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Madawi Al-Rasheed

Excerpt

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Introduction: debating religion and politics in the twenty-first century

This book is an ethnography of consent and contestation. It is about contemporary Saudis who debate politics and religion. Outsiders often refer to Saudis as Wahhabis or Salafis, but in the twenty-first century Saudis themselves no longer agree on the meaning of these terms and many do not accept their validity. Most Saudis believe that there is no separation between religion and politics at the level of public discourse. Yet the majority agree that in practice there is a separation between the professed religious rhetoric of the state, on the one hand, and the reality of political practice, on the other. Calls for the reformation of state and society always invoke religion and politics together in a single framework. This book focuses on what I call Wahhabi religio-political discourse, the sum total of interpretations that draw on religion to comprehend, justify, sanction or challenge politics. This discourse is rooted in the Wahhabi tradition and the intellectual heritage of its *ʿulama*. Wahhabi interpretations are the dominant intellectual reference point.

Some scholars claim that authoritarianism generates conceptual impotence. Others argue that authoritarian rule produces development outcomes that are either very good or very bad. In the Saudi case, authoritarianism has generated consenting subjects, incomplete projects, diverted journeys, betrayal and opportunism – but not intellectual impotence. Saudi authoritarianism has led to consent and confrontation at the same time. The regime, together with a mushrooming religious bureaucracy, created a world that insisted on complete submission to political authority while preaching total submission to God. Rather than being paralysed by impotence, the Saudis have produced a complex intellectual tapestry, woven by debating subjects, some of whom consent while others confront. Against the background of authoritarianism, vibrant diversity, pluralism and debate has arisen. There is also blind and indiscriminate violence. Violence is committed by a state that demands complete surrender to its will and by a minority that challenges this surrender. Both the state and its subjects are engaged in perpetual cycle of real and symbolic violence. The majority of ordinary Saudis are either

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spectators or active participants in volatile debates about religion, politics and society.

Wahhabiyya and Salafiyya

Wahhabiyya is a label imposed on people who would rather call themselves simply Muslims. In the past, so-called Wahhabis preferred to be known as *al-muwahhidun* or *ahl al-tawhid* (monotheists), but today this appellation is rather archaic. Many *al-muwahhidun* would probably prefer to be known as Salafiyyun. In this book, I will retain the name Wahhabiyya to refer to the Saudi variant of Salafiyya, thus applying the Arab saying that ‘a known error is better than an unknown correctness’ (*‘khata shai’ ahsan min sawab majhul*). My justification for retaining the name Wahhabiyya is based on the assumption that there is a body of religious knowledge that has common intellectual ancestry, without assuming that this factor gives the discourse rigid unity or coherence.

In this study, Wahhabiyya is considered a fragmented but hegemonic religious discourse. It is distinguished from other Sunni Muslim religious discourses by its own specific interpretations and interpreters. Wahhabiyya is simply a religious worldview that can promote both consent and contestation, depending on the context in which its teachings and texts are interpreted. This book tries to bridge the gap between text and context. Politically, Wahhabiyya can be both quietist and revolutionary, as will be shown here.

In its early eighteenth-century phase, Wahhabiyya¹ proved to be conducive to political centralisation, and did contribute to the formation of the first Saudi–Wahhabi emirate (1744–1818).² The historical alliance between sheikh Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and Muhammad ibn Saud led to the formation of the first Saudi state. This state expanded in Arabia under the pretext of purifying faith from innovation and applying Islamic law. Wahhabi enthusiasm and military expansion led to the Egyptian invasion of Arabia, under the patronage of the Ottoman sultan, early in the nineteenth century. While the political leadership, mainly the Al-Saud, were temporarily removed from the Arabian scene, the Wahhabi movement remained alive, although it avoided direct confrontation with the Ottoman empire after the Egyptian invasion. However, it seems that Wahhabis learned a serious lesson from the Egyptian annihilation of their power base in Deriyah in 1818: they learned to be pragmatic. Wahhabis survived afterwards because they supported political power, which meant moderating religious zeal. Since then, Wahhabi scholars have accepted a subservient position. They lived in the shadow of the sultan. While this history does not concern us here, it is important to remember its contours

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because it continues to affect the way religion and politics coexist in Saudi Arabia in the twenty-first century.

