

at the origin of a series of reform movements which in some cases are still active in the Muslim world. Thus it is imagined that a direct line of descent led from the Wahhabis in Arabia first to Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad 'Abduh, and Rashid Rida, and from them to the Muslim Brotherhood (*al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn*)—in short, to the conglomeration of persons and movements known as the Salafiyya. There are, indeed, points held in common by Wahhabis and Salafis, as will be discussed later in this essay, and it was not entirely by accident that from the 1960's onwards many activists of the Ikhwan chose Saudi Arabia as their place of refuge from persecution by 'Abd al-Nasir. There is, however, no genetic connection between Wahhabism and movements that subsequently arose in the Muslim world. The relative prevalence of Wahhabi modes of thought now observable in various Muslim countries is a more recent phenomenon, due to a variety of contingencies unconnected with the first appearance of that sect. A related error is to think of Wahhabism as having been from the time of its origin a reform movement that found a widespread and sympathetic echo in the Muslim world, or that it conformed to a general pattern of "renewal" (*tajdid*) then underway in the Middle East, in South Asia, in

Africa and elsewhere. All those movements were largely different in their nature from Wahhabism, which must be regarded within the specific context of its own time as an exception, an aberration, or at best an anomaly.

II

Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab was born in 1115/1703 in the small town of al-'Uyayna in Najd in the eastern part of what is today called the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Najd had not been notable in Islamic tradition for scholarship or movements of spiritual renewal; its topographical barrenness seems always to have been reflected in its intellectual history. There are, indeed, indications in *hadith* that as a recipient of divine blessing Najd compares unfavorably with such regions as Syria and Yemen, and that it is there that "disturbances and disorder and the generation of Satan" (*al-zalazil wa 'l-fitān wa qarn al-shaytan*) will arise. Correlating apocalyptic *hadith* with observable historical phenomena is a hazardous task, best left unattempted, and this particular *hadith*, if indeed authentic, may ultimately be seen to have a sense entirely

unconnected with Wahhabism.¹ However, its occurrence in the *hadith* literature does convey a sense of foreboding with respect to this part of the Arabian peninsula and suggest that any movement originating there should be viewed with great caution.

Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab's father and first teacher was the qadi of al-'Uyayna, who exercised the office in accordance with the Hanbali *madhhab* that was traditionally prevalent in the area. 'Uthman b. 'Abdullah b. Bishr, author of a standard Saudi chronicle, writes concerning the early years of Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab that "God Almighty expanded his breast for him, enabling him to understand those contradictory matters that lead men astray from His path."² Early anti-Wahhabi polemicists express matters quite differently: both his father and his brother, Sulayman, they report, detected signs of extreme doctrinal deviance in him at a quite early age.³ Certain only is that Sulayman did indeed later come out against him and write the first extended refutation of Wahhabism; his father

¹ It may, in fact, have already found its fulfilment in the welcome accorded by the Najdis to the false prophet Musaylama al-Kadhhab soon after the death of the Prophet.

² 'Uthman b. 'Abdullah b. Bishr, *Unwan al-Majid fi Tarikh Najd*, Riyadh, n.d., p. 6.

³ See below, p. 78.

appears at least initially to have been more indulgent. It was as a result of the son's activities that the father was dismissed from his post and was obliged, in 1139/1726, to leave al-'Uyayna for the nearby town of Huraymila. Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab himself stayed on for a while in al-'Uyayna attempting to rectify the allegedly polytheistic tendencies of its citizens before reaching the conclusion that "words alone are of no avail" (*la yughni 'l-qawl*).⁴ He therefore joined his father in Huraymila before leaving for the Hijaz, initially to perform the Hajj.

