

Wahhabi Islam

From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad

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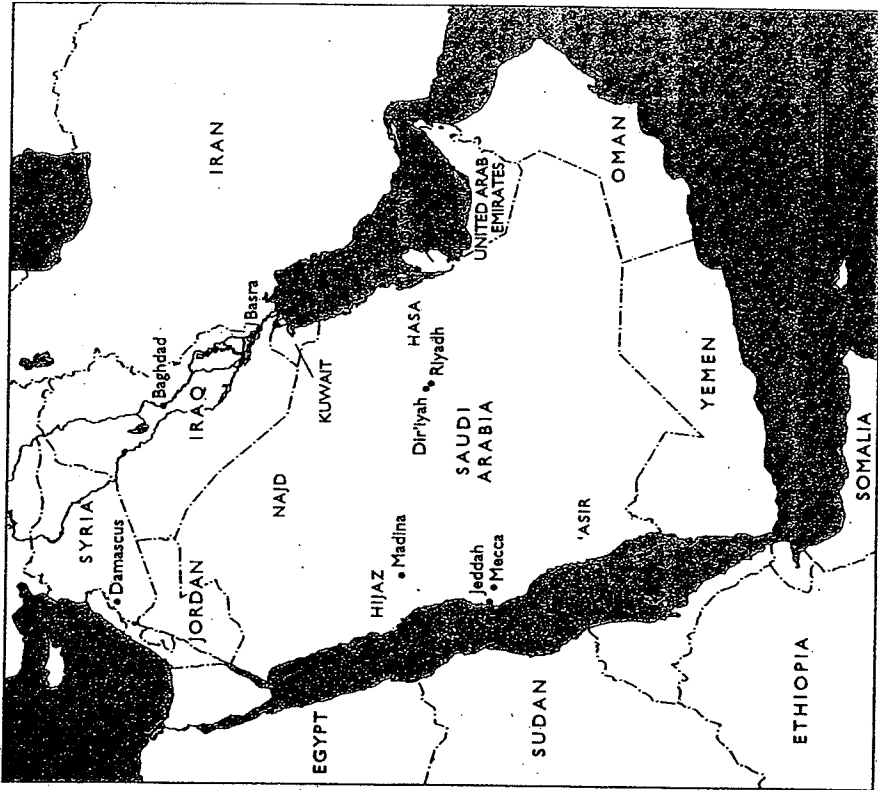
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Introduction

Post-9/11, Wahhabism has been identified by governments, political analysts, and the media as the major "Islamic threat" facing Western civilization and the inspiration for Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaida network. It has become infamous for its negative influence on Islam, mosques, and madrasas globally. It is described as extremist, radical, puritanical, contemptuous of modernity, misogynist, and militant in nature. It has been characterized as Islamo-fascism following in the traditions of communism and nazism.¹ It is accused of inspiring militant religious extremism in movements ranging from the Taliban of Afghanistan to the so-called Wahhabis of Central Asia and Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network.² It is targeted as the most intolerant of all interpretations of Islam, seeking to impose itself alone as the expression of "true" Islam.³ Wahhabi teachings are often referred to as "fanatical discourse" and Wahhabism itself has been called "the most retrograde expression of Islam" and "one of the most xenophobic radical Islamic movements that can be."⁴

Yet Wahhabism is also the conservative creed of the ruling family of Saudi Arabia and has been defended by visionary twentieth-century reformers like Muhammad Rashid Rida of Egypt and the Palestinian American scholar Ismail Raji al-Faruqi as a model for reforming and rejuvenating Islam in the modern era—an interpretation considerably at odds with its supposedly violent and intolerant tendencies. Also at odds with such negative portrayals are the more positive images of Wahhabis distributing copies of the Quran and *hadith* (accounts of the sayings and deeds of the Prophet), funding hospitals, orphanages, and other charitable institutions: and con-



structing mosques worldwide. Wahhabis have also provided relief following natural disasters globally and in the aftermath of the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo. However controversial the missionary work (*daw'at*) accompanying these efforts has been, a strong case can be made for recognition of Wahhabi involvement in charitable works and its provision of educational and worship institutions for Muslims throughout the world.⁸ This image does not fit with the more monolithic presentation of Wahhabism as a militant, violent, extremist movement.

For all of the press and academic coverage of Wahhabism, few attempts have been made to define and delineate what makes a Wahhabi a Wahhabi other than broad concerns about tendencies toward violence, extremism, terrorism, and indoctrination of the masses in the conservative Wahhabi creed. There has been little discussion of the Wahhabi interpretation of Islamic law or scripture outside of general assertions of "literalism," "innovation," "heresy," and obsession with ritual matters, such as the precise length and style of a man's beard or the exact fashion in which one is to pray.⁹ Having been accused of a paradoxical combination of narrow-mindedness and innovation, Wahhabism is then typically dismissed as being unrepresentative of "Islam" and unworthy of detailed attention to its doctrines. Particularly striking is the lack of attention given to the written works of Wahhabism's founder and ideologue, Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, despite the fact that it is assumed that the militance, violence, and extremism displayed by certain Wahhabis today have their origins in Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's own teachings.

Post-9/11, many in the West have struggled to understand the connection between Wahhabi beliefs and the horrendous acts of terrorism that caused the deaths of over three thousand civilians. Fear and uncertainty about the previously little known Wahhabis have led to serious questions: Does Wahhabism represent an ongoing threat to the United States and American interests? Is Wahhabism monolithic? Is it necessarily opposed to Western civilization and values? Can the United States safely have a friendly and cooperative relationship with the Wahhabi monarchy of Saudi Arabia or are Americans being deluded into consorting with the enemy due to the need for oil and a failure to understand the "true" nature of Wahhabism?

In response to the demands for answers, many have asserted that the militant extremism of Osama bin Laden has its origins in the religious teachings of Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, who is believed to have legitimated jihad against non-Wahhabis and encouraged the forcible spread of the Wahhabi creed. According to this interpretation, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab is the godfather of modern terrorism and Islamic militance.¹⁰ Like his contemporaries, he is accused of being opposed to modernity, an extreme literalist in his interpretation of Muslim scriptures, a misogynist, and an admirer and imitator of past militant radicals, particularly the medieval scholar Ibn Taymiyya. Like Osama bin Laden, he is believed to have had little formal religious training, and his written

works are generally dismissed as mere compilations of Quranic verses and *hadith* without any accompanying commentary or interpretation.¹¹ Finally, both Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and the Wahhabis are often accused of being outside of the Sunni tradition due to their position as "heretical innovators" and extremists.¹² Although this comparison makes for a simple and clean analysis, it is not faithful to the historical record.

The real Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, as revealed in his written works, was a well-trained and widely traveled scholar and jurist, as well as a prolific writer. His extant written works fill fourteen large volumes, including a collection of *hadith*; a biography of the Prophet Muhammad; a collection of *fatawa* (juridical opinions); a series of exegetical commentaries on the Quran; several volumes of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), numerous theological treatises; and other varied works, including detailed discussions of jihad and the status of women. The scope of his scholarship stands in marked contrast to the few legal rulings (*fatawa*) issued by Osama bin Laden. More importantly, his insistence on adherence to Quranic values, like the maximum preservation of human life even in the midst of jihad as holy war, tolerance for other religions, and support for a balance of rights between men and women, results in a very different worldview from that of contemporary militant extremists. The absence of the xenophobia, militantism, misogyny, extremism, and literalism typically associated with Wahhabism raises serious questions about whether such themes are "inherent" to Wahhabism and whether extremists like Osama bin Laden are truly "representative" of Wahhabism and Wahhabi beliefs.

Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad presents for the first time in a Western language the themes of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's writings that are of greatest concern post-9/11: Wahhabi theology and worldview, Islamic law, women and gender, and jihad. Rather than reinforcing the standard image of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab as "an unsophisticated, narrow-minded wanderer" and a "disconnected, footloose son of the remote oases" who became "the archetype for all the famous and infamous Islamic extremists of modern times,"¹³ it reveals a more moderate, sophisticated, and nuanced interpretation of Islam that emphasizes limitations on violence, killing, and destruction and calls for dialogue and debate as the appropriate means of proselytization and statecraft. This new understanding is then compared to the writings of other scholars and activists, both past and present, on the controversial topic of jihad in order to assess Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's influence, or lack thereof, on contemporary Islamic militants, most notably Osama bin Laden, and to explore the roots of the militant extremism inherent in their visions of global jihad.

I

Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and the Origins of Wahhabism: The Eighteenth-Century Context

Wahhabism was founded in the eighteenth century in the province of Najd, a broad desert expanse located in central Arabia. Najd has often been described as a desert wasteland, standing in marked contrast to the more cosmopolitan Hijaz region, which houses the Muslim holy cities of Mecca and Medina. While the Hijaz has been at the forefront of international commerce and educational exchanges, Najd has traditionally been considered a more isolated region, off the beaten track of the caravan routes. As such, Najd has not been a prime location for tourism or foreign conquest. This does not mean that it was completely isolated from the outside world. In fact, pilgrims, students, and merchants regularly traveled from Najd to other regions of Arabia and the Middle East to participate in the broad exchange of ideas, culture, and goods. These exchanges were simply on a smaller scale than was the case for the more cosmopolitan regions that served as a point of arrival rather than departure.

The main advantage that Najd enjoyed over other regions, such as the Hijaz, was that it held little interest for foreign conquerors. Consequently, Najd's history has been marked more by local tribal warfare and chieftains struggling for power than by its position as part of a broader state or empire.¹ Even when other portions of Arabia were claimed by the Ottoman Empire, Najd retained its independence.

The fact that Najd has always been independent eliminates the notion of Wahhabism as a response to European colonialism or Ottoman state consolidation. Najd had no claim to commercial or religious importance and thus held no interest for imperial conquest. If

Wahhabism was not a response to external pressures or aggressions, why did it arise at this particular time in this location? How could a movement begun in such an isolated region grow to become a global phenomenon?

Setting the Stage: The Eighteenth-Century Context

Wahhabism was neither a historical aberration nor an isolated phenomenon. It did not arise in a vacuum. In fact, Wahhabism reflects some of the most important trends in eighteenth-century Islamic thought, underscoring the interactions and exchanges that took place between Muslims in cosmopolitan regions like the Hijaz. The fact that Wahhabism so clearly reflects major trends of thought apparent in other contemporary reform movements suggests that it was neither "innovative" nor "heretical." Rather, it can more appropriately be viewed as part of mainstream eighteenth-century Islamic thought, although somewhat tailored to its specific context.

The eighteenth century is often described as the century of renewal and reform in Islam, a time when revivalist movements of various types arose in a variety of locations.² Although each movement had its own specific characteristics, reflecting the environments and contexts in which they arose, eighteenth-century revival and reform movements share some common themes and emphases. Unlike the movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which arose in response to external aggressions, like European imperialism, or the desire for political independence, the movements of the eighteenth century arose largely in response to internal conditions. The most important of these was the perceived deterioration in Muslim beliefs and practices.

