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Salafis and Wahhabis: Two Sides of the Same Coin?

By Mohamed Bin Ali & Muhammad Saiful Alam Shah Bin Sudiman

Synopsis

The terms Salafi and Wahhabi are often used interchangeably. Many confuse the two while others refer to them as one. What are the differences between the two?

Commentary

THE STUDY of modern Salafism will not be complete without looking into *Wahhabism* - a reference to the teachings of Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and its relation to Salafism. In the current discourse on Islam, the term "Salafi" and "Wahhabi" are often used interchangeably. Many confuse the two while others refer to them as one.

Wahhabi is a label given to those who follow the teachings of Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab. The Wahhabis are always referred to as Salafis, and in fact they prefer to be called as such. As a rule, all Wahhabis are Salafis but not all Salafis are Wahhabis. The term Salafism did not become associated with the Wahhabi creed until the 1970s. It was in the early 20th century that the Wahhabis referred to themselves as Salafis.

Who is a Salafi?

The usage of the term Salafi today refers to those who embrace Salafism (Arabic: Salafiyyah). *Salafiyyah* is known to be the *manhaj* or way of the Salafis. The Salafis are Muslims who advocate literal and to some degree binary interpretation of Islamic teachings as enjoined by Prophet Muhammad and subsequently practised by the early pious predecessors known as the *salaf al-salih*. Following the *salaf* is the reason for their self-designation as Salafis.

Linguistically, the term *salafi* is an ascription to the *salaf*. A Salafi is one who ascribes himself/herself to the way and teachings of the *salaf*. From the linguistic standpoint, if someone says, for example “*ana Britani*” (I am British), it means he comes from Britain or ascribing himself to Britain.

The letter ‘i’ at the end of the word (e.g. *Britani, Salafi*) shows that the person saying the word is associating himself to the word. Hence, when a person says “I am a Salafi”, he is saying that he ascribes himself to the way/teachings of the *salaf*.

Who is a Wahhabi?

A Wahhabi is one who follows Wahhabism (Arabic: *Wahhabiyyah*) or the teachings of Muhammad Bin Abdul Wahhab. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab was born in Najd in 1703 in Uyainah, in present-day Saudi Arabia. He grew up in an atmosphere where there was widespread deterioration in the Muslim beliefs and practices.

Many Muslims had fallen into acts considered shirk (associating Allah with others), and returned to the days of *jahiliyyah* (ignorance or pre-Islamic period). Ibn Abd al-Wahhab sought to reform the Muslims under the banner of “true” Islam and get rid of these acts which he considered heretical.

Wahhabis do not prefer the term *Wahhabiyyah* or being called as Wahhabis. They prefer to be called *Al-Muwahhidun* (the people of monotheism) or *Salafiyyun* (the Salafis) in reference to the pious predecessors (*salaf al-salih*). But over time Ibn Abd al-Wahhab followers prefer the more generic term *salafiyyun* which signifies adherence to the faith and practices of the Prophet and the first three generations of Muslims.

Unlike “Salafi” which is both a label and self-designated term, the term “Wahhabi” is a label given to the followers of the teachings of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, from whose name the term “Wahhabi” originates. Wahhabism simply means the way of Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab which also denotes his ideology. Hence, linguistically, a Wahhabi is one who subscribes to Wahhabism.

The main reason why Wahhabis have rejected the term Wahhabism is because it provides the impression that the teachings propagated by Ibn Abd al-Wahhab is a new doctrine or belief within the Islamic faith, whereas they believe that it is merely a reflection and an extension of the teachings of the Prophet, his companions and the *salaf al-salih*.

Due to the importance of following the footsteps of the *salaf*, Wahhabism has always been a form of Salafism. It subscribes to the methodology of the *salaf* in theology and *law*. In fact, the teaching spreads in the modern Muslim world under the banner of Salafism instead of Wahhabism. As Khaled Abou El-Fadl, a professor of Islamic law from the US observes, “the attachment of Wahhabism to Salafism was indeed needed as Salafism was a much more ‘credible paradigm in Islam’; making it an ideal medium for Wahhabism”.

Ideology of Salafism and Wahhabism

The ideology of Salafism and Wahhabism is built upon a narrowly defined religious text. Methodologically, they are literalist and puritanical in their approaches to Islamic theology and law.

In matters of jurisprudence, Salafis and Wahhabis subscribe to the Hanbali *mazhab* (school of thought) and law. However, many of them claim no specific affiliation to any particular *mazhab*. Instead, they claim to follow the stronger opinion among the Salaf based on the Quran and the *Sunnah* (the Prophet's Traditions).

But one who studies their views in jurisprudence will find their origins in the Hanbali school of *fiqh*. Even Ibn Taimiyah, a famous Islamic theologian in the medieval period and his student, Ibn Qayyim, the two scholars most referred to by the Salafis and Wahhabis, adopted the methodology of the Hanbali school.

To maintain the purity of Islam, Salafis and Wahhabis attempt to combat what they view as deviant and heretical practices such as offering prayers at tombs, glorifying 'holy places' and 'saints'. Such are classified as *shirk*, *kufir* (infidelity), *riddah* (apostasy), and *bid'ah* (innovation). They strongly reject any belief and practices that are not enjoined by the Quran and the Prophet.

For example, Salafis and Wahhabis claim that Sufi practices such as *tawassul* (intercession between man and God) which had accrued over the centuries since the pristine period of Islam threatens tawhid (monotheism or the belief in the oneness of God). They believe that *bid'ah* resulted from the adoption of local cultures by Islamic missionaries in their attempts to attract new converts. However, this blend of Islam and customs helped significantly the conversion process to Islam by making it accessible to wider audiences.

Ideologically, Salafism is wider than Wahhabism. Salafi thought has existed for hundreds of years and has spread throughout the Muslim world and beyond. Wahhabism only existed from the mid 18th century. While it is true that Wahhabism is Salafism, it is only one of Salafism's many orientations. Salafi and Wahhabi are not two sides of the same coin.

Mohamed Bin Ali is Assistant Professor and Muhammad Saiful Alam Shah Bin Sudiman is Associate Research Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University Singapore. Both studied at Al-Azhar University in Cairo and are counsellors with the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG).
