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Post-Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia?

Substantial changes have taken place in the last few years in Saudi Arabia, especially within the local political-intellectual field. Significant among these is the rise to prominence of a group of "Islamoliberals," who are "made up of former Islamists and liberals, Sunnis and Shiites, calling for a democratic change within an Islamic framework through a revision of the official Wahhabi religious doctrine."¹ Although not all have given as much importance to religious criticism as they have to political criticism, the critique of Wahhabism—in its political, social, and religious aspects²—has undoubtedly been one of the mainsprings of this new trend. That is not to say that this phenomenon is completely without precedence in Saudi Arabia: certain doctrinal aspects of Wahhabism had, at times, come under attack by prominent ulama from al-Hijaz and al-Hasa provinces and—though less commonly—from "dissident" ulama from the Najd region, the birthplace of Wahhabism. However, the word "Wahhabism" itself was not long ago nearly completely taboo. The few critiques that surfaced came mostly from Saudis belonging to peripheral geographical or religio-political groups, and these moves were always isolated. What we have today is quite different: the critique of Wahhabism—which is now often bluntly called by this name—has gained ground. It touches upon all aspects of the Wahhabi tradition, and even comes from within Wahhabism's own ideological and geographical core.

Critical trends

Among the non-Shiite³ critical trends, the first includes Saudi liberals, such as writer and political analyst Turki al-Hamad, who for decades had denounced social manifestations of Wahhabism, such as the religious police or the ban on women's driving. This group has, in the post-9/11 climate, considerably sharpened its criticism and clearly indicated their enemy by name. Secondly, a group of young and daring intellectuals—Mansur al-Nuqaidan and Mishari al-Zayidi being the two best known—have taken advantage of the Islamic credentials inherited from their Islamist past in order to develop an Islamic critique of Wahhabism. Through a series of articles they have denounced "the excesses of the Wahhabi doctrine," notably drawing an explicit link between it and the *jihadi* violence experienced by the country since May 2003. Thirdly, some Islamic thinkers have, since the mid-1990s, formulated a *salafi* critique of Wahhabism. Hasan al-Maliki, the most prominent among these, castigates the doctrinal rigidity of Wahhabism and its tendency to slavishly imitate Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and Ibn Taymiyya, rather than to create thoughts on the basis of what are, in his view, genuine Salafism tenets. Abdallah al-Hamid shares al-Maliki's belief that Wahhabism has only become a caricature of true Salafism and calls for a return to the latter. This is a condition which becomes for him the theoretical basis of his pro-democracy activism. Lastly, a fourth kind of critique has appeared which could be called a Wahhabi critique of Wahhabism. One of its champions is Islamist lawyer and political activist Abd al-Aziz al-Qasim, who insists on the internal plurality of the original Wahhabi tradition as it has developed over the past 250 years, and believes that he can revive some of its most tolerant aspects.

The critique of Wahhabism has gained unprecedented momentum in Saudi Arabia in recent years. First formulated by a small group of prominent liberal and Islamist intellectuals, it seems to have received the approval of at least part of the ruling elite who have taken a few official steps towards socio-religious reform. But is Saudi Arabia ready to enter the era of Post-Wahhabism?

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What is even more unprecedented is that the Saudi government has partly subscribed to these critical trends and has taken a number of preliminary steps towards—though not yet political—but at least social and religious reform. The organization in June 2003 of the first national dialogue conference in which thirty ulama belonging to all the confessional groups present in the kingdom's territory—Wahhabi and non-Wahhabi Sunnis, Sufis, Ismaili, and Twelver Shiites—participated was a clear move in that direction. This conference led to the adoption of a charter containing a set of "recommendations." Some of these can be considered as a severe blow to the Wahhabi doctrine: first, the charter acknowledges the intellectual and confessional diversity of the Saudi nation, which is contrary to traditional Wahhabi exclusivism; second, it criticizes one of Wahhabism's juridical pillars, the principle of *sadd al-dhara'i'* (the blocking of the means), which requires that actions that could lead to committing sins must themselves be prohibited. It is notably in pursuing this principle that women are denied the right to drive in Saudi Arabia.

Governmental backing

Furthermore, none of the figures of the official Wahhabi establishment were invited to attend the conference, which obviously denotes a willingness to marginalize them. In addition, the fact that the government-controlled press has recently opened its columns to the Islamoliberals' religious criticism clearly reflects a degree of official support for it. It is also worth noting that there have been some improvements on two crucial socio-religious issues: the status of women, whose economic role has officially been acknowledged and who have been given a voice in the national dialogue, and that of the Shiites, who

have recently witnessed a relative loosening of the restrictions imposed on their religious practice.

It therefore seems that part of the ruling elite now acknowledges the necessity for a revision of Wahhabism. The reasons for this go far beyond the American pressures on the kingdom. It has indeed become clear that only such a move would permit the creation of a true Saudi nation, based on the modern and inclusive value of citizenship—a reality still missing and much needed in times of crisis. However, the sticking point is that this ideological shift must go hand in hand with a radical reformulation of old political alliances both at home and abroad. And therein lies the problem.

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Notes

1. Stéphane Lacroix, "Between Islamists and Liberals: Saudi Arabia's New Islamo-liberal Reformist Trend," *Middle East Journal* 58, no. 3 (Summer 2004): 345-65.
2. "Wahhabism" initially refers to the religious tradition developed over the centuries by the ulama of the official Saudi religious establishment founded by the heirs of Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab. It is however commonly used in Saudi Arabia in a broader meaning, encompassing its social and political implications.
3. Shiite critique on Wahhabism has a long history given the antagonism between the two. Currently the Saudi Shiite reformist intellectuals, as part of their strategy of conciliation with the regime, are careful not to publicly make direct attacks on Wahhabism.