For eighteenth-century reformers, one of the major signs of the deterioration of Islam was the adoption of rituals and beliefs from other religions, like praying to saints and believing that saints could grant blessings or perform miracles. In some cases, people had adopted superstitious practices, like spitting in a particular way or wearing charms to ward off evil spirits. Reformers were puzzled and perturbed by these practices, particularly when they were accompanied by a failure to respect Muslim rituals and prayers. They wondered whether the people engaged in these activities knew why they were doing so or what such actions symbolized. Some questioned whether a person engaged in such activities could still be considered a Muslim since their actions reflected a belief that people and things other than God possessed the power to grant requests or provide protection.

This was a serious matter because the major distinctive doctrine of Islam is belief in absolute monotheism (*tawhid*). In Islam, God alone is considered to be worthy of worship and prayer. This belief is reflected in the defining act of the Muslim, the declaration of faith that proclaims, "I believe that there is

no god but The God and that Muhammad is the Messenger of God." Consequently, failure to act in accordance with this proclamation of faith opened the door to questions about the person's status as a Muslim. It was for this reason that the revival and reform movements of the eighteenth century adamantly insisted that a "return" to monotheism was the necessary first step in reforming Islam. This meant getting rid of foreign and superstitious beliefs and practices. Wahhabism shared this common concern and goal, becoming famous for its strict adherence to *tawhid*.

However, this was only a first step. Eighteenth-century reformers believed that adherence to *tawhid* had implications beyond private religious beliefs. They believed that adherence to *tawhid* should also be reflected in public life by placing God at the center of the political order. Theoretically, this meant recognizing God as the creator and sustainer of all life and as the ultimate sovereign and lawgiver. Practically, it meant reimplementing Islamic law (*Sharia*) as the law of the land. Eighteenth-century reformers believed that this restoration of God to the center of Muslim public life was the key to recovering the power and prestige that Muslims had enjoyed in the past during the rules of the great empires and caliphates.

In general, reformers did not seek to implement their goals by overthrowing the current regimes or insisting that their reforms be applied from the top down by force or government decree. Instead, they believed that reform should be a process, beginning at the grassroots level and moving gradually upward through society as peoples' private ethical and moral beliefs, grounded in their religion, influenced decision making and public conduct. In this way, adherence to *tawhid* was intended to launch the second goal of the reformers, the sociomoral reconstruction of society.

In addition to adherence to *tawhid*, eighteenth-century reformers called for a return to the fundamentals of faith—the Muslim scriptures of the Quran (the word of God as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad) and the *hadith* (records of the sayings and deeds of Muhammad)—as the sources of guidance that would lead to the sociomoral reconstruction of society. This emphasis on the return to fundamentals made the reformists the original Muslim fundamentalists in the same way that nineteenth-century Christian movements dedicated to a "return" to the Bible were the original Christian fundamentalists. There was nothing inherently militant or violent about this return, nor did it necessarily imply a literal interpretation of the scriptures. It was simply an attempt to move away from centuries of historical interpretations and accretions in favor of direct study and interpretation of the scriptures.

The dual emphasis of the eighteenth-century reformers on the Quran and *hadith* was neither unusual nor revolutionary. Muslims believe that the Quran and *hadith* are complementary. The Quran, as God's Word, is a statement of God's will for all of humanity. Although it contains some legal prescriptions, it is not a lawbook. Rather, the Quran provides moral and ethical guidance and

values that human beings are supposed to apply in their personal and public lives, individually and communally. The *hadith* provide practical advice on how this is to be done.

Muslims do not worship Muhammad or believe that he is God. Through-out history, they have emphasized that Muhammad was strictly a human being, although they believe that he was the most perfect of human beings. It is precisely because he was a real human being living in the real world in which love and war, family and marital relations, business and commercial transactions, and local and international relations exist that his example is so important for Muslims to study.

Muslims believe that Muhammad's life reflects the perfect living out of the teachings and values of the Quran. Consequently, whenever a question arises about how one should respond to a given situation, they turn to the *hadith* to see how Muhammad reacted. Although some Muslims have taken Muhammad's example very literally, for example, wearing their beards exactly like he did, most do not believe that such strict, literal adherence is necessary or even-desirable. Rather, many point to his attitudes and values, such as respect for women, caring for the poor and orphans, and support for social justice, as the correct examples to follow.

The reformers shared the belief that Muhammad's example was very important for Muslims to follow. Consequently, the third major characteristic of the reform movements was a renewed emphasis on the study of the *hadith* but in a new way. Eighteenth-century studies of *hadith* differed from studies of the past because they focused on the content of the *hadith* rather than their chains of transmission. This represented a major break from the past tradition of *hadith* study and authentication.

The *hadith* were initially a series of oral testimonies transmitted by Muhammad's Companions and wives. Because they were oral, *hadith* were originally verified by determining whether the chain of transmitters (*isnad*) was credible. That is, could the original source truly have had knowledge of the issue in question because he or she had direct contact with either Muhammad or one of his Companions? Was the testimony passed down through a credible series of witnesses who were known to have had enough contact with each other to have made accurate transmission possible? Was the chain of transmitters unbroken in time? And were there multiple reports of the same incident, which would bolster the claim to authenticity? In the past, if the chain of transmitters was found to be credible then the *hadith* was declared authoritative and was incorporated into the later written compilations.³

Although the reformers believed that authentication of the chain of transmitters was an important first step in determining the potential authenticity of a *hadith*, they believed that verification of the chain was insufficient by itself. They recognized the potential for fabrication not only of the chains of transmitters but also of the content. Consequently, they believed that the content of

the *hadith* should also be examined to determine whether its message was consistent with the message of the Quran. They reasoned that the Quran and *hadith* should be in agreement with respect to their content and the values they embodied because they were supposed to serve as complementary sources of scripture. Thus, if a *hadith* had a strong chain of transmitters but contradicted the teachings of the Quran, the reformers believed that it should be declared inauthentic. The Wahhabis were important with respect to this new methodology because the written works of their founder and ideologue, Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, are an excellent and compelling example of its use. The Wahhabis also became well known for their travels throughout the Muslim world in search of *hadith* collections.⁴

This new content-driven methodology of *hadith* criticism tied in directly to the reformists' goal of the regeneration of Muslim society through the return to scripture because it offered a new way to interpret and understand it. These reformers did not seek to re-create literally the early Muslim community, as some later movements tried to do.⁵ Rather, the goal was to rediscover the meaning of the *hadith* in their original context in order to determine the eternal value or ethical guideline contained within it.⁶ This value or guideline was then compared to Quranic teachings about the same, setting the stage not only for a more profound understanding of Islam but also for a more meaningful application of Islamic values in both the private and public spheres. Thus, this new methodology of studying the Quran and *hadith* was not just an intellectual exercise. It had very practical implications for daily life, for both individuals and the broader Muslim community.

The desire of eighteenth-century reformers to embrace and study scripture directly was not simply a matter of religious purity or theological quibbling. These reformers were concerned not only by their belief that Muslims were not paying sufficient attention to Islamic values and ethical considerations but also by the fact that their fellow Muslims did not distinguish between the scriptures and their interpretations. In their experience, many Muslims of their time considered the scriptures and their interpretations to be equally authoritative.

In the more than one thousand years that had passed since the death of Muhammad, religious and legal scholars had written innumerable commentaries, analyses, and exegetical studies of the scriptures. Particularly important among these works were those that detailed and elaborated upon Islamic law. Similar to the role of the law in Judaism, Islamic law plays an important role in Muslim life. The Quran declares that the correct living out of faith (orthopraxy) is a necessary corollary to correctness of belief (orthodoxy). In other words, while it is important to have correct religious beliefs, it is even more important to live a life that reflects those beliefs. The Quran teaches that at the end of time human beings will be judged not on the sole basis of what they believe but on how they lived their lives. However, the Quran is not a lawbook

along the lines of Old Testament books like Leviticus and Deuteronomy, which outline long series of exacting legal prescriptions. Rather, the Quran provides moral and ethical values and guidelines, which Muslim legal experts have elaborated and detailed for practical application. While this scholarship was one of the most important contributions and efforts of early Muslim scholars, this process was understood to have been largely completed under the Abbasid Empire (750-1258 C.E.). Although there were always some independent jurists who continued to interpret the law on their own, a practice called *ijtihad*, the guidelines and teachings of the early legal specialists were broadly accepted and utilized intact until the eighteenth century, a practice known as *taqlid*.⁷

Eighteenth-century reformers were concerned by *taqlid* because they perceived that these interpretations had come to be considered as authoritative as the scriptures. Over time, students and scholars had begun to place a heavier emphasis on study and knowledge of the commentaries and interpretations of past scholars than on direct study of the scriptures.

The reformers believed that this practice was inappropriate. They pointed to the fact that interpretations and commentaries often reflected the context in which they were written, both geographical and political, rather than the context in which the scriptures were revealed and originally understood. They questioned whether one interpretation of a legal or religious matter could truly be authoritative for every time and place, as had been claimed by past scholars. Concluding that this could not be the case, they called on each generation and context to be responsible for revisiting the scriptures directly for fresh interpretation. The promotion and exercise of *ijtihad* therefore became another defining characteristic of eighteenth-century reform movements.

The reformers understood their movements to be a process that would necessarily occur gradually. They were evolutionary, not revolutionary, in approach. In general, the movements did not seek to topple governments, engage in coups to replace one political system with another, or organize their followers into cells to carry out terrorist activities or guerrilla warfare against existing governments. They did align themselves with political leaders, but their purpose in doing so was not overtly political.⁸ What mattered to the reformers was that the political system in place reflected and supported Islam in both private and public life. They were more concerned with matters of religious practice and adherence to Islamic law than with political systems or geographic boundaries.

The reformers sought to implement a two-tiered approach to the sociomoral reconstruction of society. At the grassroots level, they sought to continually add to the number of their followers, believing that this was the level at which real change needed to occur. Once individuals began to reform their religious beliefs and practices, it was expected that these private beliefs would have a broad impact on public behavior. At the same time, the reformers were practical enough to anticipate popular resistance to the proposed reforms because

they represented a change not only in beliefs but also in behaviors at both the private and public levels. Consequently, the reformers sought protection and assistance from local political leaders. According to this arrangement, the political leaders acted as protectors who ensured that the religious teachings of the reformers were respected and implemented. In return, the reformers supported the political rule of their protectors and provided religious legitimization for it.⁹

There were times when military activity occurred under this arrangement, particularly when issues of self-defense arose. However, jihad as holy war was not the primary purpose of the eighteenth-century reform movements. The reformers were not engaged in battles for independence, the end to colonial rule, or global jihad. Engagement in jihad as holy war was not one of the movements' defining characteristics. If anything, their downplaying of jihad as holy war distinguished them from the independence movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which specifically called for jihad as holy war in order to shake off colonial overlords or respond to other aggressions.

