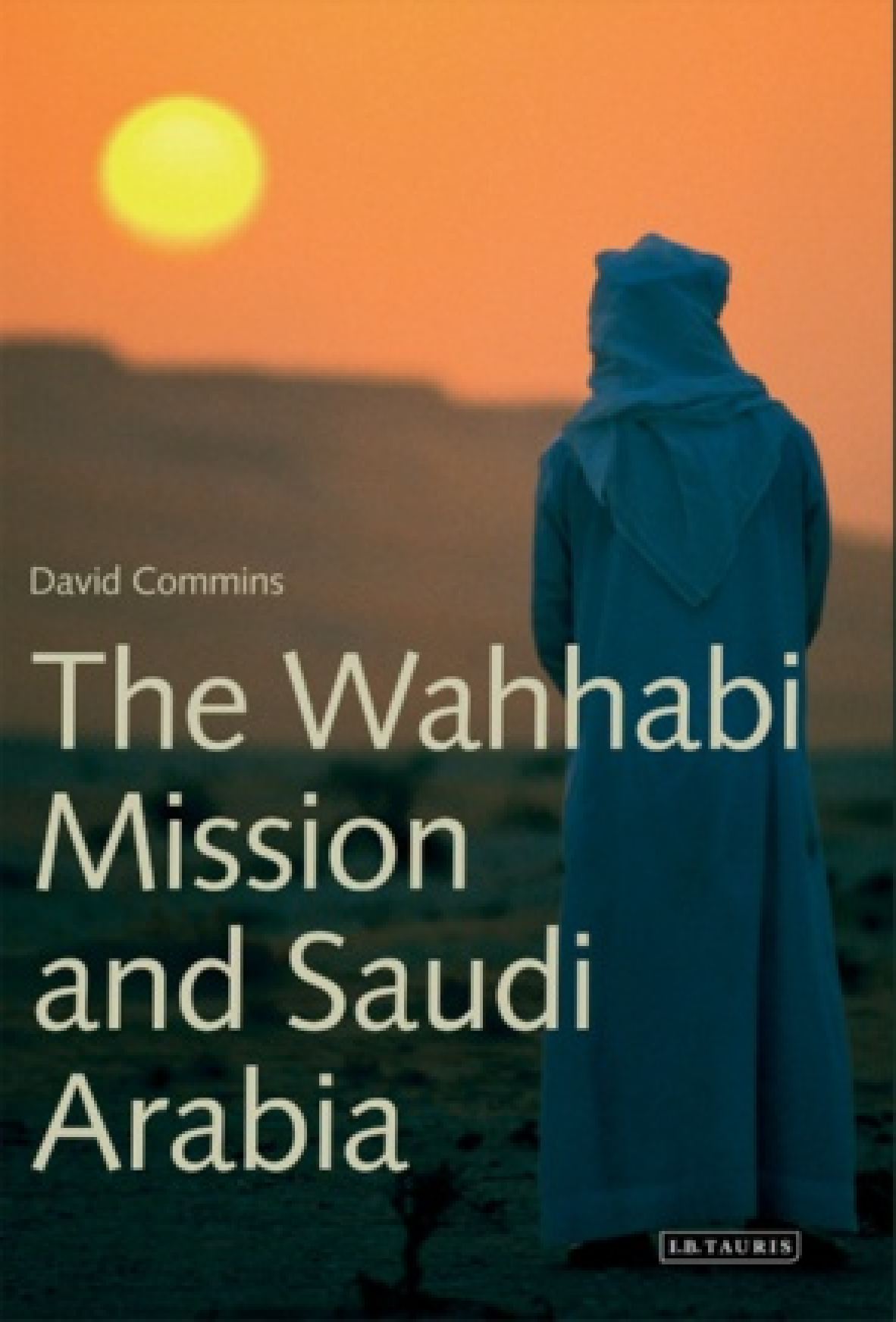
David Commins
The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia
I.B.TAURIS

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For Stephen, Gary, and Neil

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Preface

What is the Wahhabi mission?[1] To answer that question is to risk taking a position on a controversy that has divided Muslims for more than two centuries. A neutral observer could define the Wahhabi mission as the religious reform movement associated with the teachings of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1792). He and his followers believe that they have a religious obligation to spread the call (in Arabic, *da'wa*) for a restoration of pure monotheistic worship. Thus, the mission's devotees contend that 'Wahhabism' is a misnomer for their efforts to revive correct Islamic belief and practice. Instead of the Wahhabi label, they prefer either *salafi*, one who follows the ways of the first Muslim ancestors (*salaf*), or *muwahhid*, one who professes God's unity. On the other hand, a Muslim critic would say that Wahhabism is a deviant sectarian movement started by an ambitious, misguided religious leader from a remote part of Arabia that has spawned heretical movements since early Islam. Muslims sharply disagree on this question of definition because the pivotal idea in Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's teaching determines whether one is a Muslim or an infidel. In his opinion, Muslims who disagreed with his definition of monotheism were not heretics, that is to say, misguided Muslims, but outside the pale of Islam altogether. Therefore, Wahhabi

disputes with other Muslims are not comparable to those between Catholic and Protestant during the Reformation.

It is well known that Muslims profess belief in one God, and that such belief is a cardinal tenet of Islam. The profession of faith (*shahada*) states, 'There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God.' The controversy between Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and his critics turns on the implication of the first clause and its sincere proclamation. Most Muslims throughout history have accepted the position that declaring this profession of faith makes one a Muslim. One might or might not regularly perform the other obligatory rituals – the five daily prayers, fasting, almsgiving, and pilgrimage – and one might or might not scrupulously conform to Islamic ethical and moral standards. But as long as one believed that God is one and that Muhammad is His messenger, then any shortcomings would render one a sinner, not an unbeliever.

Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab did not accept that view. He argued that the criterion for one's standing as either a Muslim or an unbeliever was correct worship as an expression of belief in one God. He noted that in the time of Muhammad, the Arab idolaters acknowledged that God was the Creator and the Lord of all creation, yet they were the Prophet's worst enemies, and the Qur'an states that they will suffer eternal torment in the Fire for their disbelief. But how can that be if they believe in God the Creator? It is so because, according to the Arabian reformer, belief in one God has a second aspect that one absolutely must affirm in order to qualify as a Muslim, and that requires one to devote worship purely and exclusively to God. Any act or statement that indicates devotion to a being other than God is to associate another creature with God's power, and that is tantamount to idolatry (*shirk*). Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab included in the category of such acts popular religious practices that made holy men into intercessors with God. That was the core of the controversy between him and his adversaries, including his own brother. In the course of composing polemical epistles and treatises, a host of ancillary disputes sprouted forth.

One of the peculiar features of the debate between Wahhabis and their adversaries is its apparently static nature. A set of arguments and counter-arguments emerged in just a few decades after Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab began his public mission in the 1740s. Since then, the two sides have added what each considers convincing proof texts from the Qur'an and the Sunna (the Prophet's exemplary conduct

and sayings) to support their positions, but the main points in the debate stay the same. This struck me in fall 2001 when I read an exchange between an Omani and a Saudi scholar that went over the same ground that rivals had covered for more than two centuries. I mentioned this to an Egyptian scholar and he asked me why I would want to study something that does not change. I replied that when I began my research, I did not know if or how Wahhabism had evolved. As a western student of the subject, I was a bit shocked to find the same points getting rehashed in a twenty-first century publication, and my reaction was one of both bemusement and admiration. The former stemmed from a prejudice favouring dynamism and evolution in the realm of ideas. The latter came from a historian's wondering about the power of practices and discourses to endure through an era of profound transformation. I was at a loss to fathom it or to categorize it. My initial thought was that it represented a sort of fossilized discourse, but that is not true. It is not a fossil. It is alive and meaningful and moving to its partisans. Part of the historian's challenge is to decipher the logic and dynamism of ideas and relationships that are remote from his own time and culture.[2]

Acknowledgements

Five years ago, I decided to study the history of Wahhabism in the nineteenth century. And I wanted to research the topic in Saudi Arabia. The trick was to find a host institution and the means to support a period of study there. I was very fortunate to apply for a residency at the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies at the King Faisal Foundation shortly after it began to host foreign scholars. A Fulbright Grant for the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia Regional Research Program funded my five-month stay in Riyadh in 2001–2002. I am grateful to Juan Cole, Michael Cook, Philip Khoury, William Ochsenwald, John Voll, and Neil Weissman for encouraging the project at that early stage. I owe a deep debt of gratitude to the King Faisal Center's directors, staff, and researchers for their hospitality and assistance. The words 'institutional host' fail to capture what the Center meant to me. I cannot imagine more gracious hosts than Dr. Yahya Mahmoud ibn Junayd, Director of the Center, and Dr. Awadh al-Badi, Director of the Department of Research and Studies. Mr. Syed Jameel efficiently and cheerfully performed the sorts of administrative and logistical tasks that a newcomer might demand. All three men and their associates went out of their way to make a stranger feel welcome.

It was a special pleasure to get reacquainted with a friend from graduate school days at Ann Arbor, Dr. Abd al-Rahman Shemlan, whose warmth and wisdom have deepened over the years. To Abd al-Rahman I owe fond memories of spending Id al-Fitr in Unayza with his family and friends. Dr. Abd Allah al-Askar introduced me to his colleagues at King Saud University and invited me to visit his family's home town, al-Majma'a, affording me some glimpses of Najdi life outside Riyadh. I met Dr. Khalid al-Dakhil fairly late in my stay, but we kept in contact after my departure and got reacquainted in fall 2003 when he was a resident scholar in Washington, DC. By that time, this project was a bit further along and I used Khalid as a sounding board for ideas, confident that he would offer me frank criticism, often for leaping to unwarranted conclusions. Dr. Fahd A. al-Semmari, Secretary General of the King Abdulaziz Foundation for Research and Archives, supported my efforts to sustain academic exchange by kindly lending the Foundation's support to a panel of Saudi and American scholars at the Middle East Studies Association's 2002 Annual Meeting.

One of the special delights of research is the fortuitous encounter. On a visit to the King Fahd National Library I met Abd Allah al-Muneef, curator of the manuscript section. He led me to several important sources on nineteenth century Wahhabism. Abd Allah also kindly introduced me to fellow researchers Dr. Suheyl Sapan, curator of the Library's Ottoman and Turkish section, Abd al-Rahman A. Al-Shuqeir, Muhammad Rashid, and Rashed M. Bin Asakir. At the very end of my stay in Riyadh, I met Mr. Saud Sirhan. Thanks to all of these men, my time in Saudi Arabia turned into a fascinating intellectual and cultural journey.

Lora Berg, cultural affairs officer at the United States embassy in Riyadh, and Karim Chaibi offered their friendship, which was essential to keeping me going during the tumultuous fall of 2001. It was an honor to become acquainted with Dr. Igor Timoreev, a fellow researcher at the King Faisal Center. To him I owe delicious memories of chocolate mousse and conversations about modern Saudi history. In Cairo, Dr. Ann B. Radwan, executive director of the Binational Fulbright Commission, and Nevine Abd al-Salam provided valuable support for my research efforts. On returning to the USA, a Dickinson College Sabbatical Supplement Grant made it possible to continue research in spring 2002.

