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The Islamic Traditions of Wahhabism and Salafiyya

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Summary

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and subsequent investigations of these attacks have called attention to Islamic puritanical movements known as Wahhabism and Salafiyya. The Al Qaeda terrorist network and its leader, Osama bin Laden, have advocated a message of violence that some suggest is an extremist interpretation of this line of puritanical Islam. Other observers have accused Saudi Arabia, the center of Wahhabism, of having disseminated a religion that promotes hatred and violence, targeting the United States and its allies. Saudi officials strenuously deny these allegations. This report¹ provides a background on Wahhabi Islam and its association to militant fundamentalist groups; it also summarizes recent charges against Wahhabism and responses, including the findings of the final report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (“The 9/11 Commission”) and bills relevant to this issue in the 109th Congress. It will be updated periodically. Related CRS products include CRS Issue Brief IB93113, CRS Report RL32499, CRS Report RS21432, CRS Report RS21529, CRS Report RS21654, and CRS Report RL31718.

Background on Wahhabism

Definitions. “Wahhabism” generally refers to a movement that seeks to purify the Islamic religion² of any innovations or practices that deviate from the seventh-century teachings of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions. In the West, the term has been used mostly to denote the form of Islam practiced in Saudi Arabia and which has spread recently to various parts of the world. In most Muslim nations, however, believers who adhere to this creed prefer to call themselves “Unitarians” (*muwahiddun*) or “Salafiyyun” (sing. Salafi, noun Salafiyya). The latter term derives from the word *salaf* meaning to

¹ This report was originally written by Febe Armanios. It has been updated by Christopher Blanchard to include information relevant to the 109th Congress.

² For more on the Islamic religion, see CRS Report RS21432, *Islam: A Primer*.

“follow” or “precede,” a reference to the followers and companions of the Prophet. Some Muslims believe the Western usage of the term “Wahhabism” unfairly carries negative and derogatory connotations. Although this paper explains differences in these terms, it will refer to Wahhabism in association with a conservative Islamic creed centered in and emanating from Saudi Arabia and to Salafiyya as a more general puritanical Islamic movement that has developed independently in various places in the Islamic world.

History of Wahhabism.³ Wahhabism is a puritanical form of Sunni Islam and is practiced in Saudi Arabia and Qatar, although it is much less rigidly enforced in the latter. The word “Wahhabi” is derived from the name of a Muslim scholar, Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1791). Frustrated by the moral decline of his society, Abd al-Wahhab denounced many popular beliefs and practices as idolatrous. Ultimately, he encouraged a “return” to the pure and orthodox practice of the “fundamentals” of Islam, as embodied in the Quran and in the life of the Prophet Muhammad. In the eighteenth century, Muhammad bin Saud, founder of the modern-day Saudi dynasty, partnered with Abd al-Wahhab to begin the process of unifying disparate tribes in the Arabian Peninsula. Since the foundation of modern Saudi Arabia in 1932, there has been a close relationship between the Saudi ruling family and the Wahhabi religious establishment.⁴

Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia Today. With the establishment of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Wahhabism gained new ground and was used as the official basis for determining laws and conduct in Saudi society. Wahhabism is the basis for practices such as the segregation of the sexes, the prohibition of the sale and consumption of alcohol, a ban on women driving, and numerous other social restrictions. Wahhabism also has shaped the Saudi educational structure, and Saudi schoolbooks generally denounce teachings that do not conform to Wahhabist beliefs.⁵ The puritanical and iconoclastic philosophies reflected in this sect historically have resulted in conflict with other Muslim groups. Wahhabism opposes most popular religious practices such as saint veneration, the celebration of the Prophet’s birthday, and practices associated with the mystical teachings of Sufism. In September 2004, the State Department designated Saudi Arabia as a “Country of Particular Concern” under the International Religious Freedom Act “for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.” According to the State Department’s 2004 International Religious Freedom Report on Saudi Arabia, in spite of the Saudi government’s “campaign to foster greater moderation and tolerance of religious diversity,” members of the Shi’a Muslim minority continue “to face political and economic discrimination,” and non-Muslim groups are not granted freedom of worship, whether public or private.⁶

Political and Religious Factors

³ For a comprehensive discussion of Sunni Islam and the schools of Islamic legal thought, see CRS Report RS21745, *Islam: Sunnis and Shiites*.

