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Michael Crawford, *Ibn `Abd al-Wahhab*, Oneworld, 2014, vii + 152 pp., map, bibliography, index, \$40.00 US (hbk), ISBN 9781780745893.¹

A burst of scholarship on Wahhabism in the last decade has shed light on its relationship to political Islam, Salafism, jihadist currents, and Saudi politics.² Recent studies on the life and thought of the eponymous founder, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792), include monographs by Abd Allah al-`Uthaymin and Natana DeLong-Bas.³ Why, then, add another book to the shelf? Michael Crawford's compact volume merits attention for its close, perceptive reading of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's writings and the early Saudi chronicles. The fruit of his research is an exemplary study that offers nuanced discussion of the shaykh's career and tackles knotty questions surrounding the genesis of his doctrine and its relationship to the rise of Saudi power.

Research on Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and Saudi expansion is hamstrung by the primary sources in two ways. First, they bear the imprint of polemical, political, and military conflict between Wahhabis and their adversaries. Second, half a century separates the beginning of the shaykh's public mission and the first Saudi chronicle.⁴ Furthermore, the tradition of

¹ The reference notes for this book are located at: <<https://www.oneworld-publications.com/books/michael-crawford/ibn-abd-al-wahhab#.VYBV-EZkj1Q>>. This is the first book I have read that omits references and places them online instead. The book includes parenthetical references to sources listed in the Bibliography, which includes items mentioned in the text. Complete notes are posted at the publisher's website. The reader may download them or print them. I found this approach cumbersome but it seems to be a way for publishers to contain costs and make it feasible to publish works for the academic market.

² See, for instance: David Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia* (London: IB Tauris, 2006); Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Stephane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2011); and Nabil Mouline, *The Clerics of Islam: Religious Authority and Political Power in Saudi Arabia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

³ Natana J. DeLong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); and Abd Allah Salih al-`Uthaymin, *Muhammad ibn `Abd al-Wahhab: The Man and His Works* (London: IB Tauris, 2009).

⁴ The author of the earliest Saudi chronicle, Husayn ibn Ghannam (c. 1739-1810), was born around the time Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab launched his mission, grew up in the eastern region of al-Ahsa, and studied under the shaykh, although when he did so is not known. He composed his work at the behest of the Saudi ruler, perhaps after the shaykh's death. See: Husayn ibn Ghannam, *Tarikh Najd al-musamma Rawdat al-Afkar wa al-Ijham* (Riyadh: Al-Maktaba al-Ahliyya, 1949). The second Saudi chronicle was composed by Uthman ibn Bishr (1795-1873) at least half a century after Ibn Ghannam. See: Uthman ibn Bishr, *Unwan al-Majd fi Tarikh*

history writing in Central Arabia prior to the rise of Saudi power was so thin that firm conclusions about long term tendencies are elusive.⁵ Nevertheless, we have abundant material for reconstructing Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's theology and the reactions of clerics to it.⁶ Crawford has combed the shaykh's treatises and letters to present a succinct exposition of his conception of *tawhid*, God's oneness, and his conclusions regarding their practical implications.

The core of Wahhabi doctrine on *tawhid* is the shaykh's position that Islam obliges believers to worship God and none other. Any deviation from that requirement is not a mere lapse but a sure sign of *kufr*, unbelief. Thus, one might faithfully fulfill the other four pillars of Islam—five daily prayers, fasting, alms, and pilgrimage—but if one does or says something that implies worship for any creature, then one is an unbeliever. In concrete terms, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab had in mind Bedouin customs, Shi'ite veneration for the Imams, and the cult of holy men and their tombs, frequently associated with Sufi orders. He was especially vociferous in his condemnation of clerics who tolerated what he considered polytheistic practices or profited from them by receiving payment for amulets, talismans, and fortune telling.

An important corollary to the doctrine of *tawhid* is Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's position on the question of how to define belief: What does it consist of? Can it grow and diminish? In the early centuries of Islam, theologians discussed the three ways that belief could be affirmed: in the heart (or conscience), by word, and by deed. Sunni theologians coalesced around a minimal position that allowed affirmation in one's heart to be sufficient to qualify as a believer. The shaykh, however, insisted on a maximal position. The believer must not only proclaim and behave in accordance with belief but also denounce and take action against unbelief. A passive attitude is a sign of unbelief. It was not enough to agree with his definition of *tawhid*. One had to affirm it verbally and to act on it.