One final hallmark of eighteenth-century reform movements was the fact that they were inspired and led by scholars (*ulama*) rather than lay activists, as is so often the case in the contemporary era. This does not mean that there was a broad consensus among all *ulama* that reforms were necessary. In fact, some of the strongest opposition to the reform movements came from the *ulama*, typically those who held a position within the official religious establishment. These establishment *ulama* often owed their positions to nepotism and the sale of offices rather than to their scholarly achievements. As a result, they were often more interested in maintaining their own power bases than in the "correct" practice and interpretation of Islam. The reformers, on the other hand, tended to either occupy the lower echelons of the religious establishment or stand outside it altogether, often enjoying mass popularity rather than government favor. Consequently, a subtheme of the reform movements was opposition to reform-minded scholars by establishment *ulama*, who supported a continuation of the status quo in order to maintain their own positions of power.

The life and teachings of Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the founder and ideologue of Wahhabism, reflect these eighteenth-century themes and power struggles as they were played out first in his home province of Najd and later throughout the Arabian Peninsula. Like his contemporaries, he called for the sociomoral reconstruction of his society through greater adherence to monotheism (*tawhid*) and renewed attention to the Quran and *hadith*. He rejected imitation of the past (*taqlid*) in favor of fresh and direct interpretation (*ijtihad*) of the scriptures and Islamic law by contextualizing them and studying their content. He was a religious scholar. He established a protective relationship with a local political leader, who agreed to implement his religious teachings. Jihad was neither the primary goal nor the purpose of the movement he

inspired. And he was opposed by local religious scholars and leaders who perceived threats to their own power bases from his teachings.

Where he differed from his contemporaries was in the context of Najd and in some of the more specific details of his teachings. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's biography provides context for understanding who he was as a person, how he implemented these major reformist themes in Najd, and what their impact was upon this environment.

Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab: Biographical Sources

Most of what is known about Ibn Abd al-Wahhab comes from four types of sources: (1) contemporary chronicles written by his supporters, the most important of whom were Husayn Ibn Ghannam and Uthman Ibn Bishr; (2) polemical works written by his opponents, the most important of whom was Ahmad bin Zayni Dahlan; (3) accounts written by Western travelers to Arabia; and (4) Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's own written works. Of all of these accounts, the chronicles contain the most biographical information and are considered to be the most accurate in terms of biographical information because of the proximity of the writers to their subjects.

Husayn Ibn Ghannam (hereafter referred to as Ibn Ghannam) was the first chronicler of the Wahhabi movement. He was a contemporary and acquaintance of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab. Ibn Ghannam was an Arabic language teacher by profession, a characteristic that comes across clearly in the complex linguistic style of his chronicle. A native of al-Ahsa', Ibn Ghannam is believed to have moved to Najd in order to be close to Ibn Abd al-Wahhab. In addition to providing a year-by-year outline of the activities of the Wahhabis and a biography of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, Ibn Ghannam's chronicle, *Tarikh Najd* (*The History of Najd*), also contains excerpts of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's writings and letters. Ibn Ghannam died in 1811 C.E. and was considered "an old man." His birth date is unknown.

Uthman Ibn Abd Allah Ibn Bishr al-Hanbali al-Nasiri al-Tamimi (hereafter referred to as Ibn Bishr) was the second major chronicler of the Wahhabi movement. He was born in the town of Shaqra' in Najd. Ibn Bishr was not a contemporary of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and did not know him personally. However, he did have direct and personal contact with some of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's closest adherents, whom he interviewed while writing his chronicle. Ibn Bishr was a student of some of the most important scholars of early nineteenth-century Najd, including Ibn Ghannam, a fact that becomes clear when the chronologies are compared. However, Ibn Bishr's chronicle is not simply a rewriting or recasting of Ibn Ghannam's work. The presentation style of Ibn Bishr's chronicle is less literary and more straightforward and direct in discussion. Although he included much of the information contained in Ibn

Ghannam's work, Ibn Bishr also undertook extensive, systematic interviews with people who had firsthand knowledge and experience of the early days of the Wahhabi movement and had personally known Ibn Abd al-Wahhab. As a result, Ibn Bishr's chronicle is more detailed in many places than Ibn Ghannam's.

Both of these early chronicles provide a wealth of information about Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and the early Wahhabi movement by contemporary observers of and participants in the same. However, it is important to recall that the chronicles were not official biographers of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab. Stylistically, the chronicles are not written in the hagiographical (*manaqib*) style typically associated with biographies of Sufi saints. The chroniclers did not seek to establish Ibn Abd al-Wahhab as some sort of holy person or saint or to demonstrate his possession of the capacity to perform miracles (*barakah*). The inclusion of biographical information about Ibn Abd al-Wahhab had as its purpose the contextualization of the ideologue who inspired the Wahhabi movement. It was the development of the movement, and more particularly the chronology of the Saudi dynasty, that was the main focus of the chroniclers.

Consequently, a few words of caution with respect to the chronicles are in order. First, it is important to note that both chroniclers tended to be supportive of the Wahhabi movement. As a result, they tended to portray the most positive aspects of the movement. At the same time, they emphasized the persecution and oppression often suffered by the Wahhabis. The subtle comparison of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and the early Wahhabis to the lifetime of Islam's prophet, Muhammad, served in the minds of the chroniclers to demonstrate continuity in the Muslim experience and the attention given by the Wahhabis to the example of Muhammad. It should not be misconstrued as a literal attempt to re-create exactly the life and times of Muhammad, as has been asserted by Wahhabi opponents.¹⁰

It should also be noted that the more controversial activities of the early Wahhabis are typically portrayed in a somewhat apologetic manner. While it is important to understand the logic and processes that accompanied controversial actions (discussions that will be included in the biography), these discussions should not detract from the fact that the outcomes of certain infamous events were tragic.

Finally, as previously noted, Ibn Bishr was not a contemporary of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab. His methodology of interviewing Wahhabis who had known Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and participated in the early events of the movement provides important information about how the Wahhabis viewed themselves and their past. However, because they were recounting memories, it is possible that their recollections of past events were influenced by subsequent events. Thus, while the chronicles provide eyewitness accounts of the life and times of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, they must be understood and interpreted within their own biases. Whenever possible, information gleaned from the chronicles has been supple-

mented either by other historical materials or by Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's own writings.

The second type of primary source material, that of accounts written by Wahhabi opponents, has not been used extensively in the reconstruction of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's biography for several reasons. First, because opponents of the movement were quite vehement in their opposition, their writings tend to be extremely polemical in style rather than factual or straightforward. At times, this makes it very difficult to discern the difference between facts and rumors.¹¹ Second, many of these polemical accounts address later developments in the Wahhabi movement rather than the early period and the lifetime of its founder. Because the movement's orientation and even its teachings changed significantly over time, accounts dealing with later time periods cannot be used to portray the early period accurately. The most important examples of the second type of primary source materials are Ibn Dahlan's works, *al-Durar al-Saniyah fi al-Radd ala al-Wahhabiyyah* and *Khilasat al-kalam fi bayan ahra al-balad al-haram*, which were written long after Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's death sometime between 1792 and 1797. Ibn Dahlan was born in 1816-17, which means that his knowledge of the movement at the height of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's leadership would have been garnered more than fifty years after the fact. (Ibn Abd al-Wahhab retired from public life around 1773, although he continued to serve as a consultant and adviser until his death.) Third, because of their polemical nature, these accounts tend to be more useful in reconstructing impressions of the movement than in recounting events or teachings. Thus, polemical works have been largely discarded in the reconstruction of the biography of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and the early teachings of the Wahhabi movement.

The third type of source material, Western travel accounts, have not been used to reconstruct the biography of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab for similar reasons. Although the travel accounts provide interesting (and often controversial) impressions of Wahhabis and have been used by earlier scholars, none is contemporary with Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's lifetime. Furthermore, none of these writers met Ibn Abd al-Wahhab or read any of his writings. In fact, many never encountered any Wahhabis at all. The accounts generally record information and impressions passed on to them by people who had supposedly encountered Wahhabis. Because of their questionable accuracy, the use of Western travel accounts here has been restricted to discussions of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century impressions of the Wahhabis. They are not used to reconstruct the biography of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab or his immediate context.

Ibn Abd al-Wahhab did not write an autobiography. His written works were dedicated to religious matters, particularly theology and Islamic law. Consequently, what personal information and references to events in his life are contained in his written works are scanty and are used more to illustrate legal issues and theological points than to provide personal information about him.

self. Nevertheless, there are instances in his written works in which he refers to historical events from his life, particularly his various encounters with local religious *ulama*. They also offer insight into his personality and approach to interpersonal relations. The content of his writings will be discussed more fully in the chapters addressing important themes in his works. Before analyzing his teachings, though, it is important to get a sense of who Ibn Abd al-Wahhab was as a person.

Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab: A Biography

No physical descriptions of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab have survived the test of time. We do not know if he was short or tall, was thin or heavyset, or had any striking physical characteristics.¹² We do know a few things about his temperament and personality.

Ibn Abd al-Wahhab was a man of intense religious conviction. He believed in the importance of living one's religious beliefs in both private and public life. He valued education and was eager to engage in discussions and debates with others. He was a precise man, who said exactly what he intended and not a word more. He was a master of logic and an able and prolific writer. He was a man who sought to teach and guide individuals from every walk of life, reflecting his belief in the equality of all Muslims, regardless of their ethnic or socioeconomic background. He was devoted to the concept of social justice, dedicating significant portions of his writings to the protection of women and the poor and respect for human life and property. He believed that women had rights in balance with the rights of men in both private and public life, leading him to insist that these rights be restored and protected. He had little patience for corruption, bribery, and hypocrisy, which he continuously and vehemently denounced. He was neither a pacifist nor a warmonger. He believed that there were times when violence was justified, as in the case of self-defense. However, he was neither an active supporter nor a promoter of violence because he believed that it stood in the way of the ultimate goal of Muslims—the winning of converts. He believed that life was something to be not only respected but celebrated. He also had a dry sense of humor, which was particularly evident in his various encounters with the *ulama*, who always looked foolish at the end of his stories and legal discussions.

Ibn Abd al-Wahhab was born in 1702-3 in the town of al-Uyaynah in the Arabian province of Najd. He was descended from a prestigious family of Hanbali jurists and theologians.¹³ His grandfather, Sulayman ibn Ali ibn Mu-sharruf, was a judge (*qadi*) and was recognized as the greatest scholar and authority on Hanbali jurisprudence in Najd during his lifetime. His uncle, Ibrahim ibn Sulayman, was both a judge and an issuer of legal opinions (*mufti*), or *fatawa*, in the towns and settlements surrounding al-Uyaynah, where

he often was called in to settle disputes.¹⁴ His father, Abd al-Wahhab ibn Sulayman, was the *qadi* of al-Uyaynah and served as his first teacher of both religion and jurisprudence (*fiqh*).¹⁵ Ibn Abd al-Wahhab was clearly well placed in a strong family tradition of legal scholarship and its practical application. Thus, it is not surprising that his writings include detailed discussions of Islamic law.

