What Is Wahhabism?

One of the most rigid and reactionary sects in all of Islam today is Wahhabism. It is the official and dominant Sunni sect in Saudi Arabia, whose sole constitution is the Holy Qur'an. Wahhabism was born in the middle of the 18th Century in the Arabian Peninsula's central region of Najd. The Wahhabi sect derives its name from the name of its founder Mohammad Ibn Abdul-Wahhab (1703-92). Like most Sunni Islamic fundamentalist movements, the Wahhabis have advocated the fusion of state power and religion through the reestablishment of the Islamic Caliphate, the form of government adopted by the Prophet Muhammad's successors during the age of Muslim expansion. What sets Wahhabism apart from other Sunni Islamist movements is its historical obsession with purging Sufis, Shiites, and other Muslims who do not conform to its twisted interpretation of Islamic scripture.

Wahhabism and Saudi Arabia's ruling House of Saud have been intimately intertwined since their births. Wahhabism created the Saudi monarchy, and the House of Saud spread Wahhabism. One could not have existed without the other. Wahhabism gives the House of Saud legitimacy, and the House of Saud protects and promotes Wahhabism. In 1744, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab forged an historic alliance with the al-Saud clan and sanctified its drive to vanquish its rivals. In return, the House of Saud supported campaigns by Wahhabi zealots to cleanse the land of "unbelievers." In 1801, Saudi-Wahhabi warriors crossed into present-day Iraq and sacked the Shiite holy city of Karbala, killing over 4,000 people.

Various Saudi-Wahhabi terrorist acts and blasphemous crimes historically aroused the deep anger of Muslims around the world. In 1818, as the official ruler of the Arabian Peninsula and the guardian of Islam's holiest mosques, the Ottoman Caliph in Istanbul, Caliph Mahmud II, ordered an Egyptian force to be sent to the Arabian Peninsula to punish the Saudi-Wahhabi clan. An Egyptian army destroyed the Wahhabis and razed their desert capital of Dir'iyyah to the ground. The Wahhabi Imam Abdullah al-Saud and two of his followers were sent to Istanbul in chains, where they were publicly beheaded. The rest of the leadership of the Saudi-Wahhabi clan was held in captivity in Cairo.

Although Wahhabism was destroyed in 1818, it was soon revived with the help of British colonialism. After the execution of Imam Abdullah al-Saud, the remnants of the Saudi-Wahhabi clan looked at their Arab and Muslim brothers as their real enemies, and to Britain and the West in general as their true friends. Accordingly, when Britain colonized Bahrain in 1820, and began to look for ways to expand its colonization in the area, the House of Saud found it a great opportunity to seek British protection and help.

In 1843, the Wahhabi Imam Faisal Ibn Turki al-Saud escaped from captivity in Cairo and returned to Riyadh, where he began to make contacts with the British. In 1848 he appealed to the British Political Resident in the Persian city of Bushere "to support his representative in Trucial Oman." The British sent Col. Lewis Pelly to Riyadh in 1865 to establish an official treaty with the House of Saud. To impress Pelly with his fanaticism and violence, Imam Faisal said that the major difference in the Wahhabi strategy between political and religious wars was that in the latter there would be no compromise, for "we kill everybody" (quoted in Robert Lacey, *The Kingdom: Arabia and the House of Saud* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981).

In 1866, the Wahhabi House of Saud signed a friendship treaty with Britain. The treaty was similar to the many unequal treaties imposed by Britain on other Arab puppets along the Persian Gulf. In exchange for British help, money, and weapons, the House of Saud agreed to collaborate with Britain's colonial authorities in the area.

— *Ramtanu Maitra*