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Wahhabism and Boko Haram
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This article will delve into the theological details and history of the Wahhabist Islam religious movement. Wahhabism is the primary driving religious factor behind the terrorist organization "Boko Haram" in Nigeria. This article will seek to increase Western understanding of Wahhabist Islam and explore the religious motivations that drive "Boko Haram." In addition, the article will also explore how Wahhabist Islam has affected the structures of the governments that have chosen to adopt and implement Wahhabist interpretations of Sharia Law. Through the analysis, it will seek to investigate what Nigeria might look like if the goals of "Boko Haram" were achieved.

In recent weeks, the Nigerian terrorist organization Boko Haram has received a flurry of media attention following the terrorist organization's kidnapping of 230 school girls. Boko Haram is a Wahhabist fundamentalist organization which seeks to eliminate what it perceives as the toxic influence of Western education, and to make Sharia law the official law of the land in Nigeria.[1] The name "Boko Haram" comes from the Hasau language. In Arabic, the words "Boko Haram" translate to "Western education is sin."[2]

Wahhabism is part of the ultra-fundamentalist movement known as Salafism. Salafism is a sect of Sufism which upholds that the world is divided into two sides: "Salafis [Wahhabis], who are the winners, the chosen ones, who will go to heaven, and the rest. The rest are Muslims and Christians and Jews and others."[3] In a 2001 interview with Frontline, Executive Director of the Saudi Institute Ali al-Ahmed explained the way Wahhabists see those who do not share their faith. According to al-Ahmed, Wahhabists perceive non-Wahhabists to be in one of three groups: kafirs*,* deniers of God, mushrak*,* those who put other gods next to God, or enervators*,* people guilty of smaller religious transgressions. Those who are described by Wahhabists as enervators are "Sunni Muslims who...for instance, celebrate Prophet Mohammed's birthday, and…[other activities] not accepted by Salafis."[4] Al-Ahmed explains that those who do not embrace the literalist interpretation of Islam adopted by Wahhabists "are supposed to be hated, to be persecuted, [and] even killed."[5]

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[1] Bederka, Alan, and Mandela Lofton. "Utilizing Religious Dialogue to Combat Boko Haram in Nigeria." . http://www.scarrdc.org/uploads/2/6/5/4/26549924/bederkaloftonutilizingreligiousdialoguetocombatbokoharaminnigeria.pdf (accessed May 10, 2014).
[2] Ibid.
[3] PBS. "Interview Ali al-Ahmed." PBS. http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/saudi/interviews/ahmed.html (accessed May 10, 2014).
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.

Many radical, fundamentalist, Islamic sects have emerged as a result of the Salafi movement. In addition to Boko Haram, terrorist organizations such as the Taliban, Al Qaeda, and Al Shabab are all also motivated by a strict adherence to Salafist Islam. Each of these movements practices one of the sects of Islam that are part of the greater Salafi movement. It is important to understand that the Wahhabist religious motivations that drive Boko Haram are shared by a plurality of extremist Islamic terror organizations.

Wahhabism was founded by Muhammad ibn Abd al Wahhab in central Arabia in the mid-eighteenth century.[6] Wahhab believed that the contemporary crises of his world could be best addressed with "a fundamentalist return to the Quran and *sunnah*, and by militant rejection of all later accretions, which included medieval *fiqh*, mysticism, and Falsafah, which most Muslims now regard as normative."[7] Wahhabists claim to be "true Sunnis," making it difficult for someone unfamiliar with the faith to distinguish Wahhabism from orthodox Sunni Islam.[8] Followers of Wahhabism will always agree that they are Sunni Muslims, but emphatically reject the label of "Wahhabist." This is because such a label stands in direct contradiction to what they believe and stand for: "Purity of worship and reverence to God alone. The authentic carriers of Islam from the time of the Prophet (s) until now." Calling them Wahhabis implies that they learned ideas from a man – Muhammad ibn Abdul-Wahhab – instead of the Qur'an and Sunnah the, two great sources of Islam."[9] Because of their rejection of the label "Wahhabism," adherents of the movement have come to refer to themselves as the *Muwahiddun,* which literally means "defenders of unity."[10]

The central theological concept behind Muhammad ibn Abd al Wahhab's movement is an "emphasis on the oneness of God, [which] was asserted in contradistinction to *shirk*, or polytheism, defined as the act of associating any person or object with powers that should be attributed only to God." [11] The belief is largely responsible for the iconoclasm of the movement. Wahhabism forbids the construction of "grave markers or tombs in burial sites and the building of any shrines that could become a locus of *shirk*."[12] Examples of Wahhabi iconoclasm can be seen in 1802, when "Wahhabi fighters raided and damaged one of the most sacred Shia shrines, the tomb of Husayn, the son of Imam Ali and grandson of the Prophet, at Karbala in Iraq."[13] A more recent example of Wahhabi iconoclasm can be seen in the destruction of the world's two largest-standing Buddha statues in Afghanistan by Taliban fighters. The Taliban adheres to the Deobandi school of Islam, which has been heavily influenced by Wahhabism and the Salafi movement as a whole.[14, 15] Wahhabist iconoclasts are also responsible for the destruction of

