

# Saudi-American Forum

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SAF Book Serial

November 4, 2004

*Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad*  
**Excerpts from Chapter Four**  
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 four 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.

[http://www.saudi-american-forum.org/Newsletters2004/SAF\\_Item\\_Of\\_Interest\\_2004\\_10\\_09.htm](http://www.saudi-american-forum.org/Newsletters2004/SAF_Item_Of_Interest_2004_10_09.htm)

Visit the link below to read excerpts from chapter one of the book, “Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and the Origins of Wahhabism: Eighteenth-Century Context.”

[http://www.saudi-american-forum.org/Newsletters2004/SAF\\_Item\\_Of\\_Interest\\_2004\\_10\\_21.htm](http://www.saudi-american-forum.org/Newsletters2004/SAF_Item_Of_Interest_2004_10_21.htm)

**Related Material:**

- *Wahhabi Islam* Book Page
    - [http://www.saudi-american-forum.org/Newsletters2004/SAF\\_Item\\_Of\\_Interest\\_WahhabiIslam.htm](http://www.saudi-american-forum.org/Newsletters2004/SAF_Item_Of_Interest_WahhabiIslam.htm)
  - Conversation with Natana J. DeLong-Bas
    - [http://www.saudi-american-forum.org/Newsletters2004/SAF\\_Item\\_Of\\_Interest\\_WahhabiIslam1.htm](http://www.saudi-american-forum.org/Newsletters2004/SAF_Item_Of_Interest_WahhabiIslam1.htm)
  - Background Information on Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab
    - [http://www.saudi-american-forum.org/Newsletters2004/SAF\\_Item\\_Of\\_Interest\\_WahhabiIslam2.htm](http://www.saudi-american-forum.org/Newsletters2004/SAF_Item_Of_Interest_WahhabiIslam2.htm)
  - From Oxford University Press -- Advance praise for *Wahhabi Islam* ..
    - [http://www.saudi-american-forum.org/Newsletters2004/SAF\\_Item\\_Of\\_Interest\\_WahhabiIslam3.htm](http://www.saudi-american-forum.org/Newsletters2004/SAF_Item_Of_Interest_WahhabiIslam3.htm)
  - Glossary
    - [http://www.saudi-us-relations.org/Fact\\_Sheets/glossary.html](http://www.saudi-us-relations.org/Fact_Sheets/glossary.html)
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**Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad**  
By Natana J. DeLong-Bas

**Excerpts from Chapter Four**  
**Women and Wahhabis: In Defense of Women's Rights**  
**Pages 123-124**

Wahhabism in the contemporary era is largely portrayed as misogynist, denying women their human rights, insisting on strict gender segregation, forbidding women access to public space, and subjugating them by considering them inferior to men. Women under Wahhabi regimes are assumed to have second-class citizenship, if not slave status. Critics of Wahhabism point to extreme examples like the Taliban and Saudi Arabia's requirement that women wear the full *burqa* or *abaya* covering them from head to toe, leaving barely enough room to breathe; the ban on women driving or being recognized heads of households; and the Taliban's forbidding women to go to school, work, or seek medical care as evidence of Wahhabism's oppression, suppression, and repression of women in accordance with an extremely conservative interpretation of Islamic law.<sup>[1]</sup> All of these stereotypes and images are assumed to be based on the conservative Wahhabi interpretation of Islam despite the fact that no systematic analysis of Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's writings about women and gender has ever been undertaken. In addition, no distinctions have been made between tribal customs, local traditions, and Islamic law in these portrayals.

While these contemporary views and concerns have come to define Wahhabism for Western human and women's rights activists and Muslim feminists alike, the assertion that these attitudes are characteristic of Wahhabism risks inaccuracy because the term *Wahhabism* is rarely defined. Many of the regimes and movements labeled as Wahhabi in the contemporary era do not necessarily share the same theological and legal orientations.<sup>[2]</sup> The reality is that *Wahhabism* has become such a blanket term for any Islamic movement that has an apparent tendency toward misogyny, militancy, extremism, or strict and literal interpretation of the Quran and *hadith* that the designation of a regime or movement as Wahhabi or Wahhabi-like tells us little about its actual nature.<sup>[3]</sup> Furthermore, these contemporary interpretations of Wahhabism do not necessarily reflect the writings or teachings of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab.