The roster of colleagues and friends who have read and commented

on portions of this book includes Khalid al-Dakhil, Natana DeLong-Bas, Abd al-Aziz Al-Fahad, Hala Fattah, James Gelvin, Dina Khoury, and Steven Weinberger. My brothers Stephen and Gary Commins read chapters and offered valuable suggestions. My friend Chuck Nyren gave me smart pointers on writing style that I doubt were put to very good use. I owe Susan Lindt for her steady encouragement of this project, from conception to completion. Tina Maresco and Sandra Gorrity in the interlibrary loan department at Dickinson College kept the pipeline of books and articles flowing. When I decided to include a map, my associate Michele Hassinger assured me it would be a snap and produced one for me. I may not have turned my project from early Wahhabi history into a general survey were it not for prompting from Iradj Bagherzade and Turi Munthe of I.B.Tauris. I also thank Hanako Birks at I.B.Tauris and Steve Tribe for taking this work from rough manuscript to polished publication. I appreciate the criticisms and suggestions of two anonymous readers for improving the manuscript. Saudi Aramco World kindly granted permission to reproduce photographs from its Public Affairs Digital Image Archive. This project became a preoccupation during my daughter Marcia's final year of high school. She tolerated the inexorable spread of books, papers, and files at home and her dad's eccentric tales of discoveries in the Arabian past.

If this book has any merit, it comes from the colleagues, friends, and family members to whom I owe so much. Its flaws belong to the author.

David Commins
Carlisle, PA

• THE MIDDLE EAST •

Introduction

In the early 1740s, Muslim religious scholars in Mecca took note of a new doctrine coming out of Central Arabia.[1] The author of that doctrine, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, declared that Muslims had reverted to idolatry. Naturally, the religious scholars (*ulama*) took exception and wrote treatises attacking his views as well as his qualifications to comment on theology. As the controversy between Wahhabism and its critics unfolded, the latter formed an explanation for the 'errant' doctrine's origin that found its way into standard histories. It goes something like this.

Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab came from a remote backwater of Arabia where the tradition of scholastic learning was shallow. A handful of ulama studied at cosmopolitan centres like Cairo or Damascus and then returned to Najd (Central Arabia), where their knowledge was magnified by the depth of ignorance surrounding them among an illiterate population of townsmen and nomads. Members of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's lineage, including his grandfather, father and brother, belonged to this unsophisticated but earnest cluster of ulama. As long as they followed the lead of more learned colleagues in Syria and Egypt, the townsmen of Najd benefited from their guidance on ritual, family law and property transactions. Sheikh

Muhammad followed the family tradition of religious study, but he misunderstood passages in the Qur'an and the Prophet's tradition (*Sunna*), leading him to break with the mainstream of Muslim thought. Some of the more fanciful descriptions of his life stem from an effort to depict him as a deviant thinker. For example, an early nineteenth-century biography reports that he spent a number of years studying in Iranian towns, which would have been centres of Shiite learning as opposed to the Ottoman Empire's tradition of Sunni learning. Perhaps the author wished to imply that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab had absorbed heretical (from an Ottoman viewpoint) tendencies from Iran's Shiite scholars. Some Muslim authors averred that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's views were not the result of an innocent intellectual mistake but an intentional distortion of Islam that suited his thirst for power. Thus, he considered genuine Muslims to be infidels, whose life, property and honour were fair game for his and the Saudi dynasty's expansionist wars. He was able to stir up religious enthusiasm because he was living in the midst of ignorant nomads, easily swayed by a clever preacher and eager to plunder settlements and towns. Apart from the obviously tendentious character of this view, it is utterly mistaken about the relationship between Arabian nomadic tribes and the Wahhabi movement, which in fact regarded nomads as ignorant barbarians in need of religious instruction.[2]

Of course, the Wahhabis have a very different view of their own history. They might encapsulate it in a Prophetic tradition where Muhammad said, 'Islam first appeared as a stranger and will one day return as a stranger.' By this is meant that when Muhammad first preached in seventh-century Mecca, the idea that people owed all worship and devotion to one God was utterly foreign to the Arabs. Islam was not merely strange. It was contrary to the beliefs, customs, mentality and desires of Muhammad's audience. After years of courageous and determined effort, Muhammad gained many followers, forged them into a community and mobilized them to prevail in a political and military struggle for supremacy in Arabia. But, according to the Hadith, Muhammad foretold a time when Islam would become as alien to mankind as it had been when he began his mission. Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab believed that he lived during such a time. And it was not merely a matter of finding lax adherence among the rustic inhabitants of his native Najd, for he travelled to and spent time in the cosmopolitan Holy Cities, Mecca and Medina, the latter especially renowned as a centre of religious

learning that attracted pupils and scholars from the breadth of the Muslim world, from Morocco to the East Indies. Wherever he went, he found that people had lapsed into religious ignorance, *jahiliyya*, a barbaric state wherein they did not recognize their violation of the imperative to devote all worship to God alone.[3] Sheikh Muhammad concluded that Islam was as much a stranger in his time as it had been eleven centuries earlier when God had first revealed the Qur'an. His call (*da'wa*), the essence of the Wahhabi mission, was to revive pure devotion of worship to God alone. For Muslims who agree with this account, 'Wahhabism' is merely a rebirth of Islam at the end of a period of decadence. The paradigm of religious decline and revival is a common one in Muslim thought. In this respect, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab conformed to a cultural model of a reformist preacher. Moreover, his correspondence and the Wahhabi chronicles depict him as arriving at his convictions on his own, indeed, through inspiration, not under the influence of any teacher he encountered in his travels. The controversy between Wahhabis and other Muslims centres on his standing as an inspired reformer performing a necessary task or as an eccentric man whose deficient educational formation made him stray from the mainstream and form a sectarian movement.

