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The Islamic Traditions of Wahhabism and Salafiyya

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Summary

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and subsequent investigations of these attacks have called attention to Islamic puritanical movements known as Wahhabism and Salafiyya. The Al Qaeda terrorist organization and its leader Osama bin Laden have advocated a message of violence that some suggest is an extremist interpretation of this line of puritanical Islam. There are those who blame these extremists for corrupting the Islamic religion in general and Wahhabism in particular. Others have accused Saudi Arabia, the center of Wahhabism, of having disseminated a religion that promotes hatred and violence, targeting the United States and its allies. Saudi officials strenuously deny these allegations. This report provides a background on Wahhabi Islam and its association to militant fundamentalist groups; it will also summarize recent charges against Wahhabism and responses. It will be updated periodically. Related CRS products include CRS Issue Brief IB93113, CRS Report RS21432, CRS Report RS21529, CRS Report RS21654, and CRS Report RL31718.

Background on Wahhabism

Definitions. "Wahhabism" is a term with varied connotations, but it generally refers to a movement that seeks to purify the Islamic religion[1] of any innovations or practices that deviate from the seventh-century teachings of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions. In the West, the term has been used mostly to denote the form of Islam practiced in Saudi Arabia and which has spread recently to various parts of the world. In most Muslim nations, however, believers who adhere to this creed prefer to call themselves "Unitarians" (*muwahiddun*) or "Salafiyyun" (sing. Salafi, noun Salafiyya). The latter term derives from the word *salaf* meaning to "follow" or "precede," a reference to the followers and companions of the Prophet. In general, Muslims view the Western usage of the term "Wahhabism" as carrying negative and derogatory connotations. While this paper explains differences in these terms, it will refer to Wahhabism in association with Saudi Arabia and to Salafiyya as a more general puritanical Islamic movement.

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[1] For more on the Islamic religion, see CRS Report RS21432, *Islam: A Primer*, by Clyde Mark.

History of Wahhabism. In Islam, there are four schools of legal theory, and Wahhabism is considered to be an offshoot of the most conservative of these schools, the Hanbali school of law that developed in the ninth century. Wahhabism is a puritanical form of Sunni Islam,[2] and it is the doctrine practiced in Saudi Arabia and in Qatar, although it is much less rigidly enforced in the latter. The word "Wahhabi" is derived from the name of a Muslim scholar, Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1791). This scholar had been frustrated by the moral decline of his society and came to denounce many popular beliefs and practices as idolatrous. Ultimately, he encouraged a "return" to the pure and orthodox practice of the "fundamentals" of Islam, as embodied in the Quran and in the life of the Prophet Muhammad. In the eighteenth century, Muhammad bin Saud, founder of the modern-day Saudi dynasty, partnered with Abd al-Wahhab to begin the process of unifying disparate tribes in the Arabian Peninsula. Since the foundation of modern Saudi Arabia in 1932, there has been a close relationship between the Saudi ruling family and the Wahhabi religious establishment.[3]

Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia Today. With the establishment of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Wahhabism gained new ground as it expanded beyond a theological doctrine and was used as the official basis for determining laws and conduct in Saudi society. In day-to-day life, this has translated into practices such as the segregation of the sexes, the absolute prohibition of the sale and consumption of alcohol, a ban on women driving, and numerous other social restrictions. This Islamic interpretation also has shaped the Saudi educational structure and in general Saudi schoolbooks denounce any teachings that do not conform to Wahhabist beliefs.[4] The puritanical and iconoclastic philosophies reflected in this sect historically have resulted in conflict with other Muslim groups. Wahhabism is against most popular religious practices such as saint veneration, the celebration of the Prophet's birthday, and practices associated with the mystical teachings of Sufism. Moreover, according to the State Department's 2002 International Religious Freedom Report on Saudi Arabia,[5] "members of the Shi'a [Muslim] minority are the subjects of officially sanctioned political and economic discrimination." Wahhabism also has been accused of promoting intolerance of Christianity and Judaism.[6]

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[2] Sunni Muslims believe that the political leadership of the Muslim community should come from the most qualified individuals and not necessarily through lineage from the Prophet Muhammad, which is what Shiite Muslims believe.

