



Book Review

The Doctrine of Ahl as-Sunnah Versus the “Salafi” Movement

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The Reason for this Book

This brief but excellent book by the Iraqi scholar al-Zahawi (1863-1936) is published in English for the first time, by Allah's grace, to give our Muslim brother in the West the necessary historical background on important questions of belief and methodology which are currently under attack from certain quarters of our Community. It is a companion volume to our two books entitled *Islamic Doctrine and Beliefs According to Ahl al-Sunna*.

Islam, in our understanding and that of the majority of Muslims, both scholars and non-scholars, is the Islam of Ahl al-Sunna wa al-Jama'a — The People of the Way

of the Prophet and the Community of Muslims. Chief and foremost among them are the true Salaf of Islam: the Companions, the Successors, and their Successors according to the Prophet's sound hadith in Muslim: "The best century is my century, then the one following it, then the one following that." All the scholars understood by that hadith that the true Salaf were the models of human behavior and correct belief for us Muslims and for all mankind, that to follow them was to follow the Prophet, and that to follow the Prophet was to achieve salvation according to Allah's order: "Whoever obeys the Prophet obeys Allah" (4:80).

In our time, however, the name Salaf has been usurped by a movement which seeks to impose its own narrow interpretation of Religion towards a re-fashioning of the teachings of Islam. The adherents of this movement call themselves "Salafi." Such an appellation is baseless since the true Salaf knew no such school as the "Salafi" school nor even called themselves by that name; the only general name they recognized for themselves was that of Muslim. As an eminent scholar has stated, the Salafiyya is not a recognized school of thought in Islam, rather, it refers to a blessed historical period of our glorious past.

In reality, today's so-called "Salafi" movement, now about thirty years old, is the modern outgrowth of an two-century old heresy spawned by a scholar of the Najd area in the Eastern part of the Arabian peninsula by the name of Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792). This scholar has been refuted by a long line of scholars both in his time and ours. Their names and the titles of some of their excellent refutations are found in the bibliography given at the end of this introduction.

In essence, Salafism and Wahhabism are the same, but the latter is identified by its founder while the former takes the name of the Salaf and makes it its own. Yet both Salafism and Wahhabism depart from the belief and practice of the Salaf, as the present book abundantly makes clear.

About the Book

Al-Zahawi displays a profound mastery of the proofs of Ahl al-Sunna which he presents in a clear and systematic style. The book is divided into concise sections tracing the origins of the Wahhabi/Salafi movement and the teachings that this movement promotes in isolation of the doctrine of the majority of Muslims. After a brief historical overview of the bloody origins of Wahhabism and the "Salafi" creed, the author turns to investigate the foundations of the shari'a which have been targeted by the Wahhabi/Salafi movement for revision, namely:

the Wahhabi/Salafi tampering of the doctrine of the pious Salaf concerning Allah's essence and attributes, and his freedom from body, size, or direction; their rejection of ijma' (scholarly consensus) and qiyas (analogy); their rejection of the sources and methodological foundations of ijtihad (deriving qualified judgment) and taqlid (following qualified judgment).

The author then narrows down on the Wahhabi/Salafi practice of takfir, which is their declaring Muslims unbelievers, according to criteria not followed by the pious Salaf but devised by modern-day "Salafis." The author shows that the "Salafis" went out of bounds in condemning the Umma (Muslim Community) on the question of taqlid, declaring unbelievers all those who practice taqlid, that is, the majority of

Muslims. Finally, the author turns to the linchpin of "Salafi" philosophy: leaving the *ijma'* of the true Salaf in declaring unbelievers all Muslims who use the Prophet Muhammad's intercession, Peace be upon him, as a *wasila* or means of blessing.

About the Author

Al-Shaykh Jamil Effendi al-Siqdi al-Zahawi was the son of the Mufti of Iraq and a descendant of Khalid ibn al-Walid. He was educated in the Islamic sciences chiefly by his father and, besides going on to become the greatest Arabic and Persian poet of modern Iraq, was also a literary master in the other two Islamic languages of the time: Turkish and Kurdish.

The Prophet said, Peace be upon him: "My Community will split into seventy-three sects. All of them will be in the fire except one group." They asked: "Who are they, O Messenger of Allah?" He said: "Those that follow my way and that of my companions."