In fact, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's life and writings reflect a concern for women and women's rights reminiscent of Muhammad. Like Muhammad, he sought to ensure that women's rights, as granted by the Quran, were implemented and that women were aware of them. Like other jurists and Muslim legal thinkers of his time, he was engaged in the discussion of the appropriate place of women in Muslim society.<sup>[4]</sup> His interactions with women indicate that he recognized them as human beings capable of serving as positive, active agents in both the private and public realms and who therefore deserved access to both education and public space. Rather than demonstrating misogyny or the relegation of women to seclusion, these interactions and encounters reflect the consistent application of the principles of social justice, the equality of all believers, and the need to preserve public welfare and order that permeate all of his other theological and legal writings.

These interactions also stand in marked contrast to conventional wisdom about customs and traditions in Arabia both during this time period and in the contemporary era, as well as

traditional interpretations of Islamic law. Consistent with his legal and theological methodologies, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab sought to rediscover the earliest sources of Islamic revelation with respect to gender issues in order to reinterpret them (*ijtihad*) through contextualization, both historically in terms of the broad values taught by the Quran and hadith. He used this methodology to construct an Islamic vision of gender.

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**Terms:**

- *abaya* - Islamic dress that covers a woman from head to toe
- *hadith* - written accounts of the sayings and deeds of Islam's prophet, Muhammad
- *ijtihad* - independent reasoning in the interpretation of Islamic law

For more terms, visit the SUSRIS Glossary.

[http://www.saudi-us-relations.org/Fact\\_Sheets/glossary.html](http://www.saudi-us-relations.org/Fact_Sheets/glossary.html)

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**Notes:**

1. One example of the abundant popular literature making such claims is Jean Sasson, *Princess: A True Story of Life behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia* (New York: Morrow, 1992).
  2. For example, the Taliban was Hanafi in its orientation to Islamic law, while the Saudis are Hanbali.
  3. For example, in the former Soviet republics the ruling regimes have labeled Wahhabi any Muslim who challenged either the religious or political status quo. Muriel Atkin, "The Rhetoric of Islamophobia," *Central Asia and the Caucasus: Journal of Social and Political Studies* 1, no.1 (2000): 130.
  4. For an analysis of some of his contemporaries in Palestine and Syria, see Judith E. Tucker, *In the House of Law: Gender and Islamic Law in Ottoman Syria and Palestine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). For coverage of gender issues from the same time period, see the collection of historical essays in Amira El Azhary Sonbol, Ed., *Women, the Family, and Divorce Laws in Islamic History* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996).
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**ORDERING INFORMATION**

***Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad***  
**By Natana J. DeLong-Bas**

### **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.

Visit the link below for ordering information:

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0195169913/saudiusrelati-20/102-8953394-2249737>

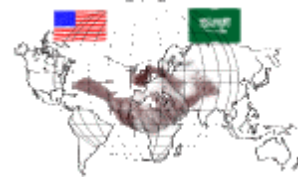
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### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**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.

## **ABOUT THE SAUDI-AMERICAN FORUM**

The Saudi-American Forum is an information service designed to provide you timely information -- background and current issues - - impacting the Saudi-U.S. relationship.



The Forum is a resource for Americans who value the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia and who want to act in response to erroneous and misleading depictions of the relationship in the media and elsewhere. The Forum is a vehicle for stakeholders in the Saudi-U.S. relationship to contribute their experiences and their ideas and opinions on the issues of the day.

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### **CONTACT INFORMATION**

You can contribute your ideas and feedback to the Forum through use of the "Feedback" form on the website or through direct email to the Forum at: [info@Saudi-American-Forum.org](mailto:info@Saudi-American-Forum.org)

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