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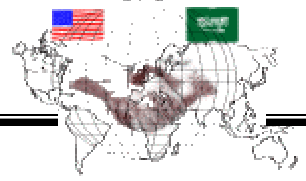

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Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad
Excerpts from Chapter One
By Natana J. DeLong-Bas

Editor's Note:

The Saudi-American Forum is very pleased to present excerpts from the new book "*Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad"* by Natana J. DeLong-Bas. Today we present excerpts from chapter one of the book and will follow with other excerpts over the coming weeks. In addition to reading the excerpts we hope you will join a a discussion of the book and view the additional material about "*Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad*." [http://www.saudi-us-relations.org//ubbthreads/ubbthreads.php?Cat=]

Visit the link below to read the introduction to the book.
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Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad
By Natana J. DeLong-Bas

EXCERPTS FROM CHAPTER ONE
Pages 8-13

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 contests 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 absolute monotheism (*tawhid*).

However, this was only a fist step. Eighteenth-century reformers believed that adherence to absolute monotheism (*tawhid*) had implications beyond private religious beliefs. They believed that adherence to absolute monotheism (*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 absolute monotheism (*tawhid*) was intended to launch the second goal of the reformers, the sociomoral reconstruction of society.

In addition to adherence to absolute monotheism (*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 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. Throughout 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.

[Text omitted.]

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 complimentary 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.

[Text omitted.]

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 the 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 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 legitimation 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 owned 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.

Notes:

2. For an excellent analysis of the eighteenth-century Islamic world, see John O. Voll, *Islam: Continuity and Change in the Modern World*, 2d ed. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1994), esp. 24-83.

4. See, for example, the Egyptian historian, al-Jabarti's, observation of his encounter with Wahhabi scholars as found in Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti, *'Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti's History of Egypt*, ed. Thomas Philipp and Moshe Perlmann, 4 vols. (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1994), 3-4:321.

5. The Sudanese Mahdi is a good example of a later movement that sought to recreate literally the early Muslim community.

6. Esposito has noted, "Islamic revivalism is not so much an attempt to reestablish the early Islamic community in a literal sense as to reapply the Quran and Sunna rigorously to existing conditions." See John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 117-18.

7. Important research on this practice has been carried out in recent years, most notably by Wael Hallaq. Hallaq's research has revealed that the practice of *ijtihad* never completely ended, as some scholars had claimed. However, the practitioners of *ijtihad* were typically a minority and belonged mostly to the Hanbali and Shafii schools of Islamic law. *Taqlid* was the broad norm historically.

8. A more militant approach was undertaken by nineteenth-century movements that claimed inspiration from the teachings of eighteenth-century reformers but took a more activist political-military approach, typically in the face of European colonialism. In the nineteenth century, Islam served as the inspiration for resistance movements, necessarily lending them a more militant character. The Indian Ocean region and the Sudan are excellent examples of more militant interpretations of the eighteenth-century reform movements.

9. Although this type of religio-political alliance was a characteristic of the eighteenth-century reform movements, it was not unique to this time period. The Hanbali school of Islamic law supported this type of arrangement

historically, both during the caliphate and during the medieval era, as recorded in the works of Ibn Taymiyya. See George Makdisi, "The Sunni Revival," in *Islamic Civilisation, 950-1150: A Colloquium Published under the Auspices of the Near Eastern History Group, Oxford, and the Near East Center, University of Pennsylvania*, ed. D. S. Richards (Oxford: Faber, 1977), 164-65; and Joseph A. Kechichan, "The Role of the Ulama in the Politics of an Islamic State: The Case of Saudi Arabia," *Middle East Studies* 18 (1986): 54.

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Book Description
Before 9/11, few Westerners had heard of Wahhabism. Today, it is a household word. Frequently mentioned in association with Osama bin Laden, Wahhabism is portrayed by the media and public officials as an intolerant, puritanical, militant interpretation of Islam that calls for the wholesale destruction of the West in a jihad of global proportions. In the first study ever undertaken of the writings of Wahhabism's founder, Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1702-1791), Natana DeLong-Bas shatters these stereotypes and misconceptions.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Natana J. DeLong-Bas is a senior research assistant at the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University, Washington, DC. She is the author of *Notable Muslims: A Biographical Dictionary* (2004) and co-author of *Women in Muslim Family Law*, revised edition, with John L. Esposito (2001). She has served as editor for and contributor to *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam* (OUP, 2003), and contributor to *The Encyclopedia of the Qur'an* (2004) and *The Encyclopedia of the Islamic World* (OUP, 2004). She is a frequent public speaker on Islam, Wahhabism and Saudi Arabia.

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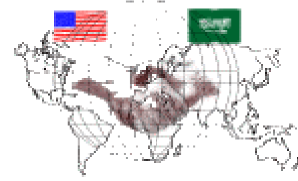

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