This is a rallying-cry to the Firm Rope of 1,418 years of mainstream Islam and an invitation to reject the absurd claim of the "Salafi" movement that it is they, and not Ahl al-Sunna, who are the Saved Group. As Zahawi asks — may Allah have mercy on him: If the saved group are those who came after Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, then what is the status of all those who came before him, and that of the majority of those who came after him — that is, Ahl al-Sunna wa al-Jama'a?

This warning is not meant as an attack on Islamic unity. On the contrary, our cry of alarm must be understood as a reaffirmation that the Saved Group which the Prophet mentioned in his hadith are the People of the Way of the Prophet and their scholars. Those scholars have spoken in no uncertain terms in condemnation of the innovations of Wahhabis and "Salafis" in our time, as the present book and the bibliography below, *al-hamdu lillah*, prove beyond doubt.

The Origin of the Wahhabi Sect

The Wahhabiyya is a sect whose origin can be traced back to Muhammad Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab. Although he first came on the scene in 1143 (1730 CE), the subversive current his false doctrine initiated took some fifty years to spread. It first showed up in Najd. This is the same district that produced the false prophet, Musaylima in the early days of Islam. Muhammad Ibn Sa'ud, governor of this district, aided Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab's effort, forcing people to follow him. One Arab tribe after another allowed itself to be deceived until sedition became commonplace in the region, his notoriety grew and his power soon passed beyond anyone's control. The nomadic Arabs of the surrounding desert feared him. He used to say to the people: "I call upon you but to confess *tawhid* (monotheism) and to avoid *shirk* (associating partners with Allah in worship)." The people of the countryside followed him and where he walked, they walked until his dominance increased.

Muhammad Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab was born in 1111 and died in 1207 (1699-1792 CE). At the outset of his career, he used to go back and forth to Mecca and Madina in quest of knowledge. In Madina, he studied with Shaykh Muhammad Ibn Sulayman al-Kurdi and Shaykh Muhammad Hayat al-Sindi (d. 1750). These two shaykhs as well as others with whom he studied early on detected the heresy of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab's

creed. They used to say: "Allah will allow him be led astray; but even unhappier will be the lot of those misled by him." Circumstances had reached this state when his father 'Abd al-Wahhab, a pious scholars of the religion, detected heresy in his belief and began to warn others about his son. His own brother Sulayman soon followed suit, going so far as to write a book entitled *al-Sawa'iq* (the thunderbolts) to refute the innovative and subversive creed manufactured by Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab.

Famous writers of the day made a point of noting the similarity between Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab's beginnings and those of the false prophets prominent in Islam's initial epoch like Musaylima the Prevaricator, Sajah al-Aswad al-Anasi, Tulaiha al-Asadi and others of their kind. What was different in 'Abd al-Wahhab's case was his concealment in himself of any outright claim to prophecy. Undoubtedly, he was unable to gain support enough to openly proclaim it. Nevertheless, he would call those who came from abroad to join his movement Muhajirun and those who came from his own region Ansar in patent imitation of those who took flight from Mecca with the Prophet Muhammad in contrast to the inhabitants of Madina at the start of Islam. Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab habitually ordered anyone who had already made the obligatory Pilgrimage (Hajj) to Mecca prior joining him to remake it since Allah had not accepted it the first time they performed because they had done so as unbelievers. He was also given to telling people wishing to enter his religion: "You must bear witness against yourself that you were a disbeliever and you must bear witness against your parents that they were disbelievers and died as such."

His practice was to declare a group of famous scholars of the past unbelievers. If a potential recruit to his movement agreed and testified to the truth of that declaration, he was accepted; if not, an order was given and he was summarily put to death. Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab made no secret of his view that the Muslim community had existed for the last six hundred years in a state of unbelief (kufr) and he said the same of whoever did not follow him. Even if a person was the most pious and Allah-fearing of Muslims, he would denounce them as idolaters (mushrikun), thus making the shedding of their blood and confiscation of their wealth licit (halal).

