The Islamic Traditions of Wahhabism and Salafiyya

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Summary

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and subsequent discussions of religious extremism have called attention to Islamic puritanical movements known as Wahhabism and Salafiyya. Al Qaeda leaders and their ideological supporters have advocated a violent message that some suggest is rooted in these conservative Islamic traditions. Other observers have accused Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Wahhabism, of having disseminated religious ideology that promotes hatred and violence, targeting the United States and its allies. Saudi officials strenuously deny these allegations. This report provides a background on these traditions and their relationship to active terrorist groups; it also summarizes recent charges and responses, including the findings of the final report of the 9/11 Commission and relevant legislation in the 110th Congress. The report will be updated to reflect major developments. Related CRS products include CRS Report RL33533, *Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations*, by (name redacted), CRS Report RL32499, *Saudi Arabia: Terrorist Financing Issues*, by (name redacted), CRS Report RS21529, *Al Qaeda after the Iraq Conflict*, by (name redacted), CRS Report RS21654, *Islamic Religious Schools, Madrasas: Background*, by (name redacted), and CRS Report RL31718, *Qatar: Background and U.S. Relations*, by (name redacted).

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Background on Wahhabism

Definitions

Wahhabism is a puritanical form of Sunni Islam and is practiced in Saudi Arabia and 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, who lived in the Arabian peninsula during the eighteenth century (1703-1791). Today, the term "Wahhabism" is broadly applied outside of the Arabian peninsula to refer to a Sunni Islamic movement that seeks to purify Islam of any innovations or practices that deviate from the seventh-century teachings of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions.[1] In most predominantly Muslim nations, however, believers who adhere to this creed or hold similar perspectives 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 Mohammed.

Some Muslims believe the Western usage of the term "Wahhabism" unfairly carries negative and derogatory connotations. Although this paper explains differences in these terms, it will refer to Wahhabism in association with a conservative Islamic creed centered in and emanating from Saudi Arabia and to Salafiyya as a more general puritanical Islamic movement that has developed independently at various times and in various places in the Islamic world.

History of Wahhabism [2]

Muhammad bin Abd al Wahhab, whose name is the source of the word "Wahhabi," founded a religious movement in the Arabian peninsula during the eighteenth century (1703-1791) that sought to reverse what he perceived as the moral decline of his society. In particular, Abd al Wahhab denounced many popular Islamic 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. Muhammad bin Saud, the ancestral founder of the modern-day Al Saud dynasty, partnered with Abd al Wahhab to begin the process of unifying disparate tribes in the Arabian Peninsula. Their partnership formed the basis for a close political relationship between their descendants that continues today.

Since its emergence, Wahhabism's puritanical and iconoclastic philosophies have resulted in conflict with other Muslim groups. Wahhabism opposes most popular Islamic religious practices such as saint veneration, the celebration of the Prophet's birthday, most core Shiite traditions, and some practices associated with the mystical teachings of Sufism. In the past, this has brought Wahhabis based in the Arabian peninsula and elsewhere into confrontation with non-Wahhabi Sunni Muslims, Shiite Muslims, and non-Muslims in neighboring areas. The first Saudi kingdom

[1] For more on Islam, see CRS Report RS21432, *Islam: A Primer*.

[2] For a comprehensive discussion of Sunni Islam and the schools of Islamic legal thought, see CRS Report RS21745, *Islam: Sunnis and Shiites*, by (name redacted). For more on the history of Wahhabism, see Alexai Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia*, New York University Press, 2000; and, John S. Habib, *Ibn Sa'ud's Warriors of Islam: The Ikhwan of Najd and Their Role in the Creation of the Sa'udi Kingdom,1910-1930*. Brill, 1978.

was destroyed by Ottoman forces in the early 19th century after Wahabbi-inspired warriors seized Mecca and Medina and threatened Ottoman dominance. Similarly, during the 1920s, Wahhabi-trained Bedouin warriors allied with the founder of the modern Saudi kingdom, Abd al Aziz ibn Saud, attacked fellow Sunnis in western Arabia and Shiites in southern Iraq, leading to political confrontations and military engagements with the British empire.

Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia Today

Since the foundation of the modern kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932, there has been a close relationship between the Saudi ruling family and the Wahhabi religious establishment.[3] Wahhabi-trained Bedouin warriors known as the *Ikhwan* were integral to the Al Saud family's military campaign to reconquer and unify the Arabian peninsula from 1912 until an Ikhwan rebellion was put down by force in 1930. Thereafter, Wahhabi clerics were integrated into the new kingdom's religious and political establishment, and Wahhabi ideas formed the basis of the rules and laws adopted to govern social affairs in Saudi Arabia. Wahhabism also shaped the kingdom's judicial and educational policies. Saudi schoolbooks historically have denounced teachings that do not conform to Wahhabist beliefs, an issue that remains controversial within Saudi Arabia and among outside observers.[4]

In September 2007, the State Department again designated Saudi Arabia as a "Country of Particular Concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act because "religious freedom remains severely restricted." According to the State Department's 2007 International Religious Freedom Report on Saudi Arabia, "the Saudi Government confirmed a number of policies to foster greater religious tolerance, to halt the dissemination of intolerant literature and extremist ideology within Saudi Arabia and around the world, to protect the right to private worship and the right to possess and use personal religious materials, to curb harassment by the religious police, to empower its Human Rights Commission, to eliminate discrimination against non-Muslim religious minorities, and to respect the rights of Muslims who do not follow the Government's interpretation of Islam." The report also notes that members of the Shiite Muslim minority continue to face political, educational, legal, social, and religious discrimination and that there is "no legal recognition or protection of religious freedom."[5]

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, especially in the West. Wahhabism is considered by some Muslims as the Saudi form of Salafiyya. Unlike the eighteenth-century Saudi roots of Wahhabism, however, modern

[3] Contemporary Saudi Wahhabism combines 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, no. 2 (2003):230-248.

[4] Michaela Prokop, "Saudi Arabia: The Politics of Education," *Int. Affairs*, 79, no. 1, pp. 77-89.

[5] Approximately two million Shiites are citizens of Saudi Arabia. Report available online at http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2007/90220.htm.

Salafi beliefs grew from a reform-oriented movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, which developed in various parts of the Islamic world and progressively grew more conservative. In line with other puritanical Islamic teachings, Salafis generally believe that the Quran and the Prophet's practices (*hadith*) are the ultimate religious authority in Islam, rather than the subsequent commentaries produced by Islamic scholars that interpret these sources.[6] Salafiyya is not a unified movement, and there exists no single Salafi "sect." However, Salafi interpretations of Islam appeal to a large number of Muslims worldwide who seek religious renewal in the face of modern challenges.

The Use of Violence

According to a number of scholars, the waging of violent *jihad*[7] is not inherently associated with puritanical Islamic beliefs. Among certain puritanical Muslims—be they self-described Salafis or Wahhabis—advocacy of *jihad* is a relatively recent phenomenon and remains highly disputed within these groups. Although Wahhabi clerics and converts have advocated religiously motivated violence and played military roles at key moments in Saudi history, most scholars date the ascendancy of militancy within the wider Salafi community to the war of resistance against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan during the 1980s. The war against the Soviets gained wide support throughout the Muslim world and mobilized thousands of volunteer fighters. Radical beliefs spread rapidly through select groups of mosques and *madrasa*s (Islamic religious schools),[8] located on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, which were created to support the Afghan resistance and funded primarily by Saudi Arabia. Similar U.S. and European funding provided to Pakistan to aid the Afghan mujahideen also may have been diverted to fund the construction and maintenance of *madrasa*s. Following the war, militant Salafis with ties to the Afghan resistance denounced leaders of countries such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt as "apostates" and as vehicles for facilitating Western imperialism. The Taliban movement also emerged from this network of institutions.

Violent Salafist-inspired groups such as Al Qaeda continue to advocate the overthrow of the Saudi government and other regimes and the establishment of states that will sustain puritanical Islamic doctrine enforced under a strict application of *shari'a* or Islamic law. Although the majority of Salafi adherents do not advocate the violence enshrined in Bin Laden's message, violent Salafist ideology has attracted a number of followers throughout the Muslim world. Analysts note that some receptive groups are drawn to the anti-U.S. political messages preached by Bin Laden and his supporters, despite the fact that these groups may hold different religious beliefs.

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

[7] *Jihad* literally means "striving" or "struggle." It is frequently used to refer to a "holy war," although this term does not appear in the Quran but in a number of *hadith* or recorded sayings of the Prophet Mohammed and his companions.

[8] See CRS Report RS21654, *Islamic Religious Schools, Madrasas: Background*, by (name redacted).

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 ideas in several Muslim countries and in the United States and Europe. Some have argued that this proselyting has promoted terrorism and has spawned Islamic militancy throughout the world.[9] 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.

"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."[10] Others also have argued that the global spread of Wahhabist teachings threatens the existence of more moderate Islamic beliefs and practices in other parts of the world, including the United States.[11] A 2005 report from Freedom House's Center for Religious Freedom cites examples of what its authors calls "hate ideology" taken from a number of Saudi government publications that have been distributed in U.S. mosques and Islamic centers.[12]

Recent attention to Wahhabi clerics in Saudi Arabia has focused on harsh sectarian rhetoric accusing Shiite Muslims in Iraq and elsewhere of religious apostasy and political disloyalty worthy of punishment. An October 2006 petition signed by 38 prominent Saudi religious figures called on Sunnis everywhere to oppose a joint "crusader [U.S.], Safavid [Iranian] and Rafidi [derogatory term for Shiite] scheme" to target Iraq's Sunni Arab population.[13]

[9] See Council on Foreign Relations Independent Task Force on Terrorist Financing, "Update on the Global Campaign Against Terrorist Financing," June 15, 2004, p. 20.

