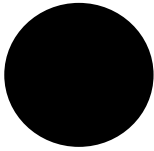


RECONSIDERATIONS

Charles Allen is a historian of the British colonial period in South Asia. His recent publications include Soldier Sahibs: The Men Who Made the North-West Frontier and The Buddha and the Sahibs: The British Discovery of Buddhism. He recently received the Sir Percy Sykes Memorial Medal for his work in “stimulating public interest in Britain’s imperial encounter with Asia.” His history of Wahhabism will be published in Britain later this year.



The Hidden Roots of Wahhabism in British India

Charles Allen

Three generations ago a great deal was known about Muslim extremism in India, and with good cause—indeed, one of my great-grandfathers was standing beside the viceroy when he was knifed to death by an alleged Wahhabi assassin in 1871. But by my grandfathers’ time that experience was fast being forgotten, and by my father’s generation it had been buried in the archives. Had this present generation been more aware of the true history of Indian Wahhabism, our governments might perhaps have been more wary of engaging in war by proxy following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. And if we are ever to come to terms with why so many young men have given and continue to give their lives to jihad in what the British knew as the North-West Frontier, and why so many cling to the belief that this same region is a *dar-ul-Islam* or “domain of the faith” second only to Mecca and Medina, then we have to understand what Wahhabism accomplished there, not only in the 1980s and 1990s but a full century and a half earlier.

I must admit that until very recently I shared this general ignorance. I can remember traveling from Swat to Hazara in the late 1990s and being absolutely baffled when a local khan told me to be sure, as I crossed the Indus at the Tarbela Dam, to look out for the site of what he called the Hindustani Camp, “which you British called the Fanatic Camp.”

So let me begin by examining what we mean by Wahhabism: the reformist theolo-

gy first expounded by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1702/3–91) in Nejd in the 1740s, espoused by the local chieftan Muhammad ibn Saud, and subsequently applied by these two houses—the al-Saud and the *aal as-Sheikh* (as the descendants of Sheikh Abd-al-Wahhab are known) in interdependent alliance until Wahhabism became the established form of Islam in the state bearing the name of Emir ibn Saud since the 1920s.

Ever since Wahhabism took root in Indian soil its adherents have consistently denied being Wahhabis. Their dissembling was aided by the inability of the British authorities to recognize that the scores of uprisings and assassinations that marred the Pax Britannica of India’s North-West Frontier from the 1840s onward were anything more than local troubles stirred up by “mad mullahs.” This misrepresentation was subsequently compounded by the distortions of nationalist historians writing after independence, who represented Wahhabi rebels as freedom fighters. As a result, our understanding of the forces that gave rise to Islamist fundamentalism on the Indian subcontinent has been seriously distorted.

The man credited with importing Wahhabism into India is Syed Ahmad of Rae Bareili (1786–1831), who returned from pilgrimage in Mecca in 1824 to begin a holy war against the Sikhs aimed at restoring the Punjab to Muslim rule. But the argument that Syed Ahmad picked up his ideas of Wahhabi intolerance and jihad

while in Arabia is untenable. The reality is that he had already accepted the basic tenets of Wahhabism long before sailing to Arabia, as a student of the Madrassa-i-Ramiyya religious seminary in Delhi and as a pupil of its leader, Shah Abdul Aziz, son of the reformer Shah Waliullah of Delhi.

Shah Waliullah is the key figure here—a man as much admired within Sunni Islam as a great modernizer (the historian Aziz Ahmad rightly describes him as “the bridge between medieval and modern Islam in India”) as Abd al-Wahhab is reviled. The one, after all, was a follower of the tolerant, inclusive Hanafi school of jurisprudence and a Naqshbandi Sufi initiate, while the other belonged to the intolerant, exclusive Hanbali school, was viciously anti-Sufi and anti-Shia, and deeply indebted in his prejudices to the notorious fourteenth-century jurist of Damascus, Ibn Taymiyya—the ideologue whose reinterpretations of militant jihad are today cited by every Islamist. Yet these two key figures have far more in common than their respective admirers are willing to accept. Not only were they exact contemporaries, they almost certainly studied in Medina at the same period—and had at least one teacher in common.