⁴ Contemporary Saudi Wahhabism combines the teachings of its founder Abd al-Wahhab and other religious and cultural traditions. Eleanor Abdella Doumato, “Manning the Barricades: Islam according to Saudi Arabia’s School Texts,” *The Middle East Journal* 57, no. 2 (2003):230-248.

⁵ Michaela Prokop, “Saudi Arabia: The Politics of Education,” *Int. Affairs*, 79, no. 1, pp. 77-89.

⁶ Approximately two million Shiites are citizens of Saudi Arabia. Report available at [<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2004/35507.htm>].

What Is Salafiyya? As noted above, among adherents in general, preference is given to the term “Salafiyya” over “Wahhabism.” These terms have distinct historical roots, but they have been used interchangeably in recent years, especially in the West. Wahhabism is considered by some Muslims as the Saudi form of Salafiyya. Unlike the eighteenth-century Saudi roots of Wahhabism, however, modern Salafi beliefs grew from a reform-oriented movement of the early twentieth century, which developed in various parts of the Islamic world and progressively grew more conservative. In line with other puritanical Islamic teachings, Salafis generally believe that the Quran and the Prophet’s practices (*hadith*) are the ultimate religious authority in Islam, rather than the subsequent commentaries produced by Islamic scholars that interpret these sources.⁷ Salafis also generally maintain that they are “the only [Muslim] group that will be saved on Judgment Day.”⁸ Salafiyya is not a unified movement, and there exists no single Salafi “sect.” However, Salafi interpretations of Islam appeal to a large number of Muslims worldwide — in Africa, Asia, North America, and throughout the Middle East.

The Use of Violence. According to a number of scholars, the use of violent *jihad*⁹ is not inherently associated with puritanical Islamic beliefs. Among certain puritanical Muslims — be they self-described Salafis or Wahhabis — advocacy of *jihad* is a relatively recent phenomenon and is highly disputed within these groups. Some scholars date the ascendancy of militancy among Salafis to the 1980s war of resistance against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. The war against the Soviets gained wide support throughout the Muslim world and mobilized thousands of volunteer fighters. Radical beliefs spread rapidly through select groups of mosques and *madrasas* (Islamic religious schools),¹⁰ located on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, which were created to support the Afghan resistance and funded primarily by Saudi Arabia. Similar U.S. and European funding provided to Pakistan to aid the Afghan mujahideen also may have been diverted to fund the construction and maintenance of *madrasas*. Following the war, Jihadist Salafis with ties to the Afghan resistance denounced leaders of countries such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt as “apostates” and as vehicles for facilitating Western imperialism. The Afghan Taliban group also emerged from this network of institutions. Jihadist Salafi groups such as Al Qaeda continue to advocate the overthrow of the Saudi government and other regimes and the establishment of states that will sustain puritanical Islamic doctrine enforced under a strict application of *shari’a* or Islamic law.

Osama bin Laden and the Al Qaeda Terrorist Network. The Al Qaeda terrorist network arose in the early 1990s, directly out of the radical Salafi Jihadist tradition. As analysts have noted, the ideology of Al Qaeda’s leader, Osama bin Laden, is intended to polarize the Islamic world into two clearly delineated factions: between the

⁷ Ahmad Dallal, “Appropriating the Past: Twentieth-Century Reconstruction of Pre-Modern Islamic Thought,” *Islamic Law and Society* 7, no. 1 (Leiden, 2000): 347.

⁸ Quintan Wiktorowicz, “The New Global Threat: Transnational Salafis and Jihad,” *Middle East Policy* 8, no. 4 (2001): 20.

⁹ *Jihad* literally means “striving” or “struggle.” It has also been used to refer to a “holy war,” although this term does not appear in the Quran. A “greater jihad” implies the spiritual struggle that each Muslim must wage within himself or herself in order to become a better individual. The “lesser jihad” is the one in which a Muslim spreads his/her faith through persuasion and social justice, but it has also been commonly used to refer to war against an aggressor.