[3] The Wahhabism practiced in Saudi Arabia today is a combination of the teachings of its founder Abd al-Wahhab and other religious and cultural traditions. Eleanor Abdella Doumato, "Manning the Barricades: Islam according to Saudi Arabia's School Texts," *The Middle East Journal* 57, iss. 2(2003):230-248.

[4] Michaela Prokop, "Saudi Arabia: The Politics of Education," *International Affairs* 79, no. 1 (London, 2003):77-89.

[5] Department of State, "Saudi Arabia: International Religious Freedom Report 2003," [http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2003/24461.htm] indicates that approximately two million Shi'ites are citizens of Saudi Arabia.

[6] The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) "Report on Saudi Arabia" (May 2003) cites that anti-Semitic and anti-Western sentiment "remains prevalent in the

Political and Religious Factors

What Is Salafiyya? As noted above, among adherents in general, preference is given to the term "Salafiyya" over "Wahhabism." These terms have distinct historical roots, but they have been used interchangeably in recent years. Wahhabism is considered by some as the Saudi form of Salafiyya. Modern Salafi beliefs have their roots in a reform-oriented movement from the early twentieth century, which progressively grew more conservative. In line with puritanical Islamic teachings, Salafis believe that the ultimate religious authority is located directly in the Quran and in the Prophet's practices, and not in commentaries which interpret these sources.[7] Salafis also maintain that they are "the only [Muslim] group that will be saved on Judgment Day."[8] The Salafiyya is not a unified movement and there exists no single Salafi "sect." However, the Salafi interpretation appeals to a large number of Muslims worldwide — in Africa, Asia, North America, and throughout the Middle East.

The Use of Violence. The use of violent *jihad*[9] is not inherently associated with puritanical Islamic beliefs. Among certain puritanical Muslims — be they self-ascribed Salafis or Wahhabis — advocacy of *jihad* is a relatively recent phenomenon and is a highly disputed matter within these groups. Some scholars date the ascendancy of militancy among Salafis to the 1980s war of resistance against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. The war against the Soviets gained wide support throughout the Muslim world and mobilized numerous volunteer fighters. Radical beliefs spread rapidly through select groups of mosques and *madrasa*s (Islamic religious schools),[10] located on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, which were funded primarily by Saudi Arabia and at times by the United States and Europe. Following the war and the rise of the puritanically-oriented Taliban, Jihadist Salafis denounced leaders of countries such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt as "apostates" and as vehicles for facilitating Western imperialism. Jihadist Salafi groups such as Al Qaeda now advocate the overthrow of the Saudi government and other regimes and the establishment of states that would sustain the puritanical Islamic doctrine enforced under a strict application of *shari'a* or Islamic law.

Osama bin Laden and the Al Qaeda Terrorist Network. The Al Qaeda terrorist organization arose in the early 1990s, directly out of the radical Salafi Jihadist tradition. As analysts have noted, the ideology of Al Qaeda's leader, Osama bin Laden,

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[6] (...continued)
[Saudi] government-controlled media."

[7] Ahmad Dallal, "Appropriating the Past: Twentieth-Century Reconstruction of Pre-Modern Islamic Thought," *Islamic Law and Society* 7, no. 1(Leiden, 2000): 347.

[8] Quintan Wiktorowicz, "The New Global Threat: Transnational Salafis and Jihad," *Middle East Policy* 8, no. 4(2001): 20.

[9] *Jihad* literally means "striving" or "struggle." It has also been used to refer to a "holy war," although this term does not appear in the Quran. A "greater jihad" implies the spiritual struggle that each Muslim must wage within himself or herself in order to become a better individual. The "lesser jihad" is the one in which a Muslim spreads his/her faith through persuasion and social justice, but it has also been commonly used to refer to war against an aggressor.

[10] See *Islamic Religious Schools, or Madrasas: Background*, CRS Report RS21654, by Febe Armanios.