[6] Doumato, Eleanor A. *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study*. Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1996.
[7] Armstrong, Karen. *Islam: A Short History*. New York: Random House Inc, 2000.
[8] Eleanor A. Doumato, *Saudi Arabia.*
[9] Qamar, Zubair. "WAHHABISM: UNDERSTANDING THE ROOTS AND ROLE MODELS OF ISLAMIC EXTREMISM." Wahabis. http://www.sunnah.org/articles/Wahhabiarticleedit.htm (accessed May 15, 2014).
[10] Noss, David, and Blake Grangaard. *A History of the World's Religions*. 2003. Reprint, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2012.
[11] Eleanor A. Doumato, *Saudi Arabia.*
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Islamabad, Ahmed. "After 1,700 years, Buddhas fall to Taliban dynamite." The Telegraph. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/1326063/After-1700-years-Buddhas-fall-to-Taliban-dynamite.html (accessed May 15, 2014).

Muhammad's birthplace and the graves of his family members for fear that they would become sites of what Wahhabists perceive as polytheistic veneration[16]

Muhammad ibn Abd al Wahhab was greatly influenced by another man, named Ahmed Ibn Taymiyah, who lived a few centuries before Wahhab. Ibn Taymiyah was born in 1263 in modern-day Turkey, and died imprisoned in Damascus in 1328. Taymiyah was imprisoned in 1326 for asserting that a person who travels to visit the Prophet Muhammad's grave is committing innovation, or *bidah*.[17] Wahhab looked at Ibn Taymiyah as a role model, and adopted many of Taymiyah's beliefs into his own sect. These beliefs include:

(1) His claim that Allah's Attributes are "literal," thereby attributing God with created attributes and becoming an anthropomorphist;

(2) His claim that created things existed eternally with Allah;

(3) His opposition to the scholarly consensus on the divorce issue;[Taymiyah believed that a divorce conducted in "an innovative fashion" was not binding and did not take effect, going against the scholarly consensus that "innovative divorces" are binding][18]

(4) His opposition to the orthodox Sunni practice of *tawassul* (asking Allah for things using a deceased pious individual as an intermediary);

(5) His saying that starting a trip to visit the Prophet Muhammad's (s) invalidates the shortening of prayer;

(6) His saying that the torture of the people of Hell stops and doesn't last forever;

(7) His saying that Allah has a limit (*hadd*) that only He Knows;

(8) His saying that Allah literally sits on the Throne (*al-Kursi*) and has left space for Prophet Muhammad (s) to sit next to Him;

(9) His claim that touching the grave of Prophet Muhammad (s) is polytheism (*shirk*);

(10) His claim that that making supplication at the Prophet Muhammad's grave to seek a better status from Allah is a reprehensible innovation;

(11) His claim that Allah descends and comparing Allah's "descent" with his, as he stepped down from a *minbar* while giving a sermon (*khutba*) to Muslims;

(12) His classifying of oneness in worship of Allah (*tawheed*) into two parts: *Tawhid al-rububiyya* and *Tawhid al-uluhiyya*, which was never done by pious adherents of the *salaf*.[19]

While Muhammad ibn Abd al Wahhab and Ahmed Ibn Taymiyah shared many of the same theological beliefs, there are important distinctions between the preachings of Ibn Taymiyah and the beliefs held by Wahhabists. For example, "While Ibn Taymiyah accepts Sufism (*Tasawwuf*) as a legitimate science of Islam (as all orthodox Sunni Muslims do), *Wahhabis* reject it as an ugly innovation in the religion."[20] Another difference between the beliefs of Ibn Taymiyah and Wahhabist beliefs can be seen in how each

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[15] PBS. "Analysis Wahhabism." PBS. http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/saudi/analyses/wahhabism.html (accessed May 15, 2014).

[16] David Noss and Blake Grangaard. *A History of the World's Religions*.

[17] Campo, Juan Eduardo. *Encyclopedia of Islam*. New York, NY: Facts On File, 2009.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Zubair Qamar. "WAHHABISM: UNDERSTANDING THE ROOTS AND ROLE MODELS OF ISLAMIC EXTREMISM."

