WAHHABISM: STATE-SPONSORED EXTREMISM WORLDWIDE

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As we near the second anniversary of 9/11, the U.S. war on terrorism has scored some impressive successes. After denying Afghanistan as a base of operations to Al Qaeda in the fall of 2001, the United States has been able to neutralize a number of its high-ranking operatives and disrupt its operations. The removal of the brutal dictatorship of Saddam Hussein in Operation Iraqi Freedom has precluded that rogue regime from developing and using weapons of mass destruction or supplying them to fellow-terrorists. On the domestic front, significant strides have been made in shoring up homeland security and no serious terrorist incident has taken place on American soil since 9/11. Despite these very positive developments, it would be highly premature to claim that we're close to winning the war. Indeed, recent terrorist attacks in Riyadh and Casablanca, as well as the putative conspiracy to blow-up Brooklyn Bridge, have shown unmistakably that terrorist networks and groups retain considerable ability to wreak havoc.

This is the case because while the United States has been successful in inflicting strategic defeats on state sponsors of terrorism, such as Afghanistan and Iraq, it has not applied the same decisive strategic approach in dealing with the phenomenon of Islamic extremism, which is both the root cause and basic support structure of the terrorist phenomenon exemplified by Al Qaeda and others. It is worth reminding ourselves here, that Al Qaeda is not the cause, but rather the symptom of the malignancy called Islamic extremism and that even if we are able to defeat Al Qaeda totally, somebody else will almost certainly continue in its footsteps, as long as the underlying malignancy lives on.[1]

Thus, most of the measures taken to defeat Islamic terrorism to date have been essentially tactical in nature and therefore of transitory effect. We have, for instance, attempted to block financial inflows to the terrorist networks, but have avoided taking a critical look into the real magnitude and nature of terrorist finances, especially with respect to the evidence of state sponsorship. The result is that despite some $117 million of frozen assets, the terrorists do not appear to be lacking in funds at all.[2] We have attempted to come to terms with the psychology behind the terrorists' murderous fury, yet refuse to examine systematically, let alone do something about, the effect and implications of daily indoctrination of hundreds of thousands if not millions of Muslims around the world into a hate-driven cult of violence. Similarly, we have tried and often succeeded in disrupting the terrorists' tactical organizational structures and communications networks, but have paid scant attention to the huge world-wide infrastructure of radical Islam which breeds and nourishes violence.

[1] For an example of an extremist Islamic organization that could easily succeed Al Qaeda and is already operating internationally see Ariel Cohen, Hizb ut-Tahrir: An Emerging Threat to U.S. Interests in Central Asia, Backgrounder #1656, The Heritage Foundation, June 2003.

[2] This becomes easier to understand when we're told recently that a single mosque in Brooklyn has been able to transfer $20 million to Al Qaeda.

Yet, without a critical consideration of these realities and the formulation of a forceful strategic response based on it, it is unlikely that we'll make lasting progress in the war on terror. It is thus necessary to briefly examine the key factors that have made and sustained Islamic extremism as a daunting challenge to our liberal democratic order.

The Ideology of Extremism

It is difficult, indeed, impossible to successfully defeat a violent ideological movement, such as radical Islam, without understanding the ideology motivating it. And there has been no lack of scholarly attention to the subject from both the liberal Western and the Muslim perspective recently. [3] Nonetheless, it is worth encapsulating the main doctrinal tenets of Islamic extremism here because they are regularly and consciously obfuscated by the extremists themselves and continue to be misunderstood.

Islamic extremism as an ideology is hardly new with the first movement that resembles today's phenomenon, known as the Kharijites, appearing shortly after the birth of Islam in the 7th century. Later it was expounded on by various Islamic scholars, such as Ibn Taymiiya in the 13th century, but it did not become institutionalized until the mid-18th century when the theories promulgated by the radical cleric Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab were accepted and imposed as the state religion of his realm by the founder of the House of Saud. Wahhabism, as this creed got to be known, like most other extremist movements before it, believed that traditional Islamic virtues and beliefs have been corrupted and preached a return to the ostensibly pure Islam of the time of the Prophet and his companions.[4] In reality, Wahhab's extreme doctrines contradicted and stood on their head major tenets of traditional Islam and in a real sense represent an outright falsification of the Muslim faith.[5]