He next spent four years in Medina, which, it might usefully be pointed out, was then still an important center of Islamic knowledge and intellectual exchange, attracting scholars and students from many different parts of the Muslim world. Among those with whom he is recorded to have studied there are Shaykh 'Abdullah b. Ibrahim, a Najdi like himself, and Muhammad Hayat al-Sindi, an Indian *hadith* scholar. Particular significance is sometimes attached to the latter affiliation, for al-Sindi also numbered among his many students the celebrated Indian Sufi and *faqih*, Shah Waliullah Dihlawi. This has been taken as evidence for some degree of affinity or compatibility between Wahhabism and the

⁴ *Unwan al-Majid*, p. 7.

various movements of renewal in the Subcontinent that sprang from the legacy of Shah Waliullah.⁵ This by no means follows, for even the most cursory comparison of Wahhabism with the infinitely richer and more profound (although frequently eccentric) teachings of Shah Waliullah immediately reveals a very great difference. Further, the mere fact that a pupil has studied with a given teacher does not necessarily mean that he has absorbed all the views of his teacher, nor that the teacher is to be held responsible for whatever notions are subsequently elaborated by the student; in other words, neither Wahhabism nor its essential constituents can be retrospectively imposed on Muhammad Hayat al-Sindi.

More significantly, Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab is said to have devoted much of his Medinan sojourn to studying the works of Ibn Taymiyya (d.728/1328), indeed a notable figure in the intellectual history of Islam, although one whose influence was probably greater posthumously than in his own lifetime. He had in common with Muhammad b.

⁵ John Voll, "Muhammad Hayat al-Sindi and Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab: an Analysis of an Intellectual Group in Eighteenth-Century Medina," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, XXXVIII:1 (1975), pp. 32-38.

'Abd al-Wahhab a delight in polemics: his targets included Christianity; Shi'ism; many practices and doctrines of the Sufis; and the Mu'tazila, surely a questionable use of his energy, given the fact that the Mu'tazila had effectively ceased to exist. Because of the interest shown by Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab in the works of Ibn Taymiyya, it is regularly claimed that Wahhabism represents a delayed surfacing of his legacy. This claim is difficult to sustain, although less disconnected from reality than the attempt to link the founder of Wahhabism with Shah Waliullah. It is not without reason that Donald P. Little once wrote an article entitled, "Did Ibn Taymiyya have a screw loose?"⁶ However, whatever one makes of the positions assumed by Ibn Taymiyya, there is no doubt that he was a far more rigorous and careful thinker and an infinitely more prolific scholar than was Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab.⁷ Further, a key difference between the two men is that Ibn Taymiyya, although opposed to certain aspects of Sufism in his time which he regarded

⁶ *Studia Islamica*, XLI: 1975, pp. 93-111.

⁷ The voluminous works of Ibn Taymiyya are generally unread today by both his ardent partisans and his detractors. Ironically, an exactly parallel fate has befallen Ibn 'Arabi, Ibn Taymiyya's chief nemesis among the Sufis.

as erroneous or degenerate, did not reject it *in toto*; he was himself an initiate of the Qadiri *tariqa*.⁸ By contrast, Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab was more broadly opposed to *tasawwuf*, root and branch, not simply to certain of its manifestations. Wahhabism is essentially a movement without pedigree; it came out of nowhere in the sense not only of emerging from the wastelands of Najd, but also its lack of substantial precedent in Islamic history.

From the point of view of Wahhabism itself, it might, of course, be argued that precisely this lack of historical precedent is a virtue, the whole purpose of Wahhabism being to dismantle the complex and intricate structures of law, theology and mysticism, not to mention religious practice, that had grown up since the completion of the Qur'anic revelation, and to find a way back directly to the twin sources of Islam, to the Qur'an and the Sunna. At first glance, these aims might appear to be laudable, and they are no doubt shared by many Muslims who would not regard themselves as Wahhabi. Indeed, there is no binding value in what has been elaborated in history; there is binding value only in the Qur'an and the Sunna. However, to imagine

⁸ George Makdisi, "Ibn Taymiya: a Sufi of the Qadiriya Order," *American Journal of Arabic Studies*. I (1974), pp. 118-129.

that the meanings and applications of Qur'an and Sunna are accessible, in any substantial and usable fashion, by disregarding the virtual entirety of post-revelatory Islamic tradition, is unrealistic. It is equally illusory to suppose that either individual or society is a blank space on which Qur'an and Sunna can be authentically imprinted without admixture from either historical or contemporary circumstance. Precisely the process and mode of the Qur'anic revelation imply continuous interaction with the changing reality of human societies, a reality that necessarily includes a historical dimension.

