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Wahhabism: From a Religious Reform Movement to a Political Ideology in Saudi Arabia

*An Historical, Intellectual, and Political Analysis of
the Interplay Between Faith and Power*

Preface

Throughout the history of Islam, movements have occasionally emerged claiming a return to *authentic* “religious purity” under the banner of eliminating superstitions. Among these movements, Wahhabism holds a unique position, as it evolved from a localized religious initiative in Najd, Arabia, into one of the most influential and dominant political-religious ideologies across many parts of the Islamic world. On the surface, the stated goal of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab—the founder of this movement—was to reform the faith of Muslims, revise religious practices, and restore the principle of pure monotheism (*Tawhid*). However, what constituted “pure Tawhid” within the boundaries of Islamic jurisprudence, the Qur’an, and authenticated prophetic traditions (Hadith) was never clearly and consistently defined. In practice, the movement, initiated and later supported by the Al Saud family, became a means of political legitimacy and a vehicle for the expansion of their religious influence and political power.

In recent centuries, Wahhabism has demonstrated that it is not merely a theological orientation but an ideological system deeply intertwined with politics, economics, and global power relations. The historical alliance between Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and Muhammad ibn Saud in the eighteenth century established a new model of religion–state partnership, which continues to define the foundational power structure of Saudi Arabia today.

From the 1970s onward, this ideology—backed by vast oil revenues and strategic support from Western powers—expanded far beyond the Arabian Peninsula. It spread through charitable networks, religious schools, and institutions promoting Wahhabi doctrine across the broader Islamic world. This expansion paved the way for the emergence of movements such as neo-Salafism, al-Qaeda, and ISIS, each interpreting and weaponizing Wahhabi principles in increasingly radical directions. These groups contributed to portraying Islam as inherently aggressive and violent, creating an atmosphere of fear and distortion inconsistent with the Qur’anic message of ethical moderation and compassion.

In this context, the role of global powers, particularly the United States, becomes significant and undeniable. As Donald Trump once stated: “The King of Saudi Arabia would not last two weeks without U.S. support.” This statement reflects the contemporary reality of power dynamics in which a religious ideology that claims independence and spiritual purity is, in effect, entangled with the survival of a monarchy and the geopolitical interests of the West.

This paper, through an analytical and comparative approach, examines the historical trajectory of Wahhabism from an initially reformist religious movement to a dominant political ideology. The first section explores its intellectual and historical foundations; the second analyses its political structure and alliance with the Al Saud family; and the final section discusses diverse scholarly assessments of this phenomenon. The main objective is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between faith and power within the framework of Wahhabism—a relationship that has profoundly shaped the contemporary Islamic world.

The Origins and Intellectual Foundations of Wahhabism

The intellectual roots of Wahhabism must be understood within the religious, social, and political context of the eighteenth-century Arabian Peninsula, a period during which much of the Islamic world was experiencing intellectual stagnation, diminishing scientific inquiry, and the gradual weakening of central political authority. The decline of the Ottoman Caliphate and the increasing prevalence of

local religious innovations (*bid'ah*), superstitions, and popular devotional practices created a fertile environment for movements that claimed to restore the purity of “early Islam.”

It was in this context that Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1792 CE) emerged. Based initially in 'Uyaynah and later in Dir'iyah, he drew significant influence from the teachings of Ibn Taymiyyah (1263–1328 CE), a medieval Hanbali scholar known for his criticisms of popular Sufi practices, intercession through saints, and the veneration of graves. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab adopted and amplified these positions, promoting what he described as “*pure monotheism*” (*Tawhīd*) and advocating a form of *jihad* against practices he considered polytheistic.

While his stated objective was the elimination of superstition and non-scriptural ritual practices—such as grave visitation, saintly intercession, and offerings at shrines—his methodology extended beyond theological critique. In practice, his movement developed a distinctly exclusivist outlook: those who did not accept his interpretation of Islam could be labelled as *apostates* (*kuffār*), thereby legitimizing armed struggle against other Muslim communities. This marked a major departure from the diversity of interpretive traditions within Islamic jurisprudence.

