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## **Wahhabism, Salafism and the Expansion of Islamic Fundamentalist Ideology\***

**Abstract :** Rise of Wahhabism was an example of a larger current, which exerts pressure on the “return to sources”, discernible in other regions of the Islamic world in the eighteenth century. Sources were the Koran and the Prophet's traditions, Sunna, contrary to the doctrines of the four Sunni schools of law at the time active. Continuing the Wahhabi ideology, Salafism represented, in the development of Islamic spirituality, maybe the most altered form of the Muslim culture, removing all values that were not connected with the first generation of Islam.

**Keywords:** Wahhabism, Salafism, fundamentalism, Islamism, takfir, values, axiology.

Wahhabism derives its name from its founder, Mohammed Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1791), which was inspired by neo-hanbalite school of Ibn Taymiyya (XIV<sup>th</sup> century), representing a traditional current that is distinguished by its literal reading of Islam and its rigorist and puritanical appearance (*Dictionnaire mondial de l'islamisme* 2002, 479).

In the early eighteenth century AD, Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab proposes a simple and revolutionary doctrine: return to original Islam (Sfeir 2007, 36), in order to restore Islam's Golden Age at the time of the Prophet and his companions (Lammens, 2003, 191). All intermediaries are banned, the saints and other prophetic Imams, for the benefit of knowing the Prophet Muhammad. According to Wahhabism, the Muslim community's last goal is to become the living embodiment of God's laws on earth (Bahgat 2004, 51).

Rise of Wahhabism was an example of a larger current, which exerts pressure on the “return to sources”, discernible in other regions of the Islamic world in the eighteenth century. Sources were the Koran and the Prophet's traditions, Sunna, contrary to the doctrines of the four Sunni schools of law (Cook 2006, 108) at the time active. As his writings testify, Abd al-Wahhab was a peaceful man, only the political instrumentalization which was made afterwards giving the opportunity of violence understanding attached to it.

In the same way we understand the meaning of the term *Wahhabism*, defined today as a return to original Islam, which uses violence and political

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power to achieve its goals (Sfeir 2007, 36). Abd al-Wahhab's followers would rigorously propagate Islam and support the idea of *jihad*, understood as a struggle for true religion, expelling (Takfir) the Muslims who resist it (Lafitte 2007, 105).

To retrieve the pious precursors of Islam (*El Salaf El Salih*)<sup>1</sup>, Abd al-Wahhab proposed replacing the barbarous and “infidel” customs by full implementation of *shari'a*, the Wahhabites describing themselves as *muwahhidun* - unitarists (*Dictionnaire mondial de l'islamisme* 2002, 479). Advocating for a puritanical and radical Islam, Abd al-Wahhab abolishes all beliefs that are likely to remember the polytheism and idolatry - the worship of saints, pilgrimages to their mausoleums, tobacco, alcohol, use of chapels, music, song, etc. - and requires for significant reforms within an Islam judged as the depository of pre-Islamic rites (*Dictionnaire mondial de l'islamisme* 2002, 479).

This current claim, which is in fact a literal interpretation of the Koran, condemns equally all the innovations in relation to the original teachings of Islam (Qur'an and hadith). Belief in predestination is mandatory, every act or unorthodox point of view being condemned and fought - the rejection of Sufism, mysticism and Shiism. Abd al-Wahhab rejects any form of social modernity: State must operate strictly in accordance with religious law (*Dictionnaire mondial de l'islamisme* 2002, 479).

Politically, he proposes a model of society based on the principle of total submission of the faithful to their sovereign which, in turn, must absolutely respect the principles of Islam, otherwise he is threatened to be dismissed. Absolute obedience to the sovereign control of the teachings of Islam is entrusted to a body of religious dignitaries. Abd al-Wahhab resumes Ibn Taymiyya's work on the "excommunication" of the political chief that would abandon the path of Islam.

In its religious dimension, Wahhabism is defined as willingness to take as a model the authentic Islam practiced by Muhammad and his Companions, refusing any other source than the Qur'an and Sunnah. Refusal of innovations, including the jurisprudence made on the basis of *ijtihad* (interpretation), is the center of this doctrine, only lessons or extracts from pious ancestors being acceptable (*Dictionnaire mondial de l'islamisme* 2002, 479).

Both religious and political movement, the Arab and Muslim Wahhabism has assumed from the outset as essential goal, when the Ottoman Empire gave the first serious signs of decadence and when the Shiism in Persia and Iraq, reinforce their progress, to build a Sunni state that would extend not only to the Najd<sup>2</sup>, but in all Arab countries, and to restore Islam to its original purity, fighting against any suspicious innovations and popular superstitions and leaving great scope for expansion, as during the time of Prophet's Companions (Laoust 1983, 323).

