged movements from Bengal to Punjab.¹ Russian journalists presently use the term “Wahhabi” for just about any manifestation of religious assertion in nearby Muslim lands.² Of course, the Arabian reformers have striven to export their doctrine, but there is little careful research on the local reception of Wahhabism in different parts of the Muslim world. This study examines how allegations of Wahhabi influence became a point of controversy between rival camps of religious scholars in early twentieth century Damascus. Thus the focus here is not on tracing Wahhabi influence but on what “Wahhabi” meant in that context and how it was used in the polemics contained in religious treatises published between 1900 and the early 1920s. From these works, it appears that the Wahhabi issue and local religious discourse evolved over time. A pair of essays published in 1900 and 1901 repeat the standard anti-Wahhabi arguments handed down since the eighteenth century, while essays published between 1909 and the early 1920s (spanning the Ottoman constitutional and early French mandate years) indicate significant shifts in discourse and context.

¹ Qeyamuddin Ahmad remarks on British colonial authorities in India using the Wahhabi label as a synonym for “traitor” or “rebel,” in The Wahhabi Movement in India, 2nd ed., Manohar 1994, pp. ix–x.
Early Responses to Wahhabism

A model study of Wahhabism’s reception in one locality is Bernard Haykel’s splendid monograph on the Yemeni scholar Muhammad al-Shawkani. He points to a number of similarities between the views and ideas of al-Shawkani and the Wahhabis regarding illegitimate innovations (bidaʿ) in the cult of saints and types of idolatry (shirk), at the same he notes that they were not identical. Moreover, Haykel situates al-Shawkani’s intellectual positions firmly in the context of the political and religious dynamics in Yemen rather than viewing them as a result of Wahhabi influence. The gaps between Wahhabi condemnation of all practices associated with tomb visits and al-Shawkani’s allowance for practices he considered permissible were substantial and irreconcilable. The Wahhabi call did not convert the leading scholar in early nineteenth century Yemen.³

In the case of Syria, and more specifically Damascus, religious scholars, or ʿulamaʾ, greeted the Wahhabi call with unremitting hostility until the late nineteenth century for doctrinal and political reasons. First, Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab’s views on monotheism, idolatry, and excommunication clashed with the longstanding consensus among the ʿulamaʾ. He viewed Muslims who participated in popular customs associated with the cult of saints and in various intercessionary behaviors as idolaters whose lives, honor, and property were legitimate spoils. His critics responded with two kinds of arguments. Some defended the permissibility of practices that Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab considered idolatry. Others admitted that such practices violated the command to devote all worship to God, but maintained that such violation did not render one an idolater.⁴

The political reason for hostility toward Wahhabism was that its association with Saudi power made it suspect from the Ottoman perspective. The first Saudi state (1744–1818) had denied the legitimacy of the Ottoman sultan and expelled the Ottomans from the holy cities of Mecca and Medina in the early 1800s. The Ottomans launched a counterattack in 1811 to regain the holy cities. In 1818, the Ottoman offensive concluded with the destruction of the first Saudi capital and

⁴ The doctrinal arguments were of course far more extensive, but this was the core of the controversy.