Ibn Abd al-Wahhab is reported to have memorized the Quran before he was ten years old, an accomplishment that marks his completion of the most basic education that any Muslim undergoes.¹⁶ He took his religious responsibilities seriously and made the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca as a young teenager. This pilgrimage was followed by a two-month stay in Medina prior to returning home to resume his studies with his father.¹⁷

In addition to memorizing the Quran, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab also studied the *hadith*, Quranic exegesis (*tafsir*) literature, *fiqh*, and the writings of various *ulama* about the fundamental principles of Islam.¹⁸ Of all of the literature he studied, the *hadith* and *tafsir* were the most influential in developing his worldview. References to the Quran and *hadith* are abundant in all of his written works.

The Quran and *hadith* were particularly influential in shaping Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's understanding of the doctrine of monotheism (*tawhid*), both in terms of how it is to be upheld and what constitutes violation of it.¹⁹ The upholding of *tawhid* was to become the hallmark not only of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's teachings but also of the Wahhabi movement he inspired. Wahhabis across time and space have been both famous and infamous for their dedication to this principle and their denunciation of any and all activities that either violate it directly or could lead someone to violate it indirectly. Failure to adhere to and uphold *tawhid* has been blamed for the collapse of the social order, evil, tyranny, corruption, oppression, injustice, and degeneration.²⁰ Like other eighteenth-century reformers, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab taught that the remedy for such sociopolitical ills was simple: the revival and reform of Islam as evidenced by stricter adherence to *tawhid*. Only this could lead to the reestablishment of a just, stable, and powerful society.

His adamant belief that *tawhid* should be at the center of Muslim life led Ibn Abd al-Wahhab to dedicate his life to preaching and teaching the necessity of worshipping the one and only God and the elaboration of how this was to be done in practice. He particularly targeted the foreign and superstitious practices adopted by many Muslims as practices to be eradicated, beginning in his hometown. It was in al-Uyaynah that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab began to preach publicly his message of *tawhid*. Although he has been cast by some writers as a rabid itinerant who preached hellfire and brimstone wherever he went, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's own writings and the historical record reveal a more subtle and nuanced approach, at least in the early stages of his encounters. Rather than arriving in a town, denouncing every practice with which he disagreed,

and threatening the inhabitants with hell and damnation if they didn't change their ways immediately, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab initially sought to engage the inhabitants in dialogue and debate about their various activities and religious practices. He did this because he believed that verbal persuasion was a more effective means of getting the inhabitants to recognize the errors apparent in some of their religious practices. Thus, the tenor of his proselytizing was one of debate and discussion rather than overt violence and destruction. On the occasions when he engaged in more visible symbols of adherence to *tawhid*, this was done only after he had gained a significant following in a given location and generally tended to be a test of the dedication of his followers to *tawhid*. The results of his preaching campaign were often mixed.

For example, when Ibn Abd al-Wahhab began preaching about *tawhid* in his hometown of al-Uyaynah, he started by engaging the townspeople in a series of discussions about what *tawhid* is and how people violate this principle, often unintentionally. In the course of the dialogue, he provided them with specific examples of how some of their religious practices were either wrong or innovative (*bid'at*). It is important to note that his method was clearly one of persuasion rather than accusation because the townspeople did not respond by throwing rocks at him or chasing him out of town. They must have found some truth in what he taught because they allowed him to stay and to continue to teach and preach. It is important to recall that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab did not have a powerful political protector at this point. Consequently, the fact that the townspeople allowed him to continue his discussions indicates that there was at least a tacit level of approval of his teachings.

However, the townspeople did not immediately or completely abandon their prior practices or activities. Listening to a single sermon or teaching session did not result in an immediate and complete life change due to a radical conversion. In Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's approach, the process of adhering to *tawhid* was understood to be exactly that—a process or change that would occur gradually over time as people examined their hearts, thoughts, and activities; gained further knowledge about their religion; and made conscious decisions to change their behavior in accordance with their renewed and reformed beliefs.

Had Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's preaching and teaching been strictly a private religious matter, this state of thoughtful discussion, debate, and gradual change might have continued. However, he did not limit religion and religious beliefs to the private sphere. He believed and taught that religion necessarily has a public dimension because what one believes and the values to which one adheres are not and should not be limited to private life. Because human beings, both men and women, are also public figures who interact with their broader communities, their beliefs and value systems, such as honesty, concern for social justice, and opposition to corruption, necessarily carry over into public behaviors. Consequently, renewal and reform of personal beliefs were intended.

to carry over into public behaviors and attitudes, ultimately presenting a challenge to the power of the local political and religious leaders. It was at this point, when he began to challenge the leadership of the community, that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab ran into serious trouble.

Local leaders perceived in Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's teachings a challenge not only to their political but also to their moral authority. They discerned that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's reforms would not remain at the private, individual level but would ultimately have an impact on the public sphere and consequently their own bases of power. When the implications of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's teachings about *tawhid* became clear and began to have a negative influence on local authorities, the local leaders responded by refusing to recognize any truth in what he taught. They ultimately pushed him to leave al-Uyaynah on a pilgrimage to Mecca.²¹ This pattern of acceptance until the local leadership felt threatened enough to encourage, if not force, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab to leave occurred repeatedly in the early years of his teaching and preaching career.

Opponents of the Wahhabi movement point to the fact that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab was pushed into leaving as evidence of the "extremist" and "heretical" nature of his teachings. However, the fact that his teachings were accepted until the local authorities began to feel that their bases of power were threatened makes it clear that the issues were really about power struggles and not so much about heretical religious teachings. Other non-Wahhabi historical records confirm that actual examination of Wahhabi texts revealed consistency with the Quran and *hadith* so that those who bothered to read them did not find any evidence of heresy in Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's writings.²²

Ultimately, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab gave in to the ruling powers of al-Uyaynah and left. He made the pilgrimage to Mecca and then proceeded to Medina,²³ where he pursued additional studies with two of the most prominent *hadith* scholars of the time, the Najdi Shaykh Abd Allah ibn Ibrahim ibn Sayf and the Indian Shaykh Muhammad Hayat al-Sindi. Mecca and Medina played a special role as major centers of eighteenth-century *hadith* scholarship and important international crossroads for Islamic scholars from throughout the world. Muslim scholars came to the Hijaz for a variety of reasons. Some simply chose to live and teach in the holiest cities in Islam, a venture that was facilitated by the development and expansion of shipping between the Hijaz and other Muslim lands. Others sought to escape foreign encroachment. This was particularly true in the case of Indian *hadith* scholars like Muhammad Hayat al-Sindi, who left behind the deteriorating Mughal Empire and its accompanying Muslim weakness to proclaim the need to recover the glorious past through a return to the fundamental sources of Islam.²⁴ Thus it was that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab came into contact with some of the major themes of eighteenth-century reform in Medina, in large part thanks to his teachers. He no doubt also engaged in discussion and debate with his fellow students from other parts of the Muslim

world. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's studies and encounters in Medina had a profound impact on both his intellectual formation and his worldview.

Although it is always difficult to determine the exact degree of influence that any teacher has over any student, it is clear that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab was inspired by the key themes taught by al-Sindi and Ibn Sayf: the importance of the *hadith* as a source of scripture, attention to the content of the *hadith* rather than just the chains of transmission, opposition to the imitation of past scholarship (*taqlid*), support for individual interpretation (*ijtihad*), and the urgent need for sociomoral reform.²⁵ Both of these important scholars were also admirers of the medieval scholar Ibn Taymiyya. Although it is often asserted that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab was an avid admirer and strict follower of Ibn Taymiyya, his writings do not support this assertion.²⁶ What is important is that Ibn Sayf and al-Sindi included at least some of Ibn Taymiyya's works in their teaching and that Ibn Taymiyya's works therefore would have been one, though certainly not the only, component of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's studies in Medina.

Perhaps in response to the charges of some contemporaries that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab founded a "fifth," and therefore heretical, school of Islamic law and that he deviated significantly from the teachings of more mainstream Sunni Islam, the chronicles include two anecdotes about his interactions with his famous teachers. These stories demonstrate Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's continuity with their teachings and their encouragement of his preaching and teaching. In the first, Ibn Sayf spends a day with Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and offers him some advice about a "weapon" that will prepare him for his future encounters. When Ibn Abd al-Wahhab expresses interest in seeing this "weapon," Ibn Sayf takes him to a house filled with books, which he commands him to study, making the subtle point that true change can only be brought about through knowledge and discussion, not violence.²⁷

The second story occurs later chronologically and describes a scene in which Muhammad Hayat al-Sindi and Ibn Abd al-Wahhab were standing near the Prophet's tomb, watching a variety of people pass by to seek help and intercession from it. al-Sindi asks Ibn Abd al-Wahhab for his opinion about this practice. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab responds that, "These people should wash their hands of what they are doing since what they are doing is worthless/false." Ibn Abd al-Wahhab then proceeds to "correct" this behavior and make it right, apparently without any interference or opposition from al-Sindi.²⁸

Whether or not these incidents actually occurred is open to debate. However, it is clear that the chroniclers included these anecdotes to validate and justify Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's mission and demonstrate his continuity with mainstream eighteenth-century thought. The anecdotes are mentioned here because they reflect the worldview that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab came to adopt. He believed in the importance of education, study, and debate as the most convincing means of winning converts, and he was not afraid to carry out the

practical application of his theological beliefs, such as preventing people from requesting intercession from tombs. Regardless of whether these anecdotes are true, it is clear that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab left his studies in Medina inspired to engage in a more activist preaching career.

From Medina, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab set out for Basra (located in modern Iraq), where he pursued additional studies in *hadith* and *fiqh* with an important scholar and madrasa (Islamic school) teacher, Muhammad al-Majmu'i. Like Ibn Sayf and al-Sindi, al-Majmu'i also reportedly endorsed Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's public proclamations forbidding associationism (*shirk*) and *bid'at* and confirmed and approved his message of *tawhid*.³⁰ Al-Majmu'i further reportedly allowed his own children to study with him. It was only when the leaders of Basra decided that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's teachings represented a threat to their own power and authority that they decided to drive him out in the heat of the day.³¹ Al-Majmu'i, though not included in the forcible exile, was injured in the process.³¹

It is believed that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab came into contact with Shiis during this stay in Basra, which would explain his familiarity with their theological beliefs and juridical and religious practices. Although it is often asserted that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab was adamantly opposed to Shiism, he specifically targeted only one particular extremist sect, the Rafidah, in only one treatise.³² Outside of this treatise, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab never specifically mentioned the Shiis by name, although he denounced some of the practices that he believed violated *tawhid*.³³

On leaving Basra, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab traveled to al-Zubayr, from which location he intended to continue north to Syria.³⁴ However, while he was in al-Zubayr he lost his financial support and had to abandon his travel plans.³⁵ He returned to Arabia and traveled to al-Ahsa, where he stayed with Shaykh Abd Allah ibn Abd al-Latif.³⁶

Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's sojourn in al-Ahsa was brief. For undisclosed reasons, he soon left al-Ahsa and headed for Huraymila, where his father lived.³⁷ On his arrival in Huraymila, he resumed his studies with his father and began preaching against the innovation and associationism practiced there in both words and deeds.³⁸ It was during this stay in Huraymila that he wrote his most famous treatise, *Kitab al-Tawhid* (*The Book of Monotheism*), copies of which circulated quickly and widely throughout Najd.³⁹ Although his ideology and the movement he inspired have been dismissed by some, who claim that he had little influence, originality, or lasting impact, the historical record shows that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's influence spread over a wide area within a short period of time, suggesting that the message he preached found broad enough support not only to last but also to consolidate a movement.⁴⁰

This is not to say that everyone responded positively to his message. Indeed, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's pattern of preaching prohibitions ultimately caused a rift between him and his father, as well as with the inhabitants of Huraymila.