[20] Ibid.

perceives the celebration of the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad. While Taymiyah accepted the legitimacy of celebrating the birthday of the Prophet, a practice accepted by Sunni Orthodox Muslims as legitimate, Wahhabists categorically reject the celebration of the Prophet's birthday as reprehensible.[21]

Seeing as how Wahhabism was created in what is modern-day Saudi Arabia, it should be unsurprising that the faith remains strong in the region. Wahhabism has been the dominant faith in Saudi Arabia for more than two centuries. When the Saudi government came into power in 1932, they attempted to unify the various ethnic and religious groups in the region under Wahhabism. This was done because Wahhabism was believed to be "much purer because it's more fundamentalist, much more conservative than the people who are like in the south, the people in Mecca, who had more mystical religious trends, such as the Sufi trend, which is very mystical."[22]

Until the 1970s, Wahhabism remained relatively contained to the Arabian Peninsula. While the government of Saudi Arabia has always embraced the ultra-fundamentalist beliefs of the sect, the movement did not spread any considerable distance until "Saudi charities started funding Wahhabi schools (madrassas) and mosques from Islamabad to Culver City, California."[23] This investment in Wahhabi schools allowed for the propagation of the faith across the globe and is at least partially responsible for the rise of Wahhabist organizations from Nigeria to Pakistan.

The spread of Wahhabism is also partially responsible for the rise of Boko Haram in Nigeria, although it is but one of a myriad of factors have contributed to the emergence of the organization. As mentioned before, Boko Haram's principle goal is to see the installation of Sharia law in place of the secular legal code in Nigeria. Boko Haram also seeks to encourage the propagation of their religious ideals against what they perceive to be the encroachment of Western values in their culture. If Boko Haram's goals were to be realized, the nation of Nigeria would have a legal system and government based on a strict, literalist, interpretation of Islamic scriptures. While it may be difficult to imagine what that might look like, it may be possible to derive some insight on the subject by examining the nation of Saudi Arabia where some of these ideals have become a reality.

While Saudi Arabia is highly urbanized and is a far more technologically developed nation than Nigeria, the nations' adherence to Sharia law reflected in the nation's culture and legal system have created numerous disturbing issues in Saudi culture. For example, "Detainees [in Saudi Arabia], including children, commonly face systematic violations of due process and fair trial rights, including arbitrary arrest and torture and ill-treatment in detention."[24] In addition, Saudi law defines a variety of crimes such as adultery, apostasy, sexual indecency, and drug smuggling as capital crimes, and allows for the use of the death penalty as punishment. Saudi Arabia is also notorious for its denial of basic rights and equality to women living in the nation. Recently however, women in Saudi Arabia have been gaining ground, but

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[21] Ibid.

[22] Yamani, Mai. "Interview Mai Yamani." *Saudi Time Bomb?*. : PBS, . .

[23] PBS. "Analysis Wahhabism." PBS. http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/saudi/analyses/wahhabism.html (accessed May 15, 2014).

[24] Human Rights Watch. "World Report 2013: Saudi Arabia." Human Rights Watch. http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2013/country-chapters/saudi-arabia?page=2 (accessed May 16, 2014).

even something as seemingly inconsequential as letting girls receive physical education classes in school has been met with resistance.[25]

It is important to understand that the progress in women's rights in Saudi Arabia is the product of time and of allowing progressivism to grow organically within the culture. A desire for equality between sexes has been an omnipresent element within Saudi Arabia's culture since its independence.[26] The new movement of progressivism in Saudi Arabia is a result of the maturation of the nation's culture. While this gives hope for Nigeria's future, as well as the futures of other nations plagued by violent fundamentalist organizations, time is only a long term solution. Clearly the violent and hostile nature of these organizations puts a degree of pressure on the people affected by them. This results in governments seeking short term solutions that may provide relief to the people in the short term, but tend to exacerbate conflicts with fundamentalist organizations in the long term.

SCARR believes that the adoption of a model of governance based on Wahhabism, similar to the one utilized in Saudi Arabia would have disastrous consequences for the people of Nigeria. Unlike Saudi Arabia, Nigeria is far more religiously divided, with about 49.3 percent of the population practicing Christianity and about 48.8 percent of the population practicing Islam.[27] Given Wahhabism's inability to acknowledge the right of other faiths to exist, SCARR believes that the installation of a Wahhabist government in Nigeria would lead to a greater exacerbation of religious tensions in the region.

[25] The Economist Newspaper. "Unshackling themselves." The Economist. http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21602249-saudi-women-are-gaining-ground-slowly-unshackling-themselves (accessed May 16, 2014).
[26] Ibid.
[27] Pew Research Forum. "Table: Religious Composition by Country, in Percentages." Pew Research Centers Religion Public Life Project RSS. http://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/table-religious-composition-by-country-in-percentages/ (accessed May 16, 2014).