To resume the biographical sketch. From Medina, Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab returned to Huraymila and not long thereafter, for reasons that are not immediately apparent, traveled to Basra, settling in a village by the name of al-Majmu'a. There, in the words of the Saudi historian, 'Uthman b. 'Abdullah b. Bishr, "he denounced certain things pertaining to *shirk* (*al-shirkhiyat*) and innovations (*al-bida'*)."⁹ It was there too that he probably had his first direct contact with Shi'i Islam. Al-Ahsa, to this day a predominantly Shi'i region despite decades of Wahhabi-Saudi persecution, borders on Najd, to its

⁹ 'Urwai *al-Majid*, p. 8. The term *al-shirkhiyat* is probably the sole contribution made by Wahhabism to the technical vocabulary of Islam.

very great misfortune, but there is no indication that Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab had much substantial awareness of Shi'ism before his stay in al-Majmu'a. Now Shi'i Islam attracted his attention as allegedly rife with *al-shirk-kiyat*. He had, however, no success in persuading either Sunnis or Shi'is of their dire shortcomings, and he left. According to the account of 'Uthman b. 'Abdullah b. Bishr, he intended to make for Damascus (perhaps because of the presence there of Hanbali scholars), but somehow lost the money he needed for the journey, and instead returned to Huraymila by way of al-Ahsa. This was, says the Saudi historian, because "God Who knows the hidden and the apparent wished to make His cause triumph and elevate His word by uniting the people of Najd under a single leader."¹⁰

Another, anonymous and probably legendary, account suggests that from Basra Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab travelled to Baghdad, where he married a wealthy bride and settled down for five years. Then he is said to have proceeded by way of Kurdistan to Iran, where he visited Hamadan, Qum and Isfahan in order to study philosophy.¹¹ If indeed he undertook such a journey despite his antipathy

¹⁰ 'Urwan al-Majid, p. 8.

for Shi'ism, the motives that inspired him to do so are a mystery. There is no mention of Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab in the Persian sources of the period, which may mean—always supposing that he indeed visited Iran—that his attempts at propagating his notions of rectitude were disregarded there as insignificant or that he contradicted himself by making provisional use of the Shi'i practice of *taqiya* (prudent dissimulation). It is more likely, for chronological reasons alone, that he returned more or less directly from Basra to Huraymila.

There he joined his father and continued to inveigh against "ignorance, *shirk*, and innovation" with such inexhaustible zeal that his father tired of him and "words were exchanged between them" (*waqa'a baynahu wa bayna abibi kalam*), as 'Uthman b. 'Abdullah b. Bishr delicately phrases it.¹² He also found time to compile the little book called *Kitab al-Taubid*. Despite the promise of expounding the most fundamental of all Islamic doctrines contained in the title, this booklet consists exclusively of unmentioned *hadiith*, arranged in sixty-seven chapters. The

¹¹ Neşet Çağatay, "Vehhabilik," *Islam Ansiklopedisi*, XIII, p. 263; anonymous, *Lami' al-Shihab fi Tarikb Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab*, ed. Ahmad Abu Hakima, Beirut, 1967.

¹² 'Urwan al-Majid, p. 8.

late Ismail Raji al-Faruqi, in his day one of the principal promoters of Wahhabism in North America, had it almost right when, in the introduction to his translation to *Kitab al-Taubid*, he described the book as having "the appearance of a student's notes." It would have been closer to the mark to say that this and many other writings of Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab were the notes of a student. In a flight of fancy that would have done honor to a medieval court panegyrist, al-Faruqi attempted to account for the general modesty of his hero's literary output by asserting that "he applied himself [to rectifying the alleged misunderstanding of *taubid* by virtually all Muslims] with a mental vigor too great for his pen."¹³ Vigor Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab was certainly about to demonstrate, but whether it was of the mental variety is open to question.