Salafiyya is a methodology that invokes the literal interpretation of religious texts, and the return to the early tradition of the pious companions of the Prophet. It must be said that there is no consensus among Sunni Muslims on who the pious ancestors (*al-salaf al-salih*) were, although the majority of scholars would probably identify them as including the first generation that accompanied the Prophet. Other Sunnis might stretch the *salaf* to include three generations after the Prophet. For some contemporary advocates, Salafiyya dates back to the works of medieval scholars who called for literal interpretations of religious texts. Some contemporary Islamists argue that Salafiyya is rooted in medieval theology, especially the early calls to return to the Quran and Sunna (tradition of the Prophet), associated with Ahmad ibn Hanbal (780–855), Ibn Taymiyya (1268–1328) and their followers.

As a descriptor, Salafiyya is a modern term, dating back to the late nineteenth-century Islamic reformist movements, especially the one associated with Azharite Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905) and the activist Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1839–97). The Saudi Wahhabi Salafiyya does not have much in common with this modernist Salafiyya. Muhammad Abduh preached a reformist–modernist Salafiyya while Wahhabiyya was a revivalist Salafi movement, concerned mainly with the purification of religious practice and the application of *shari‘a*. Modernist Salafiyya grew as a result of the encounter with the West and as the result of a quest for advancement. The Wahhabi Salafiyya emerged in central Arabia prior to this encounter, although Western powers were beginning to encircle Arabia in the eighteenth century. Its main objective was the purification of faith and worship. The eighteenth-century Wahhabi Salafi tradition had a more limited objective than that propagated by modernist Salafis. When contemporary Wahhabis invoke *al-salaf al-salih*, one is led to believe that Sheikh Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab could be counted among them, but not many Sunni Muslims would agree.

In the twenty-first century, those who call themselves Salafis are engaged in fierce debate among themselves to define who is a Salafi and who is not. As there is no agreement over the meaning of Salafiyya or who is a Salafi, I am inclined to consider it an elastic identity that is invoked to convey a meaning or several meanings. In the West today, Salafiyya represents extreme radicalism, intolerance, backwardness and violence. In Western media and even scholarly work, Salafis are portrayed as ‘fundamentalists’ and potential terrorists. Yet for others outside the West, Salafiyya represents authentic, unmediated Islam. For those people, Salafiyya means worshipping God according to the Quran and the

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tradition of the Prophet, transmitted by those who were his contemporaries, without the mediation of later generations.³ According to advocates of Salafiyya, the movement empowers the ordinary worshipper, who is no longer dependent on a wide circle of interpreters. A Salafi can be actively involved in interpretation himself, provided that he has a basic standard of knowledge and literacy. Modernity encouraged and perpetuated Salafiyya. Literacy and mass communication favour its survival in contemporary Muslim society. Salafiyya and modernity are inseparable.

Eighteenth-century Wahhabiyya was the main impetus behind political centralisation in Arabia. Without Wahhabiyya, there would have been no Al-Saud and no Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. However, in the twenty-first century, Wahhabiyya continues to support the power it created and defended. In its official version, Wahhabiyya is the discourse of power legitimisation. From its early eighteenth-century history, it developed religious interpretations to legitimise political power which led to deep grounding in authoritarianism, and even despotism, within Islam. Wahhabiyya sanctioned a regime that claims to rule according to Islam but in reality in the twenty first century retains only Islamic rhetoric and external trappings. The latter include public beheadings, excluding women from the public sphere, closing shops for prayers as well as other orchestrated and dramatised displays of religiosity. The exclusion and confinement of women have become a symbol for the piety of the Saudi state. Islam is consequently reduced to this dimension. In reality the regime operates according to personalised political gains rather than religious dogma or national interest.

