

## **Wahhabism in its home country: Saudi Arabia**

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Defining the term „Wahhabiya“ is a difficult task. In fact, although every scholar dealing with the Middle East and most Muslims as well are using it in a way or another, it remains a highly contested term. First and foremost, it is a label attached to the Najdi reform movement by its opponents. Therefore, its supporters reject it and prefer names as *al-muwahhidun*, *ahl at-tawhid*, *as-salafiyun* or simply *al-muslimun*. However, using one of these conceals the fact that the Wahhabiya is distinct from the Salafiya and other Islamic movements which have proposed reform along the lines of an idealized community of early Muslims in Mecca and Medina.

When writing about the Wahhabiya, I define it as a Central Arabian reform movement, founded by the so-called „pact“ between the ruler of Dir'iyah, Muhammad b. Saud and the reformer Muhammad b. Abdalwahhab in 1744/45. The pact between religious scholar and ruler triggered a dynamic of expansion which led to the foundation of three subsequent states and which has provided the Saudi state with a superior religious legitimacy until today. However, the relationship between rulers and scholars changed over the course of time. Most notably, the emergence of a modern state from the 1930s on made the ruler the dominating part in a relationship which had been far more equal until the early twentieth century. Thereby, the Wahhabi movement lost some of its religious-ideological momentum. On the other hand, the religious part of it gained financial support by what was to become one of the richest states on earth, allowing it to expand its scope of action worldwide.

Based on this definition, the Wahhabi (or Najdi) scholars form one part of the movement only. While the Wahhabiya went through a fundamental process of change from early in the twentieth century on, the *'ulama* remained committed to the ideology of Muhammad b. Abdalwahhab. Although Salafi and Wahhabi thought converged to a certain extent, the core

of Wahhabi religious and - to a lesser extent legal - thinking have remained unchanged. This found its physical embodiment in the figure of the late Grand Mufti, 'Abdal'aziz b. Baz (d. 1999) who had been an influential figure among the Wahhabi *'ulama* for more than fifty years.

In my presentation I will focus on the three following aspects:

1. In German literature on the Wahhabiya, a chronological subdivision has been established. Reinhard Schulze in 1990 differentiated between Wahhabiya and „Neo-Wahhabiya“, adopting and developing an older idea by Werner Ende. Thereby, he hinted at that - after Saudi forces had conquered the Hijaz in 1924/5 - increased contacts to Hijazi and Salafi scholars changed the character of the Wahhabi movement. Schulze sees an alliance of Hijazi *'ulama* on the one hand having adopted most tenets of the Wahhabiya in a more moderate form, and of Syrians and Egyptians working for the emerging Saudi state on the other hand. This alliance he defines as the Neo-Wahhabiya

While the differentiation between a Wahhabiya and a Neo-Wahhabiya after about 1930 seems logical, Schulze's interpretation doesn't address the core issue. The Wahhabiya changed because the ruler became increasingly independent of the Wahhabi scholars from Najd, who from now on formed only one - if the dominant - group of *'ulama* in the Kingdom. While some Hijazis moved closer to Wahhabi tenets, they did not join the Wahhabiya, but might rather be counted as Salafis.

2. The differentiation between Najdi and Hijazi scholars has become essential for an understanding of the Wahhabiya. It is widely believed that the Hijazis adapted to the new realities after 1924/5 by subscribing to the main Wahhabi tenets, excepting only the most controversial items like the excommunication (*takfir*) of non-Wahhabis. However, using a term like Neo-Wahhabiya conceals that Wahhabi *'ulama* from Najd still dominate religious institutions in the Kingdom and that they remain separate from their Hijazi colleagues. Hijazis are excluded and mainly stick to their functions in their home province, in some cases even keeping up religious traditions forbidden by the Wahhabi state, like i.e. Sufism. Essentially, the Wahhabiya remains a Najdi project.

3. Having defined the *'ulama* from Najd as *the* representatives of the Wahhabiya, it is important to stress that not all scholars from Najd were Wahhabis. In fact, many Najdi scholars opposed the Wahhabi movement from the 18th century. In the early 20th century, different schools had emerged, with Wahhabis or Wahhabi radicals dominating in Riyadh and Southern Najd in general , while the school of Unaiza (and, to a lesser extent, Hail) proved to be more cosmopolitan, and, as a consequence, established contacts with the Salafi movement all over the region. As a result, the most important Saudi Arabian scholars of the twentieth century, Abdarraḥman b. Nasir as-Sa'di (d. 1956), was a modernist rather than a Wahhabi.