A brief digression on what might charitably be termed the scholarly output of Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab will be in order at this point. All of his works are extremely slight, in terms of both content and bulk. In order to justify his encomium for Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab, al-Faruqi appended to his translation of each chapter of the *Kitab*

¹³ Shaykh Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, *Kitab al-Taubid*, trans. Isma'il al-Faruqi, reprint, Delhi, 1988, p. xv.

al-Taubid a list of "further issues" he drew up himself, implying that the author had originally discussed some of the "issues" arising from *badith* in the book; he had not. Similarly, an edition of Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab's *Kasbf al-Shububat* published in Riyadh in 1388/1968 has a note on the title page, "made detailed by (*qanna bi tafsilih*) 'Ali al-Hamad al-Salihi." Another book ascribed to Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab, *Masa'il al-Jabiliyya* (Madina: al-Jami'a al-Islamiyya, 1395/1975), bears the notation, "expanded by (*tarwassa'a fiha*) al-Sayyid Mahmud Shukri al-Alusi." In neither of the latter two cases is there any indication of where the contribution of Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab ends and where that of the elaborator begins. It seems that the custodians of Wahhabism, embarrassed by the slightness of Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab's opus, have come to regard the expansion of its girth as a necessity.

It is true that some fairly thick volumes have been published in Saudi Arabia as the collected works of Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab (*Mu'allafat al-Shaykh al-Imam Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab*, Riyadh: Jami'at al-Imam Muhammad b. Sa'ud), but they are mostly a little more than collections of notes and arrangements of *badith* according to certain subjects. The present writer has in his collection vol-

umes one, two and four of this set; it is unclear how many volumes the complete series comprises. Volumes one and two consist entirely of *hadith* relating to regulations for ablution, prayer, and *zakat*; they contain no elucidation or commentary from Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab, and the identification of the sources of *hadith* contained in the footnotes is entirely the work of the three editors of the series.¹⁴ Volume four opens with a brief treatise entitled *Kitab Fada'il al-Qur'an*, again a collection of uncommented *hadith* arranged in eighteen chapters. It continues with a work promisingly entitled *Tafsir Ayat al-Qur'an al-Karim*, which turns out to be little more than a series of paraphrases of some Qur'anic verses and notes on elementary grammatical points occurring in others; the only interest it exhibits lies in the occasional polemical barbs its author launches against those he calls "the leaders of *shirk*" (*a'immat al-shirk*). The volume concludes with the precis made by Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab of Ibn Qayyim al-Jauziyya's *Zad al-Ma'ad*, hardly a demanding text that would require special treatment.

Assessing Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab's accomplishments as a scholar and author is an

¹⁴ The editors are 'Abd al-'Aziz b. Zayd al-Rumi, Muhammad Baltaji, and Sayyid Hijab.

entirely legitimate criterion for estimating for his broader achievement, for the history of Islam as an intellectual and spiritual tradition consists above all of its scholars and the works that they wrote; the book is the quintessential artefact of Islamic civilization. Every major figure to inaugurate a significant movement of renewal in Islamic history has been a prolific and influential writer, two examples relatively close in time to Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab being Shaykh 'Uthman dan Fodio and Shah Waliyullah Dihlawi. He is not remotely comparable to either. One has, indeed, the impression that Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab regarded the authorial act as one more unauthorized innovation that for centuries had clouded the Muslim mind.

To return from this digression to the biography. His father's death in 1153/1740 seems to have freed him from all restraint in attempting to uproot alleged manifestations of *shirk*. Although he gathered some followers, he soon found it politic to leave Huraymila and was able to return to al-'Uyayna under conditions more favorable than those prevailing some fourteen years earlier when he had been compelled to leave the city. Now the ruler of al-'Uyayna, 'Uthman ibn Mu'ammal, extended his protection to Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab and swore loyalty to