Under state control Wahhabi interpreters – for example, *‘ulama*, intellectuals and activists – gradually developed into a class of *noblesse d’état*. Although Saudi *‘ulama* appear to enjoy more power, financial resources, prestige and privileges than their counterparts elsewhere in the Muslim world, it must be emphasised that the modern state has pushed them towards a ceremonial role. This does not rule out influence and control: unlike their counterparts in other Arab countries, Wahhabi scholars have considerable control over the social sphere. However, like other official religious scholars in the Arab world, Wahhabis lost control over policy and politics to royalty and state bureaucrats and technocrats – the political sphere is beyond Wahhabi control. In order to survive in a changing world, interpreters of Wahhabiyya accepted this reality, which had serious consequences. The Saudi state is not a Wahhabi state, as claimed by amateur observers. State policy is determined by a coterie of individuals who do not have Wahhabiyya as their reference paradigm, but who use it as a convenient device to cloak their personal political activities. Outside observers often do not distinguish between the ‘Wahhabised’ social sphere and Saudi politics.

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Like the political regime it supports and sanctions, Wahhabiyya is authoritarian. It does not tolerate difference in opinion, and fears any theological debate which may result in questioning either its own monopoly over religious interpretation or the legitimacy of the political power it supports. It abides by the maxim of *hajr al-mubtāʿi*, an old principle grounded in religious texts that calls for the ostracisation of innovators, defined as those who do not share Wahhabi teachings. Wahhabis ostracise the 'other', especially the Muslim other. They shun their adversaries for fear of contaminating or shaking their own beliefs. Yet Wahhabiyya is constantly engaged in vigorous preaching (*dʿawa*), both inside and outside Saudi Arabia. This, however, is different from debate with the other, who does not share Wahhabi interpretations. Official Wahhabiyya is religiously dogmatic, socially conservative and politically acquiescent.

Saudi Arabia may have a single dominant official religious discourse, commonly referred to as Salafi Wahhabiyya, but in the shadow of this discourse there are people who are engaged in challenging, redefining, destroying and reinterpreting it. Today in Saudi Arabia, as elsewhere in the world, there is no monopoly over religious knowledge, thanks to new communication technology, literacy and printing. A religious tradition such as the Wahhabiyya was based on the interpretation of a closed circle of scholars, who trace their intellectual genealogy to the interpretations of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. Today, Wahhabiyya itself is not produced and reproduced only by this closed circle; it is both asserted and challenged by people who are brought up on its teachings but who may belong to regions in Saudi Arabia outside that of its earlier advocates. *Ulama*, intellectuals and laymen are engaged in a fierce debate that not only touches upon religious matters but spills over to politics, history and society. Yet in the twenty-first century Wahhabiyya remains the main intellectual background against which both consent and confrontation are understood, assessed and measured.

Given the historical marginality of central Arabia where Wahhabiyya originated in the eighteenth century, the movement would most probably have shared the fate of other eighteenth- and nineteenth-century revivalist movements in the Muslim world:⁴ it would have gone down in historical imagination as a nuisance to the Ottoman Empire in one of its most far-flung, insignificant territories. However, the Saudi regime hoped that the combination of *daʿwa* (call) and *dawla* (state), together with a changing regional Arab power context would shift the centre from Egypt to Saudi Arabia in the second half of the twentieth century.⁵ This granted Wahhabiyya a hegemonic status unmatched by its early humble eighteenth-century intellectual credentials. The small size of the Saudi population and its limited development at the time militated against

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Saudi Arabia replacing Egypt but it became more influential. Since the 1970s, oil wealth has allowed this religious tradition greater visibility – not only in Saudi Arabia, but also abroad.