Historians need not choose sides in the argument between Wahhabis and their foes. But historians love to argue and I might start some arguments with a new framework for making sense of Wahhabism. It is time to push past questions about its origins and the emphasis on its relationship to the Saudi dynasty, as significant as they are.[4] Whatever historical forces caused its emergence, Wahhabism has been around long enough to make one wonder about the secrets of its endurance during a transformative phase of history. It is not merely a matter of dynastic support. True, the doctrine's initial establishment required that support because Wahhabism overturned an ancient tradition of religious learning and that was achieved, in part, by force. Many ulama left their homes in Najd and resettled in southern Iraq, where they incited Ottoman ulama to wage a propaganda war against the Wahhabi doctrine. In turn, Wahhabi sheikhs discouraged travel to Ottoman lands, whose inhabitants they deemed idolaters, and subjected visitors to close scrutiny for hints of doctrinal contamination. The uprooting of the old scholastic tradition and the quarantine on travel made it possible for Wahhabism to attain a monopoly on religious thought and practice in most of Najd. Thus, by the mid 1800s, the Wahhabi mission formed a regional religious

culture with its own doctrine, canon, leadership, cadre of ulama and centre of learning. Its dependence on dynastic power had diminished so that when Al Saud collapsed in the 1880s and 1890s, the mission did not collapse with it. True, Najd's new rulers did not make a show of supporting the doctrine; but they did not try to suppress it either. Wahhabism was not merely the dominant doctrine in Najd. It was practically the only one.

If Wahhabism isolated itself from the rest of the Muslim world and other Muslims regarded it as a heretical innovation, how did it attain so much influence outside Saudi Arabia in the twentieth century? A sequence of developments created an opening in the wall separating Wahhabis and other Muslims. In the late nineteenth century, an Islamic revivalist tendency appeared in the Arab East and India. The revivalists had much in common with the Wahhabis. Although not identical, these doctrinal cousins were dedicated to resisting western cultural influences, so differences were submerged and contacts cultivated. Most significantly, revivalists published works to revise Wahhabism's reputation in the eyes of the Muslim world. The next step in the rapprochement came in the first decades of the twentieth century when the founder of Saudi Arabia's modern kingdom, Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud, took steps to integrate his realm into regional and global political and economic systems. In pursuit of that policy, he suppressed the mission's most zealous current, employed non-Saudi Arabs as advisers and invited Americans to develop his land's reservoirs of petroleum. Wahhabi ulama disapproved of the foreigners' arrival but were powerless to block it. Ibn Saud's pragmatism and political independence at a time when European powers exercised direct rule over most Arab lands raised his kingdom's stature. During the same era, popular religious organizations such as the Muslim Brothers surfaced in Egypt and spread to other Arab countries, widening the revivalist niche that viewed Wahhabism with favour. In the 1960s and 1970s, Al Saud adopted an Islamic foreign policy and created religious institutions to proselytize abroad. In that effort, the Wahhabis joined hands with the Muslim Brothers and revivalist organizations in Pakistan. As a result of that alliance, Wahhabism reached new heights of influence far beyond the confines of its historic homeland. The anti-Soviet Afghan jihad of the 1980s represented the peak of Wahhabi-revivalist collaboration and triumph.

Throughout the decades of rapprochement between Wahhabism and Islamic revivalist movements, it seemed that the Wahhabi

mission's connection to the Muslim world was a one-way street, with Saudi ulama propagating the Najdi doctrine abroad and retaining its monopoly at home. But Saudi Arabia's integration into regional politics and its need for expatriate workers to manage the modern sector of its economy exposed it to the full range of Arab political and religious tendencies. Given the popularity of nationalist and leftist parties in the 1950s and 1960s, it made perfect sense to ally with conservative religious organizations like the Muslim Brothers. The decision to offer asylum to Muslim Brothers fleeing persecution at the hands of secular Arab regimes was part of an effort to consolidate the bastion of Islam against atheist currents. No one could have foreseen that the Muslim Brothers would successfully spread their ideas in the kingdom and erode Wahhabism's hegemony. As long as Muslim revivalists supported Al Saud, their doctrinal differences with Wahhabism could be muted and the extent of revivalist inroads into Saudi religious culture undetected. Wahhabism's soft spot was its political doctrine, which dictates obedience to a ruler unless he commands a believer to violate Islamic law. This puts Wahhabi religious scholars in the position of either defending rulers or offering quiet, behind the scenes criticism. Muslim revivalists have no compunction about openly denouncing rulers or even striving to depose them. The economic downturn of the 1980s and the infiltration of western culture soured many Saudi citizens' views of their rulers' leadership. Revivalist thought offered a platform for political dissent missing in Wahhabism. The alliance between doctrinal cousins shattered in 1990 when Riyadh responded to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait by requesting military assistance from the USA. The kingdom's erstwhile revivalist friends suddenly turned into sharp critics, accusing Al Saud of betraying Islam by inviting infidel troops to occupy the land of the holy places. Saudi dissidents, who had assimilated the revivalist ideology, echoed that criticism and accused the Wahhabi leadership as well of betraying Islam for the sake of an illegitimate dynasty. Dissidents preached to receptive ears at mosques and recordings of their sermons found a large market. Wahhabi hegemony faced its most serious challenge since the early nineteenth century. In the following decade, Wahhabi religious leaders tepidly defended Al Saud against the angry bromides of dissident preachers, confident of their popular backing.