To name just one egregious example, a key postulate of Wahhab's teaching asserts that Muslims who do not believe in his doctrines are *ipso facto* non-believers and apostates against whom violence and Jihad were not only permissible, but obligatory. This postulate alone transgresses against two fundamental tenets of the Quran – that invoking Jihad against fellow-Muslims is prohibited and that a Muslim's profession of faith should be taken at face value until God judges his/hers sincerity at judgment day. This extreme reactionary creed was then used as the religious justification for military conquest and violence against Muslim neighbors of the House of Saud. Already in 1746, just two years after Wahhabism became Saud's religion, the new Saudi-Wahhabi state proclaimed Jihad against all neighboring Muslim tribes that refused to subscribe to it. Indeed, well into the 1920s the history of the House of Saud is replete with violent campaigns to force other Muslims to submit politically and theologically, violating yet another fundamental Quranic principle that prohibits the use of compulsion in religion.

[3] For a critique of radical Islam as exemplified by Wahhabism from the point of view of traditional Muslim scholarship see Hamid Algar, Wahhabism: A Critical Essay, Islamic Publications International, New York 2002. Recent book-length Western studies include Dore Gold, Hatred's Kingdom, Regnery Publishing, Wash. D.C., 2003 and Stephen Schwartz, The Two Faces of Islam, Doubleday, New York 2002.

[4] The Wahhabis themselves despise the term and never use it since they believe and claim that theirs is in fact the only true Islam.

[5] To the extent that Wahhabism contradicts some of the fundamental tenets of Islam it is misleading to call it fundamentalist as many observers routinely do.

Today, the Wahhabi ideology continues to be characterized by a set of doctrinal beliefs and behavior prescriptions that are often inimical to the values and interests of the vast majority of Muslims in the world to say nothing about those of non-Muslims. Non-Wahhabi Sunni Muslims (syncretic Muslims, Sufis, Barelvis, Bahai, Ahmadis, etc) are still considered illegitimate, at best, while the Shia religion is particularly despised as a "Jewish conspiracy" against Islam.[6] The Wahhabis continue to believe and preach violence and Jihad as a pillar of Islamic virtue, rigid conformism of religious practice, institutionalized oppression of women, wholesale rejection of modernity, secularism and democracy as antithetical to Islam and militant proselytism.
This jihadist ideology par excellence, is by and large, also the worldview of radical Islam and it is not at all an exaggeration to argue that Wahhabism has become the prototype ideology of all extremist and terrorist groups, even those that despise the House of Saud.

How did this obscurantist, pseudo-Islamic creed manage to become the dominant idiom not only among the extremists but increasingly the Islamic establishment? The short answer is money and an acute legitimacy crisis in the Muslim world in the last quarter of the 20th century.

Regarding the latter, the progressive, centuries-long, gradual decline of Islam as a dominant force and civilization reached its nadir in 1924, when Mustafa Kemal (Ataturk) simultaneously did away with the Caliphate and the Ottoman Empire by overnight transforming the latter into a secular Turkish republic. The unceremonious discarding of the symbol of the Muslim community (ummah), coupled with the establishment of European colonial rule over much of the Muslim world gave rise to revivalist movements and ideologies seeking to come to terms with Islam's predicament and efforts to restore it to previous glories.

Beginning with the Muslim Brotherhood of Hassan el-Banna in 1928, followed by the movements founded by Islamist ideologues like Abul ala Maududi, Sayyid Qutb and the extremist Deobandi creed in South Asia, radical Islam established a strong presence in the Muslim world in the second half of the 20th century. Then in the 1970s and 1980s Islamic terrorist groups (Al Jihad and Gamaa Islamiya in Egypt, Front for National Salvation (FIS) in Algeria etc.) began appearing in the Middle East and South Asia, especially after the beginning of the Soviet war in Afghanistan. While none of these groups and movements were 100% Wahhabi originally, their ideological differences were insignificant.[7]

As these movements were violently suppressed in places like Egypt and Algeria, the Saudis were quickly able to co-opt them by providing sanctuary and financial assistance to their members in both Saudi Arabia and outside of it. Thus, the economic and logistical dependence of many of these extremists on the Saudis, coupled with the ongoing radicalization of Wahhabism itself, created a highly synergistic relationship between the practitioners of terror and their Wahhabi

[6] For instance, the establishment of an Islamic state based on Sharia'a in Iran under Ayatollah Khomeini was seen as a real threat to Saudi/Wahhabi interests, rather than a victory for Islam, and treated with unmitigated hostility by Riyadh.