Ibn Abd al-Wahhab consequently ceased preaching until his father's death in 1740.⁴¹

After his father's death, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab resumed his preaching and teaching activities. Although some historical records indicate that he at this time declared jihad as holy war against those who did not adhere to the doctrine of *tawhid*, not all accounts agree with this assertion.⁴² It is unlikely that jihad as holy war would have been declared at this time because this not only would have been inconsistent with Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's teachings but also physically impractical, if not impossible. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab did not have a political program at this time. Consequently, he would have lacked the military power to engage in a jihad as holy war. It is more likely that he simply continued his preaching and teaching activities, gradually winning converts.

At least some of the people of Huraymila responded positively to his preaching and offered him their financial support. Huraymila was an interesting test case for the political potential of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's teachings because the population was divided in its reaction to them. On the one hand, two of the tribes of Huraymila became united due to their support for Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and his teachings, demonstrating the capacity of his message to serve as a unifying force.⁴³ On the other hand, Huraymila also demonstrated the threat of his message to local political and religious leaders and the power of his message to divide the community. The opposing forces of Huraymila were apparently so threatened by Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's message and so adamant about continuing their "deviant" behavior that they banded together in an assassination plot against him.

The main issue at stake with respect to deviant behavior was Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's denunciation of sexual immorality and his insistence that the people of the region adhere to proper Islamic standards of sexual behavior, that is, reserving sexual relations for marriage. In response, a splinter group, consisting mostly of slaves, attacked him under the cover of night with the intent of killing him. The attempt was foiled when Ibn Abd al-Wahhab realized what was happening and called for assistance.⁴⁴

After the assassination attempt, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab left Huraymila and again returned to his hometown of al-Uyaynah, which had been rebuilt and was now ruled by Uthman ibn Hamid ibn Muammar. Ibn Muammar, as befitted a leader of his time, received Ibn Abd al-Wahhab hospitably and honored him by granting him the hand of his aunt, al-Jawhara bint Abd Allah ibn Muammar, in marriage.⁴⁵ It was only after this marriage that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab began to teach Ibn Muammar about the principle of *tawhid*.⁴⁶ Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and Ibn Muammar then struck a deal. In exchange for Ibn Muammar's support for his religious teachings, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab agreed to support the ruler's political ambitions to expand his rule over Najd and possibly beyond.⁴⁷ Ibn Muammar agreed, and Ibn Abd al-Wahhab embarked on a broad public preaching campaign.

The alliance formed between Ibn Muammar and Ibn Abd al-Wahhab was important for several reasons. First, it foreshadowed the later alliance between Muhammad Ibn Saud and Ibn Abd al-Wahhab that led to the foundation of the first Saudi state, which remains intact today as the third Saudi state. This was a tactic adopted by many other eighteenth-century reformers throughout the Muslim world. The formation of a religio-political alliance was not unique to the Wahhabis.

Second, this alliance made clear the religious basis for the political movement that grew out of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's religious teachings and ultimately became known as Wahhabism. What was important about this religious vision as it was translated into the political sphere was that the leader was to proclaim and adhere to the principle of *tawhid*. That is, all earthly power had necessarily to grow out of recognition of the unique and all-powerful role of God. This approach emphasized the importance of intent in carrying out one's actions, for it makes it clear that one must have the proper intent—recognition and enforcement of *tawhid*—as the basis for one's actions, even, and especially, those concerned with politics, in order to obtain the desired results. Without proper intent, a political leader would only be working for self-aggrandizement, a goal that was clearly at odds with *tawhid*.

The third issue of importance with respect to this time period is the fact that three acts that have come to symbolize the Wahhabi movement occurred during it. These acts were the cutting down of a sacred tree, the destruction of a tomb monument, and the stoning of an adulteress. All of these activities reflected the practical application of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's overarching message of *tawhid*. They have also come to be considered the hallmark of the Wahhabi movement and prominent examples of the kind of extremism generated by Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's teachings. They not only made Ibn Abd al-Wahhab famous in his own time and place but made both him and the Wahhabi movement infamous across the centuries and throughout the world. Consequently, it is worth examining the circumstances under which these activities occurred in order to determine what can be learned from them with respect to Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's worldview.

All three of the infamous events are recorded by the chronicles in a fair amount of detail.⁴⁸ The first, the cutting of the sacred tree, took place following the initial call to *tawhid* issued after the alliance was established between Ibn Muammar and Ibn Abd al-Wahhab. There were in al-Uyaynah at that time a number of trees on which the local populace was in the habit of hanging things in order to request the trees' blessing or intercession on their behalf. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab believed that this practice constituted a direct and serious violation of *tawhid* because it visibly proclaimed the belief that something other than God had the power to grant blessings and intercede for people. He therefore decided that a strong, visible response was in order. Following the example of the Prophet Muhammad, he sent a variety of people out to cut down the trees

that served as objects of worship. He saved the most glorified of all of the trees for himself.

While his point was to provide a positive visual aid for the implications of true adherence to *tawhid*, the spectacle of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab personally chopping down this object of popular veneration and worship proved to be a shock to the inhabitants of al-Uyaynah and others who heard about it. Regardless of how much this action was supported by his followers, his willingness to engage in such a destructive act signaled to nonadherents the extremism and intolerance latently inherent in his teachings. This incident made it clear that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's dedication to *tawhid* was absolute and that worship or veneration of objects, as well as other animist and superstitious practices, would not be tolerated in areas where he and his followers lived. Veneration or worship of anyone or anything other than God clearly had no place in Islam as far as the Wahhabis were concerned.

Similarly, the second incident, that of the destruction of the monument over the tomb of Zayd ibn al-Khattab (one of Muhammad's Companions and the brother of the second Sunni caliph, Umar ibn al-Khattab) was intended to demonstrate visually what it means to adhere to *tawhid*.⁴⁹ As in other cases, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab had already carried out a preaching and teaching mission in the area where the tomb was located and had won a significant number of followers. The destruction of the monument over the tomb, which was popularly venerated because of its connection to the early Muslim community, was a deliberate act. It was neither an accident nor a random incident. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab specifically chose this tomb because of its popularity and because it honored a human being rather than God.

As with the tree-chopping incident, the destruction of the tomb represented direct adherence to the example of the prophet Muhammad. The *hadith* record Muhammad's command to destroy tombs and shrines because they can and have led to the veneration and worship of the people buried or commemorated there, an act that clearly violates the principle of *tawhid*.⁵⁰ It was because of the possibility that people might be led to worship human beings rather than God that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab was so adamant about tomb destruction. It was not because of a literal approach to the interpretation of scripture.

Ibn Abd al-Wahhab was a pragmatic man as well as a determined preacher. He recognized the importance of this particular tomb and the devotion of the people of the area to it. He knew that there would likely be strong opposition and resistance to its destruction by the local populace, regardless of what they proclaimed to believe. The tomb was an important emotional connection to the early Muslim past. It was probably also an important source of revenue because it served as a pilgrimage site. The local population was not likely to sit by and passively allow its destruction. Consequently, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab asked Ibn Muammar and approximately six hundred of his men to accompany him to the site.

As anticipated, the local inhabitants resisted Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's declared intent to destroy the monument. However, when they saw Ibn Muammar and his men and learned of their resolve to engage in war anyone who stood in opposition, they refrained from interfering with its destruction. As with the tree-chopping incident, the spectacle of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab tearing the monument down with his own hands made a strong impression on both observers and those who heard about the incident later. Equally impressive was the political protection Ibn Abd al-Wahhab now enjoyed. People no longer felt as free to oppose the practical application of his teachings because they had personally witnessed or heard about the military strength that now backed him.

The destruction of the tomb was important for three reasons. First, it again confirmed for non-Wahhabis the extremist nature of the Wahhabi movement, despite the fact that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab had neither done nor encouraged anything that was not part of the Prophet Muhammad's own example. Opponents of the movement looked at the end result—the destruction of an object of popular veneration—and assumed that militancy and destruction of property were inherent to Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's teachings. Thus, the reputation of the Wahhabis for violence and destruction began, although this was not the driving force behind the action.

Second, the destruction of the tomb set a pattern for tomb destruction by the Wahhabis over both space and time. They became notorious for their destruction of tombs that served as objects of popular veneration. This pattern has led to conflict between Wahhabis and Shiis and Sufis up through the contemporary era.

Third, the destruction of the tomb signified that the Wahhabi movement was not simply opposed to non-Muslims. Because this tomb belonged to a hero from the early Muslim community, the message behind the destruction was clear: not even Muslims should serve as popular objects of veneration. Because such objects carried the potential to lead otherwise faithful Muslims from the straight path of *tawhid*, they could not be permitted to remain. Thus, certain battle lines were drawn between Muslims as intolerance for popular practices inconsistent with *tawhid* was declared.

The destruction of the monument produced a variety of reactions. While some of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's followers found it inspiring and set out to repeat it as evidence of their faith, others were concerned that he had gone too far in carrying his teachings to their logical conclusion. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab himself did not find the destruction of the monument to be particularly troubling because the issue was one of property that was not vital to human survival. As will be shown in his discussion of jihad, he had a very different perspective where life, whether human or animal, and survival were concerned. Destruction of property was permissible in the case of the monument only because of the religious purpose it had come to fulfill. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab did not call for his followers to engage in broad or rampant destruction of property.

The third critical incident, the stoning of the adulteress, was the most troubling for Ibn Abd al-Wahhab because a human life was at stake. Although opponents have pointed to this incident as evidence of the violence and misogyny supposedly inherent to Wahhabism, as well as the supposedly literal interpretation the outcome reveals, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab did not interpret the incident this way. When viewed in its fuller context, it reveals a more complicated, multilayered issue. It is important to note that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab himself was uncomfortable with the outcome of this tragic case.⁵¹

The historical literature typically mentions only the end result of this incident—the fact that the woman was stoned—and provides neither contextualization nor a discussion of the process that led to the stoning. The impression generally given, therefore, is that a woman was brought before Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and accused of adultery. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab responded by instantaneously stoning her, in accordance with his literalistic interpretation of Islamic law. According to opponents, this incident proved once and for all that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab was a militant extremist who hated women and believed that any indication of sexual immorality on their part deserved the death penalty, regardless of the surrounding circumstances.

This presentation is misleading not only because it does not include any of the details of what actually happened but also because it fails to accurately portray Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's attitude toward women.⁵² It is therefore necessary to examine this incident in some detail to understand what it actually conveys about Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's attitude toward women and his interpretation of Islamic law.

