

BOOK REVIEWS

**David Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia*,
(London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), pp. 276**

Wahhabism and Saudi Arabia have historical, political, and theological connections. Historically, Wahhabism has been associated with Saudi Arabia since the 18th century, as the founder of the Wahhabi movement, Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792), was born and died in the Arabian Peninsula. Politically, the emergence of Saudi Arabia has been associated with the cooperation between the Wahhabis and the family of Saud. Theologically, Wahhabism is based on Islamic theological doctrines, especially the doctrine of the Oneness of Allah.

In the preface (pp. vi-viii), Commins begins to ask, "What is the Wahhabi mission?" According to Commins, there are many answers to the question. "A neutral observer could define the Wahhabi mission as the religious reform movement associated with the teachings of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. He and his followers believe that they have a religious obligation to spread the call (in Arabic, *da`wa*) for a restoration of pure monotheistic worship" (p. vi). The followers of Wahhabism do not like the name Wahhabis, but they prefer the names based on their methods and doctrines, namely the *Salafis* and the *muwahhidun*, those who believe in the Oneness of Allah.

For a Muslim who criticizes Wahhabism, it is "a deviant sectarian movement started by an ambitious, misguided religious leader from a remote part of Arabia that has spawned heretical movements since early Islam". For Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, "Muslims who disagreed with his definition of monotheism were not heretics, that is to say, misguided Muslims, but outside the pale of Islam altogether"(p. vi).

In other words, the Muslims who do not accept his definition of the Oneness of Allah are unbelievers. Most of the Muslims do not agree with his definition, and therefore, have been his enemies. Most

of the Muslims believe that as long as they believe in the Oneness of Allah and Muhammad as His messenger, they are believers; and any shortcoming in their Islamic ethical principles and legal practices or actions would render them sinners, not unbelievers. The Wahhabis and their adversaries set out arguments and counter-arguments based on their understandings and interpretations of the texts of the Koran and the Prophetic traditions as well as the history of the early Muslims to support their positions.

In the introduction, Commins states about the emergence of the Wahhabi doctrine in early 1740s in Central Arabia. “The author of that doctrine, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, declared that Muslims had reverted to idolatry. Naturally, the religious scholars (*ulama*) took exception and wrote treatises attacking his views as well as his qualifications to comment on theology” (p. 1). Ibn Abd al-Wahhab defended his doctrine by referring to the Prophetic tradition stating, “Islam first appeared as a stranger and will one day return as a stranger”. The founder of Wahhabism believed that he lived during the time of *jahiliyyah* (ignorance of Islam). He “concluded that Islam was as much a stranger in his time as it had been eleven centuries earlier when God had first revealed the Qur’an. His call (*da`wa*), the essence of the Wahhabism mission, was to revive pure devotion of worship to God alone. For Muslims who agree with this account, ‘Wahhabism’ is merely a rebirth of Islam at the end of a period of decadence. The paradigm of religious decline and revival is a common one in Muslim thought” (p. 3).

The first chapter (pp.7-39) elaborates Najd. Najd was “an abode of disorderly, uncouth, and irreligious nomads” (p. 7), and “Najdi society was divided between nomads and settled folk (*hadar*). The nomads belonged to several tribal groups organized by ties of kinship, both real and fictive” (p. 9). Ibn Abd al-Wahhab composed a small treatise entitled, *The Book of God’s Unity*, in Arabic language, to explain his mission to Muslims. The book “contains 67 brief chapters. The first six chapters define monotheism and idolatry in general terms; the following chapters comment on the meaning of Qur’anic verses and the implications of Hadiths to establish clear lines of permitted and forbidden beliefs, practices, and utterances” (p. 12). Among the forbidden practices

and beliefs are making a vow to any being and believing in intercessions by righteous and religious Muslim individuals. For Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, “making a vow to any being but God is a form of idolatry” (p. 15). He justified the destruction of shrines erected over the graves of dead holy Muslims to prevent a form of idolatry because Muslims commonly sought the intercessions from the dead holy Muslims.