[7] For example, while many of these movements considered the Muslim political leadership of their countries illegitimate and urged and conspired in its violent overthrow, most, though not all, of the Wahhabis supported the House of Saud.

supporters and paymasters despite the fact that many practicing jihadists like Osama bin Laden resented the Saudi regime.

While this ideological affinity between the Wahhabis and modern day radical Islam is undoubtedly of key import, it was vast amounts of money more than anything else that made Wahhabism the chief enabler and dominant influence of the Islamist phenomenon.

Financing Radical Islam

Saudi financing of Islamic extremism plays such a huge role in its emergence as a global phenomenon that a proper understanding of it is impossible without coming to terms with its dimensions. Simply put, without the exorbitant sums of Saudi money spent on supporting extremist networks and activities, the terrorist threat we are facing today would be nowhere as acute as it is.

While the Wahhabis have always been sympathetic to Sunni Muslim extremists and evidence exists that they have supported such people financially as early as a century ago,[8] the real Saudi offensive to spread Wahhabism aggressively and support kindred extremist groups world-wide began in the mid-1970s, when the kingdom reaped an incredible financial windfall with rocketing oil prices after Riaydh's imposition of an oil embargo in 1973.[9] "It was only when oil revenues began to generate real wealth," says a government publication, that "the kingdom could fulfill its ambitions of spreading the word of Islam to every corner of the world." [10]

There are no published Western estimates of the numbers involved, which, in itself, is evidence of our failure to address this key issue, but even the occasional tidbits provided by official Saudi sources, indicate a campaign of unprecedented magnitude. Between 1975 and 1987, the Saudis admit to having spent $48 billion or $4 billion per year on "overseas development aid," a figure which by the end of 2002 grew to over $70 billion (281 billion Saudi rials).[11] These sums are reported to be Saudi state aid and almost certainly do not include private donations which are also distributed by state-controlled charities. Such staggering amounts contrast starkly with the $5 million in terrorist accounts the Saudis claim to have frozen since 9/11. In another comparison, it is instructive to put these figures side by side with the $1 billion per year said to have been spent by the Soviet Union on external propaganda at the peak of Moscow's power in the 1970s.

Though it is claimed that this is "development aid" it is clear from the Saudi media and government statements alike that the vast majority of these funds support "Islamic activities", rather than real developmental projects. For example, a report on the yearly activities of the Al Haramain Foundation described as "keen on spreading the proper Islamic culture" are listed as follows: "it printed 13 million (Islamic) books, launched six internet sites, employed more than

[8] The Islamist ideologue Rashid Rida was one of the first of those in 1909. See Apgar, op.cit.
[9] Saudi oil revenues jumped from $1 billion in 1970 to $116 billion in 1980.
[10] Ain Al-Yaqeen, March 27, 2002.
[11] See Saudi Aid to the Developing World, Nov. 2002, in www.saudinf.com/main/1102.htm and statement by Dr. Ibrahim Al-Assaf, Saudi Minister of Finance and National Economy as reported by Saudia Online, Jan.2, 2003 (www.saudia-online.com/news2003/newsjan03/news2.shtml.) 96% of these aid amounts are said to be grants.

3000 callers (proselytizers), founded 1100 mosques, schools and cultural Islamic centers and posted more than 350,000 letters of call (invitations to convert to Islam)" while the International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO), another key "charity," completed 3800 mosques, spent $45 million for Islamic education and employed 6000 proselytizers.[12] Both of these organizations have been implicated in terrorist activities by U.S. authorities and both operate directly out of Saudi embassies in all countries in which they do not have their own offices.

The Saudi money is spent according to a carefully designed plan to enhance Wahhabi influence and control at the expense of mainstream Muslims. In Muslim countries, much of the aid goes to fund religious madrassas that teach little more than hatred of the infidels, while producing barely literate Jihadi cadres. There are now tens of thousands of these madrassas run by the Wahhabis' Deobandi allies in South Asia and also throughout Southeastern Asia. In Pakistan alone, foreign funding of these madrassas, most of which comes from Saudi Arabia, is estimated at no less than $350 million per year.[13] The Saudis also directly support terrorist activities in places like Pakistan, Afghanistan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Chechnya, Bosnia and, as noticed above, most of the large Saudi foundations have been implicated in such involvement.