the understanding of *taubid* he was preaching. The alliance was cemented by Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab's marriage to al-Jauhara, the aunt of 'Uthman b. Mu'ammār. Thus protected by the ruler, Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab began cutting down some objectionable trees before moving on to a more ambitious demolition project: the destruction of the tomb of Zayd b. al-Khattab, a Companion of the Prophet and brother of the second caliph, who had died in the battle of Yamama fighting Musaylama al-Kadhhab. 'Uthman b. Mu'ammār provided Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab with an armed escort of six hundred men to protect him and his small band of followers while they flailed away at the structure. It was, however, his personal lapidation of an adulteress who had allegedly confessed her guilt, freely and repeatedly, that truly put Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab on the map. "Thereafter," writes 'Uthman b. 'Abdullah b. Bishr, "his cause flourished, his power increased, and true *taubid* was everywhere disseminated, together with the enjoining of virtue and the prohibition of vice."¹⁵

It was precisely then that 'Uthman b. Mu'ammār yielded to pressure from a powerful tribal chieftain of the region and expelled Muhammad b. 'Abd al-

¹⁵ 'Urwān al-Majīd, p. 10.

Wahhab from al-'Uyayna. The apparent setback was in fact greatly beneficial, for he moved on to al-Dir'iyya and concluded a new alliance, with Muhammad b. Sa'ud, ruler of the city, sealing it with another marriage. This alliance proved permanent, giving rise to a political entity that could for many years be interchangeably designated as Saudi or Wahhabi. In the twentieth century, it is true, the Saudi state came to acquire a second *raison d'être* as a privileged instrument of foreign—first British and then American—interests in the Middle East. In its origin, however, it was simply the political and the military arm of the Wahhabi sect. The weakening of the linkage between the religious establishment and the Saudi family now visibly underway is in its essence the inevitable outcome of a clash between these two inherited loyalties, the Wahhabi and the Anglo-American. It remains to be seen what will occur once these Siamese twins, Wahhabism and the Saudi family, are disconnected from each other and which will survive.

The now disintegrating alliance began happily enough. Muhammad b. Sa'ud pledged his aid to Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab in waging *jihad* against all who deviated from his understanding of *taubid*. He had but one reservation: that Muhammad

b. 'Abd al-Wahhab would prevent him from levying his customary annual tax on the people of al-Dir'iyya. Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab assured him that the forthcoming *jihad* would yield booty far in excess of that tax.¹⁶ The stage was thus set for a campaign of killing and plunder all across Arabia.

In 1159/1746, the Wahhabi-Saudi state made a formal proclamation of *jihad* against all who did not share their understanding of *tauhid*, for they counted as non-believers, guilty of *shirk* and apostasy. It is significant that whenever the term "Muslims" occurs in 'Uthman b. 'Abdullah b. Bishr's chronicle, '*Urwan al-Majid fi Tarikh Najd*, it refers exclusively to the Wahhabis. But the Wahhabi dismissal of all Muslims other than themselves as non-believers is of more than historical significance. Discreetly concealed over the years because of a variety of factors—above all the desire of the Saudi regime to portray itself as a protector of Muslim interests, despite abundant evidence to the contrary—this attitude of monopolistic rejection continues to inform the attitudes to Muslims held by contemporary Wahhabis and those under their influence, even when not fully articulated.¹⁷

¹⁶ '*Urwan al-Majid*, p. 12.

¹⁷ See below, p. 54.

One of the earliest historians of the Wahhabi movement, the Ottoman admiral Eyüb Sabri Pasha, drew an interesting parallel in his *Tarih-i Vehhabyan* between Wahhabism and the movement of the Qaramita, an offshoot of the Isma'ili movement that captured Mecca in 317/930.¹⁸ This comparison was inspired by what befell the Haramayn during the Wahhabi occupation from 1806 to 1812. Other Ottoman officials made what was perhaps a more instructive comparison, with the Kharijites.¹⁹ At a much earlier point in Islamic history, the Kharijites had, like the Wahhabis, regarded Muslims who did not share their precise doctrines as apostates against whom war was permissible, if not obligatory, and had accordingly unleashed a campaign of banditry against them. As the Wahhabis spread out across the Arabian peninsula in the middle of the eighteenth century, their conduct and the rationale they invoked were by no means dissimilar. It is, then, in the Kharijite movement that some historical antecedent for the Wahhabis can perhaps be discovered after all, with respect not to the details of doctrine but to their mode of interaction with others.