The 11 September 2001 attacks on the USA led to intense scrutiny of Wahhabism and its global influence. The involvement of Saudi

citizens in the attacks and suspicions that Saudi institutions helped fund al-Qaeda led many to conclude that Wahhabism contributed to anti-western violence and therefore to call on the Saudi government to reduce its influence. But were Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda the fruit of Wahhabi schools in Saudi Arabia? How could that be the case when bin Laden considered Al Saud traitors who must be overthrown? In the autumn of 2001, a Wahhabi cleric appeared on a Saudi television news programme to explain why killing civilians is prohibited in Islam and why Osama bin Laden could not proclaim a jihad (that power is held by the sovereign). Young men called the station and defied the Wahhabi cleric: the 11 September attacks were part of a righteous jihad against the West; bin Laden was the 'commander of believers' and therefore perfectly justified in launching a jihad.

In 2003–2004, Saudi cities were the scene of a wave of suicide bombings, killings of westerners and gun battles between Saudi security forces and militants. Was this mayhem the outcome of revivalism's inroads in the kingdom, a sign of Wahhabism's diminished authority? Or were Wahhabis divided between loyalists to the dynasty and zealots who had jettisoned traditional political theory? In that event, we would be witnessing its fragmentation. Furthermore, members of Al Saud decided it might be time to trim Wahhabism's domination by holding a series of National Dialogues that included Shiites, Sufis, liberal reformers and professional women. At present, the indications are not good for true believers in Wahhabi doctrine. But as its history demonstrates, the doctrine has survived crises before. The question that history cannot answer is what will be Wahhabism's future.

Chapter One

Islam Began as a Stranger and Will Return as a Stranger

The Wahhabi religious reform movement arose in Najd, the vast, thinly populated heart of Central Arabia. Contrary to common belief, the movement did not bear the stamp of nomadic or tribal Arabia. Rather, it emerged from oasis settlements. To make sense of the movement's origins, then, we must situate it in the context of Najdi society and that society's place in the wider Muslim world.

Najd before the Wahhabi Mission

For centuries before the rise of Wahhabism, Najd was, to outsiders, a virtually forgotten land, an abode of disorderly, uncouth and irreligious nomads, a hole in the imagination of Islamic civilization's great urban centres in Istanbul, Cairo and Damascus. It lay beyond the Muslim heartland's cultural horizon even though it was adjacent to the Holy Cities, the spiritual core of Islam. Few Muslims traversed the Central Arabian desert to reach the pilgrimage centres at Mecca and Medina. Instead, pilgrims from North Africa, Egypt and Turkey would gather in Cairo and Damascus to journey in caravans that skirted the Red Sea coast. From the vast Indian Ocean basin, pilgrims sailed under monsoon winds to Yemen and Red Sea ports. The exceptions to this avoidance of Najd's parched landscape were pilgrims and merchants from Iraq and Iran, for whom the land route was close at hand.

Najd's isolation also obtained in the political sphere, as none of the great Muslim land empires had ruled it since the weakening of the Abbasid caliphate in the tenth century. The Ottoman Empire at its height in the sixteenth century surrounded the region on two sides, projecting its authority like two arms, one down the Red Sea coast to Yemen in order to secure the Holy Cities and another down the Persian Gulf to guard against Portuguese interlopers and to fend off Persian advances in Iraq and on the Gulf's western Arabian shore. The Ottomans saw no reason to invade and subdue Najd – it lacked valuable economic resources, it posed no strategic threat and it offered the sultan no prestige. Istanbul regarded the peninsula as a primitive frontier zone whose primary importance was as the site of Islam's Holy Cities. The sultan claimed to be their guardian on behalf of all Muslims, both inside and outside his domain. As long as the Ottoman-commanded pilgrim caravans made the journey safely, Istanbul was satisfied with arrangements managed by sharifs of Mecca with nomadic tribes. Interfering with or obstructing the pilgrimage, however, would pose a threat to the sultan's prestige and provoke a strong reaction. Except for the rare successful nomadic raid on pilgrim trains, Ottoman sultans had little reason to worry about that quarter of their realm in the early 1700s. They were far more concerned with the empire's weakening posture with respect to European powers.

Local Arabian powers west and east of Najd played a more active role in its political affairs. In Hijaz, the sharifs of Mecca, who acknowledged the Ottoman sultan as sovereign, had complex relations with the tribes and settlements of Najd. The sharifs tried to develop stable alliances with powerful tribes and extracted tribute from settlements; such arrangements, however, were rarely durable because of the tribes' view of alliances as temporary opportunities. In al-Hasa, the Banu Khalid tribe was dominant and vied with Meccan sharifs for influence over Najd. In the early 1700s, the Banu Khalid enjoyed several decades of preponderance among the region's tribes and oases.[1]

Najd occupied a marginal position in the Muslim world. If we take a different perspective, that of Najd looking outward, the picture shifts. The central Islamic lands loomed large in its economic activities and a substantial section of the settled population regarded the major cities as vessels of religious and cultural ideals. Nomads and oasis dwellers derived part of their livelihood from trade with neighbouring

regions (Iraq, al-Hasa, Hijaz, Syria) and from servicing trans-Arabian caravans with guides, escorts and camels. Nomads raided settled areas in adjacent lands for plunder. Nearby Muslim lands provided a model of civilized life that oasis dwellers regarded as exemplary and one dimension of that model was religious learning.[2]