It needs to be emphasized here that contrary to Saudi claims that charities such as Al Haramain, the World Muslim League (WML), the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY) and the International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO) are independent and non-governmental, there is conclusive evidence from Saudi sources that they are tightly controlled by the government and more often than not run by government officials. It is also the case that as early as 1993, the kingdom passed a law stipulating that all donations to Muslim charities must be collected in a fund controlled by a Saudi Prince [14]

Early on in the Wahhabi ideological campaign, the penetration of the Muslim communities in non-Muslim Western societies was made a key priority. The objective pursued there was slightly different and aimed to assure Wahhabi dominance in the local Muslim establishments by taking over or building new Wahhabi mosques, Islamic centers and educational institutions, including endowing Islamic chairs at various universities. [15] Taking over a mosque, of course, means more than just the ability to impose the Wahhabi version of Islam. The imam and the leadership of the mosque are also responsible for the collection of *zakat* (the 2 ½ % yearly tithe Muslims must donate), which gives them the ability to contribute these funds to extremist organizations. Most Pakistani mosques in the United Kingdom, for instance, have reportedly been taken over by the Wahhabi/Deobandi group even though their members belong primarily to the moderate Barelvi

[12] Ain-Al-Yaqeen, (Saudi government-controlled newspaper), December 8, 2000.
[13] For details on Saudi funding of the madrassas see Alex Alexiev, The Pakistani Time Bomb, Commentary, March 2003
[14] See www.saudhouse.com/salman_bin_abdul_aziz.htm
[15] The typical modus operandi in taking over a mosque or similar institution follows approximately the following pattern: Saudi representatives offer a community to subsidize the building of a new mosque, which usually includes an Islamic school and a community center. After completion of the project an annual maintenance subsidy is offered making the community dependent on Saudi largess in perpetuity. Saudi chosen board members are installed, a Wahhabi imam (prayer leader) and free wahhabi literature are brought in and the curriculum changed in accordance with Wahhabi precepts. Visiting speakers of extremist views are then regularly invited to lead Friday night prayers and further radicalize the members. The most promising candidates are selected for further religious education and indoctrination in Saudi Arabia to be sent back as Wahhabi missionaries as the circle is completed.

creed. As a result, millions of their donations are said to be supporting terrorist groups in Pakistan.[16]

While nobody knows for sure how much the Saudis have spent on getting a foothold in non-Muslim regions and especially in Western Europe and North America, the sums are clearly huge. According to official information, the Saudis have built over 1500 mosques, 210 Islamic centers, 202 Islamic colleges and 2000 schools for educating Muslims in non-Muslim countries. Most of these institutions continue to be on the Saudi payroll for substantial yearly donations assuring that Wahhabi control is not likely to weaken any time soon.[17]

What have the Saudis been able to buy with this unprecedented Islamic largesse? Quite a bit it would seem. For starters, the Wahhabi creed which is practiced by no more than 20 million people around the world, or less than 2% of the Muslim population, has become a dominant factor in the international Islamic establishment through an elaborate network of front organizations and charities, as well as in a great number of national establishments, including the United States. In just one example, the venerable Al Azhar mosque and university in Cairo, which not too long ago was a paragon of Islamic moderation has been taken over by the Wahhabis and spews extremist propaganda on a regular basis. Two of their recent fatwas make it a religious duty for Muslims to acquire nuclear weapons to fight the infidels and justify suicide attacks against American troops in Iraq.[18]The Wahhabi project has contributed immeasurably to the Islamic radicalization and destabilization in a number of countries and continues to do so. Pakistan, for instance, an important U.S. ally, is facing the gradual talibanization of two of its key provinces under Wahhabi/Deobandi auspices and the prospect of large-scale sectarian strife and turmoil. Riyadh-financed extremist networks exist presently around the world providing terrorist groups and individuals with a protective environment and support and even the recent terrorist incidents in Saudi Arabia itself do not seem likely to bring about meaningful change.

Already Saudi officials have stated that they do not intend to either change their anti-Western curriculum or stop their "charitable" activities. Yet the evidence of conscious Saudi subversion of our societies and values as partly detailed above is so overwhelming that to tolerate it further would be unconscionable. Failure to confront it now will assure that we will not win the war on terror anytime soon.

[16] International Crisis Group (ICG) Report, "Pakistan: Madrassas, Extremism and the Military," Asia Report #36, July 29, 2002, p. 16

[17] Although information on this aspect is rather scarce, figures provided from time to time in the Saudi media indicate yearly payments to Islamic centers in the range of $1.5 million to $7 million.

[18] See Suicide Attacks Permitted: Al Azhar, Dawn, April 6, 2003 (www.dawn.com/2003/04/06int10.htm)