On the other hand, he affirmed the faith of anyone who followed him even though they be persons of most notoriously corrupt and profligate styles of life. He played always on a single theme: the dignity to which Allah had entitled him. This directly corresponded to the decreased reverence he claimed was due the Prophet whose status as Messenger he frequently depreciated using language fit to describe an errand boy rather than a divinely commissioned apostle of faith. He would say such things as "I looked up the account of Hudaybiyya and found it to contain this or that lie." He was in the habit of using contemptuous speech of this kind to the point that one follower felt free to say in his actual presence: "This stick in my hand is better than Muhammad because it benefits me by enabling me to walk. But Muhammad is dead and benefits me not at all". This, of course, expresses nothing less than disbelief and counts legally as such in the four schools of Islamic law.

Returning always to the same theme, Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab used to say that prayer for the Prophet was reprehensible and disliked (makruh) in the Shari'a. He would prohibit blessings on the Prophet from being recited on the eve of Friday prayer and their public utterance from the minbar, and punish harshly anyone who

pronounced such blessings. He even went so far as to kill a blind mu'adhdhin (caller to prayer) who did not cease and desist when he commanded him to abandon praying for the Prophet in the conclusion to his call to prayer. He deceived his followers by saying that all that was done to keep monotheism pure.

At the same time, he burned many books containing prayers for the Prophet, among them *Dala'il al-Khayrat* and others, similar in content and theme. In this fashion, he destroyed countless books on Islamic law, commentary on the Qur'an, and the science of hadith whose common fault lay in their contradiction of his own vacuous creed. While doing this, however, he never ceased encouraging any follower to interpret Qur'an and hadith for himself and to execute this informed only by the light of his own understanding, darkened though it be through errant belief and heretical indoctrination.

Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab clung fiercely to denouncing people as unbelievers. To do this he used Qur'anic verses originally revealed about idolaters and extended their application to monotheists. It has been narrated by 'Abd Allah Ibn 'Umar and recorded by Imam Bukhari in his book of sound hadiths that the Khawarij transferred the Qur'anic verses meant to refer to unbelievers and made them refer to believers. He also relates another narration transmitted on the authority of Ibn 'Umar whereby the Prophet, on him be peace, said: "What I most fear in my community is a man who interprets verses of the Qur'an out of context." The latter hadith and the one preceding it apply to the case of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab and his followers.

It is obvious the intention to found a new religion lay behind his statements and actions. In consequence, the only thing he accepted from the religion of our Prophet, on him be peace was the Qur'an. Yet even this was a matter of surface show. It allowed people to be ignorant of what his aims really were. Indicating this is the way he and his followers used to interpret the Qur'an according to their own whim and ignore the commentary provided by the Prophet, on him be peace, his Companions, the pious predecessors of our Faith (*al-salaf al-salihun*), and the Imams of Qur'anic commentary. He did not argue on the strength of the narrations of the Prophet and sayings of the Companions, the Successors to the Companions and the Imams among those who derived rulings in the Shari'a by means of *ijtihad* nor did he adjudicate legal cases on the basis of the principle sources (*usul*) of the Shari'a; that is, he did not adhere to Consensus (*ijma'*) nor to sound analogy (*qiyas*). Although he claimed to belong to the legal school (*madhhab*) of Imam Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, this pretense was motivated by falsehood and dissimulation. The scholars and jurists of the Hanbali school rejected his multifarious errors. They wrote numerous articles refuting him including his brother whose book touching on Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab's errors was mentioned earlier.

The learned Sayyid al-Haddad al-Alawi said: "In our opinion, the one element in the statements and actions of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab that makes his departure from the foundations of Islam unquestionable is the fact that he, without support of any generally accepted interpretation of Qur'an or Sunna (*bi la ta'wil*), takes matters in our religion necessarily well-known to be objects of prohibition (*haram*) agreed upon by consensus (*ijma'*) and makes them permissible (*halal*).

Furthermore, along with that he disparages the prophets, the messengers, saints and the pious. Willful disparagement of anyone failing under these categories of person is unbelief (kufr) according to the consensus reached by the four Imams of the schools of Islamic law.

Then he wrote an essay called "The Clarification of Uncertainty Concerning the Creator of Heaven and Earth" (kashf al-shubuhah 'an khaliq al-ardi wa al-samawat) for Ibn Sa'ud. In this work he declared that all present-day Muslims are disbelievers and have been so for the last six hundred years. He applied the verses in the Qur'an, meant to refer to disbelievers among the tribe of the Quraysh to most Allah-fearing and pious individuals of the Muslim community. Ibn Sa'ud naturally took this work as a pretext and device for extending his political sovereignty by subjecting the Arabs to his dominance. Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab began to call people to his religion and instilled in their hearts the idea that every one under the sun was an idolater. What's more, anyone who slew an idolater, when he died, would go immediately to paradise.