¹⁰ See CRS Report RS21654, *Islamic Religious Schools, Madrasas: Background*.

umma (Islamic community) and those regimes which are closely allied with the United States and the West.¹¹ Recent attacks inside Saudi Arabia, in particular, have aimed to undermine the Saudi ruling family, to expose its allegedly “misguided” or insufficient dedication to Wahhabi Islam, and to jeopardize its protectorship of Mecca and Medina, Islam’s holiest cities. Since the 1990s, Al Qaeda has called for a war against the United States, alleging that “U.S. crimes against Islam” were part of a “Zionist-Crusader” plot intended to annihilate Muslims.¹² Many Islamic scholars, including some Wahhabi leaders, have condemned the September 11 attacks against civilians as having no roots in the Islamic religion and view bin Laden as a hijacker and a usurper of their religion.¹³ Bush Administration officials have echoed this sentiment, noting that the United States has “an interest in the voices of the moderates, the people who do not want their religion stolen away from them by extremists like Osama bin Laden.”¹⁴

Although the majority of Salafi adherents do not advocate the violence enshrined in bin Laden’s message, this ideology has attracted a number of followers throughout the Muslim world. Analysts note that some receptive groups are drawn to the anti-Western political messages preached by bin Laden and his organization, despite the fact that these groups may hold different religious beliefs. Some experts caution against “homogenizing” these groups and organizations into a monolithic entity. One warns that the neglect of these groups’ historical roots and the consolidation of “varying motivations, ideologies and objectives of regional terrorist groups”¹⁵ undermines the overall understanding of terrorism, particularly in regions such as Southeast Asia and North Africa.

“Reformist” Salafi Trends. It is worth noting that there are Salafis and Wahhabis who believe that violence should be a last resort and, if used, should be the final stage in a long process of personal transformation, purification, and self-discipline in which each Muslim should engage and which ultimately will lead to the establishment of a pure Islamic state. These “reformists” oppose violence on the basis of the Prophet Muhammad’s own practices; however, their rejection of violence is not absolute and is debated in the face of defending perceived threats against the Islamic religion.

Recent Allegations against Wahhabism and Responses

There have been two major allegations against Wahhabism and against the Saudi Arabian government, which is viewed as its principal proponent:

“Wahhabism Spreads Terrorism”? It is widely acknowledged that the Saudi government, as well as wealthy Saudi individuals, have supported the spread of the

¹¹ Michael Scott Doran, “Somebody Else’s Civil War,” *Foreign Affairs* (Jan./Feb. 2002): 23.

¹² John Kaltner and Quintan Wiktorowicz, “Killing in the Name of Islam: Al Qaeda’s Justification for September 11,” *Middle East Policy* 10, no. 2(2003): 85. For more on Al Qaeda’s ideology, see CRS Report RL32759, *Al Qaeda: Statements and Evolving Ideology*.

¹³ Nora Boustany, “Bin Laden Now a Target in Arab Media; Criticism Emerges as Scholars Emphasize Distance from ‘Distortion of Religion’,” *Washington Post*, Nov. 23, 2001. See also Tamara Albertini, “The Seductiveness of Certainty: The Destruction of Islam’s Intellectual Legacy by the Fundamentalists,” *Philosophy East and West* 53, no. 4(2003): 456.

¹⁴ “Defense Undersecretary Feith Holds News Briefing,” Heritage Foundation, Nov. 24, 2003.

¹⁵ Carlyle A. Thayer, “No, Al Qaeda Isn’t Everywhere,” *Far Eastern Econ. Rev.*, Aug. 21, 2003.

Wahhabist form of Islam in several Muslim countries and in the West. Some have argued that this proselyting has promoted terrorism and has spawned Islamic militancy throughout the world.¹⁶ Saudi funding of mosques, *madradas*, and charities, some of which have been linked to terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda, has raised concern that Wahhabi Islam has been used by militants who tailor this ideology to suit their political goals and who rely on Saudi donations to support their aspirations. Some maintain that the spread of Wahhabism was used to placate radical religious groups that threatened the Saudi regime.¹⁷ Others maintain that Islam, like other religions, “possesses holy texts that can be invoked to support [peace or violence], depending on the circumstances.”¹⁸

“Wahhabism Spreads Intolerance”? Some reports suggest that teachings within Saudi domestic schools may foster intolerance of other religions and cultures. A 2002 study by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) indicates that “some Saudi textbooks taught Islamic tolerance while others viciously condemned Jews and Christians...[and] use rhetoric that was little more than hate literature.”¹⁹ Others also have argued that the global spread of Wahhabist teachings threatens the existence of more moderate Islamic beliefs and practices in other parts of the world, including the United States.²⁰ A 2005 report from Freedom House’s Center for Religious Freedom cites examples of what its authors calls “hate ideology” taken from a number of Saudi government publications that have been distributed in U.S. mosques and Islamic centers.²¹

Saudi Arabia’s Response to These Allegations. The Saudi government has strenuously denied the above allegations. With regard to charges of terrorism, senior Saudi government and religious officials have issued statements insisting there is no association between the Islamic religion and terrorism.²² In response to allegations of teaching intolerance, the Saudi government has embarked in recent months on a campaign of educational reforms, although the outcome of these reforms remains to be seen. Many Saudi leaders have asserted that their religion is tolerant and peaceful, and they have denied allegations that their government exports religious or cultural extremism or supports extremist religious education.