The story opens with the woman in question coming to Ibn Abd al-Wahhab of her own accord and confessing to him that she has committed *zina*. *Zina* is an act of sexual intercourse that occurs outside of marriage, whether as fornication or adultery. Because the Quran teaches that the only legal avenue for sexual intercourse is within the marriage relationship and further condemns fornicators and adulterers, the sin in question here was a serious one. *Zina*'s one of the four sins included among the crimes punishable by death (*hudud*).⁵³ The assignment of the death penalty for the commission of *zina* comes from the *hadith*.⁵⁴ It is not specified by the Quran.

It is noteworthy that the woman came to Ibn Abd al-Wahhab of her own free will. No one forced her to appear before him and confess her sins. She was not dragged into a tribunal by her male family members nor was she accused of sexual immorality by her neighbors. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab himself was surprised by the woman's confession because there did not appear to be any reason for it other than to test his sincerity and resolve as a preacher. Interestingly, he did not respond by condemning the woman to stoning on the spot, even though Islamic law gave him the right to do so because she had confessed her sin personally. Neither did he call in her male family members and insist that they do a better job of controlling the woman's sexual activities.

Instead, he spoke directly to the woman and held her personally responsible for her behavior. He admonished her to be chaste, giving her the benefit of the doubt—perhaps she had not known what constituted correct behavior—and the opportunity to repent and change her behavior.

The final outcome of this case was due to the woman's deliberate choice to continue in her immoral sexual behavior. There is no indication that either her honor or that of her family was impugned by her interactions with Ibn Abd al-Wahhab.⁵⁵ The case also serves as evidence of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's concern for justice for women. Throughout the case, he tended to reject condemnation in favor of conversation and education, even where women were concerned. The woman's ultimate punishment was due to her failure to cease her immoral behavior.

The woman responded to her encounter with Ibn Abd al-Wahhab by committing *zina'*, again—repeatedly—making it clear that she had no intention of changing her behavior. Puzzled by the woman's odd behavior—she knew what the consequences of her actions were because he had personally made her aware of them—Ibn Abd al-Wahhab launched an inquiry into her state of mind. Was it possible that the woman was insane and therefore not responsible for her actions? After all, what sane person would deliberately and knowingly commit a sin or crime that carried the death penalty?

The inquiry found the woman to be of rational, sound mind. However, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab was still reluctant to stone her. Perhaps there was another reason for her behavior. Was she being raped or otherwise forced to engage in sexual intercourse against her will? Ibn Abd al-Wahhab arranged another meeting with the woman to inquire about her circumstances. The woman informed him that she was not being coerced and that she intended to continue to engage in *zina'*. She left the meeting and continued to engage openly in *zina'*, confessing her sin each time she did so.

It was only at this point—after several discussions, two inquiries into the woman's circumstances, and three opportunities to change her ways—that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab gave in to pressure from the local *ulama* and reluctantly agreed to the implementation of the death penalty in accordance with the example of the Prophet Muhammad. This was not a trivial case of a woman exposing her ankles in public or not appearing properly veiled. The woman was convicted because of her repeated confessions to the act, not because of other peoples' accusations or due to circumstantial evidence such as pregnancy. She had been given ample opportunity for instruction and repentance yet had repeatedly rejected them. Because of the strong stance of the *hadith* on this issue and because the woman had consistently and repeatedly confessed to the crime of *zina'*, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab was left with no choice but to implement the prescribed punishment, however much he personally disliked it.⁵⁶

The case of the adulteress was as much a test of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's resolve to adhere faithfully to scripture and Islamic law as it was about illicit

sexual activity. The chronicles cite the story as positive evidence of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's faithfulness in adhering to the requirements of the law. However, this should not detract from the tragedy of the loss of human life that concluded the case.

Although Ibn Abd al-Wahhab ended this case without appearing to be a hypocrite, the same cannot be said for the local *ulama*. The same *ulama* who had pressured Ibn Abd al-Wahhab for the stoning sentence then hypocritically used this incident to convince local political leaders that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab was encouraging the local population to revolt against established authority.⁵⁷ They further intensified their campaign of defamation and opposition, insisting that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's teachings were inherently militant and posed a threat to regional stability.

The theme of opposition by local religious scholars and political leaders who feared a threat to their own power bases recurs throughout Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's biography. Many of his writings and some of the most significant events during his lifetime, particularly his forced departure from a variety of locations, were related to his encounters with the *ulama*. How was a group of religious scholars able to wield such power?

The *ulama* possessed such power because of their symbiotic relationship with the communities they served. The *ulama* are neither an ordained clergy nor an officially appointed body of certified or licensed scholars, since neither exists in Islam. They are simply men who have pursued a religious education and are supposed to be knowledgeable about the Qur'an, *hadith*, and Islamic law and their interpretation. Although they hold official government positions in some countries, this is not always the case and has not always been the norm historically. It would be more accurate to refer to the *ulama* as a social class than as an official body or institution.

The authority of the *ulama* rests in the recognized scope of their scholarship, their ability to attract adherents to their teachings, and the number of students who study with them. Thus, an authoritative *alim* owes his authority to his popularity, while an *alim* who lacks popular acclaim likewise lacks authority. Clearly, therefore, the *ulama* of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's day had a vested interest in preventing the community from changing its allegiance from adherence to its own teachings to adherence to his. Given this vested and personal interest in seeing Ibn Abd al-Wahhab disgraced, defamed, and rejected, it is not surprising that the most lasting negative impressions, rumors, and polemics we have about the Wahhabis and their teachings come from the *ulama*.

The major fear that the *ulama* had with respect to Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's teachings was that they would become not only less powerful but also potentially irrelevant. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's radical rejection of the imitation of past juridical rulings (*taqlid*) threatened to reduce their control over religious matters, interpretations of the sacred texts and Islamic law, and ultimately the local population's worldview. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's insistence that every Muslim,

both male and female, personally read and study the Quran and *hadith* served not only to undercut the authority of the *ulama* but in many cases to bypass them altogether. Why did he take such a stance?

Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's problem with the *ulama* was not the fact that they existed. In fact, he did not seek to do away with them altogether, since he recognized the value of the *ulama* as repositories of specialized religious knowledge. What he did seek to do was to reserve the title *'alim* for a person who was able to back his religious opinions and interpretations with citations from the Quran and *hadith*, rather than simply relying on interpretations.⁵⁴ Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's major concern with the *ulama* of his time was that their knowledge consisted of legal manuals and exegetical literature alone and did not include direct study and knowledge of the Quran and *hadith*.

Ibn Abd al-Wahhab sought to counter this tendency by limiting the role of the *ulama* and requiring every Muslim to study the Quran and *hadith* personally and directly. He required this of his followers in order to ensure that all believers would not only have a common base of knowledge, but also a basis for evaluating whether a person claiming to be an *'alim* merited the title. His own personal experience led him to fear that a Muslim without this knowledge base would not be capable of discerning whether the teaching or opinion of another Muslim was correct. The danger in not knowing was that a well-intentioned and sincere Muslim could be led astray, as had already happened numerous times in his own context. It was this concern that led to his adamant teaching that the Muslim must rely on the Word of God, not blind adherence to a fallible and potentially ignorant human being, for guidance.

Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's concern about the *ulama*'s lack of familiarity with the Quran and *hadith* was accompanied by a belief that they also lacked knowledge and understanding of the interpretive texts they taught and cited.⁵⁵ He further lambasted the *ulama* for their literal, rather than contextual interpretation of the Quran and *hadith*. (Ironically, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab repeatedly had to defend himself from the same charge, launched by the *ulama*.) The danger in a literal approach is that passages such as Quran 2:190-91 which state "Kill the idolaters wherever you find them!" when taken out of context appear to be blanket calls to kill idol worshippers. However, when understood within the specific historical context in which they were revealed—in response to military aggression carried out by idolaters against the early Muslims—they are much more confined in their implications. In this case, the purpose was to grant the early Muslim community the right to defend itself when attacked, even if this meant a preemptive strike in order to prevent further deaths.

Ibn Abd al-Wahhab was also concerned by the fact that many *ulama* gave precedence to customs, traditions, and their own interpretations and beliefs over Islamic law. He charged that when the *ulama* decided to support a particular legal opinion or custom they turned their own opinions into infallible divine directives. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab found this practice, in particular, to be

outrageous because it placed the opinions of human beings on a par with divine revelation—a claim that not even Muhammad's Companions could make.⁵⁶ He denounced this practice as a departure from *tawhid* and reminded his followers that Muslims are called to worship and serve God not the *ulama*.⁵⁷

Not only was Ibn Abd al-Wahhab upset that the *ulama* would dare to make such an outrageous claim of infallibility, but he was also infuriated that they often promoted outmoded and poor understandings of religious and legal issues.⁵⁸ For him, this was made clearest in their tendency to rely on the teachings and interpretations of past scholars (*taqlid*) rather than direct study of the Quran and *hadith* for fresh interpretations (*ijtihad*).⁵⁹ All of these factors led Ibn Abd al-Wahhab to the conclusion that the religion promulgated and supported by the *ulama* could not properly be called Islam.⁶⁰

The faults of the *ulama* were not strictly theological. Their teachings and authority also had a very real impact on everyday life. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's writings mention many times the rampant corruption and nepotism among the *ulama*, the wealthy, and political leaders. For example, he denounced the practice of paying a judge (*qadi*) or issuer of *fatawa* (*mufti*) to render a particular decision or opinion or to cheat a woman out of her inheritance because such a judgment clearly violated Islamic law. Because they had collaborated with local leaders and the wealthy to cheat women and the poor, in particular, out of their God-given rights, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab declared that the *ulama* had abandoned their moral and religious authority. The need for sociomoral reform was clear. The fact that these practices were apparently so widespread simply added further fuel to his contention that individuals had to read and study scripture for themselves rather than relying on the dubious opinions of religious leaders. The potential threat this stance represented to both the *ulama* and local leaders resulted in their vehement opposition to his teachings.

Not content to let matters rest with the *ulama* alone, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab also criticized their political supporters because it was their political and economic support that allowed the *ulama* such an influential role in the first place. He reserved his harshest criticism in this regard for those who glorified and supported the *ulama*, accusing them of derogating and corrupting Islam.⁶¹

Not surprisingly, the *ulama* responded very negatively to Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's criticisms. They launched a serious campaign to discredit him, including false portrayals of his doctrines and teachings, in order to protect their own positions of power. This negative campaign of defamation survived the tests of time and found its way into the historical record. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's own writings and teachings did not. Thus, the defamation campaign of the *ulama* marked the beginning of distortions of Wahhabi teachings and impressions of the same.

Charges leveled against the Wahhabis included accusations of heretical and innovative teachings and their supposed constitution of a new school (*madhhab*) of Islamic law.⁶² Ibn Abd al-Wahhab himself was accused of brib-

ery,⁶⁷ corruption, killing nonadherents and destruction of their property, falsely devouring the property of the people by claiming that they were indebted to him, and even of outright apostasy.⁶⁸ Denunciations of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and his movement are among the most vehement in Islamic writings, reflecting the danger he represented to the established powers and social positions of his surroundings.