Wahhabiyya's historical alliance with an absolutist monarchical state under the leadership of the dynastic Al-Saud family, which became extremely rich as a result of oil revenues, allowed the movement greater visibility while at the same time bestowing legitimacy on the political leadership. Oil wealth brought to Saudi Arabia mass education, printing, communication technology, and easy travel and movement: all facilitated the consolidation of Wahhabiyya. Hence Najdi Wahhabiyya became prematurely transnationalised under the patronage of the Saudi regime. The religious treatises and epistles of its founding fathers and its latter advocates travelled to all continents. Oil wealth allowed the Saudi regime to be recognised as a major international player, but Wahhabiyya granted it Islamic legitimacy among Muslims, not only in Saudi Arabia, but also worldwide. This legitimacy derived from the claim that the Saudi state is a monotheist state that upholds *shari'a* and Islamic values, in addition to being the protector of the most sacred Islamic shrines, although it only assumed that role in the late 1920s.

Wahhabi discourse generated consent among people who were not naturally predisposed to submit to the political authority that carried its banner. Wahhabiyya not only facilitated conquest but ensured consent after battle. From the very beginning, the Saudi–Wahhabi project was centred on accusing the people of Arabia of being polytheists whose religion needed to be purified and corrected. This required them to submit to the political will of the Al-Saud. Rebelling against the Saudis was no longer a political act but a sin, a violation of the principles of monotheism. Therefore, obeying rulers became a religious duty, part and parcel of worshipping God. This consenting Wahhabi religio-political discourse is today contested from within.

It is ironic that the forces that consolidated the consenting Wahhabi religio-political discourse are also responsible for its contestation. Under state control, Wahhabi discourse mutated and fragmented in an attempt to escape the straitjacket imposed by political power. Furthermore, communication technology, mass education and printing, while allowing the consolidation of this discourse, also led to confrontation with Wahhabiyya. The oil wealth that consolidated Wahhabiyya generated challenging voices. Schisms within Wahhabiyya characterise its religio-political discourse at the turn of the twenty-first century. While the world fears Wahhabiyya, Wahhabiyya itself fears the schisms within its own rank and file. While the Western world condemns Wahhabiyya, Wahhabiyya itself condemns its own people, especially when those people challenge it from within.

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Wahhabiyya in the eyes of others

As a religious movement that was tied up with a political project, Wahhabiyya was always a contested tradition within the Sunni world of Islam. *‘Ulama* in the immediate vicinity of the centre of Wahhabiyya,⁶ together with those in Mecca and Madina,⁷ devoted considerable energy to refuting its claims and interpretations. Some local Najdi *‘ulama* referred to it as ‘the fifth *madhhab*’, which Sunni *‘ulama* in Istanbul, Mecca, Cairo, Damascus and Baghdad⁸ denounced in long treatises that circulated across the Ottoman Empire.⁹ Wahhabiyya regarded Islam in these lands as corrupted, and even as closer to polytheism than to monotheism. It was only natural for those Muslims to defend their religious practices and tradition.

Non-Sunni Muslims – for example, Shi‘is, Ismailis, Zaydis and others – immediately felt the greater danger of Wahhabi teaching, which denounced their traditions as contemporary forms of innovation, and even blasphemy.¹⁰ Non-Sunni *‘ulama* rejected what they regarded as bigoted and uncompromising radicalism associated with the call of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. Intellectual battles between Wahhabi advocates and their critics have continued throughout the last 250 years. While on the surface these conflicts were grounded in religion, they nevertheless reflected political concerns. To understand the various responses to Wahhabiyya, one must situate the polemic in the context of competition and rivalry between various power centres and regional groups in the pre-modern world of Islam – mainly Cairo, Damascus, Baghdad and Arabia. The debates between Wahhabis and other Muslims continue until the present day.