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<sup>1</sup> *El Salaf El Salih* – term designating the Companions and successors of Prophet Muhammad.

<sup>2</sup> City in Saudi Arabia, where Mohammad Ibn Abdel Wahhab was born.

Wahhabism became stronger when allied the tribe of Saud, who won, after numerous battles with Arab tribes, mostly from the Arabian Peninsula, to found then the Saudi Arabia (Roy 1995, 30). Wahhabism stresses above all the unity of God, rejecting the principle of the intercession of saints, very present in Sufism and popular Islam, and their prayer at the graves; it says that the infidels, and not only sinners, Muslims who do not abide by strict canons of pure Islam (Roy 1995, 30) - *Takfir* theory<sup>3</sup>.

The followers of Wahhabism refuse all innovations, all previous interpretations of Islam to them, which, paradoxically, lead to acceptance of some possibilities of interpretation (*ijtihad*) because there is no established authority to interpret the Qur'an and Sunna, the only sources they recognize. Wahhabism condemns also music, poetry, tobacco, laughter etc. But politically, Wahhabism is not revolutionary: its future is closely linked to that of a monarchy, whose concept is missing entirely from the Koran or Sunna (Roy 1995, 30).

Wahhabism and neighboring movements are defined as those who follow the path of ancestors (*Salafi*) and often prefer this term *Salafi*. At the end of the nineteenth century, a current founded by Jamaluddin Afghani and resumed by Muhammad Abdouh will launch a more intellectual reform (salafism) than Wahhabism itself (Roy 1995, 30).

In contemporary Wahhabism, best represented today in Saudi Arabia, social classification is complete, everyone being bound to the smallest details to have a religious behavior. Totalitarian indoctrination of children, which are taught that everything is reflected in *shari'a*, is omnipresent (Murawiec 2003, 46). From age seven, children are taught to watch and to denounce their parents if they do not do the five daily prayers in the mosque of their neighborhood or if they interrupt the fasting festival of Ramadan (Basbous 2002, 105). Also, bookstores, clubs, video, printers, advertising agencies are closely supervised by government authorities and the *religious police*, "to ensure respect for rules of taste and ethics" (Mackey 2000, 263). In this context, the role of Saudi scientists - mathematicians, physicists, chemists, doctors, computer scientists, psychologists, economists, etc. - in the international scientific community is very low (Murawiec 2003, 46).

After more than two centuries after its installation in distant Arabia, Wahhabism, this Sunni doctrine, is one of the most important trends of contemporary radical Islam (Sfeir 1997, 77), Saudi Arabia representing the sponsor and the crucible of the most Sunni terrorist movements today, 15 of those 19 suicide bombers of September 11, 2001 being Saudis (Zuhur 2005, 15).

The Wahhabi are offended by the Shiite conception of imamat - legitimate spiritual leaders of the Muslims - and Sufi search for union with God while still living (Zuhur 2005, 15).

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<sup>3</sup> In Islamic law, *takfir* is the practice whereby an individual or a group, previously considered Muslim, is said infidel or *kafir*.

Anchored in the past, designed based on the legacy of Ibn Hanbal and Ibn Taymiyya, Wahhabism remains immutable rule currently in Saudi Arabia. Shari'a takes place of the constitution, part of King Khaled reiterated on its access to the throne in 1975: "Islamic law is and will remain our standard, our source of inspiration and our goal" (Zuhur 2005, 15).

Brutally cutting any possibility of human interpretation, Wahhabism reinterpreted the traditional institutions of religious authority, but using only a limited part of the vast tradition of thought and practice of Islamic jurisprudence. Searching the empirically quantifiable values of Islam, Wahhabism has become empty of spirituality and values such as human dignity, love or compassion (Doorn-Harder 2004, 665), thus representing deterioration in its axiological horizon of the original Islam.

Follower of the Wahhabi ideology, Salafism represented, in the development of Islamic spirituality, maybe the most altered form of the Muslim culture, removing all values not connected with the first generations of Islam. Refusing the four law schools - Hanafism, Malekism, Shafeism and Hanbalism - , removing ethics and morality that have developed independently of the Quran, Salafism, sometimes called neo-fundamentalist Islamic ideology, has inspired most of the leaders of contemporary Islamist terrorist movements .