Najdi society was divided between nomads and settled folk (*hadar*). The nomads belonged to several tribal groups organized by ties of kinship, both real and fictive. Each tribe grazed its sheep, goats, horses and camels in a more or less well-defined domain. They exchanged animal products for food crops and for goods made in settlements or imported there. They also sold transportation and security (against raids by other tribes) to merchant and pilgrim caravans. In contrast to the interdependence that characterized economic relations between nomads and settled folk, they were usually separate in the political sphere. Each tribe had its own leading clan, from which was selected a sheikh. Tribes made alliances with each other and oasis settlements, but again, such alliances were temporary. An important difference between the nomadic and settled realms lay in the degree to which kinship figured as a factor in social relations. It is only a slight overstatement to say that for residents of oasis settlements, tribal bonds seldom figured in their political or economic pursuits. One might consider them to be detribalized because of their immersion in an environment that fostered ties related to landed property and commercial wealth rather than common shares in livestock.[3]

The domain of the sown, the oasis settlements of Najd, depended on date palms and cultivated crops. Traders profited from long-distance caravans in the trans-Arabian trade. The political order bore a superficial resemblance to the nomadic one in that the settlements had chiefly lineages that commanded armed retinues to collect land rent from poorer townsmen. The Arabian chronicles record political events in the larger settlements as unending battles for pre-eminence between chiefly lineages or within rival branches of the same lineage. The scale of political power was small, both in terms of population and area under the sway of a chieftain. At the most, the chief of a large settlement might dominate smaller neighbours by levying tribute and designating an ally to act as his surrogate. More commonly, settlements were completely independent or even divided into two rival segments.

Since the fifteenth century at the latest, Najdi religious scholars (ulama) looked to learning centres in Hijaz, Egypt, Syria and Iraq

to provide the most eminent teachers for itinerant Arabian pupils and to supply authoritative texts on Islamic sciences. The record on Najdi ulama prior to the mission is thin, but we can discern four significant patterns. First, just a handful of oasis settlements had any religious learning worth mention at all. Second, in those settlements, certain family lineages specialized in maintaining and transmitting the scholastic tradition. Third, the focus of learning and practice was applied Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*). Fourth, the majority of ulama followed the Hanbali school of fiqh while a handful belonged to the Shafi'i and Maliki schools.[4] These aspects of Najd's scholastic tradition, singly or in combination, do not explain the rise of the Wahhabi mission, but the mission does bear a Hanbali stamp and it is firmly associated with the region's most prominent scholastic lineage, known as Al Musharraf. While we know few details about the ulama, we know even less about the religious lives of ordinary Najdis apart from what Wahhabi critics wrote about their deviance from proper Islamic practice. The religious climate seems to have accommodated a variety of traditions: different Sunni schools of law, coexistence between local custom and norms of Islamic law (*shari'a*) in everyday life and indifference to the sectarian allegiance of Shiite pilgrims from Iran and al-Hasa passing through the region to perform the hajj.[5] Wahhabi sources characterize Najd as a land of such lax observance and moral degradation that a revivalist mission was necessary, but the handful of chronicles that predate the mission take no note of such decadence.

To summarize conditions in Najd around 1700, society was divided between nomadic and settled populations, both organized in small scale, autonomous, ephemeral polities, as tribal groups or chieftaincies. The arid and semi-arid region provided sufficient vegetation and rainfall for raising livestock and growing date palms; a steady stream of merchant and pilgrim caravans traversed the peninsula, adding a locally significant surplus to the economy. A small number of settlements hosted scholars, mostly from a handful of lineages, who looked to cosmopolitan centres as repositories of Islamic sciences.

The Mission of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab

A prominent scholarly lineage named Al Musharraf provided religious leadership as teachers and judges in several oasis settlements.[6] The modern Saudi historian Abd Allah al-Mutawa has identified ten

ulama from Al Musharraf in the period before Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab.[7] Abd al-Wahhab ibn Sulayman Al Musharraf (d. 1740) was the chief jurist in al-Uyayna. He had two sons who pursued religious learning, Sulayman and Muhammad. Because the latter would launch the Wahhabi reform movement, historical sources provide much more, often contradictory, detail about his upbringing than his brother's.[8] Of course, he acquired the standard introduction to reading and writing through instruction about the Qur'an and then proceeded to the usual range of Islamic sciences, with emphasis on jurisprudence. The variants in his life story begin with descriptions of his travels to pursue learning.[9] For at least two centuries, Najdi religious pupils journeyed to Cairo, Damascus and the Holy Cities to study under leading Hanbali authorities and then return home burnished with the prestige of their academic affiliation.[10] That Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab travelled widely was not extraordinary. It is attested by all the sources, but the details vary not only on the sequence of his travels, they diverge as well on the extent of his journeys. Saudi sources confine his travels to Arabian towns – the Holy Cities and a town in al-Hasa (just east of Najd) – and the southern Iraqi city of Basra. Other accounts report lengthy tours in Baghdad, Mosul, Damascus and several Iranian towns. A close study of the various sources leads to the conclusion that somebody was misinformed.

