
THE WAHHABIS AND THE MUSLIM BROTHERS: FROM ALLIANCE TO ALIENATION. REGIONAL AND GLOBAL IMPLICATIONS*

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For decades, the Wahhabis and the Muslim Brothers were allies both in ideology and in political practices. They were united by their attitude to Western culture as to corruption and debauchery, a negative perception of the Western system of values, and the desire to mold society based on the models of the Koran, Sunnah, and Sharia. Their common enemies were secular nationalist regimes and communism. The points of disagreement – the condemnation by the Brothers of the hereditary monarchies, then the direct call to overthrow the pro-Western rulers – were simply glossed over. For Saudi Arabia's Salafi Wahhabis, loyalty to the Saudi monarchy was an axiom. The peak of cooperation was achieved when both Brothers and Wahhabis participated in the jihad in Afghanistan against the Soviet troops and the pro-communist government. In joint camps, future extremist jihadists were brought up. The watershed was the war against Saddam Hussein's Iraqi troops, which occupied Kuwait. The deployment of a huge American army, as well as its European allies, in the territory of Saudi Arabia, where two main Muslim shrines are located, was considered sacrilege by the Muslim Brothers, as was the invitation of infidel troops to war against a Muslim state, albeit with a dictatorial secular regime. However, the leadership of the Saudi ulama issued a fatwa approving the actions of the rulers of the Kingdom. Over the years, the disagreements were voiced louder and louder, and the culmination was the rupture between the Wahhabis and the Brothers, which had substantial regional and global implications.

Keywords: *the Muslim Brothers, the Wahhabis, Western culture, Saudi Arabia, the Saudi ulama.*

The global relationship between Islam and the Western World produces a framework, within which various Islamist movements form alliances or, conversely, enter into confrontations (Grinin and Korotayev 2019). Throughout the twentieth century, the Salafi Wahhabis and the Muslim Brothers were allies in their common struggle against Western ideas and atheistic communism as well as in their anti-Western nationalism. Their rupture came about later.

To trace the evolution of these two Islamist movements, we will look back at their formative years.

In the nineteenth century, the Islamic religious thought, which served the interests of the Ottoman Empire for centuries, found itself in a deep crisis since it could not convincingly counter Western ideology and Western value systems. Already in the nineteenth century, the challenge by the aggressive and dominant West forced Muslim societies to respond to it with two versions of theory and practice. The first option, it seemed, was to try to become like Europe and adapt European forms of social and political order, military affairs, law, morality, culture and education. This path was followed by the Ottoman Empire and its successor – Turkey, – starting from the nineteenth century reforms by Bayraktar Mustafa Pasha and all the way to Kemal Atatürk, who tried to ‘throw off the burden of the Islamic past’ and ‘westernize’ the country (Hristov 2019).

The second path was taken by the Islamic reformers (‘revivalists’) of the late nineteenth – early twentieth centuries, such as Jamal-al-Din Afghani, Muhammad Abduh and his follower Rashid Rida. They set the tasks of reviving the greatness of Islam in imitation of the era of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions, freeing themselves from the domination of the West, and returning to the principles of ‘pure Islam’ based on the Koran, Sunnah and, accordingly, Sharia, but wanted to accompany this with the adoption of the West’s achievements in the fields of science, politics and military affairs.¹

In 1928, the Egyptian schoolteacher Hassan al-Banna founded the Society of the Muslim Brothers (popularly known as the Muslim Brotherhood), which was based on the Arab revivalist movement and which became widely spread internationally. The Brotherhood developed into a structured organization with its own hierarchy, discipline, charitable activities and even a paramilitary unit. In twenty years, this organization became a bulwark of resistance to the Western cultural influence, but not only that. Al-Banna defined Islam as the all-encompassing law of human life and society, rather than just rituals and rules of individual behavior (Commins 2006: 140; Vasiliev 2008: 304–306). In his sermons, Islam became an ideology, also a political one, which set the Muslim Brotherhood on the collision course with Egypt’s corrupt pro-Western royal regime. Hasan al-Banna was assassinated in 1949.

After the brief period of collaboration with the nationalist regime of Gamal Abdel Nasser, who had overthrown the king, the Brotherhood was banned. Many Brothers ended up in concentration camps. Among them was Sayyid Qutb, the ideologist and the new leader of the Brothers, who was executed in 1966.