Salafism ("predecessors" or "first generations") is a Sunni Islamic movement that takes the pious ancestors as exemplary models (*Salafi*) of the patristic period of early Islam (Moosa 2005, 21). A number of different terms are used on Salafia, including salafiyists, neo-Wahhabis, hanbalites or neo-Islamists (Wiktorowicz 2001, 65).

Since the latter half of the nineteenth century, some Muslim intellectuals have understood the need to revive the Islamic world, thereby initiating the Islamic equivalent of the Renaissance. Renaissance followers regard themselves as reaffirming the Islamic orthodoxy, which goes, beyond tradition, to the Qur'an and Sunnah (Gould 2007, 25). The first group of Renaissance Muslims has argued that the decline of Islam is due to the failure of adherence to the right way. They have criticized the innovations of "tradition" and brought back to life *ijtihad* (interpretation), for a rational examination of the Qur'an and the Sunna. They opposed *taqlid*, the blind adherence to tradition established by one of the Sunni schools of law; for them, the worship of this tradition is just representing the inauthentic Islam, which in turn explains the backwardness of the contemporary Muslim world. We could call this group "modernists", because they have not found anything in the authentic Islam to contradict of what they have accepted as being good in modernity (Gould 2007, 25).

The second group of "Renaissance men" also circumvented the tradition, which they regard as corrupt and immoral and being often associated with immoral political systems. They differ from the first group in their way of re-examining the Quran and the Sunna, which led them to the conclusion that modernity is not good. We might call this second group *Salafi*, because they evoked the era of the Prophet and one or two generations who followed the

guiding models, these first generations exemplify the right way and bringing them to life can sometimes seem like a re-evocation of tradition (Gould 2007, 25).

Although the Salafies are usually eager to use modern technology, they reject modern Western values, which are presumed to have as result a form of barbarism. Traditionalists are critical sometimes to the “Renaissance men” for the task which they take to re-interpret the Quran and Sunnah and to issue interpretations that legitimize horrifying activities. Thus, traditionalists are sometimes critical to Islamists, who, in this plan, tend to be *Salafi*, for acts of violence that violate the principles of true Islam (Gould 2007, 25).

Religion of Islam goes through a real revolution nowadays due to extensive pressure from the Wahhabi-Salafist and jihadist-insurgent ideologies (Bingham 2006, 50). The insurgency is driven by people marked by a long tradition of extreme intolerance within Islam, which does not distinguish politics from religion and distorts them both.

Sunni fundamentalists contemporary goals are to restore the perfection of early Islam practiced by Muhammad and his Companions, who are Righteous Ancestors, to establish a utopian society based on *Salafi* principles, by imposing their interpretation of Islamic law on all members of society; annihilating local variants of Islam in the name of authenticity and purity; transforming Islam from a personal faith into an authoritarian political system, establish a panislamic caliphate governed according to the strict principles of Salafi Islam, often conceived as stretching from Morocco to Indonesia and the Philippines; and, finally, subjecting the entire world under the domination of extremist Islamic ideology (Bingham 2006, 50).

There often occurs a confusion between Salafism and Wahhabism, or between versions of Wahhabism (Zuhur 2005, 3), Salafism being seen, in certain acceptions, as representing certain religious teachings of Wahhabism (Sulaiman 2005, 20); Salafism is not a political program, it requires instead a more proper personal conduct.

Global movement led by a desire for religious purification, the goal for Salafist movement is not a pragmatic one, of national policy, but is explicitly religious and ideological (Wiktorowicz 2001, 65). The Salafies believe that, through centuries of religious practice, some innovations (*bid'a*) were introduced into religion by Sufism and other popular customs. As a result, the society is now following a deviant version of Islam, contrary to the “right way” of God. Salafies seek to restore the practice of capturing the purity of Islam, as they were understood by the *Salafs* - first Companions of the Prophet - and revealed in the Quran and Sunnah (Wiktorowicz 2001, 65).

Salafies reject post-Qur'anic interpretations, such as those of Shaybani or collection of Bukhari's traditions, which are not included in the sacred texts, relying instead solely on the strict reading of the Quran (Hassner 2007, 131). They seek to relive the authentic Islam by imitating generation of Muslim leaders who surrounded him and followed the Prophet and by rejecting any

impure practices. The first of these, often invoked by the founders of the Salafist movement, are polytheistic practices like venerating holy popular tombs. With the exception of the holy places in Mecca and Medina, Salafies consider that worshipping of the saint's remains is fundamentally alien to Islam and therefore corrupting. As Wahhabism, Salafist tradition rejects all four Sunni schools of law (Hassner 2007, 131).