Shah Waliullah came to Mecca on hajj in 1730, when he was 27, and then spent 14 months studying in Medina. First among his teachers was Shaikh Abu Tahir Muhammad ibn Ibrahim al-Kurani al-Madani, a renowned teacher of Hadith (the statements and examples of conduct of the Prophet gathered into a corpus to become, together with the Koran, the basis of sharia—the divinely ordained laws governing all aspects of behavior) in whose library the young Shah Waliullah studied the works of Ibn Taymiyya. In the case of Abd al-Wahhab the facts are not quite so well documented, but we know that he studied Hadith in Medina in his late twenties under the Indian Muhammad Hayat al-Sindi, a Naqshbandi sufi and a Shafi jurist who was an admirer of Ibn Taymiyya and a student of Ibrahim al-

Kurani—the teacher who taught Hadith to Shah Waliullah and introduced him to the ideas of Ibn Taymiyya. So we have the intriguing possibility that the two greatest Sunni reformers of their age not only sat at the feet of the same teachers but may even have sat in the same classes. We can also be confident that some of these teachers encouraged their students to follow Ibn Taymiyya’s hard line and to regard militant jihad as a prime religious duty—which is what both Abd al-Wahhab and Shah Waliullah then went home to implement.

On his return to India, Shah Waliullah preached the oneness of God and called a return to the basics. Just as Ibn Taymiyya had done, he defied custom by setting himself up as a *mujtabid* (one who makes his own interpretations of established religious law by virtue of informed reasoning), and indulging in independent reasoning (*ijtihad*). In central Arabia, Abd al-Wahhab did likewise—the only major difference between the two being that Abd al-Wahhab succeeded in imposing his reading of Islam on his countrymen while Shah Waliullah failed, for lack of a strong champion.

With the British takeover of the Mughal capital of Delhi in 1803 and the humiliating demotion of the emperor to the status of a pensioner, Shah Waliullah’s eldest son and successor, Shah Abdul Azziz, issued a fatwa, or religious judgment, that Delhi had been enslaved by *kuffr* (paganism). He declared Hindustan to be a *dar al-harb* or “domain of enmity” and that it was now incumbent on all Muslims to strive to restore India to Islam. This was no more than a gesture, but it set a goal that his student Syed Ahmad did not forget.

After a murky period as a mercenary, Syed Ahmad returned to his religious studies, to reemerge in his early thirties as a visionary revivalist and preacher. He very soon acquired disciples, of whom the first two were the nephew and son-in-law of his former teacher. Many Sunnis now saw him as the inheritor of the mantle of the Shah Wal-

iullah and hundreds flocked to join his cause, among them a young man called Wilayat Ali, who deserves special mention not only because he became an important leader of the Wahhabi movement but because of his antecedents. It seems to have been overlooked—by historians determined to distance Syed Ahmad’s movement and Arabian Wahhabism—that Wilayat Ali was initially a student of Ghulam Rasul of Benares. The significance of Ghulam Rasul is that he spent many years in Arabia—not in Mecca or Medina but in the remote province of Nejd, the seat of Wahhabism. When he returned to Benares he took the name of Hajji Abdul Haq and became known as the Nejdī Sheikh. He also brought with him a radical version of Islam that we can confidently label as “Wahhabism,” which means that it was already established in India *before* Syed Ahmad began his pilgrimage to Mecca in 1821.

The Five Articles of Faith

Syed Ahmad’s teachings were now based on five main articles of faith (as summarized by T. E. Ravenshaw in his *Historical Memorandum on the Sect of the Wahabees*, 1864): “Reliance on one Supreme Being [*tawhid*]; repudiation of all forms, ceremonies, and observances of the modern Mahomedan religion, retaining only such as are considered the pure doctrines of the Koran [*bidat*]; the duty of holy war for the faith [*jihad*] against infidels generally; blind and implicit obedience to their spiritual guides; expectation of an *Imam* who will lead all true believers to victory over infidels.” The first four of these articles accorded with the teachings of Abd al-Wahhab, but the last was the quintessential Shia belief that at the end of days a messiah-figure known as the Imam Mahdi, or the “expected one,” would come to the rescue of Islam. Divisions now began to appear between Syed Ahmad’s more hardline followers in Patna, who saw themselves as Wahhabis in all but name, and those in Delhi, led by the grandson of Shah Waliullah, Shah

Muhammad Ishaq (hereafter referred to as the “Delhi-ites”).

In December 1825, the fortress of Bharatpur was taken with great slaughter—a further demonstration of the ascendancy of the British. “Fate has been so kind to the accursed Nazarenes and the mischievous polytheists,” Syed Ahmad wrote to a friend. “My heart is filled with shame at this religious degradation and my head contains but one thought, how to organize jihad.” He decided the time had come to emulate the Prophet, who had preceded his Islamic conquest by making a retreat (*begira*) from the land of enmity of Mecca and migrating to the land of faith of Medina. Syed Ahmad arranged that Patna should serve as his movement’s main base in Hindustan. However, his fighting base had to be a domain of the faith, ideally Afghanistan.