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

[11] U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Hearing:* "Is Saudi Arabia a Strategic Threat?" November 18, 2003, http://www.uscirf.gov/events/hearings/2003/november/11182003_saudiThreat.html.

[12] Freedom House, "Saudi Publications on Hate Ideology Fill American Mosques," January 2005.

[13] "Saudi Arabian Clerics Issue Statement Backing Iraq's Sunni Muslims," Open Source Center (OSC) Document - GMP20061211837002, December 10, 2006.

Saudi Arabia's Response

The Saudi Arabian government has strenuously denied the above allegations. Saudi officials continue to assert that Islam is tolerant and peaceful, and they have denied allegations that their government exports religious or cultural extremism or supports extremist religious education.[14] In response to allegations of teaching intolerance, the Saudi government has embarked on a campaign of educational reforms designed to remove divisive material from curricula and improve teacher performance, although the outcome of these reforms remains to be seen. Confrontation with religious figures over problematic remarks and activities poses political challenges for the Saudi government, because some key Wahhabi clerics support Saudi government efforts to de-legitimize terrorism inside the kingdom and have sponsored or participated in efforts to religiously re-educate former Saudi combatants.

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, although others maintain that U.S. economic and security interests require continued and close ties with the Saudis. The Bush administration has praised Saudi counter-terrorism cooperation, and President Bush has praised Islam and denounced groups that have "hijacked a great religion."[15]

9/11 Commission

The Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (the "9/11 Commission") claims that "Islamist terrorism" finds inspiration in "a long tradition of extreme intolerance" that flows "through the founders of Wahhabism," the Muslim Brotherhood, and prominent Salafi thinkers. The report further details the education and activities of some 9/11 hijackers in the Al Qassim province of Saudi Arabia, which the report describes as "the very heart of the strict Wahhabi movement in Saudi Arabia." According to the Commission, some Saudi "Wahhabi-funded organizations," such as the now-defunct Al Haramain Islamic Foundation, "have been exploited by extremists to further their goal of violent jihad against non-Muslims."[16] Due in part to these findings, the Commission recommended a frank discussion of the relationship between the United States and its "problematic ally," Saudi Arabia.

Issues for Congress

Wahhabism has been a focus of congressional hearings, which have examined the relationship between Wahhabi religious belief and terrorist financing, as well as its alleged ties to the spread of intolerance. Several bills in the 108th Congress criticized Saudi-funded religious institutions and alleged that they provide ideological support for anti-Western terrorism. Section 7105(b) of

[14] "Saudi Arabia's Highest Religious Authority Warns Against the Dangers of Extremism," August 21, 2003. Available at http://saudiembassy.net/ReportLink/Report_Extremism_Oct03.pdf.

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

[16] See CRS Report RL32499, *Saudi Arabia: Terrorist Financing Issues*, by (name redacted).

the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 (P.L. 108-458, December 17, 2004) expressed the sense of Congress that "there should be a more robust dialogue between the people and Government of the United States and the people and Government of Saudi Arabia." Section 7120(b) of the act required the President to submit to Congress within 180 days a strategy for collaboration with Saudi Arabia, which was to include proposals for promoting tolerance and diversity in Saudi Arabia and for diminishing support for extremist groups from Saudi sources. The report was submitted in classified form in September 2005.[17]

In the 110th Congress, P.L. 110-53, the Implementing Recommendations of the 9/11 Commission Act of 2007 (signed August 3, 2007), states that "the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has an uneven record in the fight against terrorism, especially with respect to... support for radical madrassas... and restrictions on religious pluralism." The bill requires the Administration to submit a report to Congress 180 days following enactment describing the long-term strategy of the United States to engage with the government of Saudi Arabia to facilitate political, economic, and social reforms, including greater religious freedom. House and Senate versions of the Saudi Arabia Accountability Act of 2007 (H.R. 2976 and S. 2243) contain findings related to extremism and incitement. S. 2243 specifically would require the President to certify whether the government of Saudi Arabia "has stopped financing and disseminating materials, and other forms of support, that encourage the spread of radical Wahhabi ideology." Both bills have been referred to committees of jurisdiction.

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[17] House Committee on International Relations, Survey of Activities, Week of September 6, 2005: Letter Transmitting Report—September 7, 2005, CLASSIFIED, Department of State, pursuant to Sec. 7120 of the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act, 2004 (P.L. 108-458); Ex. Comm. 3684.