With the support from Uthman bin Mu’ammār, the Amir of al-Uyayna in Najd, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab “resumed his mission of combating popular veneration of trees, stones, tombs, Shrines erected over the graves of Companions and holy men, and places where folk slaughtered animals to seek good fortune. Uthman supported a campaign to eliminate physical structures associated with intercessionary practices” (pp. 17-18). Ibn Abd al-Wahhab “personally destroyed a dome over the grave of a Companion, Zayd ibn al-Khattab, brother of the second Caliph, Umar”, and “he commanded the stoning of a woman who willingly confessed to adultery” (p. 18). The ruler of al-Hasa, Sulaymān ibn Uray’ar forced Uthman to expel Ibn Abd al-Wahhab from al-Uyayna. In 1744, he arrived in al-Dir’iyya that was under the rule of Al Saud. Muhammad ibn Saud became the Amir of al-Dir’iyya. The pact between Ibn Saud and Ibn Abd al-Wahhab was made to spread the political power and the religious mission. “Between 1744 and the Sheikh’s death in 1792, Ibn Saud and his descendents gradually expanded their realm to encompass all of Central Arabia. Saudi-Wahhabi conquest took place through a long series of raids that saw advances, retreats, and renewed advances” (p. 19).

The Wahhabi mission began to spread to Syria, Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco between 1780s and 1790s. “Wahhabi-Ottoman political hostility turned into a political confrontation after the Saudi conquest of Mecca and Medina in 1803 and 1805” (p. 32). Sulaymān ibn Abd Allah ibn Muhammad (1785-1818) was of the view that “the Ottoman-Saudi military confrontation was not merely a struggle between enemy political forces but a facet of struggle between belief and unbelief, between monotheism and idolatry, between those who love God and His messenger and those who hate

God and His messenger” (p. 36). Sulaiman supported Saudi-Wahhabi political and religious missions.

The second chapter, “Holding Fast Against Idolatry”, clearly indicates the Wahhabi mission to hold fast against idolatry and vigorously defend Islamic monotheism dictated by Ibn Abd al-Wahhab. “For fifty years, the teachings of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab had polarized Arabia’s Muslim scholars. The Saudi emirate had provided political backing and economic sustenance to Wahhabi religious scholars” (p.40). The Ottoman armies attacked and razed al-Dir’iyya, the base of the first Saudi emirate at the end of 1818. The Ottoman expedition to Najd was to crush Saudi political power and the Wahhabi mission. The Wahhabi sect was equated with the Kharijite sect in the early Muslim history. However, in 1823, the second Saudi emirate led by Turki ibn Abd Allah emerged with the Wahhabi supporters made Riyadh his capital. In May 1834, Turki was assassinated by his cousin named Mishari ibn Abd al-Rahman. Turki’s son, Faysal, came with his armies from Bahrain, seized Riyadh, captured Mishari, and had him killed (pp. 44-45). Faysal became the new leader of Saudi emirate. When Faysal died in 1865, his son, Abd Allah, took over the leadership and was challenged by his half-brother, Saud. Because of the internal strife within the Saudi emirate, between Abd Allah and Saud, in 1891, the Rashidi amirate defeated the second Saudi emirate.

The third chapter is about the history of Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud, the Wahhabis and Wahhabism. He led his supporters to take control of Riyadh from the Rashidi emirate in January 1902. “In the next thirty years, he undertook a military and diplomatic campaign to expand his domain to encompass the lands that today make up the kingdom of Saudi Arabia. His accomplishments laid the foundation for the establishment of Wahhabism as the official religion of a twentieth-century Arab nation” (p.71). The British assisted Abd al-Aziz with “arms and funds for his struggle against the pro-Ottoman Rashidis, who fell to Saudi arms in 1921”. After Saudi forces led by Abd al-Aziz were able to prevail over the Hashemite forces in 1924-1925, the Hashemite kingdom in Hijaz collapsed and Abd al-Aziz took control of Hijaz, including the cities of Mecca and Medina. “In 1932, Abd al-Aziz “proclaimed the establishment of the Kingdom of

Saudi Arabia” (p. 72). Abd Al-Aziz supported Wahhabi religious scholars or ulema and gave them control over the religious institutions. However, in many cases during his rule, Abd al-Aziz opposed the purist and fundamentalist Wahhabis, known as the Ikhwan, who accused or labeled other tribes as infidels and attacked them.

The fourth chapter is on Wahhabism in a modern state of Saudi Arabia. Saud ibn Abd al-Aziz succeeded his father in November 1953. He supported the Wahhabis and their Wahhabism. They imposed their religious and ethical teachings through “the Committees for Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong”. For example, in 1967, the committee banned women driving. Muhammad ibn Ibrahim ibn al-Latif (1893-1969), the powerful Wahhabi religious leader, was responsible for the establishment of the legal courts, the court procedures and judicial appointments, the university in Medina to train the proselytizers and its 75 percent of student population came from outside Saudi Arabia, the World Muslim League “to revive Islam and to support beleaguered Muslim minorities”, as well as “to dispatch Saudi-sponsored proselytizers to combat Sufism and religious innovations” (p. 112). In short, in the modern state of Saudi Arabia, “Wahhabism kept its doctrinal cohesion; at the same time, it adjusted to Al Saud’s state-building measures”. The Wahhabi religious scholars joined the government institutions, and they turned those institutions “into vehicles to entrench and even expand their sway” (p.129).