In January 1826, he commenced his retreat along with some 400 armed mujahidin (“strivers for the faith”). At the same time, he wrote to Muslim rulers such as the emir of Bokhara, exhorting them to support his jihad—not against British imperialism, as it is so often portrayed, but to purge Hindustan of “the impurities of polytheism and the filth of dissonance.” The response was lukewarm and when Syed Ahmad’s army eventually reached Kabul by way of the Bolan Pass they found themselves unwanted. With their numbers greatly reduced they finally emerged from the Khyber Pass onto the Vale of Peshawar, occupied by Pathans of Afghan origin but then ruled over by the Sikhs. Here they were received as liberators and a sanctuary was provided for them at Sittana in the massif known as the Mahabun Mountain, jutting into the plains from the hills of Swat and Buner. This had long been regarded as a land of saints and now became the Wahhabis’ dar al-Islam. Astonishingly, it remained the Wahhabi stronghold, or what the British called the Fanatic Camp, to the end of the nineteenth century.

In fall 1826, Syed Ahmad summoned all Muslims to join his holy war. The Pathans

rallied to his cause and he was formally chosen as the movement's imam and commander of the faithful, echoing the titles of the early caliphs. His war began in spring 1827, initially with a military disaster but then with a series of victories against the Sikh armies that culminated in the capture of Peshawar in 1830. To mark this great victory, Syed Ahmad declared himself badshah, or king of kings, possibly as a preliminary to presenting himself as the longed-for Imam Mahdi. He also imposed strict Wahhabi rules on Peshawar and the surrounding country. After two months the locals rebelled and every Hindustani jihadist found in the Vale was dragged from his prayers and put to the sword. Syed Ahmad and his companions survived the massacre and fled across the Indus River into Hazara, only to be cornered by a Sikh army. On May 8, 1831, Syed Ahmad, his two closest disciples, and some 1,300 Hindustanis made their last stand and died bravely.

That should have ended the fundamentalist movement. But led by Wilayat Ali, the original Wahhabi convert, the Wahhabis in the plains regrouped. Wilayat Ali lacked charisma but was a brilliant propagandist, confecting the story that Syed Ahmad was not really dead but merely waiting in the mountains to resume the jihad, thus reshaping Wahhabism into a cult centered on its hidden imam. A secret network based on Patna was established by which funds, supplies, and weapons were sent along a covert caravan trail to the Mahabun Mountain, along with volunteers to be trained as mujahidin. Finally, in spring 1851, Wilayat Ali and his younger brother, Inayat Ali, with hundreds of armed men, made their hegira from the plains to the Punjab frontier, with the aim of recommencing the jihad in the winter of 1853–54.

All this went largely unnoticed by the British authorities, until August 1852, when a bundle of "treasonable correspondence" was seized that revealed the existence of a sect of fanatic Muslims in Patna. A raid

on the Wahhabis' base was carried out, but after a stand-off the governor general concluded that the troublemakers in the mountains should be left alone "since they are insignificant."

In the event, the commissioner of Peshawar, Frederick Mackeson, chose not to leave the Hindustani Fanatics alone. In January 1853, in response to an appeal from a local chief, he launched a raid on the Hindustani camp at Sittana, driving its inhabitants further into the mountains. But he failed to follow up; a decision that probably cost him his life, since in the following September he was knifed to death in his bungalow by a tribesman from Swat. Nevertheless, the raid forced the Hindustanis to put off their jihad, which was rescheduled for the summer of 1857.

Wahhabism Survives

The events of the great Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 are well known, but the part played by the Wahhabis deserves closer examination. All the evidence suggests that the Wahhabis refused to align themselves with the non-Wahhabi rebels, in part because they regarded the king of Delhi, Bahadur Shah, as a heretic due to his religious tolerance, but also because they had their own plans. The main fighting arm of the Wahhabis were the Hindustani Fanatics up at Sittana, but they too remained inactive until several hundred mutinous soldiers arrived in their camp. Wilayat Ali had died of a fever a year earlier so it was his younger and more intemperate brother, Inayat Ali, who responded by launching a raid into the plains, apparently believing that he would be joined by mujahidin sent up from Patna. Instead, the Hindustanis were subjected to a series of assaults that forced them to retreat even deeper into the mountains.