is intended to polarize the Islamic world into two clearly delineated factions: between the *umma* (Islamic community) and those regimes which are closely allied with the United States and the West.[11] Recent attacks inside Saudi Arabia, in particular, have aimed to undermine the Saudi ruling family, to expose its "misguided" or insufficient dedication to Wahhabism, and to jeopardize its protectorship of Mecca and Medina, Islam's holiest cities. Since the 1990s, Al Qaeda has called for a war against the United States, alleging that "U.S. crimes against Islam" were part of a "Zionist-Crusader" plot intended to annihilate Muslims.[12] Al Qaeda has preached that while Islam may prohibit the killing of civilians, the Quran justifies "reciprocal attacks" against an enemy that, Al Qaeda claims, has purposely attacked Muslim civilians, particularly in the context of the Palestinian struggle.[13] Many Islamic scholars, including some Wahhabi leaders, have condemned the September 11 attacks against civilians as having no roots in the Islamic religion and view bin Laden as a hijacker and a usurper of their religion.[14] Bush Administration officials have echoed this sentiment, noting that the United States has "an interest in the voices of the moderates, the people who do not want their religion stolen away from them by extremists like Osama bin Laden."[15]

Although the majority of Salafi adherents do not advocate the violence enshrined in bin Laden's message, this ideology has attracted a number of followers throughout the Muslim world. Analysts note that some receptive groups are drawn to the anti-Western message preached by bin Laden and his organization, despite the fact that these groups may hold different religious beliefs. Some experts caution against "homogenizing" these groups and organizations into a monolithic entity. One warns that the neglect of these groups' historical roots and the consolidation of "varying motivations, ideologies and objectives of regional terrorist groups"[16] undermines the overall understanding of terrorism, particularly in regions such as Southeast Asia and North Africa.

"Reformist" Salafi Trends. It is worth noting that there are Salafis and Wahhabis who believe that violence should be a last resort and, if used, should be the final stage in a long process of personal transformation, purification, and self-discipline in which each Muslim should engage and which ultimately will lead to the establishment of a pure Islamic state. These "reformists" oppose violence on the basis of the Prophet Muhammad's own practices; however, their rejection of violence is not absolute and is debated in the face of defending perceived threats against the Islamic religion.

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[11] Michael Scott Doran, "Somebody Else's Civil War," *Foreign Affairs* (Jan./Feb. 2002): 23.

[12] John Kaltner and Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Killing in the Name of Islam: Al Qaeda's Justification for September 11," *Middle East Policy* 10, no. 2(2003): 85.

[13] *Ibid.*, pp. 86-87.

[14] Nora Boustany, "Bin Laden Now a Target in Arab Media; Criticism Emerges as Scholars Emphasize Distance from 'Distortion of Religion,'" *The Washington Post*, Nov. 23, 2001. See also Tamara Albertini, "The Seductiveness of Certainty: The Destruction of Islam's Intellectual Legacy by the Fundamentalists," *Philosophy East and West* 53, no. 4(2003): 456.

[15] "Defense Undersecretary Feith Holds News Briefing," the Heritage Foundation, Nov. 24, 2003.

[16] Carlyle A. Thayer, "No, Al Qaeda Isn't Everywhere," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Aug. 21, 2003.

Recent Allegations against Wahhabism and Responses

There have been two major allegations against Wahhabism and against the Saudi Arabian government, which is viewed as its principal proponent:

"Wahhabism Spreads Terrorism"? It is widely acknowledged that the Saudi government, as well as wealthy Saudi individuals, have supported the spread of the Wahhabist form of Islam in several Muslim countries and in the West. Some have argued that this proselyting has promoted terrorism and has spawned Islamic militancy throughout the world.[17] Saudi funding of mosques, *madrasa*s, and charities, some of which have been linked to terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda, has raised concern that Wahhabi Islam has been used by militants who tailor this ideology to suit their political goals and who rely on Saudi donations to support their aspirations. One argument maintains that spreading Wahhabism was used to placate the most radical and conservative religious groups which threatened the Saudi ruling family.[18] Others maintain that Islam, like other religions, "possesses holy texts that can be invoked to support [peace or violence], depending on the circumstances."[19]

"Wahhabism Spreads Intolerance"? Some reports suggest that teachings within Saudi domestic schools may foster intolerance of other religions and cultures. A 2002 study by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) indicates that "some Saudi textbooks taught Islamic tolerance while others viciously condemned Jews and Christians...[and] use rhetoric that was little more than hate literature."[20] There are those who have also argued that the global spread of Wahhabist teachings threatens the existence of more moderate Islamic beliefs and practices in other parts of the world.[21]

Saudi Arabia's Response to these Allegations. The Saudi government has strenuously denied the above allegations. With regard to charges of terrorism, senior Saudi government and religious officials have issued statements insisting there is no association between the Islamic religion and terrorism.[22] In response to allegations of teaching intolerance, the Saudi government has embarked in recent months on a campaign of educational reforms, although the outcome of these reforms remains to be seen. Many

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[17] In the controversial work of journalist Stephen Schwartz, *The Two Faces of Islam* (New York: Doubleday, 2002), the author writes that "Wahhabism exalts and promotes death in every element of its existence: the suicide of its adherents, mass murder as a weapon against civilization, and above all the suffocation of the mercy embodied in Islam," p. 180.