Core Intellectual Principles

The Wahhabi doctrine rests on three fundamental principles:

1. A strict and absolute interpretation of monotheism, rejecting all forms of mediation between the individual and God.
2. Direct reliance on the Qur'an and Hadith while minimizing or rejecting interpretive tradition, communal consensus (*ijma*), and the layered reasoning developed by classical jurists — even though scriptural texts are inherently open to multiple semantic and contextual interpretations.
3. Rejection of philosophical reasoning, mysticism, and speculative theology, privileging textual literalism over intellectual inquiry and experiential spirituality.

Consequently, many Muslim scholars, particularly those in the Sufi and traditional Sunni legal schools, criticized Wahhabism as a revival of a rigid and reductionist approach to early Islamic belief. Unlike other reformist movements in Egypt, India, and Iran, which sought to harmonize faith and reason, Wahhabism emphasized the subordination of reason to the literal text, resulting in a doctrinally rigid religious worldview.

The Political Alliance and Expansion of Wahhabism

A decisive turning point came in 1744 CE, when Ibn Abd al-Wahhab formed an alliance with Muhammad ibn Saud, the ruler of Dariya. This partnership united religious authority with political and military power: Ibn Abd al-Wahhab provided theological legitimacy, while the Saud family offered protection and territorial expansion. This alliance laid the foundation for a religion–state coalition that continues to define the governance of Saudi Arabia today.

As Wahhabi doctrine spread, cities and regions brought under Saudi rule underwent extensive religious restructuring. Shrines were demolished, local devotional customs were prohibited, and Wahhabi doctrine became the basis of public religious life. These developments accelerated following the conquest of Mecca in 1803, fundamentally reshaping the cultural and religious landscape of the Arabian Peninsula, and challenging established Sunni traditions, including those of the Hanafi legal school and Sufi orders.

The Wahhabi–Al Saud Alliance: From Religious Mission to Political Instrument

The alliance formed between Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and Muhammad ibn Saud in 1744 CE marked the beginning of a strategic partnership between religious doctrine and political authority—one that not only shaped the formation of the Saudi state, but also influenced the trajectory of Sunni Islam in subsequent centuries. The pact was clear in its division of roles: *Ibn Abd al-Wahhab would provide religious leadership and doctrinal justification, while the Al Saud family would assume responsibility for governance and military expansion. “In this way, religious authority legitimized political power, and political power ensured the dissemination of Wahhabi teachings. It should be noted, however, that the Qur’anic concept of jihad primarily refers to personal and societal endeavour for moral and developmental purposes, rather than armed struggle.”*

Although the stated objective of the Wahhabi movement was to “purify faith from innovations” and restore *pure monotheism*, the movement soon became inseparable from the political ambitions of the Saud family. The Al Saud sought religious legitimacy to consolidate and expand territorial rule, while Ibn Abd al-Wahhab required military and financial support to institutionalize his doctrinal mission. This mutual dependency established a model in which *religion served*

political objectives, and political authority protected and amplified religious authority—a structure that remains central to the governance of Saudi Arabia today.

Over time, the alliance shifted from a reformist initiative to a political instrument. Religious discourse functioned as a tool to maintain dynastic authority and reinforce the tribal sociopolitical order of the Arabian Peninsula. In the twentieth century, the discovery of oil and the geopolitical involvement of Britain and later the United States in the Persian Gulf solidified this structure into the foundation of the modern Saudi state. The combination of vast oil revenues, foreign security guarantees, and cooperation with Wahhabi clerical institutions enabled the monarchy to operate without significant accountability to the wider population, elevating the religious–political establishment to a position of untouchable authority.

As former U.S. President Donald Trump once stated, “*The King of Saudi Arabia could not last two weeks without U.S. support.*” This remark highlights the enduring dual dependency at the core of Saudi rule: internal legitimacy derived from religious authority and external protection derived from global power alliances.

From the 1970s onward, Saudi Arabia used its oil wealth to broaden the global reach of Wahhabism. Charitable foundations, Islamic universities, missionary organizations, and religious schools were established across Asia, Africa, and Europe to promote Wahhabi doctrine. Within this ideological environment, new movements—including neo-Salafism, al-Qaeda, and later ISIS—found intellectual and financial space to develop their own militant interpretations.