In April 1858 the British military commander in Peshawar led a three-pronged assault on the Mahabun Mountain to wipe out the Hindustani Fanatics once and for all. Inayat Ali had just died of fever, and the Wah-

habis were again taken by surprise. The mujahidin were surrounded and all but wiped out, yet somehow Wilayat Ali's eldest son, Abdullah Ali, escaped to fight another day. The survivors moved to an abandoned settlement named Malka, where they were entirely dependent on the charity of their neighbors. Amazingly, the Wahhabis bounced back, again thanks to official indifference. They rebuilt their organization and reopened their underground trail to the North-West Frontier. The outcome was a series of arrests in the plains, and a disastrous campaign, mounted at huge cost to destroy the Fanatic Camp at Malka, so clumsily executed that it achieved nothing beyond uniting the Pathan tribes against the British and raising the Wahhabis' prestige as champions of Islam.

By beating detainees to extract confessions and using "approvers" to turn Queen's evidence, the Wahhabi organization in plains India was broken up, leading to a series of high-profile trials in the 1860s and 1870s. One curious feature of these trials was that those convicted, besides being shackled in irons, were dressed in orange overalls (a color code replicated at the U.S. base at Guantanamo). A number of leaders were condemned to death, subsequently commuted to transportation for life on the Andaman Islands, and others sentenced to various terms of imprisonment. A special commission was then set up to examine the extent of the threat posed by the sect, producing the first detailed report on the Wahhabi movement—Ravenshaw's memorandum. This documented for the first time its extraordinary sophistication and its long history of armed jihad.

Then, in 1871, the whole issue came back to a fresh boil with the murder of the British chief justice, John Norman, on his way into court to preside over a Wahhabi trial in Calcutta. He was stabbed to death by a Pathan who went to the gallows without giving a coherent account of his motives. This was followed five months later

by the unprecedented assassination of a viceroy, Lord Mayo, while on tour in the Andaman Islands. His attacker, also a Pathan, had served as orderly to a number of British political officers in Peshawar. The British in India united in concluding that the Wahhabis were behind the assassination, but no evidence was found to support this belief. Yet two possibly unconnected events remain unexplained: a grandson of Wilayat Ali was found to have visited the Andaman Islands shortly before Lord Mayo's arrival, and a person or persons unknown had given a great feast for the killer on the night before the murder.

Remarkably, the Wahhabis on the Mahabun Mountain survived the purges. Under the leadership of Abdallah Ali, they moved from one hideout to another, harassed in turn by the local tribes and the British authorities. In 1873, Abdullah Ali's youngest brother in Patna appealed for an official pardon, rejected on the grounds that the Hindustani Fanatics would eventually be forced to give up. But the government was, as often before, indulging in wishful thinking. The Hindustanis clung on, kept alive by handouts from the Pathan tribes.

When a British journalist came to write about the North-West Frontier in 1890, he noted that the Hindustanis were widely admired among the tribes for their "fierce fanaticism." Their colony was celebrated locally as the Kila Mujahidin, or "the Fortress of the Holy Warriors," wherein they "devoted their time to drill, giving the words of command in Arabic, firing salutes with cannon made of leather, and blustering about the destruction of the infidel power of the British." It was said that they were still awaiting the return of Syed Ahmad, their Hidden Imam. Then came the great frontier uprising of 1897–98, beginning in Swat and spreading like the proverbial wildfire south through tribal country, and requiring an army of 40,000 to reduce them to submission. It is worth examining the source from which the mullah who incited the

uprising drew his ideas. Known to the British as the “Mad Fakir,” Mullah Sadullah was a 60-year-old native of Buner who reappeared in his homeland after many years’ absence to proclaim that he had been visited by Syed Ahmad the Martyr and had been ordered by him to turn the British out of Swat and the Vale of Peshawar. He had with him a 13-year-old boy named Shah Sikander (Alexander) who claimed to be the legitimate heir to the throne of Delhi. Unfortunately for the mullahs, British bullets did not turn to water as he had predicted, and the boy was among the many tribesmen killed in the fighting.

Three Legacies

Many young Wahhabis, easily identified by their distinctive black waistcoats and dark blue robes, fought and died in the uprising. We can now see that two great legacies of Syed Ahmad on the frontier were, first, the “jihadization” of the Pathans; and, second, the reinforcement of the belief that the border region was a domain of the faith, to be defended at all costs.

