

unify the realm of earth and the realm of heaven in one system.” The primary condition for the realization of that system would be the adoption and implementation of the Shariah in the public sphere. Western secular values must be rejected in the Muslim world because Islam forbids its theological beliefs to be “divorced in nature or in objective from secular life and customs.” All secular governments, therefore, including those run by Arabs like Nasser, must be replaced, by force if necessary, with a viable and morally accountable Islamic state.

In 1965, a year after he had been released from prison, Qutb was rearrested for the publication of *Milestones* and was hanged for treason. Meanwhile, those radicalized members of the Muslim Brothers who had managed to escape Nasser’s wrath found refuge in the only place that would open its arms to them: Saudi Arabia, a country on the verge of an economic explosion that would transform its rough band of tribal leaders into the wealthiest men in the world—an astounding achievement for a kingdom founded a little more than a decade earlier as the result of an informal alliance between an insignificant tribal Shaykh and a barely literate religious zealot.



AT THE DAWN of the eighteenth century, around the time Europe was beginning to take notice of the vast natural resources waiting to be tapped across the Mediterranean, the sacred land that had given birth to Islam and reared it in its infancy fell under the nominal suzerainty of the Ottoman Empire, though the Caliph allowed the Sharif of Mecca—a descendant of the Prophet and heir to the Banu Hashim—to wield authority over the Arabian population. Yet neither Ottoman influence nor the Sharif’s control extended far beyond the Hijaz. Throughout the vast, inaccessible deserts of eastern Arabia—a region called the *Najd*, whose austere and sterile landscape was matched by its stagnant religious and cultural development—there lived large numbers of autonomous tribes loyal to no one but themselves. Among these was a small clan of little account led by an ambitious Shaykh named Muhammad ibn Saud (d. 1765).

While by no means a wealthy man, ibn Saud owned most of the cultivated lands in the tiny oasis town of Dariyah, which had been

founded by his family. His position as Shaykh gave him exclusive control of the town’s wells and primary trade routes. Although he maintained a small network of caravans, his finances were severely limited by his reach, which did not extend beyond the boundaries of the oasis. Still, ibn Saud was a proud and ostentatious man, cut from the fabric of his ancient Arab ancestors, and fiercely dedicated to the protection of his family and clan. So when an itinerant preacher named Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703–66) arrived in his oasis looking for protection, he immediately seized the opportunity to create an alliance that would increase both his economic prosperity and his military might.

Born in the deserts of Najd to a devout Muslim family, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab displayed his religious zeal at a young age. Recognizing his talent for Quranic study, his father sent him to Medina to study with the disciples of Shah Wali Allah, who had only recently launched his campaign against Indian Sufism. Abd al-Wahhab was deeply influenced by Wali Allah’s puritanical ideology. But it was not until he left Medina for Basra and experienced for himself the rich diversity of Shi’ism and Sufism in all its local variations that his anger at what he considered to be the adulteration of Islam transformed into a fanatical obsession to strip Islam of its “superstitious innovations” and restore it to its original Arab purity. Upon returning to the Arabian Peninsula, he embarked on a violent crusade to promote his radically puritanical, “fundamentalist” sect of Islam, popularly known as *Wahhabism*.

A few words are needed about the meaning and function of fundamentalism in Islam. The term “fundamentalism” was first coined in the early twentieth century to describe a burgeoning movement among Protestants in the United States who were reacting to the rapid modernization and secularization of American society by reasserting the fundamentals of Christianity. Chief among these was a belief in the literal interpretation of the Bible—an idea that had passed out of favor with the ascendance of scientific theories such as evolution, which tended to treat biblical claims of historicity with mocking contempt. Considering the fact that all Muslims believe in the “literal” quality of the Quran—which is, after all, the direct speech

THE HISTORY OF ISLAM - A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

of God—it makes little sense to refer to Muslim extremists or militants as “fundamentalists.” Nor is this a proper term for those Islamists like Sayyid Qutb whose goal is the establishment of an Islamic polity. Nevertheless, because the term “Islamic fundamentalism” has become so common that it has even slipped into Persian and Arabic (where its literal translations are, somewhat appropriately, “bigot” in Arabic and “backward” in Persian), I will continue to use it in this book—but not to describe politicized Islam. That movement will be called “Islamism,” its proper name. “Islamic fundamentalism,” in contrast, refers to the radically ultraconservative and puritanical ideology most clearly represented in the Muslim world by Wahhabism.