[18] Dave Montgomery, "Radical Re-Education," *The Fort-Worth Star-Telegram*, Dec. 3, 2003.

[19] Peter David, "In the Name of Islam," *The Economist*, Sept. 13, 2003.

[20] "Saudi Arabia: Opposition, Islamic Extremism, and Terrorism," Report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Nov. 27, 2002, p. 18.

[21] The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has proposed that Congress support a study by the General Accounting Office (GAO) that would examine the "Saudi exportation of intolerance" to foreign countries and the United States. Hearing, "Is Saudi Arabia A Strategic Threat: The Global Propagation of Intolerance," Nov. 18, 2003.

[22] "Saudi Arabia's Highest Religious Authority Warns Against the Dangers of Extremism," Press release, Aug. 21, 2003, Saudi Arabia Embassy website:
 [http://saudiembassy.net/ReportLink/Report_Extremism_Oct03.pdf].

Saudi leaders have asserted publicly that their religion is one of "peace and tolerance"[23] and have denied allegations that their government exports religious or cultural intolerance. A recent Saudi Embassy press release notes that "We do not fund the so-called radical madrassas that people accuse us of funding, because that goes against our policy."[24]

Current U.S. Policy and Legislation

In light of allegations against Wahhabism, some critics have called for a reevaluation of the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia,[25] although others maintain that U.S. economic and security interests require continued and close ties with the Saudis. In November 2003, Secretary of State Colin Powell noted that the Bush Administration has "encouraged our Saudi friends to do more with respect to terrorist activity, at least within the Kingdom, and they are."[26] President Bush has made a number of statements that praise the Islamic religion as a whole and denounce those groups that have "hijacked a great religion."[27]

Wahhabism has been a focus of congressional hearings, which have examined the relationship between this religious belief and terrorist financing, as well as its alleged ties to the spread of intolerance. In November 2003, the "Saudi Arabia Accountability Act of 2003" was introduced as S. 1888 and H.R. 3643. The bill lists charges against Saudi Arabia and states that "many Saudi-funded religious institutions and the literature they distribute teach a message of hate and intolerance that provides an ideological basis for anti-Western terrorism." Among other provisions, it calls for the end of Saudi government funding to all institutions that incite or encourage global terrorism. H.R. 3137, introduced in September 2003, lists several specific charges against Saudi Arabia and calls the country "the center of Wahabbism, the ultra-purist, jihadist form of Islam followed by members of Al Qaeda." The bill calls for a ban of direct aid to Saudi Arabia along with five other countries. Saudi Arabia receives $25,000 in annual U.S. aid under the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program. H.Con.Res. 244 concludes that "the Government of Saudi Arabia forcefully limits the public practice or expression of religion to the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam" and calls upon the Saudi government to safeguard the freedom of non-Muslims and of non-Wahhabi Muslims. These bills have been referred to committees of jurisdiction.

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[23] "Saudi King and Crown Prince Address Muslims," Press release, Feb. 13, 2003, *ibid*.

[24] "Statement by Adel al-Jubeir, Foreign Affairs Advisor to the Crown Prince," Press release, Nov. 14, 2003, Saudi Arabia Embassy website: [http://www.saudiembassy.net/press_release/releases/03-PR-1114-terrorism.htm].

[25] David Van Biema, "Wahhabism: Toxic Faith?" *Time*, Sept. 15, 2003; David E. Kaplan, et al., "The Saudi Connection," *U.S. News and World Report*, Dec. 15, 2003.

[26] "Interview by Abdul Rahman Al-Rashed of Asharq Al-Awsat," Nov. 5, 2003, U.S. Department of State website: [http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2003/26028.htm].

[27] "Remarks by President George W. Bush on U.S. Humanitarian Aid to Afghanistan," Oct. 11, 2002, White House website: [http://www.whitehouse.gov/infocus/ramadan/islam.html].