But there was a third, more potent, legacy. The Wahhabi trials and assassinations led to discussions in the vernacular newspapers and in the mosques as to where a Muslim’s first loyalties lay. Convocations of muftis and other jurists met in Calcutta and Delhi and, after much agonizing, produced differing declarations. In Calcutta, they decreed British India to be domain of the faith, wherein religious rebellion was unlawful. In Delhi, however, they found the country to be a domain of enmity—but went on to state that rebellion was nevertheless uncalled for. At the same time, many ordinary Muslims, despite their misgivings about Wahhabi dogma, interpreted the trials as victimization of fellow Muslims. A number of historians have cited this as explaining the decline of Muslims in government employ from this time onward. The sadder reality is that this decline was part of a wider pattern of withdrawal from public

life as the Muslim community began a retreat into the past.

Spearheading the great leap backward were two groups of mullahs, both with Wahhabi associations, both linked to the path of Islamic revivalism originally initiated in Delhi by Shah Waliullah. The more extreme of the two set up a politico-religious organization known as Jamaat Ahl-i-Hadith, the Party of the Tradition of the Prophet. One of its founders was Sayyid Nazir Husain Muhaddith Dihlawi, the leader of the Wahhabi “Delhi-ites.” The Ahl-i-Hadith movement’s many critics were quick to label it “Wahhabi,” and to this day it continues to be described and denounced as such. In Pakistan today it has over 400 madrassas and has sponsored a number of militant organizations linked to terrorism.

A second group of clerics was led by two students of Sayyid Nazir Husain who, in 1857, had attempted to set up their own domain of the faith north of Delhi: Muhammad Qasim Nanautawi and Rashid Ahmed Gangohi. In May 1866, they founded their own madrassa at Deoband, a hundred miles north of Delhi. They drew their students from the peasantry and refused government funding. Boys as young as five were accepted and often remained there until adulthood, so that many came to identify with the madrassa as their main home and the teacher as a surrogate parent. Although modeled on the university, the ethos of Deoband was that of the seminary. English was prohibited, Urdu served as the lingua franca, and all students began their studies by learning the Koran by heart in the original Arabic. The theology taught at Deoband was an uncompromising fundamentalism mirroring that of Wahhabism. It denounced the worship of saints, the adorning of tombs, and such activities as music and dancing; it waged a ceaseless war of words against Shias, Hindus, and Christian missionaries; it distanced itself from all that was progressive in Indian society; and it retained militant jihad as a central pillar of

faith but focused this jihad on the promotion of Islamic revival.

At the same time, Deoband exploited modern technology, especially in the dissemination of fatwas on every issue brought before its muftis. By this means Deoband gained the support of the masses, providing Muslims with a new sense of identity and an alternative to the British model. In 1879, the institution assumed the additional name of Dar ul-Ulum, the Abode of Islamic Learning. By then it was already becoming renowned throughout the Islamic world as a center of religious study second only to Al-Aqsa in Cairo, producing an ever growing cadre of graduates who formed a class of reformist clerics not unlike the Jesuits of the Catholic Counter-Reformation: a politicized group who could compete against all other clerics to advantage and, above all, disseminate the teachings of Deoband in their own madrassas. The first of these graduates, Mahmood ul-Hasan, duly became rector of Dar ul-Ulum Deoband and in 1915 set up his own clandestine mujahidin army in an attempt to replicate Syed Ahmad—a bid that ended in disaster, with the imprisonment of its leader and over 200 followers.

By 1900, Dar ul-Ulum Deoband had founded over two dozen allied madrassas in

northern India. Today that figure stands, remarkably, at over 30,000 worldwide. The consequences for Islam have been profound, resulting in a seismic shift within Sunni Islam in South Asia, which became increasingly conservative and introverted, less tolerant and more inclined to look for political leadership from the madrassas and the madrassa-trained politician. It also gave new force to an old ideal: that a Muslim's first duty was to his religion and that he had an absolute obligation to defend Islam wherever it was under attack. Nowhere has this new force made more impact than in Pakistan, where the Deobandi-led politico-religious party known as Jamiat-i-Ulema-i-Islam (JUI), the "Party of Scholars of Islam," has widespread support in the Pathan tribal areas. Pakistan now has well over 7,000 JUI, Deobandi, or Ahl-i-Hadith madrassas. It was here in the 1980s and 1990s that the Taliban's leaders and many of its rank-and-file were educated and jihadized. And it is here, in this frontier region, that Osama bin Laden most surely confounds a superpower's efforts to find him, dead or alive. ●

This essay is drawn from a lecture given at the Royal Society for Asian Affairs at Canning House in London on February 23, 2005.