However, in parallel with the development of ‘pro-Western’ and ‘anti-Western’ (nationalist) tendencies in the Arab world, traditional Hanbali Islam, known as ‘Wahhabism’ and later ‘Salafism’, gained great acceptance on the Arabian Peninsula. Its founder, the Islamic scholar Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, formulated his doctrine back in the eighteenth century on the basis of the school of the Iraqi scholar Ahmad ibn Hanbal (the eighth century) and Sheikh ul-Islam Ibn Taymiyyah (the thirteenth–fourteenth centuries). According to al-Wahhab, the mere statement that, ‘There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his messenger’ does not yet make a person a Muslim. He must reject any object of worship, any hint of idolatry, accurately observe all rituals of Islam. If someone commits idolatry, then the use of force against him is thereby sanctified and permitted (Ibn Abd al-Wahhab AH1375b [‘The Book of Monotheism’]: 134; Ibn Abd

al-Wahhab n.d. [‘The Three Principles and Their Evidence’]: 8; Ibn Abd al-Wahhab AH1375a [‘Foundations of Faith’]: 167–170).

The Muslim world fell into the sin of polytheism (*shirk*), began to indulge in sinful innovations (*bida*) in the form of ‘idolatry’ – the worship of saints, graves of ancestors, sacred trees – as well as in Sufi apostasy and moral debauchery (Ibn Abd al-Wahhab 1375a [‘The Book of Great Sins’]: 206). (Naturally, the Shiites were attributed to the ‘polytheists’). His doctrine, which corresponded to the socio-political situation in Arabia, primarily in Nejd, found the support of the founder of the first Saudi state, Emir Muhammad ibn Saud. The Saudi state challenged the Ottoman Empire, was defeated by the army of the Egyptian Pasha, was restored in Nejd, but then disintegrated due to rivalry within the Saudi family. It reemerged again under the leadership of Abdul-Aziz bin Muhammad Al Saud at the beginning of the twentieth century and controlled most of Arabia. In 1932, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was established. The Wahhabis again formed the ideological foundation of this state.

The xenophobic, anti-Western attitude of the Wahhabis was in line with the ideas of Islamic revivalists both in the Arab world and in British India. Already in the nineteenth century, the revivalists from Ahl al-Hadith in British India established contacts with the Wahhabis. In the twentieth century, Abul A'la Maududi, a prominent Indian and Pakistani theologian who was close to the Muslim Brothers, published widely in Saudi Arabia. Maududi believed that Islam is a set of principles rooted in eternal divine truth, and this is contrary to democracy, capitalism, socialism, which he considered Western ideologies and, thus, modern manifestations of godlessness. He advocated a purely Islamic state based on Sharia (Commins 2006: 146–147).

However, the Islamist movements of South Asia remain generally outside the scope of the present article.

In the Ottoman times, the Arab revivalists and the Wahhabis were united in their respect for Ibn Taymiyyah, whose writings they quoted abundantly. This did not mean that their doctrinal positions coincided. The Wahhabis considered all Muslims who disagreed with them to be heathens. The Islamic reformers in the Ottoman Empire were more flexible about this issue. However, the opinions of the two schools of thought coincided with regard to the legitimacy of *ijtihad* (i.e., of independent reasoning by an authoritative ulama in interpreting and commenting on theological and legal questions). This made them opponents of the official religious establishment of the Ottoman Empire, which rejected *ijtihad*. Both the Wahhabis and the reformers considered it necessary to cleanse worship of ‘innovations’, especially Sufi ones. But their attitude to the ideology and practice of the Sufis differed (Mitchell 1969: 213–216).

Al-Banna shared with the Wahhabis a distrust of Western values and the belief that Islam is both a true religion and a set of rules for behavior in the modern world. Both the Muslim Brotherhood and the Wahhabis rejected the Western way of life, which corrupted and undermined Muslim traditions. Although the Wahhabis only later confronted the West, they shared the opinion of the Muslim Brothers about Western culture, which was associated with godlessness, immorality and extreme individualism.

Given the overwhelming supremacy of Western powers in the military, economic, political, cultural and moral spheres, the supporters of revivalism considered Islam as the logical basis for resisting the West (Grinin *et al.* 2019).

The Wahhabis were positively assessed by Rashid Rida, a Syrian student of Muhammad Abduh, in his journal *Al-Manar (Lighthouse)*. In the 1920s, Rashid Rida popularized the Wahhabis and Ibn Saud, who created an independent state at a time when the Middle East was divided into French and British spheres of influence after the First World War (Rida 1925).