Some historians suggest that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's studies in Medina formed his outlook. In the early eighteenth century, ulama in Medina were part of an intellectual trend that was sweeping the Indian Ocean's Muslim rim: the revival of Hadith (reports about the Prophet Muhammad) studies and a concomitant desire to bring the practices of Sufi orders into conformity with rules of Islamic law.[11] The list of Sheikh Muhammad's teachers in Medina includes one of the Hadith-revivers and some sources report that this teacher urged him to dedicate himself to a campaign to purify religious practices at odds with the Sunna.[12] On the other hand, his doctrine bears little similarity to the teachings of other eighteenth-century religious revivalists and the very notion of a common revivalist impulse during that era is not firmly established.[13] Another possibility is that he arrived at his ideas during his stay in Basra in the 1730s. The southern Iraqi city was passing through a turbulent period that included spells of Persian invasion and battles between Ottoman and Persian armies. Basra has a large Shiite population, something unknown in Najd and it is possible that Sheikh Muhammad reacted against Shiite veneration

for the imams when he first encountered it.[14] There he began public preaching against what he deemed illegitimate ritual innovations (singular, *bid'a*) and violations of man's duty to devote all worship to God alone.[15] According to Sheikh Muhammad's grandson, it was during his study with Basra's scholars that God revealed to him hidden aspects of God's unity and His attributes. This special divine inspiration set him apart from other scholars of his time and moved him to compose the seminal treatise for Wahhabism, *The Book of God's Unity*, on the basis of Hadith collections he found in Basra.[16] The chronicler Ibn Ghannam placed the writing of that treatise in Huraymila, but Wahhabi sources concur that gifted inspiration is the wellspring for his monotheist manifesto.[17]

This brief essay is of tremendous significance for the Wahhabi mission and the subject of enduring controversy between supporters and detractors. It represents the core of Sheikh Muhammad's teaching and the foundation of the Wahhabi canon. The essay deals with matters of theology, ritual and the impact of actions and speech on one's standing as a true monotheist. It has nothing to say on Islamic law, which guides Muslims' everyday lives. This is a crucial point. One of the myths about Wahhabism is that its distinctive character stems from its affiliation with the supposedly 'conservative' or 'strict' Hanbali legal school. If that were the case, how could we explain the fact that the earliest opposition to Ibn Abd al-Wahhab came from other Hanbali scholars? Or that a tradition of anti-Wahhabi Hanbalism persisted into the nineteenth century? As an expert on law in Saudi Arabia notes, 'Ibn Abd al-Wahhab produced no unprecedented opinions and Saudi authorities today regard him not as a mujtahid in fiqh [independent thinker in jurisprudence], but rather in da'wa or religious reawakening… The Wahhabis' bitter differences with other Muslims were not over fiqh [jurisprudence] rules at all, but over *aqida*, or theological positions.'[18]

The Book of God's Unity contains 67 brief chapters. The first six chapters define monotheism and idolatry in general terms; the following chapters comment on the meaning of Qur'anic verses and the implications of hadiths to establish clear lines of permitted and forbidden beliefs, practices and utterances. The typical chapter has a text, usually verses from the Qur'an and hadiths, sometimes only one or the other, to illustrate a particular aspect of the main theme.[19] After the authoritative text, there is a list of issues that Muslims should consider based on those texts. In most of the essay, Sheikh

Muhammad's voice is muted; his 'authorship' consists of selecting Qur'anic verses and hadiths to juxtapose with a set of issues that seem to be salutary lessons the reader should draw from the religious texts. One gets the impression that each chapter functioned as a text for oral lessons with a circle of pupils or for public sermons. It is not a sustained discourse on monotheism and idolatry as one might expect from its title. Rather, it consists of discrete bits radiating from the axial concept of monotheism. For the sake of analysis, it is possible to divide the treatise into clusters of thematically related chapters. For instance, seven chapters deal with popular superstitions that imply human effort to manipulate supernatural forces rather than to trust in God: sorcery, soothsayers, breaking spells (reciting the Qur'an is permitted, other methods are not), divining evil omens and astrology.

The first chapter, 'On God's Unity', begins with five passages from the Qur'an commanding man to worship God and forbidding him to worship any other being. In particular, the verses state that God created mankind and the *jinn* (invisible spirits mentioned in the Qur'an) so that they should worship Him; God sent a prophet to every people to teach them to worship God and to avoid *taghut* (often translated as idolatry); God commanded that men shall worship only Him; God commanded men to worship Him alone and to 'associate' none with Him; the Lord has forbidden men from 'associating' any other being with Him. The Arabic term for 'associating' a creature with God is *shirk* and in Islamic usage it has the sense of idolatry or polytheism.[20] A large portion of Wahhabi discourse focuses on listing acts that constitute shirk. There follow two hadiths. In the first one, the Prophet's Companion Ibn Mas'ud[21] reported that the Prophet's will, or his legacy to the Muslims, was a verse from the Qur'an, already cited among the five verses, forbidding association with God. The second Hadith is a report from the Companion Mu'adh ibn Jabal where he relates that he was once riding on a camel behind the Prophet when the Prophet asked his Companion if he knew what God's creatures owe Him and what He owes His creatures. The Prophet then answered his own question: God's creatures owe Him exclusive worship and not associating any other being with Him; God owes his creatures not to punish any who do not associate any other being with Him. Finally, Sheikh Muhammad listed twenty-four *masa'il*, issues or salutary lessons, in the texts. They are stated in very brief form: The wisdom of creating the jinn and humans; the wisdom

of God sending prophets; the religion of all prophets is the same and so forth. The issues include doctrinal points (all prophets taught the same core religious belief), the significance of specific verses in the Qur'an and the Prophet's modesty in sharing a donkey with another rider.[22]

