

The Gulf Monarchies in Transition.

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POST-WAHHABISM IN SAUDI ARABIA?

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In the last few years, the critique of Wahhabism has gained unprecedented momentum in Saudi Arabia. First formulated by a heterogeneous group of prominent liberal and Islamist intellectuals, it seems to have received the approval of at least part of the ruling elite who have taken a few official steps towards socio-religious reform. But is Saudi Arabia yet ready to enter the era of Post-Wahhabism?

Huge changes have recently taken place in Saudi Arabia, especially within the local political-intellectual field. Significant among these is the rise to prominence of a group of "islamo-liberals," who are "made up of former Islamists and liberals, Sunnis and Shiites, calling for a democratic change within an Islamic framework through a revision of the official Wahhabi religious doctrine."¹ Although not all have given as much importance to religious criticism as they have to political criticism, the critique of Wahhabism – in its political, social and religious aspects² – has undoubtedly been one of the mainsprings of this new trend. That is not to say that this phenomenon is completely without precedence in Saudi Arabia:

¹ Stéphane Lacroix, "Between Islamists and Liberals: Saudi Arabia's New Islamo-liberal Reformist Trend," *Middle East Journal* 58, no. 3 (Summer 2004): 345-65.

² "Wahhabism" initially refers to the religious tradition developed over the centuries by the ulama of the official Saudi religious establishment founded by the heirs of Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab. It is however commonly used in Saudi Arabia in a broader meaning, encompassing its social and political implications.

certain doctrinal aspects of Wahhabism have, at times, come under attack by prominent ulama from al-Hijaz and al-Hasa provinces and – though less commonly – from "dissident" ulama from the Najd region, the birthplace of Wahhabism. However, the word "Wahhabism" itself was until not long ago largely a taboo, the critiques came mostly from Saudis from peripheral geographical or religio-political groups, and these moves were always isolated. What we have today is quite different: the critique of Wahhabism – which is now often bluntly referred to as such – has gained ground. It touches upon all aspects of the Wahhabi tradition, and tends to come from within Wahhabism's own ideological and geographical core.

Critical trends

I will not deal here with the Shiite critique of Wahhabism, which has been an ongoing phenomenon since Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's time, and an obvious one given the fundamental antagonism between Shiism and Wahhabism. Worth noting however is that the Saudi Shiite reformist intellectuals, as part of their current strategy of conciliation with the regime within the broader islamo-liberal movement, have been very careful not to publicly make any direct attack on Wahhabism, and have somehow chosen to let their Sunni counterparts take this responsibility.

Among the non-Shiite critical trends, the first includes Saudi liberals, such as the writer and political analyst Turki Al Hamad, who had for decades continuously denounced the social manifestations of Wahhabism – the religious police or the ban on women's driving. In the post-9/11 climate, they have considerably sharpened their criticism and named their "Wahhabi" enemy. Second, a group of young and daring intellectuals – Mansur Al Nuqaidan and Mishari Al Zayidi being the two best known – have taken advantage of the Islamic credentials inherited from their radical Islamist past in order to develop an Islamic critique of Wahhabism. Through a series of articles, they have denounced "the excesses of the Wahhabi doctrine," notably drawing an explicit link between it and the jihadi violence experienced by the country since May 2003. Third, some Islamic thinkers have, since the mid-1990s, formulated a salafi critique of Wahhabism. Hasan Al Maliki, the most prominent among these, castigates the doctrinal rigidity of Wahhabism and its tendency to imitate Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and Ibn Taymiyya rather than to innovate as, he believes, genuine salafism commands. Abdallah Al Hamid shares Al Maliki's belief that Wahhabism has only become a caricature of true salafism and calls for a return to the latter, a condition which he makes as the theoretical basis for his pro-democracy political activism. Lastly, a fourth kind of critique has arisen, which could be called a Wahhabi critique of Wahhabism. One of its champions is

Islamist lawyer and political activist Abd al-Aziz Al Qasim, who insists on the internal plurality of the original Wahhabi tradition as it has developed over the past 250 years, and believes that he can revive some of its most tolerant aspects, therefore proposing a revision of Wahhabism from within the tradition itself.

Governmental backing

What is even more unprecedented is that the Saudi government has partly subscribed to these critical trends and has taken a number of preliminary steps towards – if not yet political – social and religious reform. The organization in June 2003 of the first national dialogue conference, with thirty ulama belonging to all the confessional groups present on the kingdom's territory – Wahhabi and non-Wahhabi Sunnis, Sufis, Ismaili and Twelver Shiites –, was an obvious move in that direction. This conference led to the adoption of a charter containing a set of “recommendations,” some of which can be considered a severe blow to the Wahhabi doctrine. First, the charter acknowledges the intellectual and confessional diversity of the Saudi nation, which is contrary to traditional Wahhabi exclusivism. Second, it criticizes one of Wahhabism's juridical pillars, the principle of *sadd al-dhara'i'* (the blocking of the means), which requires that actions that could lead to committing sins must themselves be prohibited. It is notably in pursuing this principle that women are denied the right to drive in Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, none of the figures of the official Wahhabi establishment were invited to attend the conference, which obviously denotes a willingness to marginalize them. In addition, the fact that the government-controlled press has recently opened its columns to the islamo-liberals' religious criticism clearly reflects a degree of official support for it. It is also worth noting that there have been some improvements on two crucial socio-religious issues: the status of women, whose economic role has officially been acknowledged and who have been given a voice in the national dialogue, and that of the Shiites, who have recently witnessed a relative loosening of the restrictions on their religious practice.

It therefore seems that part of the ruling elite now acknowledges the necessity for a revision of Wahhabism. The reasons for this go far beyond the American pressures on the kingdom. It has indeed become clear that only such a move would permit the creation of a true Saudi nation, based on the modern and inclusive value of citizenship – a yet missing reality and a much needed one in times of crisis. However, this ideological shift cannot go without a radical change in age-old domestic political alliances. And this is what could make it risky.

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