One of the most prominent and repeated charges made against him was the claim that he promoted violence against those who did not adhere to his teachings. This claim, more than any other, has been handed down over time, creating an image of Wahhabism that is bloodthirsty and violent. It is therefore very striking to note that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab himself was aware of these charges and vehemently denied them. He addressed the topic in a legal opinion (*fatwa*) he issued in response to a question about the appropriate response to a Muslim who has been charged with sinful behavior but refuses to repent. It is clear from the question that the person asking it expected Ibn Abd al-Wahhab to give a quick response indicating that such a person was to be considered outside of the Muslim community and therefore subject to jihad as holy war. Ironically, the questioner cited the authority of the *ulama* in support of this expected answer. The *ulama* had declared that any person not supporting his or her leader or accepting his particular interpretation of Islam was both sinful and immoral, rendering such a person an unbeliever (*kafir*) and subject to jihad as holy war. In support of their claims, the *ulama* cited the examples of Muhammad and the Companions.⁶⁹

Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's response to the question was clearly not what the questioner expected. Rather than concurring with the extremist attitude of the *ulama*, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab denounced their interpretation as overly rigid and literalistic because they had taken the example of Muhammad and his Companions completely out of its historical context, making the response to a specific historical situation into a broad value to be applied indiscriminately. Clearly disgusted by the narrowness of vision of these interpreters, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab commented that incidents such as the one cited here must be placed within their historical context in order to understand both the circumstances in which they occurred and the intended broad meaning of the event. One cannot simply look at the end result.

In this particular case, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab declared that the *ulama* were seeking to justify violence and fighting people who did not adhere to their teachings, thereby expanding their own claims to power. Such a distortion of religion had nothing to do with the pursuit of truth or understanding as far as he was concerned. Indeed, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab declared that the *ulama* would have to answer to God for their disbelief and for having led others astray.

Having thus shed light on the true agenda of the *ulama*, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab turned to the question at hand: how does one respond appropriately to a Muslim accused of sinful behavior who refuses to repent? He cited Quran

5:41 in his answer. This verse states that temptations and trials are intentionally sent by God as tests. Therefore, no human being has control over what situations he or she might encounter. What God requires is that the Muslim should struggle against unbelievers (*kuffar*) and hypocrites (*munaḥiq*). However, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab did not declare that such a "struggle" had necessarily to be carried out via jihad as holy war. Rather, he taught that this struggle should begin with education and the call to Islam, relegating fighting and military engagements to a method of last resort and then only in cases in which Muslims actually apostasize.⁷⁰

The battle for power between Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and the established religious and political orders soon became apparent. Not only was he opposed and vilified by the *ulama*, but the local political powers also began to oppose his teachings. The most important incident in this regard occurred while Ibn Abd al-Wahhab was under Ibn Mu'ammār's protection.

When the powerful leader of al-Ahsa and the Bari Khalid tribe, Sulayman ibn Muhammad, heard about his support for Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, he sent a letter to Ibn Mu'ammār, commanding him to either kill Ibn Abd al-Wahhab or force him to leave the area. Sulayman threatened to cut off all of Ibn Mu'ammār's land taxes (*kharaḥ*) if he disobeyed. This was not an idle threat. Not only did Ibn Mu'ammār's landholdings cover a broad area, but this land produced significant quantities of food and clothing and housed twelve hundred donkeys. All of these items were taxable and provided Ibn Mu'ammār with considerable revenue. Such a great financial loss would have been more than Ibn Mu'ammār's subjects could sustain for the sake of religious teachings—and Ibn Mu'ammār knew it.⁷¹ Consequently, Ibn Mu'ammār wrote his own letter to Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, explaining the situation and asking for his cooperation. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab responded with another letter, reminding Ibn Mu'ammār of his faith and his obligation to uphold *tawhid* at all costs. He thus encouraged Ibn Mu'ammār to consider the ultimatum from Sulayman as a test of his faith.

However, Ibn Mu'ammār was unwilling to take this risk. Although he spared Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's life, he decided to shun him, hoping that this would satisfy Sulayman.⁷² Unfortunately for Ibn Mu'ammār, Sulayman was not satisfied. He and his men continued to harass both Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and Ibn Mu'ammār. Finally, Ibn Mu'ammār wrote Ibn Abd al-Wahhab a second letter in which he regretfully informed him of Sulayman's command to kill him and of his own powerlessness in the face of Sulayman because of the inferiority of his forces. Ibn Mu'ammār asked Ibn Abd al-Wahhab to leave voluntarily since he did not want to see him hurt or injured. Although he still respected Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's religious teachings, Ibn Mu'ammār recognized that he also had practical responsibilities to his people and could not reasonably ask them to leave their land.

To facilitate his journey and guarantee his continued protection, Ibn Mu'ammār offered Ibn Abd al-Wahhab an escort for his journey to wherever

he sought to go. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab responded by requesting two horsemen to accompany him to al-Dir'iyah, which Ibn Muawmar provided. Although some have claimed that these horsemen were instructed to kill Ibn Abd al-Wahhab along the way, the horsemen themselves denied this claim. Ibn Muawmar maintained that his decision to withdraw protection and support was politically motivated and in no way reflected negatively on Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's teachings—a claim that is consistent with his later attempts to regain Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's favor.⁷⁴

Upon his arrival in al-Dir'iyah, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab stayed briefly with Abd Allah ibn Abd al-Rahman ibn Suwaylim and his cousin, Harmid ibn Suwaylim. However, he soon set his sights on the local leader, Muhammad Ibn Saud.⁷⁴ As with his stay in al-Uyaynah, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab did not immediately engage in public preaching activities in al-Dir'iyah, nor did he immediately preach his message of *tawhid* to Muhammad Ibn Saud. Rather, he conducted his preaching activities in clandestine visits with small groups of people. It was only after gaining some important adherents that a delegation of two blind men and a prominent woman renowned for her "intelligence, knowledge, and religion" was sent to Muhammad Ibn Saud's wife and brother with the express purpose of introducing Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's message to them, particularly his hallmark theme of *tawhid*.⁷⁵

Muhammad Ibn Saud's wife was the first to accept Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's proclamation of God's special role for Muhammad Ibn Saud and to proclaim her belief in it to her husband. Subsequently, two of his brothers, Thunayan and Mashari, also declared their belief and encouraged Muhammad Ibn Saud to support and promote *tawhid*.⁷⁶ After these three declarations, Muhammad Ibn Saud ordered that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab be placed under his protection and brought to him under the escort of his own men. When his brothers persuaded him that his personal intervention would be most effective, Muhammad Ibn Saud himself set out to Ibn Suwaylim's house to meet Ibn Abd al-Wahhab in person.

Ibn Abd al-Wahhab greeted Muhammad Ibn Saud with the message of *tawhid*, promising him that if he dedicated himself to the promotion of *tawhid* and the eradication of associationism (*shirk*), ignorance (*jahl*), and divisions among the people, God would grant him and his descendants rule over the lands of Najd and its regions, as well as the people within them.⁷⁷ It is clear from his remarks that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's interest remained in religious issues but that he was also a pragmatic man who realized that no political leader would be willing to take such great risks for the sake of religion unless some kind of earthly reward accompanied it.

Thus, in 1744 the famous alliance that led to the foundation of the first Saudi state was formed between Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and Muhammad Ibn Saud, sealed by a mutual oath swearing (*bay'ah*) of loyalty.⁷⁸ According to this arrangement, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab was responsible for religious matters and

Muhammad Ibn Saud was in charge of political and military issues. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab promised not to interfere with Muhammad Ibn Saud's state consolidation, and Muhammad Ibn Saud promised to uphold Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's religious teachings.

The fault lines of this alliance soon became clear. There is a marked difference between noninterference in military activities and active support and religious legitimization for them. If Ibn Saud had expected Ibn Abd al-Wahhab to legitimate all of his military undertakings for the sake of state consolidation and accumulation of power in the name of jihad as holy war, he must have been severely disappointed. Muhammad Ibn Saud's first conquest, the people of al-Dir'iyah and their possessions, met with neither approval nor condemnation from Ibn Abd al-Wahhab. Rather than actively supporting or promoting this conquest, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab merely "acceded" to it, hoping that Ibn Saud would get his fill of conquest and then focus on more important matters—those pertaining to religious reform. In fact, as evidence of the lack of religious support this military conquest enjoyed, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab left Ibn Saud's company altogether during this campaign, devoting himself instead to spiritual matters and prayer.⁷⁹ This was hardly what one would expect had Ibn Abd al-Wahhab believed that jihad as holy war was intended to be used as a tool for conquest.

The tension between the two was also apparent in Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's careful delineation of the parameters to be followed by each in their roles as political leader (*amir*, Muhammad Ibn Saud) and religious leader (*imam*, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab). According to this vision, the *amir* was responsible for political, military, and economic matters and the *imam* for religious issues.⁸⁰ Only the *imam* could declare jihad as holy war and this only when the motivating factor was faith alone. Jihad was not intended to serve as a means of acquiring power, wealth, or glory.⁸¹ This did not preclude the *amir* from engaging in military activities that he believed were necessary or expedient. What it did do was to limit the religious legitimization of those military activities. Because only the *imam* could declare a jihad as holy war, the *amir* could not automatically claim that any and all military activities were being carried out in the name of jihad. Thus, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab was able to restrict the declaration of jihad to cases that he believed fit the religious criteria.

Although observers and historians have assumed that any and all military activities undertaken by the Saudis after the 1744 alliance were jihad activities, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's teachings and writings do not support this contention. His behavior—his tendency to withdraw from Ibn Saud's company during such engagements and his ultimate withdrawal from his position as *imam* in 1773—further makes it clear that he did not actively support all Saudi military actions.⁸² In fact, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's writings and activities after the alliance demonstrate his continued efforts to win converts through discussion, debate, and persuasion rather than force.

For example, during the two years following the alliance, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab engaged in a letter-writing campaign in which he contacted local leaders, scholars, and rulers throughout Arabia, explaining his interpretation of *tawhid* and inviting them to join his movement.⁸³ Many, though not all, of the recipients responded positively to these missives, although they did not always do so out of religious conviction. These notables were well aware that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab was "in a House of Strength" due to his alliance with Muhammad Ibn Saud and that their own continued power bases necessitated accommodation with these two parties.⁸⁴

Those who did not respond positively to Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's invitation were not immediately or necessarily declared to be unbelievers (*kafirs*), who were therefore subject to jihad as holy war. Rather than engaging in immediate warfare, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab persisted in his attempts to engage those who resisted in dialogue and debate in order to try to work out a formal relationship. The conquests of Riyadh and Washm are particularly instructive in this regard.

The conquest of Riyadh occurred neither quickly nor forcibly. It took the Saudis twenty-seven years to consolidate their hold over this important city, suggesting that a considerable amount of time was allowed for the inhabitants to grow in their understanding of and adherence to *tawhid*.