¹⁶ See Council on Foreign Relations Independent Task Force on Terrorist Financing, “Update on the Global Campaign Against Terrorist Financing,” June 15, 2004, p. 20.

¹⁷ Dave Montgomery, “Radical Re-Education,” *The Fort-Worth Star-Telegram*, Dec. 3, 2003.

¹⁸ Peter David, “In the Name of Islam,” *The Economist*, Sept. 13, 2003.

¹⁹ *Saudi Arabia: Opposition, Islamic Extremism, and Terrorism*, Report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Nov. 27, 2002, p. 18.

²⁰ U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Hearing: “Is Saudi Arabia a Strategic Threat?”* Nov. 18, 2003, [<http://www.uscirf.gov/hearings/18Nov03/saudi.php3>].

²¹ Freedom House, “Saudi Publications on Hate Ideology Fill American Mosques,” January 2005.

²² “Saudi Arabia’s Highest Religious Authority Warns Against the Dangers of Extremism,” Aug. 21, 2003. Available at [http://saudiembassy.net/ReportLink/Report_Extremism_Oct03.pdf].

Current U.S. Policy and Legislation

In light of allegations against Wahhabism, some critics have called for a reevaluation of the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia, although others maintain that U.S. economic and security interests require continued and close ties with the Saudis. The Bush administration has praised Saudi counter-terrorism cooperation, and President Bush has praised Islam and denounced groups that have “hijacked a great religion.”²³

9/11 Commission. The Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (the “9/11 Commission”) claims that “Islamist terrorism” finds inspiration in “a long tradition of extreme intolerance” that flows “through the founders of Wahhabism,” the Muslim Brotherhood, and prominent Salafi thinkers. The report further details the education and activities of some 9/11 hijackers in the Al Qassim province of Saudi Arabia, which the report describes as “the very heart of the strict Wahhabi movement in Saudi Arabia.” According to the Commission, some Saudi “Wahhabi- funded organizations,” such as the now-defunct Al Haramain Islamic Foundation, “have been exploited by extremists to further their goal of violent jihad against non-Muslims.”²⁴ Due in part to these findings, the Commission recommended a frank discussion of the relationship between the United States and its “problematic ally,” Saudi Arabia.

Issues for Congress. Wahhabism has been a focus of congressional hearings, which have examined the relationship between this religious belief and terrorist financing, as well as its alleged ties to the spread of intolerance. Several bills in the 108th Congress criticized Saudi-funded religious institutions and alleged that they provide ideological support for anti-Western terrorism. Section 7105(b) of the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 (P.L. 108-458, December 17, 2004) expresses the sense of Congress that “there should be a more robust dialogue between the people and Government of the United States and the people and Government of Saudi Arabia.” Section 7120(b) of the Act requires the President to submit to Congress within 180 days a strategy for collaboration with Saudi Arabia. The strategy paper is to include proposals for promoting tolerance and diversity in Saudi Arabia and for diminishing support for extremist groups from Saudi sources.

In the 109th Congress, Section 233 of the proposed Targeting Terrorists More Effectively Act of 2005 (S. 12) states the sense of Congress that Saudi Arabia must “undertake a number of political and economic reforms,” in order to more effectively combat terrorism, including “providing more political rights to its citizens, increasing the rights of women,” and “engaging in comprehensive educational reform.” The bill would require the President to submit a report, classified as necessary, within 90 days of enactment that describes the long-term strategy of the United States to engage with Saudi Arabia to facilitate political, economic, and social reforms and to effectively prevent the financing of terrorism. The bill has been referred to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations.

²³ “Remarks by President George W. Bush on U.S. Humanitarian Aid to Afghanistan,” Oct. 11, 2002, White House website: [<http://www.whitehouse.gov/infocus/ramadan/islam.html>].

²⁴ For more on Al Haramain and allegations on Saudi support for terrorism, see CRS Report RL32499, *Saudi Arabia: Terrorist Financing Issues*.