The difference was that Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab operated in a feudal-tribal society where there was no Western influence, while the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood were a reaction to explicit European dominance and cultural invasion. In some doctrinaire trifles, the Muslim Brothers also differed from the Wahhabis. In particular, al-Banna rejected the practice of the Sufis, but only to the extent that it contradicted the Koran and Sunnah. He did not oppose individual and group *zika*. Yet it was the *zika* that the Wahhabis considered the 'illegal innovation' of the Sufis (Mitchell 1969: 217). Al-Banna also did not share the point of view of the Wahhabis, who believed that most Muslims were idolaters.

In many ways, the two doctrines shared the ideas about the need to resist Western values. A dangerous difference was that the Wahhabis always supported the Saudi monarchy and lived off its largesse, while al-Banna generally denied the legitimacy of the hereditary monarchy in Islam. It simply cannot be envisaged that this point of view could have been popular among the Saudi ulama.

Sayyid Qutb was categorical in his assessment of modern Islamic society as *jahiliyyah* (pre-Islamic paganism and barbarism). He called for a fight not only with the West in all its forms, but also with modern Islamic rulers, considering them all (from nationalists to monarchs) to be corrupt servants of the United States or the West in general. He practically abandoned the logic of Ibn Taymiyyah, who had forbidden rebellion against any ruler, even a sinner, unless he had forced his subjects to violate the Sharia law. Qutb called for the revolutionary overthrow of the rulers of *jahiliyyah* in order to establish society according to ideal Islamic canons, as in the days of the Prophet Muhammad. In this he differed from Maududi, who advocated a gradual transformation of society. According to Qutb, when a heathen ruler stands at the head of the state under the conditions of *jahiliyyah*, he deserves death (Mouline 2014: 242–243). Naturally, such a formulation of the problem did not suit the Wahhabi ulama. Qutb's works in Saudi Arabia were hushed up and only occasionally published in limited editions.

It should also be borne in mind that the Muslim Brothers were different in different countries and within the organization. Among them there were supporters of various ideas and methods of struggle. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood embarked on the path of terrorism against the nationalist regime of Hafez Assad, who carried out a brutal crackdown on this organization. The majority of Egyptian Muslim Brothers showed a willingness to 'play by the rules' to some extent and took part in the parliamentary elections, strengthening their positions within the country. The Egyptian government did not prevent the Brothers from participating in the war of the Afghan opposition against

the Marxist regime. For the time being, all differences between the Wahhabis and the Brothers were put aside.

In the Middle East at that time, nationalist ideas dominated, which led to coups and the overthrow of monarchies in Egypt, Iraq, Yemen and Libya. Nationalism was one of the forms of anti-colonial ideology and simultaneously aimed at reducing the role of religion in society.

In his confrontation with Nasser's Egypt and communist ideas, Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, a Saudi crown prince and then king, a political ally of the United States, focused on Islamic values, establishing the Muslim World League and Islamic University in Medina, where three-quarters of the students were foreigners. The propaganda of Islam in its Wahhabi (Salafist) version was fueled by growing oil revenues.

During the years of persecution of the Brothers in Egypt, Syria and Iraq, Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf states opened their doors to them. The rapid development of education, including religious one, demanded teachers, who were in great deficit. Immigrant Brothers occupied a strong position in the education system, and their numbers and salaries grew along with oil revenues. True, the leading positions in the 'corporation' of the Wahhabi ulama were not accessible to them. However, under their influence, there appeared local religious scholars, mainly from among young people, who preached reformist views colored by certain 'liberalism' – the Sahwa Movement (Awakening).²

In the 1970s, there appeared serious cracks in the ideology and practice of Wahhabism itself.

On the first day of 1400 AH (20 November 1979), a large group of Wahhabi fanatics captured the Great Mosque that surrounds the Kaaba in Mecca. Confusion reigned in Western capitals and in Riyadh. After the revolution in Iran, the second pillar of Western influence in the Persian Gulf basin seemed to be under threat. However, King Khalid received the support of the Council of Senior Scholars for military action in the Great Mosque and suppression of the rebellion. Pakistani Special Forces and a unit of the French Foreign Legion were invited to assist. By December 5, security forces regained control of the shrine and quelled the uprising. The rebel leader Juhayman al-Otaybi and dozens of his associates were captured and executed.