In truth, Wahhabi doctrine is little more than an overly simplified conception of tawhid. When the Wahhabi declares “There is no god but God,” he means that God must be the sole object of religious devotion; any act of worship that involves any other entity whatsoever is considered shirk. For Abd al-Wahhab, this included the veneration of Pirs, the intercession of the Imams, the commemoration of most religious holidays, and all devotional acts that centered on the Prophet Muhammad. The Wahhabists sought to outlaw rituals like dhikr and matam or any other custom that had crept into Islam as it spread out of the tribal confines of the Arabian Peninsula to be absorbed by the disparate cultures of the Middle East, Central Asia, Europe, India, and Africa. In their place, Abd al-Wahhab instigated a strict implementation of the Shariah, free of all foreign influences and interpretations. Like al-Afghani, Muhammad Abdu, and the Pan-Islamists; Sa’d Zaghlul, Sati al-Husri, and the Pan-Arabists; Hasan al-Banna, the Muslim Brothers, and the Islamic socialists; and Sayyid Qutb, Mawlana Mawdudi, and the radical Islamists, Abd al-Wahhab called for a return to the unadulterated Muslim community established by Muhammad in Medina. Yet Abd al-Wahhab’s was an archaic and exclusivist vision of that original community, and any Muslims who did not share it—especially the Sufis and Shi’ah—were put to the sword.

As Hamid Algar has pointed out, had it not been for the extraordinary circumstances under which Wahhabism emerged, it would undoubtedly have “passed into history as a marginal and short-lived

sectarian movement.” Not only was this a spiritually and intellectually insignificant movement in a religion founded principally upon spiritualism and intellectualism, it was not even considered true orthodoxy by the majority of Sunni Muslims. Yet Wahhabism had two distinct advantages that would guarantee its place as the most important sectarian movement in Islam since the Penitents first gathered at Karbala a thousand years earlier. First, it had the good fortune to emerge in the sacred lands of the Arabian Peninsula, where it could lay claim to a powerful legacy of religious revivalism. Second, it benefited from a willing and eager patron who saw in its simple ideals the means of gaining unprecedented control over the region. That patron was Muhammad ibn Saud.

The facts of the alliance between Ibn Saud and Abd al-Wahhab have given way to legend. The two men first met as Abd al-Wahhab and his disciples were tearing through the Arabian Peninsula, demolishing tombs, cutting down sacred trees, and massacring any Muslim who did not accept their uncompromisingly puritanical vision of Islam. After being expelled from an oasis where they had received shelter (the horrified villagers demanded that Abd al-Wahhab leave after he publicly stoned a woman to death), they made their way toward the oasis of Dariyah and its Shaykh, Muhammad ibn Saud, who was more than happy to give Abd al-Wahhab and his holy warriors his unconditional protection.

“This oasis is yours,” Ibn Saud promised; “do not fear your enemies.”

Abd al-Wahhab replied with an unusual demand. “I want you to grant me an oath,” he said, “that you will perform jihad against the unbelievers [non-Wahhabi Muslims]. In return you will be leader of the Muslim community, and I will be leader in religious matters.”

Ibn Saud agreed, and an alliance was formed that would not only alter the course of Islamic history, it would change the geopolitical balance of the world. Abd al-Wahhab’s holy warriors burst into the Hijaz, conquering Mecca and Medina and expelling the Sharif. Once established in the holy cities, they set about destroying the tombs of the Prophet and his Companions, including those pilgrimage sites that marked the birthplace of Muhammad and his family. They sacked the treasury of the Prophet’s Mosque in Medina and set fire to every

book they could find, save the Quran. They banned music and flowers from the sacred cities and outlawed the smoking of tobacco and the drinking of coffee. Under penalty of death, they forced the men to grow beards and the women to be veiled and secluded.

The Wahhabis purposely connected their movement with the first extremists in the Muslim world, the Kharijites, and like their fanatical predecessors, they focused their wrath inward against what they considered to be the failings of the Muslim community. Thus, with the Hijaz firmly under their control, they marched north to spread their message to the Sufi and Shi'ite infidels. In 1802, on the holy day of Ashura, they scaled the walls of Karbala and massacred two thousand Shi'ite worshippers as they celebrated Muharram. In an uncontrolled rage, they smashed the tombs of Ali, Husayn, and the Imams, giving particular vent to their anger at the tomb of the Prophet's daughter, Fatima. With Karbala sacked, the Wahhabis turned north toward Mesopotamia and the heart of the Ottoman Empire. Only then did they get the attention of the Caliph.

In 1818, the Egyptian khedive, Muhammad Ali (1769–1849), at the behest of the Ottoman Caliph, sent a massive contingent of heavily armed soldiers into the Peninsula. The Egyptian army easily overwhelmed the ill-equipped and poorly trained Wahhabis. Mecca and Medina were once again placed under the care of the Sharif and the Wahhabists forcefully sent back into the Najd. By the time the Egyptian troops withdrew, the Saudis had learned a valuable lesson: they could not take on the Ottoman Empire on their own. They needed a far stronger alliance than the one they had with the Wahhabis.