As a consequence, Ibn Sa'ud carried out whatever Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab ordered. If he commanded him to kill someone and seize his property, he hastened to do just that. Indeed, Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab sat among his folk like a prophet in the midst of his community. His people did not forsake one jot or little of what he told them to do and acted only as he commanded, magnifying him to the highest degree and honoring him in every conceivable way. The clans and tribes of the Arabs continued to magnify him in this manner until, by that means, the dominion of Ibn Sa'ud increased far and wide as well as that of his sons after him.

The Sharif of Mecca, Ghalib, waged war against Ibn Sa'ud for fifteen years until he grew too old and weak to fight. No one remained of his supporters except they joined the side of his foe. It was then that Ibn Sa'ud entered Mecca in a negotiated peace settlement in the year 1220 (1805 CE). There he abided for some seven years until the Sublime Porte (i.e. the Ottoman government) raised a military force addressing command to its minister, the honorable Muhammad 'Ali Pasha, ruler of Egypt. His intrepid army advanced against Ibn Sa'ud and cleared the land of him and his followers. Then, he summoned his son Ibrahim Pasha who arrived in the district in the year 1233 (1818 CE). He finished off what remained of them.

Among the hideous abominations of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab was his prohibiting people from visiting the tomb of the Prophet, on him be Allah's blessing and peace. After his prohibition, a group went out from Ahsa to visit the Prophet. When they returned, they passed by Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab in the district and he commanded that their beards be shaved and they be saddled on their mounts backwards to return in this fashion to Ahsa. The Prophet, on him be peace, related information about those Khawarij preserved in numerous hadiths. Indeed, these sayings constitute one of the signs of his prophethood; for they convey knowledge of the unseen. Among them are his statements in Bukhari and Muslim: "Discord there; discord there!" pointing to the East; and "A people will come out of the East who will read Qur'an with it not getting past their throats. They will pass through the religion like an arrow when it passes clean through the flesh of its quarry and comes back pristine and prepared to be shot once again from the bow. They will bear a sign in the shaving of their heads." Another narration of the hadith adds: "They are calamity for the whole of Allah's creation;

Blessed is he who kills them" or "Slay them! For though they appeal to Allah's Book, they have no share therein." He said: O Allah! bless us in our Syria and bless us in our Yemen!" They said: O Messenger of Allah! And in our Najd? but he replied: In Najd will occur earthquakes and discords; in it will dawn the epoch [or horn] of Shaytan." Again he said: "A people will come out of the East, reading the Qur'an and yet it will not get past their throats. Whenever one generation is cut off, another arises until the last dawns with the coming of Antichrist. They will bear a sign in the shaving of their heads."

Now the Prophet's words explicitly specify in text his reference to those people coming out of the East, following Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab in the innovations he made in Islam. For they were in the habit of ordering those who followed them to shave their heads and once they began to follow them, they did not abandon this practice. In none of the sects of the past prior to that of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab did the likes of this practice occur. He even ordered the women who followed him to shave their heads. Once he ordered a woman who entered his new religion to shave her head. She replied: "If you ordered men to shave off their beards, then it would be permissible for you to order a woman to shave her head. But the hair on a woman's head has the same sacred status as a man's beard." Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab was unable to answer her. Found among the narrations transmitted from the Prophet, on him be peace, is his statement: "At the end of time, a man will rise up in the same region from which once rose Musaylima. He would change the religion of Islam." Another saying has it: "From Najd a Shaytan will appear on the scene causing the Arab peninsula to erupt in earthquake from discord and strife."