The views of the rebels were a jumble of beliefs of the Wahhabis dating back to the nineteenth century, calls for jihad, and the ideas of Mahdism, which are rare for Sunni Islam. In his speech through loudspeakers, al-Otaybi called for the elimination of Western cultural influence, severing ties with the Western exploiters of Muslims, expelling foreigners from the country, overthrowing the illegitimate Saudi dynasty, because it did not prevent the West from plundering the country. He accused the ulama of hypocrisy because they did not protest against the policies of the ruling dynasty and betrayed Islam. It was necessary to establish a 'genuine Islamic regime' that would make the members of the Saudi family accountable for the wealth they had plundered. The country had to stop exporting oil to the United States until the latter abandoned its hostility to Islam. In response to the writings of Maududi and Qutb, Juhayman al-Otaybi argued that there were no genuine Islamic governments at the time and that the Muslim world

lived under the yoke of regimes that served the West (Holden and Richard 1982: 514–518; Mouline 2014: 242–243).

Much of the ideology of Juhayman al-Otaybi testifies to nostalgia for his ancestors, who participated in the Ikhwan revolt (1927–1929) against Ibn Saud, and sympathy for the position of the Muslim Brothers.

The uprising did not receive a wide response in the country. After its defeat, the Saudi regime began to tighten formal religious requirements and put pressure on glimmers of religious dissent and ‘liberalism’. Cinemas were closed and new restrictions on women's work and behavior in society were introduced. The religious police (The Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice) received broader powers.

For the United States and its allies, the attacks against the Western system of values during the Cold War against the USSR were not particularly dangerous. They supported Islamists of all colors and shades in their anti-communist and anti-Soviet views, and viewed the jihadists as the US allies.

The period of the highest cooperation of the Wahhabis, Muslim Brothers and Islamists from South Asia was the war in Afghanistan against the USSR and its client Marxist regime. The armed opposition received the support of the US, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan in terms of weapons and finance. The cadres of jihadists were replenished from all countries of the Muslim world. The withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan in 1988 opened up opportunities for the victory of the armed opposition, and then a new round of the civil war. The jihadists who had fought in Afghanistan dispersed to other countries and became the base of extremist movements.

The rupture between the Wahhabis and the Muslim Brothers occurred during the war waged by the US-led coalition (1990–1991) against Iraq, which had occupied Kuwait.

The dissatisfaction with the Saudi leadership, which allowed the army of ‘infidels’ to accommodate themselves in the territory where the main Muslim shrines were located, prompted accusations against the royal family, which ‘conspired’ with the United States in the name of Western rather than Muslim interests. A wave of protests by the Brothers and their supporters swept Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan and Saudi Arabia itself. The Muslim Brotherhood moved to the ‘pro-Iraqi’ camp, that is practically supported the secular Baathist regime against the Wahhabi monarchy. The Muslim world was convinced that the war was a cunning American conspiracy to manipulate the Kuwaiti crisis, control oil supplies from the Gulf, advance Israeli interests, and enhance Washington's regional hegemony. The Saudi dynasty, as well as their loyal supporters – the ‘corporation’ of the Wahhabi ulama who supported this decision – were accused of ‘betraying Islam’.

Religious ‘liberals’ from the Sahwa Movement were also among the opposition activists. They came up with ‘advice’ to the king to reform the country and work out a constitutional order to ensure national unity, justice and equality. In their statements, they stressed that the basis of their reasoning was the Koran and the Sharia law. They called for the separation of powers into the executive, legal and legislative branches, as well as the holding of elections at the national and municipal levels. The movement was easily suppressed.

While discontent was expressed in the form of individual sermons, petitions and theological disputes, it did not threaten the stability of either the Saudi regime or the Wahhabi theologians. The threat came from another side.

When the common enemy in the face of the USSR, communism and nationalism disappeared, jihadists, turning to Qutb's ideas, turned their weapons against the United States and the Saudi regime. Their leader was Osama bin Laden, a Saudi businessman, who had been among those organizing the transportation of jihadists to Afghanistan.

In 1995, a truck loaded with explosives was blown up near an American mission training Saudi Arabian National Guard employees. Among those killed were five Americans and two Indians. The government received a fax demand from the jihadists to withdraw the US troops from Saudi Arabia. Four terrorists were arrested and executed. Three of them were the Afghan war veterans.

New acts of terror followed in Saudi Arabia, Arab countries and the West, including the United States.

This meant that another war began, inspired by other appeals. We have already shown that this war has had very important regional and global implications (Vasiliev *et al.* 2019). The development of this conflict after 1995 will be studied in our next article.

NOTES

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¹ Islamic Modernism and Islamic Revival. In *Atlas of the World's Religions*. URL: <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t253/e9>.

² What is Sahwa, the Awakening movement under pressure in Saudi? *Al Jazeera*. URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/sahwa-awakening-movement-pressure-saudi-190603100555782.html>.

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