The opportunity to form just such an alliance presented itself with the Anglo-Saudi Treaty in 1915. The British, who were eager to control the Persian Gulf, encouraged the Saudis to recapture the Arabian Peninsula from Ottoman control. To assist them in their rebellion, the British provided regular shipments of weapons and money. Under the command of Ibn Saud's heir Abd al-Aziz (1880–1953), the plan worked. At the close of the First World War, when the Ottoman Empire had been dismantled and the Caliphate abolished, ibn Saud reconquered Mecca and Medina and once again expelled the Sharif. After publicly executing forty thousand men and reimposing Wah-

habism over the entire population, Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud renamed the Arabian Peninsula "the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia." The primitive tribe of the Najd and their fundamentalist allies had become the Wardens of the Sanctuary, the Keepers of the Keys.

Almost immediately, the sacred land where Muhammad had received the gift of revelation miraculously burst forth with another gift from God—oil—giving the tiny Saudi clan sudden dominion over the world's economy. They now felt it was up to them to respond to this blessing from God by spreading their puritanical doctrine to the rest of the world and purging the Muslim faith once and for all of its religious and ethnic diversity.

The Muslim Brothers arrived in Saudi Arabia at an opportune time. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia remained the sole Muslim country in which the Ulama had not lost their grip over society. On the contrary, Saudi Arabia was both an utterly totalitarian and an uncompromisingly Wahhabist state. Here there was no debate between Modernists and Islamists; there was no debate whatsoever. Nationalism, Pan-Arabism, Pan-Islamism, Islamic socialism—none of these vibrant and influential movements in the Muslim world had a significant voice in the Saudi kingdom. The only doctrine that was tolerated was Wahhabi doctrine; the only ideology, Islamic fundamentalism. Any deviation was violently suppressed.

No wonder the Saudi monarchy viewed Nasser's secular nationalism as a direct threat to their way of life. As the man who defied the West by nationalizing the Suez Canal, Nasser had achieved near-mythic status not only in the Muslim world but in most other third-world countries. In the Middle East, Nasser embodied the last gasp of Pan-Arabism. His Arab socialist vision, though failing miserably in Egypt, was regarded by many Muslims as the sole alternative to the spread of Westoxification. So great was his charisma, and so successful his brutal suppression of opposition, that by the 1960s, his authority was unchallenged in every sector of Egyptian society.

Hoping to curb Nasser's growing influence in the Muslim world, the Saudi monarchy opened its arms to the radicalized Muslim Brothers—not just those who had been exiled from Egypt, but also those from other secular Arab states like Syria and Iraq. The Saudis offered

all the money, support, and security the Brothers needed to fight back against secular nationalism in their home countries. But the Muslim Brothers discovered more than shelter in Saudi Arabia. They discovered Wahhabism; and they were not alone. Hundreds of thousands of poor workers from all over the Muslim world began pouring into Saudi Arabia to work the oil fields. By the time they returned to their homes, they were fully indoctrinated in Saudi religiosity.

Religious adherence to the Saudi model became the prerequisite for receiving government subsidies and contracts. The vast sums the Saudis paid to various Muslim charities, the foundations they established, the mosques, universities, and primary schools they built—everything the Saudis did was inextricably linked to Wahhabism. In 1962, their missionary efforts gained momentum with the creation of the Muslim World League, whose primary goal was the spread of Wahhabi ideology to the rest of the Muslim world. This was, in effect, the new Islamic expansion, except that these tribal warriors did not need to leave the Arabian Peninsula to conquer their neighbors; their neighbors came to them. As Keepers of the Keys, the Saudis controlled the Hajj pilgrimage, to the chagrin of most Muslims who considered them little more than a crude band of unsophisticated fundamentalists. With billions of dollars spent to modernize and expand the pilgrimage festivities so as to ensure maximum participation, nearly a million Muslims inundate the bare Meccan valley every year.

Since the creation of the Muslim World League, the simplicity, certainty, and unconditional morality of Wahhabism have infiltrated every corner of the Muslim world. Thanks to Saudi evangelism, Wahhabi doctrine has dramatically affected the religio-political ideologies of the Muslim Brothers, Mawdudi's Islamic Association, the Palestinian Hamas, and Islamic Jihad, to name only a few groups. The Saudis have become the patrons of a new kind of Pan-Islamism: one based on the austere, uncompromising, and extremist ideology of Islamic fundamentalism, which has become a powerful voice in deciding the future of the Islamic state.