Perhaps the most distinctive facet of Sheikh Muhammad's teaching and hence of the Wahhabi mission, is the insistence that proclaiming, understanding and affirming that God is one do not suffice to make one a Muslim, but that one must also explicitly deny any other object of worship. In the *Book of God's Unity*, he developed that point in Chapter Six, which stands out from the others in consisting largely of his own commentary on Qur'anic verses and a single Hadith. The verses state that idolaters call upon beings that themselves worship God, that Abraham declared he would not worship the idols of his folk, that Christians take men of religion as lords alongside God and that some people associate other beings with God. It seems that the Hadith is the key text in this chapter. The Prophet once declared that, 'Whoever affirms that there is no god but God and denies all other objects of worship, safeguards his blood, property and fate with God.' Sheikh Muhammad discussed the Qur'anic verses in a straightforward manner: they affirm the imperative of rejecting any hint of idolatry. He then stated that the Hadith is a clear explanation of the meaning of 'There is no god but God,' namely, that pronouncing, understanding and affirming it do not makes one's blood and property safe from attack. One must also deny any other object of worship and if that denial is ever compromised, then the safeguard against attack is lifted. He emphasized this point, 'It is indeed a grave problem, singular in its seriousness and importance, which has in these texts been made absolutely clear and its solution established without question.' It would be only a slight overstatement to assert that most of the animosity between Wahhabis and other Muslims boils down to this single question of what exactly makes one's life and property inviolable from attack.[23]

In addition to making idolatry a justification for war, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab underscored the perils of idolatry in the afterlife. According to the Qur'an, God forgives any sin except that of associating another being with Him. The Prophet once said that if someone died in the act of invoking God's associates for help, then he would enter the Fire. According to another Hadith, on the Day of Judgment, whoever did not associate another being with God will

enter heaven and whoever did associate another being with God will enter the Fire.[24] Since idolatry has such dire consequences in this life and the next, it is essential to recognize the various forms that idolatry can assume. For instance, according to Sheikh Muhammad, making a vow to any being but God is a form of idolatry. The proof texts for this point are two Qur'anic verses. One enjoins believers to fulfil their vows. The other relates that God knows all the vows that one makes. The Hadith proof text states, 'Whoever vowed to obey God, let him fulfil his vow; whoever vowed to disobey God, let him not fulfil it.' In the absence of any texts that condemn vows to other beings, it seems that Sheikh Muhammad extracted the chapter heading, 'Vows to other than God are Idolatry,' from the implication of these texts rather than their clear sense.[25] He had stronger textual support for the position that seeking the help of any being but God is a form of idolatry. Several Qur'anic verses emphasize the futility of calling upon other beings; in a Hadith, the Prophet urges believers to not seek help from him against a hypocrite who was hurting some believers but to turn instead to God. Sheikh Muhammad interpreted the verse which commands believers not to call on other beings for help to mean that such practice constitutes major idolatry, even if one appeals to a righteous person for purely decent purposes. He also considered the texts to show that 'calling on anyone is a kind of worship of the person called.'[26] This last point would become a hugely controversial issue between Wahhabis and other Muslims. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab insisted that 'calling upon' (*al-du'a'*) is the essence of worship. Other Muslims argued that one's intention and expectation determined whether 'calling upon' constituted worship or an innocent way to seek God's favour.

Another major point of contention is intercession, the belief that a particularly righteous individual might intercede with God on behalf of a believer at the Last Judgment. Five Qur'anic verses state that man has no intercessor apart from God, that the angels may intercede only with God's permission and that none but God has the slightest bit of power. Of course, Muslim critics of the Wahhabis seized the exception in the verse, 'None intercedes with God except as He is pleased to allow' and they asserted that their intercessionary requests were directed to those God 'is pleased to allow'. Sheikh Muhammad cited a Hadith reporting that the Prophet will not ask to intercede but will bow to and praise God; only then will God say that he may intercede and grant his intercession. While he considered this

a proof against intercession, other Muslims interpreted the same text to indicate its permissibility.[27]

Muslims commonly sought the intercession of dead holy men at shrines erected over their graves. It should be no surprise, then, that Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab justified the destruction of shrines. To support his position, he adduced a Hadith condemning Christians for worshipping at graves and placing images in churches. He blamed Shiites for importing into Islam the practice of constructing mosques at graves. (He also exhibited his anti-Shiite bias by using the insulting term *Rafida*, or 'Rejecters'.) A second Hadith bars the believers from building an edifice over the Prophet's grave for fear they would turn it into a mosque. Yet another one forbids imitating People of the Book in their custom of worshipping at prophets' graves. By analogy, Sheikh Muhammad declared that one may not pray at any grave, since to do so could lead to its conversion into a place of worship.[28] The most controversial point to arise from his discussion of worship at graves had to do with custom in Medina, where Muslims visited and prayed at the Prophet's tomb. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab cited hadiths that prohibit prayer at the Prophet's grave and concluded that while one may visit his grave, one must not pray there or in any cemetery for fear it could lead to idolatry.[29] The Wahhabis' enemies accused them of disrespecting the Prophet whereas the Wahhabis insisted they were closely following the Prophet's own example.

One last detail in *The Book of God's Unity* is worth mention. It expresses Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab's sense that he lived at a time in history when Islam had become a stranger. This concept is embedded in three hadiths. The Prophet foretold that the believers would follow the path of Jews and Christians; he did not fear the prospect of an enemy conquering the believers but that of misguided leaders restoring idol worship and the appearance of false prophets; and the Prophet predicted that one group of believers would remain steadfast and not succumb to either false prophets or misguided leaders. Sheikh Muhammad concluded that the hadiths meant that idolatry would spread among the believers but that one group would stay true to God's message and eventually prevail.[30]

That perception pervaded Wahhabis' sense of their history as one of an enterprise facing resistance and onslaught from powerful political forces. The first Wahhabi chronicler, Husayn ibn Ghannam, portrayed Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab not merely as a heroic figure, but as a solitary one in the early stages of his reformist effort.[31]