The conquest began with Ibn Abd al-Wahhab extending an invitation to its ruler, Dham ibn Dawwas, to adhere to his religious teachings. Although Dham ibn Dawwas initially refused this offer, he made peace with the Wahhabis and entered into a truce. This is significant because it shows that a truce with non-Wahhabis was permissible. Initial rejection of Wahhabi teachings did not result in an immediate or permanent state of warfare.

Over time, Dham ibn Dawwas accepted Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's teachings and even invited some Wahhabi *ulama* to live and teach in Riyadh. However, Dham ibn Dawwas broke this truce several times. It was only at this point that protracted military activities began, culminating with the final conquest of Riyadh in 1773.⁸⁵

The conquest of Riyadh did not serve as an opportunity for vengeance or violence against the inhabitants. Although the Wahhabis legally had the right to put to death any person who had actively fought to oppose them, they did not do so. People were not forced to convert, nor were all of their properties or financial assets confiscated. Instead, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab declared that this was an opportunity to offer the inhabitants protection and to implement order and justice.⁸⁶ Some of the major accomplishments of the Wahhabis in Riyadh were the establishment of security along the roads, the institution of contracts and other written documentation of legal and commercial transactions, and the development of an organized, written system of communication between Riyadh and outlying towns.⁸⁷ The example of Riyadh therefore makes clear that not only were the inhabitants not slaughtered following the conquest, but

they actually made important gains in terms of security and communications, lending further evidence to the contention that death and destruction were not the main goals of the early Wahhabis.

Similarly, the conquest of Washm took seven years to accomplish.⁸⁸ As with Riyadh, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab first engaged in a letter-writing campaign with the inhabitants of Washm. Although some of the leaders rejected and resisted his teachings, this did not result in an immediate military response. In fact, no overt military action was taken against the region at this time. Instead, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab persisted with his invitations to religious discussions, supporting the notion of a gradual conversion process through education and dialogue rather than a "convert or die" mentality.

That religious issues and debates were really at the heart of the desired conquest of Washm is reflected in the fact that a written war between a number of religious scholars occurred there. Washm was inundated with written religious tracts by a variety of scholars, many from the Hijaz, refuting Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's teachings. Thus, the "battleground" was clearly religious, not just a matter of military might.⁸⁹ Indeed, the historical record indicates that the military style adopted in the conquest of Washm was relatively light in touch, with a siege occurring on only a single occasion. Economic pressure was the preferred method in this case.

Those who responded positively to Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's invitations sometimes made a migration (*hijrah*) to al-Dir'iyah to study with Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and his followers. The *hijrah* was not a requirement in the way that the seventh-century Kharijites, for example, had required a *hijrah* as a way of literally following the example of the Prophet Muhammad. Rather, the *hijrah* here simply provided an opportunity for people to come to study directly with Ibn Abd al-Wahhab or one of his followers. In many cases, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab chose instead to send teachers to the other locations so that no *hijrah* occurred at all. *Hijrah* was not a religious requirement according to Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's teachings.⁹⁰

Ironically, one of the parties who elected to make a *hijrah* was Ibn Muammar, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's previous protector. Claiming that he deeply regretted exiling Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, Ibn Muammar and a contingent of his men arrived in al-Dir'iyah offering Ibn Abd al-Wahhab their renewed protection and pleading with him to return to al-Uyaynah. As proof of their sincerity and ability to provide protection, Ibn Muammar and his men engaged in raids designed to expand Wahhabi influence. However, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, ever the pragmatist, recognized that Ibn Muammar was more likely motivated by the power and wealth now enjoyed by Muhammad Ibn Saud than by religious zeal. He therefore declined the offer.⁹¹

Ibn Muammar ultimately left al-Dir'iyah and returned to al-Uyaynah. He was later accused of engaging in subversive activities and of plotting against

the newly founded Saudi state. He was assassinated in the mosque of al-Uyaynah in 1749 by a local group of Wahhabi sympathizers, an act that reportedly infuriated Ibn Abd al-Wahhab.⁸²

There were other indications of discord within the movement, most notably among those who had elected to make the *hijra* to al-Dir'iyah. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab remained faithful to his vision of reforming Islamic beliefs and practices through education. He did not set up a jihad-oriented community bent on military conquest or a terrorist training camp providing specialized classes in the use of weapons, bomb construction, or the planning of suicide missions. Those who made the *hijra* were immersed in a life of religious study, with particular emphasis placed on *hadith* instruction.

That some of the emigrants were disappointed at what they found in al-Dir'iyah soon became clear. Religious instruction was not what they had expected. Many had seen the growing strength and spreading power base of Muhammad Ibn Saud and no doubt expected that the real purpose of the *hijra* would be military training and preparation for war. It is important to recall that Arabia was a tribal society in which raiding and the taking of booty were prominent political and economic features. Consequently, many of the emigrants found the more peaceful emphasis on education to be particularly "trying" and gave in to the "temptation" to pursue other activities.⁸³ Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's goal of reforming Islam was overshadowed and ultimately overwhelmed by Muhammad Ibn Saud's quest for state consolidation.

Not surprisingly, it was at this time that organized military opposition to the Wahhabi movement began, supported by the *ulama*. Opponents of the Wahhabi movement claimed religious justification for their military actions by accusing the Wahhabis of ignorance, sorcery, and lies—religious criteria by legitimated fighting according to the Quran.⁸⁴ That the charges were untrue was irrelevant—they provided the justification for military action, leading to a strike against the Wahhabis. It was only at this point—when the Wahhabi community was threatened—that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab finally authorized a jihad as holy war to defend the Wahhabis.

However, even this defensive jihad remained limited in scope, as fighting was permitted only against those who had either attacked or insulted his followers directly.⁸⁵ This first jihad served to establish the reputation of the Wahhabis as capable of defending themselves. Although the Wahhabis took booty at the conclusion of the conflict, as was their legal right, no rampant violence or destruction occurred, nor were any forcible converts made.⁸⁶ Ibn Abd al-Wahhab also took this opportunity to remind his followers that the taking of booty was not meant to enrich the winners. Rather, booty obtained in jihad as holy war was to be used to fulfill the legitimate needs of the people. To prove his point, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab kept nothing for himself.⁸⁷

Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's refusal to emphasize material acquisitions served to deepen the fault lines in his alliance with Ibn Saud. Ibn Saud, as a tribal leader,

clearly had no interest in a more ascetic existence because his subjects expected to lead comfortable lives in return for their political loyalty. It was therefore also at this point that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and Muhammad Ibn Saud had a falling-out of sorts.

Ibn Abd al-Wahhab was appalled by what he witnessed in lands controlled by the Al Saud family. The inhabitants were not following basic Islamic rituals and had adopted a luxurious lifestyle. Incensed by what he perceived to be their "extreme" levels of ignorance (*jahlīyyah*), he demanded that they abandon their materialism and take their religious duties more seriously. He reprimanded them for neglecting their prayers and other Muslim obligations, particularly the required tithing of 2.5% of a Muslim's wealth (*zakaat*), preached to them about greater and lesser *shirk*, and reminded them of their pledge to uphold *tawhid*.⁸⁸ Because this territory was held by the Al Saud, who had pledged to uphold and implement *tawhid*, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab held them responsible for the dedication of their subjects to material pursuits.

Despite this, the Al Saud continued their military exploits to extend their power and expand their wealth. When Muhammad Ibn Saud died in 1767 and was succeeded by his son, Abd al-Aziz, the emphasis on materialism increased. Ultimately, rather than becoming famous as a center for religious learning, al-Dir'iyah became known for its wealth and strength. Whereas the era of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's prominence was marked by poverty, trial, and temptation, that of Abd al-Aziz was characterized by wealth, power, and luxury, as evidenced by the possession of money, property, arms and weapons decorated with gold and silver, horses, dromedaries, clothing, and luxuries.⁸⁹

This accession to wealth and power was not interpreted as God's favor due to faithful adherence to Islam. In fact, just the opposite was the case, as wealth and power came only when religious reforms and restraints were set aside. Ibn Bishr notes that by the time Abd al-Aziz acceded to leadership the people "had tired of holding back their hearts."⁹⁰ They were not interested in pure religious reform. They wanted earthly power and rewards—reflections of the tribal society in which they lived. Thus, the shift from a more religiously oriented era of educational endeavors to emphasis on political and military power is clear.⁹¹

Finally, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab resigned his position as *imam* and withdrew from active political and financial life in 1773, following the conquest of Riyadh. He turned over command of the deserts to Abd al-Aziz and entrusted him with command over both his followers and the treasury, the Bayt al-Mal.⁹² Abd al-Aziz proceeded to expand his vision beyond the confines of Najd into the rest of Arabia, Iraq, and Syria.⁹³ His actions made it clear that the Al Saud family had as its ultimate goal the expansion of its territories and power, with or without religious legitimation. In fact, Saudi-Wahhabi power reached its height between 1792 and 1814, long after Ibn Abd al-Wahhab withdrew from public life.

Ibn Abd al-Wahhab remained a consultant to Abd al-Aziz but largely withdrew his legitimization of Saudi military activities. Instead, he devoted himself to learning, teaching, and worship until his death in 1791 or 1792.¹⁰⁴ He left behind four sons who were eminent religious scholars, as well as many students dedicated to his teachings.¹⁰⁵

Conclusion

Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's influence continued after his death, both in terms of the spread of his religious teachings and in the reinterpretations of the same through the contemporary era. His biography makes certain suggestions about his dedication to return to the fundamental sources of Islam, the Quran, and his *hadith*; his hallmark theme of the theological principle of *tawhid* and his opposition to *shirk*; his support for *jihād* (the reinterpretation of Islamic law) and rejection of the imitation of the past (*taqlid*); his concern for the rights of women; and his limitation of the use of *jihad* and discouragement of violence in favor of education and debate. In chapter 2, these themes are explored in more detail in order to provide a fuller explanation of his worldview.

2

The Theology and Worldview of Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab

Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab was both a theologian and a legal scholar. The worldview that he espoused reflected both of these traits. In Islam, correct belief (orthodoxy), although important, is not sufficient on its own to achieve salvation in the Afterlife. Muslims believe that God will judge them on the basis of how they lived their lives, not just on the basis of what they believed. Thus, correct practice (orthopraxy) is also a main determinant in whether one will go to Heaven or Hell.

Although many Muslim scholars have therefore chosen to emphasize Islamic law over theology as the most important subject for study, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab gave both equal treatment. He believed that correct belief was a necessary first step in guiding the Muslim in correct behavior. Without correct belief, one would not know how to behave. Consequently, his works provide detailed coverage and analysis of both theology and law.

Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's detailed attention to theology reflected the emphasis he placed on intent rather than ritual perfection. He encouraged Muslims to consider their motivations before undertaking activities—the content of intent—rather than focusing on the form that those activities took. In this way, he demonstrated how the worldview of the Muslim—with God at the center not only of the universe but also of the individual Muslim's heart and mind—is intended to have an impact on every action a human being undertakes and that every action is intended to be a reflection of the faith in the Muslim's heart and mind. It also meant that his worldview was one of an activist, rather than passive, faith, so that faith, as the motivat-