One of the abominations of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab was his burning of books containing works of Islamic science and his slaughter of the scholars of our faith and people both of the top classes and common people. He made the shedding of their blood and confiscation of their property and wealth licit well as digging up graves of awliya (saints). In Ahsa, for example, he ordered that some of the graves of awliya be used by people to relieve the wants of nature. He forbade people to read Imam Jazuli's *Dala'il al-Khayrat*, to perform supererogatory acts of devotion, to utter the names of Allah in His remembrance, to read the mawlid celebrating the Prophet's birth, or to evoke blessings and prayers on the Prophet from the Minaret after the call to prayer. What's more, he killed whoever dared to do any of those things. He forbade any kind of act of worship after the canonical prayers. He would publicly declare a Muslim a disbeliever for requesting a prophet, angel or individual of saintly life to join his or her prayers to that person's own prayer expressing some intention whose fulfillment might be asked of Allah as, for example, when one supplicates the Creator for the sake of Muhammad, on him be peace, to accomplish such-and-such a need. He also said anyone who addressed a person as lord or master (sayyid) was a disbeliever.

Undoubtedly, one of the worst abominations perpetrated by the Wahhabis under the leadership of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab was the massacre of the people of Ta'if upon entering that town. They killed everyone in sight, slaughtering both child and adult, the ruler and the ruled, the lowly and well-born. They began with a suckling child nursing at his mother's breast and moved on to a group studying Qur'an, slaying them, down to the last man. And when they wiped out the people they found in the

houses, they went out into the streets, the shops and the mosques, killing whoever happened to be there. They killed even men bowed in prayer until they had annihilated every Muslim who dwelt in Ta'if and only a remnant, some twenty or more, remained.

These were holed up in Beit al-Fitni with ammunition, inaccessible to their approach. There was another group at Beit al-Far to the number of two-hundred and seventy who fought them that day, then the second and third until the Wahhabis sent them a guarantee of clemency; only they tendered this proposal as a trick. For when they entered, they seized their weapons and slew them to a man. Others, they also brought out with a guarantee of clemency and a pact to the valley of Waj where they abandoned them in the cold and snow, barefoot, naked exposed in shame with their women, accustomed to the privacy afforded them by common decency and religious morality. They, then, plundered their possessions: wealth of any kind, household furnishings and cash.

They cast books into the streets alleys and byways to be blown to and fro by the wind among which could be found copies of the Qur'an, volumes of Bukhari, Muslim, other canonical collections of hadith and books of fiqh, all mounting to the thousands. These books remained there for several days, trampled upon by the Wahhabis. What's more, no one among them made the slightest attempt to remove even one page of Qur'an from under foot to preserve it from the ignominy of this display of disrespect. Then, they raised the houses and made what was once a town a barren waste land. That was in the year 1217 (1802 CE).

The Wahhabi Creed

Moreover, since Allah the Exalted had shut tight the door of prophecy after the Seal of the Prophets, our master Muhammad, on him be Allah's blessing and peace, there was no way to realize the goal of his desires except to claim that he was a renewer of the faith (mujaddid) and an independent thinker in the formulation of legal rulings (mujtahid). Such an attitude — or rather the worst and most profound state of moral misguidance and religious disbelief — brought him to the point of declaring every group of Muslims disbelievers and idolaters. For he set out to apply the verses of Qur'an specifically revealed to single out the idolaters of the Arabs to generally include all Muslims who visit the grave of their Prophet, and seek his intercession with their Lord.

In doing this, he cast aside what ran counter to his own invalid claims and the vain desires commanding his ego to work mischief regarding the explicit statements of the Master of all messengers and Imams, the mujtahids of our religion (that is, who have the capacity to exercise independent reasoning in the process of legal discovery). Hence, when he saw a consensus of legal opinion in matters of faith which clashed with his own unwarranted innovations, he rejected it as a matter of principle, asserting: "I do not entertain any opinion of people coming after the Qur'an which contains all that pertains to Islam, the fresh and the dry (cf. 6: 59)." Thus, he failed to heed what the Qur'an itself declared, when it says: "He who follows the path of those other than the Muslims" (4:115) inasmuch as he accepted from Qur'an only what it reveals concerning the idolaters of the Arabs. These verses he interpreted in his own

obscure fashion, having the gall to stand before Allah and facilitate the accomplishment of his own personal political ambitions by means of an unwarranted and unjustified exegesis of His holy text. His method here mostly consisted in applying these verses concerning the idolaters to Muslims and on this basis declaring that they had been disbeliever for the last six hundred years, that one may shed their blood with impunity and confiscate their property and reduce their land, the Abode of Peace, (Dar al-Islam) to a field of war against disbelief (Dar al-Harb).