At the risk of simplifying a complex reality, we might suggest that the global Jihadist ideology is rooted in what some thinkers have called neo-Salafism, which is combined with the neo-fundamentalist Salafism that appeals to the notion of an Islam under the siege of Christianity, Zionism and secular forces (Ramakrishna 2005, 343). Osama bin Laden is the emblematic figure of contemporary Salafist trends that have formed in the early '80s (Zuhur 2005, 22).

From the Salafi's strict conception on Islam, which is sometimes at odds with real life, evil interpretations are born, finishing in terrorist derives.

Salafism was at first a reformist movement that had nothing to do with an integrist and closed Islam. The authors of this reform - Al Afghani, Mohamed Abdou and Rachid Rida - oppose the weakness of Islam in the nineteenth century before the Christian West's expansion. Napoleon's occupation of Egypt, the French colonization of North Africa and British domination of Muslims in India and later in Egypt were a profound shock for the Muslim world which, until the eighteenth century, was regarding itself as being superior to the West (Henzel 2005, 69).

Movement will be radicalized later, when faced with colonianism and when nationalist and secular elites will fight to seize power for independence (Laidi and Salam 2002, 106). Jamal ad-Din Al-Afghani (1839-1897) launched this modernization and reformation movement of Islam and a wing of this movement will develop later into the revolutionary Salafism which United States faces today.

Salafism was born from the decline of the Ottoman Empire. While Constantinople was declining and European nations were trying to recover part of the empire, a group of Muslims mobilized against the threat of Western domination over the lands of Islam. In their mind, an Iranian known as Jamal Al Din al Afghani encourages the elites of Muslim countries to claim independence. Not to found nations, because only the Muslim community (*umma*) has value, but to banish Christian invader, responsible for the decline of Islam (Laidi and Salam 2002, 106).

Afghani is a reformer, even a "revolutionary" one, in the sense that he professed Islam inspired by a dynamic rationalism, renouncing the lessons of the four schools of religious law (Hanafism, Hanbalism, Malekism and Shafeism). The new approach of Islam opened again the gates of *ijtihad* (personal reflection effort on Qur'anic revelation) for each (Laidi and Salam 2002, 107). This was the original Salafism, much different from those who today claim to belong to it.

Al-Afghani's followers, including Egyptian Mohamed Abdou and Syrian Rachid Rida (1865-1935), have changed some theses of their predecessors. Rida

clearly indicated areas that are open to *ijtihad* and some others that must remain forever closed, believing that only the sacred text is clear and does not require a personal reflection. Is Rida the father of modern Islamists? He is the first who brought the need for Muslims to create a party to represent them in the political field. Neither Afghani nor Abdou had gone so far to defend Islam against the West. But Rachid Rida, who had fully lived the fall of the Turkish Caliphate, calls the Muslims to unite in order to restore the imamat, providing them with an action plan and a real political program to achieve this objective (Laidi and Salam 2002, 108).

Salafi speech is categorical, politicized, radical, opposing any idea of involvement or cooperation with Western societies, which are viewed as being related to open treason (Ramadan 2004, 27). The ultimate goal is the opposition to the ruling powers and the struggle to establish "Islamic state" as Caliphate (Ramadan 2004, 27). Rashid Rida, one of the leading exponents of Salafism, argued against the dangers that threaten Muslims to embrace Western ideas of secularism and nationalism, arguing that a return to Islam represents the core of any Muslim renaissance (Milton-Edwards 2004, 23).

At the end of the Cold War, a new trend has emerged within the revivalist Islamic groups, called *Salafi jihadism* (Kane 2007, 64). At first, this trend has crystallized around the Al Qaeda group, created by Osama bin Laden with U.S. support, Pakistan and Saudi intelligence. Having fought and helping defeat the Soviet Union, Al Qaeda turned against the regimes that were previously supporting it with a series of terrorist attacks that culminated in the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 in the United States. During recent years, Al Qaeda has transformed itself from an organization into an ideology that threatens the Western States and its allies in the Middle East (Kane 2007, 64).

Obsessively fixing the past, the origins, and removing any trace of human spirituality which is not based on the Quran or the Prophet Muhammad's model, we believe that Salafism represents a big regression of the Islamic spirituality, erasing centuries of evolution and remaining anchored into the beginning period of Islam. Axiologically blinded towards any other cultures or civilizations, Salafies seek to impose their obsessive way of being and living, by any means and in any socio-cultural context, fact that makes them seem *the new barbarians of the present time*.

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