For many decades, Western academic wisdom on Wahhabiyya accepted the old Philby–Rentz¹¹ thesis, which regarded the movement as an authentic revivalist Unitarian Muslim tradition. It was agreed that Wahhabiyya can be rather excessive and rigorous but in no way constitutes a threat to the West, as long as its advocates remained under the control of the Al-Saud. Wahhabiyya even proved to be capable of rendering great services to the Western project of defeating communism in the context of the Cold War and the liberation of Afghanistan. For decades, Western governments whose nationals worked and benefited from Saudi oil had faith in the ability of the Al-Saud to keep the so-called Wahhabis under control by ensuring minimal contact between the expatriate Western minority and Saudi society. For this purpose, the regime confined the Western expatriate elite to luxurious residential compounds while Saudis built high walls around their abodes to ‘protect’ themselves against the influx of ‘infidels’. They also clung to a mixture of religious

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and social tradition that favoured not only exclusion of the other but also its demonisation. This was neither a sign of an inherent xenophobia nor a national characteristic. It was a defensive reaction to the sudden inundation of ‘aliens’ with whom there were no common cultural or linguistic grounds. This was clearly reflected in the residential segregation that most Saudi cities experienced since the 1970s.

In the twentieth century, the expatriate Western residential compounds in major Saudi cities constituted a porous boundary, a physical and moral ghetto that a small minority of Saudi locals admired as a refuge from their own restrictive traditions. Such Saudis considered these compounds an escape from rigid morality, excessive prohibitions and surveillance. Other Saudis condemned this segregated physical space, the ghetto that came to symbolise foreign domination, moral bankruptcy, debauchery, corruption and sin. Most, however, tried to ignore the existence of what they regarded a necessary physical evil in the midst of a vast land of piety. Western residential compounds became oases in a Muslim conservative desert. As such they were and still are contested and dangerous ‘liminal’ spaces. Recently a very small minority endeavoured to eliminate these compounds physically, depicting them as colonial settlements (*mustawtanat*). It is not without significance that the residential expatriate compound was the prime target during the wave of violence that swept Saudi Arabia in 2003.

Common Western wisdom regarded Wahhabis as enigmatic puritans who were best left to their own devices. In the past many Western scholars celebrated the stabilising effect of Wahhabiyya at the level of politics but resented its excessive social conservatism. They would have preferred a socially lax Wahhabiyya that allowed them greater access to Saudi society or more freedoms in this society but guaranteed the stability of the political regime that is seen by many as a ‘friend’. But social conservatism and political acquiescence are inseparable in a context such as Saudi Arabia. Nothing annoyed Westerners in Saudi Arabia more than the social aspects of Wahhabiyya – for example, its uncompromising views on sex segregation, the ban on alcohol and women driving, public beheadings and other ‘idiosyncrasies’, which they did not encounter elsewhere in the Muslim world. For years the West was happy to live with this social conservatism. Westerners recognised that there is often a little price to be paid for untaxed income, lavish financial contracts, weapon purchases, commissions, investment and an ongoing flow of oil at reasonable prices. For the Western world, Saudi Arabia has a double significance, as it remains both a prime producer of important energy and an avid consumer of Western goods.

After the events of 11 September 2001, Wahhabiyya and terrorism became connected in the minds of many Westerners. The attack on New

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York and the Pentagon, in which fifteen of the nineteen hijackers were Saudis, changed many things, one of which was Western perceptions of Wahhabiyya. Its Western critics suddenly became louder. The movement and its supporters were accused of generating terrorism, intolerance and hatred towards the West. Wahhabi discourse was suddenly held responsible for delaying the emancipation of Saudi women, abuse of human rights and discrimination against religious Muslim minorities – for example, Saudi Shi'is, Ismailis and Sufis, long-forgotten groups whose plight nobody had until then bothered to highlight in the West. Moreover, the movement was accused of providing the religious justification for denouncing Jews and Christians and promoting a culture of confrontation with the West in general. Suddenly Wahhabiyya moved from being the 'puritanical' Unitarian movement that had created a glorious empire, according to ARAMCO American historian George Rentz, to being the discourse of hatred, intolerance and terrorism.

