Review Essay

Varieties of Wahhabism

Tarek Masoud
John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts


Ever since al-Qā`ida’s appearance on the Western radar screen in the mid-1990s, we have tended to view that organization, and the violence it has meted out, as the natural and inevitable outcome of a pact made in the deserts of Arabia in the middle of the 18th century. That pact, struck between the progenitor of what is now the royal family of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the founder of the uncompromisingly unitarian Wahhabi strain of Islam that is its established religion, brought to life (after a series of struggles, triumphs, and reversals of fortune) a state in which the powers temporal and spiritual are perpetually locked in an uneasy embrace. Men of religious learning, we are told, clothe their grasping, emphatically worldly rulers in barely-adequate garments of divine sanction, while stoking in the bellies of their subjects a puritanical fire that periodically lashes out to consume those who fall short of the creed’s exacting requirements.

Under this standard narrative, the 15 Saudis who (along with one Egyptian, one Lebanese, and two citizens of the United Arab Emirates) immolated themselves and 3,000 others on September 11th, 2001, were students who had learned their lessons too well, who had taken too seriously the exhortations of their schoolbooks “to consider the infidels their enemies,”¹ who had listened too closely to the urgings of their country’s chief religious authority to “nourish baghdā’ (hatred) rather than mawadda (affection) in their hearts for infidels.”²

Indeed, sage voices reminded us that it was ever thus, that religious zealotry may be harnessed only for so long before it kicks over its traces. After all, the Saudi bargain between “prince and priest” had unraveled before. In 1929, ’Abdul ’Aziz Ibn Saʿūd was forced to turn his sword against those of his own men, Wahhabi zealots called the ikhwān, who had wanted to carry the true faith beyond the frontiers that he had managed to work out with imperial Britain. In the House of Commons, the colonial secretary at the time, Leo Amery, explained that Ibn Saʿūd had “lost control of his own subjects”—early testimony to the trickiness of deploying religion as a tool of statecraft. As Nadav Safran put it, “Although Ibn Saʿūd was aware from the outset of the need to control militant Wahhabism and devised ways that he thought would do so, the ikhwān eventually eluded his control.” It is this same dialectic—of exploiting religion only to have it turn against its master—that, we are told, brought forth al-Qāʿida more than 70 years later, as “the Saudi state, keen to boost its religious legitimacy, began promoting pan-Islamic nationalism,” and once again inherited a whirlwind.

But as tidy as this tale is, it is incomplete. It forces us to imagine a monolithic Saudi state inculcating in its subjects a monolithic Wahhabism and reaping a predictable and monolithic jihadi response. To the extent that there were diverse reactions to what the Saudi state was up to—as one would expect in any society populated by human beings—we are kept woefully ignorant of it. Moreover, ideas exit the stage just as Wahhabism slips its moorings and ushers in jihad. From then on, the great drama shifts to the field of battle, and our concern is redirected to the jihadist enemy whose leaders must be captured, whose cells must be squeezed, whose sources of funding must be dried up. To the extent that ideas still matter in this sanguinary story, it is in how to make jihad’s animating credo yield to a more tolerant, secular, and liberal one. Untold and unexplored is what has happened inside Wahhabism after it issued forth in blood and terror. What ideological responses did the Saudi state and its men of the cloth bring to their jihadi challengers? And how did those challengers respond? And what of the rest of Saudi society—did it remain

4) Not to be confused with the Society of Muslim Brothers (Jamāʿat al-ikhwān al-Muslimūn), founded in Egypt in 1928.