¹⁸ Eyüb Sabri Pasha, *Tarih-i Vehhabyan*, Istanbul, 1296/1879, pp. 3-17.

¹⁹ Neşet Çağatay, "Vehhabilik," *İslam Ansiklopedisi*, XIII, p. 267.

expansion of the Saudi realm and the coercive propagation of Wahhabism. In 1187/1773, he conquered Riyadh, and some seventeen years later began a more significant expansion of his realm by setting his sights on the Hijaz. In 1146/1733, before he had acquired Saudi patronage and support, Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab had sent a thirty-man delegation to the Sharif of Mecca, Mas'ud b. Sa'id, to obtain permission for himself and his followers to make the hajj. The Sharif discerned that part of his purpose would be to disseminate his teachings among the assembled pilgrims, and he therefore organized a debate between the visiting Wahhabis and the 'ulama of Mecca and Medina. Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab's representatives failed to carry the day, and the *qadi* of Mecca pronounced them to be unbelievers, in view of the well-known principle, based on *hadith*, that whoever without good reason denounces a fellow Muslim as an unbeliever himself enters that category. Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab died in 1206/1791, soon after 'Abd al-'Aziz's clashes with the rulers of the Hijaz had begun, but this in no way diminished the Saudi lust for conquest and slaughter. Within less than a decade, the Wahhabi creed was to be imposed on the Haramayn—albeit temporarily—by force of arms.

Contempt for non-Wahhabi Muslims has also dovetailed nicely on more than one occasion with the necessity of giving allegiance to non-Muslim powers during the twentieth century. It is noteworthy, for example, that 'Abd al-'Aziz b. Sa'ud, who ruled from 1902 to 1953, once told St. John ("Abdullah") Philby, his go-between with the British Foreign Office, that he preferred Christians to non-Wahhabi Muslims. Christians, he explained, act according to their religion, whereas the Muslims who do not follow the Wahhabi understanding of *tauhid* are guilty of *shirk*. In short, better a Christian than a non-Wahhabi Muslim.²⁰ It is by no means fanciful to interpret the dealings of the Saudi family with their foreign patrons as being in part the translation of such attitudes into policy.

In the fifteen years that followed the Wahhabi declaration of *jihad* large areas of Arabia were conquered. First the Saudis conquered most of Najd; then the tribes of central Arabia were subdued; and 'Asir and parts of Yemen came into their possession. Muhammad b. Sa'ud died in 1180/1766 and was succeeded by 'Abd al-'Aziz, who applied himself with still greater energy than his predecessor to the

²⁰ Elizabeth Monroe, *Philby of Arabia*, London, 1973, pp. 69-70.

The conquest of the Hijaz and the atrocities that accompanied it were preceded in 1217/1802 by a Saudi raid on the city of Karbala in southern Iraq, the place of martyrdom and burial of Imam Husayn. According to some accounts, the raid took place precisely on Muharram 10, the day on which Shi'is gather to commemorate his martyrdom. If such was the timing of the assault, it must have been deliberately chosen to inflict maximum insult and pain on the Shi'is. The matter-of-fact account of the atrocity given by the Saudi chronicler 'Uthman b. 'Abdullah b. Bishr, however, places it some three months earlier:

In the year 1216, Sa'ud [son of 'Abd al-'Aziz] set out with his divinely supported army and cavalry that he had recruited from both the citydwellers and nomads of Najd, from the south, from the Hijaz, Tihama and elsewhere. He made for Karbala and began hostilities against the people of the city of al-Husayn. This was in the month of Dhu'l-Qa'da. The Muslims [i.e., the Wahhabis] scaled the walls, entered the city by force, and killed the majority of its people in the markets and in their homes. Then they destroyed the dome placed over the grave of al-Husayn by those who believe in such things. They took whatever they found inside the dome and its surroundings. They took the grille surrounding the tomb which was encrusted with emeralds, rubies, and

other jewels. They took everything they found in the town: different types of property, weapons, clothing, carpets, gold, silver, precious copies of the Qur'an, as well as much else—more than can be enumerated. They stayed in Karbala for no more than a morning, leaving around midday with all the property they had gathered and having killed about two thousand people. Then Sa'ud departed by way of al-Ma' al-Abyad. He had the booty assembled in front of him. He deducted one fifth for himself and then distributed the rest among the Muslims [i.e., the Wahhabis], giving a single share to each footsoldier and a double share to each horseman. Then he returned home.²¹ All in a day's work, it would seem.