The events of 11 September brought about new dimensions in the controversy surrounding Wahhabiyya. The West, through its academic community, media specialists and think-tank consultants, became an active agent in the debate about Wahhabiyya. While not all this debate is based on scholarly assessment aimed at understanding contemporary Saudi–Wahhabi religious discourse,¹² serious effort was put into identifying the origins of terrorism, with the result that the Wahhabis were directly accused of promoting religiously motivated and sanctioned violence.¹³ Despite official Saudi attempts to dissociate their state religion from the atrocities of 11 September, such accusations against Wahhabiyya continued to flourish. These were given substance and credibility by Saudi political activists, both inside the country and abroad, some of whom had a vested interest in demonising Wahhabiyya.¹⁴ The war on Iraq in 2003 contributed to the further demonisation of Wahhabiyya, especially after it transpired that Saudis were active participants in the *jihād* against Americans as part of the Iraqi resistance. Almost all observers assumed that those Saudis were acting in the name of Wahhabiyya, after being indoctrinated in its teachings in Saudi schools. In those commentators' minds, by the age of eighteen Saudi men are fully prepared to launch *jihād* against 'infidels'. Saudi males suddenly became suspect potential terrorists; there were calls for their eyes to be screened and kept on record, along with their fingerprints. If not Wahhabis, they are assumed to be Salafi fanatics. In the minds of many outsiders, Wahhabiyya and Salafiyya are synonymous, both standing for fanaticism and violence.

In response to the events of 11 September, the Saudi regime quickly encouraged academic studies in English, in addition to religious publications,¹⁵ to restore its own image and that of the Wahhabiyya in the

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Western English-speaking world.¹⁶ Conferences sponsored by Saudi embassies were held in Washington, London and Paris to improve the standing of Saudi Arabia and the Wahhabi tradition. The country opened the once almost impenetrable borders for Western researchers, graduate students, journalists and other visitors to scrutinise local society. Books in English appeared, presenting Wahhabiyya as a peaceful tradition that encourages dialogue with the other and respects women's rights and minorities. For example, a defense of Wahhabiyya, under the patronage of Saudi princes and research centres was written by Natana DeLong-Bas. In this book, the author contests negative images of Wahhabiyya and absolves it from any responsibility for twenty-first-century terrorism.¹⁷ The Saudi regime insisted that it was a victim rather than an incubator of terrorism. Sponsored publications absolved Wahhabiyya from any responsibility for the atrocities of 11 September. These propaganda publications lay the blame on modern imported Islamist movements and ideologies such as the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and militant Jihadi movements.¹⁸ While evaluating Western accusations is beyond the scope of this study, it is important to emphasise that, despite Saudi efforts, Wahhabiyya became in Western popular imagination a model of the uncompromising and radical religious interpretation that inspires violence. Many Muslims, including Saudis, share this view.

These negative accounts ignore a long history of Western–Saudi harmony. Scholars in the West overlook the fact that the Al-Saud were more than happy to seek military and financial help from so-called infidels as early as 1915, and even to pursue a policy that was subservient to imperial powers. Saudi–British relations prove that the Saudi leadership was capable of making compromises, or even turning a blind eye to intimate relations with a foreign power, defined in Wahhabi world view as a *kafir* state. Most Western accounts of official Wahhabiyya do not make distinctions between the movement's religious intolerance of other Muslims, on the one hand, and its acceptance of Western influence in Saudi Arabia, on the other. They fail to highlight that political acquiescence and subservience to political authority is an important characteristic of the domesticated tradition that grew in the shadow of Saudi kings.¹⁹ When Ibn Saud clashed with the Ikhwan fighters in the 1920s, it was assumed that this resulted from their objections to his relations with 'infidel' Britain. In fact the conflict with the Ikhwan was more to do with the marginalisation of the tribal population and the failure of its leadership to secure a place in the new Saudi polity, after its military contribution to the Al-Saud project. The Ikhwan rebellion was not simply a rebellion against Ibn Saud's subservience to Britain. It was a last cry against Ibn Saud's Machiavillian policy that required eliminating those who brought him to power.