Of course, the problem with fundamentalism is that it is by definition a reactionary movement; it cannot remain tied to power. The Saudi kingdom discovered this from the very beginning when, sud-

denly flush with money, Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud began using his newfound wealth to build a life befitting a king. Soon Saudi Arabia was awash in modern technology bought from the West. The elaborate process of extracting oil from the desert required the presence of hundreds of foreign nationals—mostly British and American—who brought to Arabia an unfamiliar yet alluring culture of materialism. So close was Abd al-Aziz to the British Empire that he was even knighted by the Queen. In short, the king had been Westoxified and, as a result, turned his back on the Wahhabi warriors—now dubbed the *Ikhwan*, or “brothers” (not to be confused with the Muslim Brothers)—who had helped place him in power.

In 1929, the Ikhwan, angered by the greed and corruption of the Saudi court, launched a rebellion in the city of al-Salba. They demanded that the king renounce his materialism and expel the foreign infidels from the holy land. In response, Abd al-Aziz sent an army to al-Salba and massacred the Ikhwan.

However, Saudi Arabia quickly discovered what the rest of the world would soon learn. Fundamentalism, in all religious traditions, is impervious to suppression. The more one tries to squelch it, the stronger it becomes. Counter it with cruelty, and it gains adherents. Kill its leaders, and they become martyrs. Respond with despotism, and it becomes the sole voice of opposition. Try to control it, and it will turn against you. Try to appease it, and it will take control.

In 1991, during the Persian Gulf War to expel Saddam Hussein's Iraqi army from Kuwait, a small group of Saudi dissidents calling themselves *al-Qaeda* took up the original revolutionary ideology of Wahhabism and turned against the Saudi royal family, whom they considered to be a corrupt bunch of gluttonous degenerates who had sold the interests of the Muslim community to foreign powers. In true Kharijite fashion, al-Qaeda divided the Muslim world into “the People of Heaven” (themselves) and “the People of Hell” (everyone else).

The sinful actions of the Saudi princes have, in al-Qaeda's view, made them members of the latter group—apostates who must be punished by excommunication from the holy community of God. And it is not just the Saudi royal family that al-Qaeda has targeted. All Muslims whose interpretation of scripture and observance of the Shariah do

not fit in the Wahhabi model are considered infidels. Consequently, as al-Qaeda's founder, Osama bin Laden, has promised, "They shall be wiped out!"

Despite the tragedy of September 11 and the subsequent terrorist acts against Western targets throughout the world, despite the clash-of-civilizations mentality that has seized the globe and the clash-of-monotheisms reality underlying it, despite the blatant religious rhetoric resonating throughout the halls of governments, there is one thing that cannot be overemphasized. What is taking place now in the Muslim world is an internal conflict between Muslims, not an external battle between Islam and the West. The West is merely a bystander—an unwary yet complicit casualty of a rivalry that is raging in Islam over who will write the next chapter in its story.

All great religions grapple with these issues, some more fiercely than others. One need only recall Europe's massively destructive Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) between the forces of the Protestant Union and those of the Catholic League to recognize the ferocity with which interreligious conflicts have been fought in Christian history. In many ways, the Thirty Years' War signaled the end of the Reformation: perhaps the classic argument over who gets to decide the future of a faith. What followed that awful war during which nearly a third of the population of Germany perished was a gradual progression in Christian theology from the doctrinal absolutism of the pre-Reformation era to the doctrinal pluralism of the early modern period and, ultimately, to the doctrinal relativism of the Enlightenment. This remarkable evolution in Christianity from its inception to its Reformation took fifteen vicious, bloody, and occasionally apocalyptic centuries.

Fourteen hundred years of rabid debate over what it means to be a Muslim; of passionate arguments over the interpretation of the Quran and the application of Islamic law; of trying to reconcile a fractured community through appeals to Divine Unity; of tribal feuds, crusades, and world wars—and Islam has finally begun its fifteenth century.

10. Slouching Toward Medina

THE ISLAMIC REFORMATION



"IN THE NAME of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful," the IranAir pilot intones as our plane glides to a stop at Tehran's Mehrabad Airport. There is a nervous shifting in the seats around me. The women sit upright, adjusting their headscarves, making sure their ankles and wrists are properly covered, while their husbands rub the sleep from their eyes and begin gathering the belongings their children have scattered in the aisle.

I lift my head to look for the two or three faces I have been carefully observing since boarding the plane in London. They are the younger, single passengers on board, men and women who, like me, are in their late twenties or early thirties. They are dressed in ill-fitting clothes that look as though they were purchased in secondhand stores—awkward long-sleeved shirts; dull slacks; unadorned headscarves—all meant to appear as inoffensive as possible. I know this