The Wahhabis' first conquest in the Hijaz was the city of Ta'if, which they overran in Dhu'l-Qa'da 1217/February 1803 after a lengthy siege punctuated by various intrigues and fruitless negotiations. Here, too, they enacted a massacre, burnt books other than Qur'an and *hadith* which they found, and destroyed as many of the tombs of the Sahaba in the city as they could find. The Saudi chronicler describes the episode as follows:

'Uthman [a defector from the forces of Ghalib, the Sharif of Mecca] entered the city, together with the groups accompanying him. God enabled them to take it by force but without fighting [*sic*], and they

²¹ *Unwan al-Majid*, pp. 121–122.

killed some two hundred of its people, in the market-places and in their homes. They took much property, valuable items such as coins, weapons, cloth, and jewelry, beyond all measure and computation ... 'Uthman sent it all to 'Abd al-'Aziz, who appointed him governor of Ta'if and the rest of the Hijaz.²²

Some two months later, 'Abd al-'Aziz entered Mecca and compelled the *'ulamā* of the city to give him *bay'a*. But this first Wahhabi occupation of Mecca was short-lived for Sharif Ghalib was able to retake the city two and a half months later.

Not long after, 'Abd al-'Aziz was assassinated in al-Dir'iyya by a certain 'Uthman, variously described as a Kurdish dervish from Mosul who had pretended to be an ardent convert to Wahhabism and as a Shi'i—possibly Afghan—from Karbala seeking vengeance for the massacre that had been enacted in that city.²³ 'Abd al-'Aziz was promptly succeeded by his son Sa'ud, the butcher of Karbala, and the campaign of conquest continued with barely a pause. In Muharram 1220/April 1805, the Wahhabi-Saudi army captured Medina and in Dhu'l-Qa'da 1220/January 1806 took possession of

22. *'Urwan al-Majid fi Tarikh Najd*, p. 123.

23. *'Urwan al-Majid fi Tarikh Najd*, pp. 125-126. For his allegedly Afghan identity, see 'Abbas al-'Azzawi, *Tarikh al-'Iraq bayna Ibtidaiyyin*, Baghdad, 1956, VI, p. 160.

Mecca for the second time. This occupation of the Haramayn was to last until the end of 1227/1812, a period of six and a half years in which Wahhabi doctrine was imposed on the people of Mecca and Medina and the Wahhabis engaged in their signature activity of dome demolition. In Mecca, the domes over the houses reputed to have been the birthplaces of the Prophet, Khadijat al-Kubra, Imam 'Ali, and Abu Bakr al-Siddiq, were destroyed, and the tombs and mausolea in the historic cemetery of al-Ma'la were levelled to the ground. In Medina, the treasury of the Prophet's Mosque was plundered but attempts to demolish the dome surmounting the grave of the Prophet were abandoned when several of the zealots entrusted with the task fell providentially to their deaths. However, all structures and gravestones in the cemetery known as Jannat al-Baqi' adjoining the Prophet's Mosque were destroyed; buried there were wives and Companions of the Prophet, several Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt, and a host of lesser luminaries from the spiritual and intellectual history of Islam. Earlier, when free of Wahhabi coercion, the *'ulama* of the Haramayn had unhesitatingly rejected the doctrines of Wahhabism; now they were compelled to submit. Among the measures imposed on them and the

general population of the two cities were the compulsory performance of all five prayers in congregation; obligatory indoctrination of both scholars and common folk in Wahhabi teachings; the destruction of books deemed supportive of *shirk*—including, for example, al-Jazuli's *Dala'il al-Khayrat* and al-Yafi'i's *Raud al-Rayahin*; and a wide range of prohibitions including certain details of the prayer as specified by the Hanafi and Maliki *madhhabs*, the use of a *tasbeeh*, the commemoration of *Milad al-Nabi*, especially through the recitation of poetry, the traditional recitation of a number of *hadith* before the Friday sermon, the possession or smoking of tobacco, and (temporarily) the drinking of coffee. Further, the pilgrimage caravans coming from Syria and Egypt, deemed pestilential bearers of *shirk*, were denied access to the Haramayn.