The fifth chapter is on the Wahhabi mission and Islamic revivalism. Two revivalist trends were attracted with Wahhabism. The first one was the revivalist trends in the Arab East covering Egypt, Syria, and Iraq. The second one was the revivalist trends in South Asia, especially India. The Wahhabis and the revivalists in the Arab East and in South Asia were enthusiasts for Ibn Taymiyyah. Their common interest in Ibn Taymiyyah did not make them united in their doctrines. The main difference between the Wahhabis and other Muslim revivalists is on idolatry and Islamic monotheism. The Wahhabis viewed other Muslims as infidels but other Muslim revivalists did not agree with the Wahhabis on this doctrine. The Whhabis and other Muslim revivalists agreed on the need “to purify

worship practices of innovations,” but they differed on what constituted the innovative worship practices. The Wahhabis and the Muslim revivalists also differed on the means or methods to purify the religious innovations among the Muslims. “True, most Muslims still viewed Wahhabi doctrine on monotheism as excessively rigid. True, the Wahhabis and their revivalist cousins differed in substantial ways” (pp. 153-154). However, the influence of Wahhabism outside Saudi Arabia has seen its augmentation in the twentieth century because both Wahhabism and Islamic revivalism have seen “the West as the force posing the greatest danger to Islam” (p. 154).

The sixth chapter delineates seven challenges to Wahhabi hegemony. First, the development programs in Saudi Arabia and the dynastic legitimacy. Second, the 1979 internal crises in Saudi Arabia with the down fall of Iranian monarchy. The millenarian group occupied Mecca’s Grand Mosque on November 20, 1979, and the group rejected the Saudi monarchy and condemned the Wahhabi ulema. Third, the rise of jihadist tendency in Islamic revivalism in Saudi Arabia. Fourth, the Wahhabi-revivalist schism, for example, the Islamic revivalists opposed western military intervention in the Middle East, but Saudi Arabia and the Wahhabis did not, and thousands of foreign non-Muslim troops were stationed in Saudi Arabia. Another example is “Hawali, Awda, and other sheikhs articulated widespread dissatisfaction with the Wahhabi leadership’s focus on ritual correctness at a time when Muslims suffered under foreign occupation and domination in Palestine, Iraq, Kashmir, and Chechnya” (p. 182). Fifth, Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda; as al-Qaeda called for the overthrow of Al Saud and for the holy war against the West. Sixth, the Wahhabi mission outside Saudi Arabia; the issue is on the purpose of the Wahhabi mission abroad either for tolerance and peace or for intolerance and violence. “Saudi-funded publications, schools, and mosques on all continents have been blamed, with god reason, for spreading religious intolerance” (p. 192). Seventh, the pressures on Wahhabism inside Saudi Arabia; by the Saudis who supported al-Qaeda, and the Saudis who supported the liberal Islamists demanding moderate interpretation of Islam and reforming basic institutions in Saudi Arabia.

Commins is of the view that predicting the future is not part of the historian's job. However, he states that "the Wahhabi mission's two-hundred-year reign as a hegemonic regional religious culture is in jeopardy" (p. 205). "Early in the twenty-first century, the religious field in Saudi Arabia appears to be in flux, its horizons hazy, and the destiny of the eighteenth-century call from Najd uncertain" (p. 209).

The book is a good source of theological and political histories of Wahhabism from its origin and foundation in the 18th century until the early years of the 21st century. The theological and political doctrines went hand in hand, since the founder of Wahhabism aimed at spreading Islamic theological doctrines different from those upheld by many Arab Muslim religious scholars and their followers in many locations such as in Mecca, Medina, Jeddah, and Taif. Therefore, the conflicts leading to wars took place between the Wahhabis and other Muslims on several occasions during the early years of Wahhabism. The political aspect of Wahhabism was its cooperation with the Arab politicians, whose aims were taking control of the inhabitants and ruling over them. The Arab politicians who cooperated with Wahhabism were the family members of Saud. Their political and theological cooperation brought success to the foundation and consolidation of the country named Saudi Arabia in 1953. Their political and theological cooperation has continued until the present day; although some changes have taken place in their attitudes and approaches towards some of Islamic theological and political doctrines due to the internal and external factors influencing and effecting modern Saudi Arabia.

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