Thus, Wahhabism evolved from a localized reform movement into a transnational ideological network with political, cultural, and security implications. While its proclaimed aim was the propagation of “true Islam,” in practice, it facilitated the consolidation of Saudi state power and reinforced the geopolitical influence of Western allies in the Muslim world. This fusion of religion and power blurred the boundaries between devotion and governance, transforming doctrine into an instrument of political survival—a dynamic that remains visible to the present day.

Evaluations and Divergent Perspectives

Since its inception, Wahhabism has been the subject of contrasting evaluations and interpretations. Scholars and political observers have approached it from different angles. Broadly, three main perspectives can be identified:

1. Reformist Interpretation

Proponents of this view, including official Saudi clerics, consider Wahhabism an effort to purify Islam from innovations and return to *authentic Islam*. According to them, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab raised the call to monotheism in response to perceived religious deviations and extreme Sufi practices, inviting Muslims back to the Qur'an and Sunnah. Prominent scholars associated with this perspective, such as Ibn Baz and Ibn Uthaymeen, framed Wahhabism not as a new sect but as a revival of early Islamic principles.

Critical observation: While this interpretation emphasizes reformist intentions, the historical alliance with the Saudi state reveals a more complex reality. The convergence of Wahhabi doctrine and Saudi political ambitions served to consolidate dynastic authority, illustrating how reformist rhetoric and political objectives advanced in parallel.

2. Intra-Islamic Critical Interpretation

Many Muslim thinkers, including Muhammad al-Ghazali, Fazlur Rahman, and some scholars at Al-Azhar, view Wahhabism as a contributor to intellectual stagnation, religious rigidity, and division within the Muslim community. Its strict literalism and rejection of independent reasoning (*ijtihad*) curtailed the intellectual dynamism that had characterized Islamic societies for centuries, disregarding the historical contributions of earlier scholars to philosophy, science, and jurisprudence.

From this perspective, while Wahhabism claimed to restore monotheism, it also functioned in practice as a mechanism that reinforced political authority. Contemporary Islamic institutions often regard it as a movement “serving political power” rather than purely advancing religious truth, using doctrinal claims to justify political ends.

3. Western Analytical Interpretation

Western scholars such as Madawi al-Rasheed, Thomas Hegghammer, and Gilles Kepel examine Wahhabism in relation to Saudi political strategies and broader global interests. They argue that the movement was strengthened during the twentieth century through financial and political support from Western powers, functioning as a geopolitical instrument to counter nationalist, leftist, and reformist movements across the Arab and Islamic world.

From this perspective, Wahhabism is not merely a religious doctrine but serves as the backbone of the Saudi state's official ideology, prioritizing political stability and the consolidation of power over spiritual reform or the purification of Islam from superstition.

Comparative Assessment

Taken together, these perspectives illustrate that Wahhabism operates at the intersection of faith and political authority. Although it began as a reformist religious initiative, over time it evolved into a tool for consolidating monarchical power and legitimizing rulers. The movement's dual character—reformist in rhetoric, political in practice—has profoundly influenced both Saudi governance and the global perception of Islam.

Conclusion

Wahhabism should be understood within the broader context of the intellectual and political crises that have affected the Muslim world in recent centuries. While its stated aim was to purify religion from innovations and superstition and to restore pure monotheism, in practice its trajectory was shaped by political alliances with the Saudi ruling family and strategic support from Western powers. This transformed Wahhabism into an ideology that legitimized the monarchy and served as a vehicle for the continuation of Saudi dynastic dominance.

Intellectually, the movement's rejection of rational inquiry, Sufism, and mysticism curtailed the horizons of Islamic thought, suppressing reflection, tolerance, and intellectual flexibility. Politically, its emphasis on absolute obedience to rulers facilitated the emergence of authoritarian interpretations of political Islam and contributed to the rise of extremist groups, including the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and ISIS.

Ultimately, Wahhabism began as a reaction against superstition but evolved into a tool for the consolidation of political power. In essence, it acted as a mechanism that, under the guise of religious reform, guaranteed the authority of rulers and, in the process, distorted the global image of Islam. The strategic alignment between Saudi Wahhabism and Western geopolitical interests, particularly during the Cold War, further expanded its influence regionally and globally.

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