The Wahhabi occupation of the Haramayn forced the Ottomans to act decisively. Their prestige as the guardians of Sunni Islam and heirs to the caliphate was dependent on at least a nominal control of the Haramayn, their actual exercise of authority being frequently contested by the Sharifs of Mecca. Some Arab historians of a nationalist bent, at least those of an earlier generation, were tempted to regard the Wahhabi movement as a

proto-nationalist uprising, aimed at “freeing the Arabs from Ottoman imperial rule.” More recently, the Saudi government has alleged that the first Wahhabi conquest of the Arabian peninsula aroused “the jealous attention of the Ottoman Empire” and inspired a wish “to put an end to the newly emerging nation.”²⁴ Such characterizations are entirely anachronistic: the Wahhabi ideology had nothing to do with nationalism, and it is questionable whether a Saudi nation exists even now. It can in any event be argued that both the first emergence of the Wahhabi-Saudi state in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century and its consolidation and expansion in the twentieth century occurred in a context of European encroachment on the Arab lands and served therefore as a factor of enfeebling division. As the historian Shaykh Ahmad b. Zayni Dahlan points out, the Ottomans were confronted at one and the same time with two “disturbances” (*fitnas*): the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt and the Wahhabi conquest of Arabia; it is, indeed, possible that the Saudis were in correspondence with the French. Nor were the French the only adversaries the Ottomans were forced to confront at this time;

²⁴ “King Fahd of Saudi Arabia,” advertising supplement to *The Economist*, November 17–23, 2001.

recurrent hostilities against both Russia and Austria were also underway.

In view of these multiple preoccupations, after a series of campaigns against the Wahhabis launched by the governor of Basra had ended in failure, the Ottomans delegated the task of liberating the Haramayn to the governor of Egypt, Muhammad 'Ali Pasha. In 1226/1811 he landed at the port of the Yanbu' on the Red Sea coast, and by the end of the following year he was able to liberate Medina and three months later, Mecca. The Saudis fled back to Najd, pursued by the forces of Muhammad 'Ali Pasha, who captured and sacked their capital of al-Dir'iya in 1234/1819. Two of the grandsons of Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab were executed, and 'Abdullah b. Sa'ud was dispatched to Istanbul. There he, too, was put to death, in accordance with a *fatwa* given by Mustafa Asim Efendi, the Shaykh al-Islam of the day. Other Saudi-Wahhabis were distributed to various sites around the city for public execution in order to demonstrate the exemplary fate that the Ottomans reserved—even at this relatively late point in their history—for those who joined political ambition to religious deviance.

III

Let us now turn in somewhat greater detail to the distinctive teachings of Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab. They center on a definition of *taubid* as consisting essentially of three parts: *taubid al-rubu-biyya* (recognition that Allah alone has the attribute of *rabb*, lord and creator of the worlds, He who gives life and death); *taubid al-asma wa 'l-sifat* (simple affirmation of the divine names and attributes mentioned in the Qur'an, unaccompanied by any attempt at interpretation, and the impermissibility of applying to other than God any of the names, even, for example, *karim* ["generous"]); and *taubid al-'ibada* (directing all worship to God alone).

This last is most significant from the point of view of Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab, both in his stark doctrinal scheme and in his contempt-laden assessment of the Muslim condition as it had allegedly been for many centuries. In rejection of all precedent and scholarly consensus, he dismisses the first component of *taubid* as a mere verbal profession, of no value in itself and certainly not adequate for acquiring the quality of Muslim, for, he claims, even