Strict definition of God's oneness and belief meant that if you did not act on Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's understanding of *tawhid*, then you were an unbeliever. To deem someone an unbeliever is *takfir*. His clerical adversaries condemned him for directing *takfir* against Muslims and accused him of violating the longstanding consensus that permitted minor violations of *tawhid* without forfeiting the status of a believer. The accusation of excommunicating believers struck a chord: Ibn Abd al-Wahhab penned many letters to clerics in which he denied that his doctrine excluded believers from the fold. He said that one could be deemed an unbeliever only after he had proof of *tawhid* by receiving instruction about its meaning and requirements and then rejected it. At times he asserted that familiarity with the Quran was sufficient proof for *tawhid*, but later Wahhabi clerics abandoned that position and admitted that proof required that a teacher explain *tawhid* and *kufr*.

Najd, 2 vols. (Riyadh: Darat al-Malak Abd al-Aziz, 1982-3). For a discussion of how the late composition of sources bears on discrepancies in accounts of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab's travels, see: Michael Cook, "On the Origins of Wahhabism," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 2 (1992): 191-202, at page 197. For a study on Saudi history writing from early Saudi times to the present, Jorg Matthias Determann, *Historiography in Saudi Arabia: Globalization and the State in the Middle East* (London: IB Tauris, 2013).

⁵ Michael Cook, "The Historians of Pre-Wahhabi Najd," *Studia Islamica*, 76 (1992): 163-176.

⁶ A modern edition of the Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's writings came out in the late 1970s. Abd al-Aziz al-Rumi, Muhammad al-Bultaji, and Sayyid Hijab, eds., *Mu'allafat al-Shaykh al-Imam Mubammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab*, 12 vols. (Riyadh: Jami'at al-Imam Muhammad ibn Sa'ud al-Islamiyya, 1978). The writings of Wahhabi critics from his time are not collected in one volume. For a sample of their tone, see Samir Traboulsi, "An Early Refutation of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab's Reformist Views," *Die Welt des Islams*, 42 (2002): 373-415.

Because Ibn Abd al-Wahhab included action as an essential part of belief, his teaching polarized Central Arabia. His followers had to show enmity to unbelievers and to bear loyalty only to fellow believers, even if it meant cutting ties with members of one's family, clan, or tribe. Asserting that kinship mattered less than belief was disruptive in a society where kinship played a major role in politics, social interactions, and economic activities. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab wavered on whether association with polytheists made one an unbeliever, but he did take that position in some of his writings. On the collective scale, the imperative to act on *tawhid* meant that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab had to come to grips with jihad. On this issue, he hewed to standard positions in classical Sunni jurisprudence. If believers are attacked, they must wage defensive jihad. If living near unbelievers, Muslims must wage offensive jihad to spread *tawhid*, after warning the unbelievers and calling them to belief. The radical step in doctrine—putting believers in the camp of unbelievers—preceded the definition of jihad, but jihad was just about inevitable if people did not willingly embrace the shaykh's theology.

While Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's writings provide abundant material for a reconstruction of his theology, the sources on his early years do not offer much for an explanation of how he arrived at it. The oldest attempt to answer the question originated with his critics and continues to surface in pseudo-academic form.⁷ According to this narrative, because he came from a cultural backwater, he lacked the rigorous intellectual formation that pupils attained in major learning centers such as Cairo and Damascus. As a result, when he studied the Quran and the Prophetic Tradition, he reached faulty conclusions about the requirements of belief. Crawford shows that this explanation appeared in some of the first attacks on his doctrine. A second explanation places Ibn Abd al-Wahhab in the context of the Hanbali tradition, arguing that he represented its minority activist tendency. Nabil Mouline makes a case for "Hanbali-Wahhabism" and Crawford points out the significance of Hanbalism's activist tendency as a source for the shaykh's thought.⁸ At the same time, he remarks that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab outdid activist Hanbalis in condemning theological moderation. Moreover, I am not aware of a strain in Hanbalism where one party of Hanbalis excommunicated and waged jihad against another party of Hanbalis, as Ibn Abd al-Wahhab did. A third explanation posits that he represented a particular instance of a pervasive mood of reform in the Muslim world during the eighteenth century. Fazlur Rahman made the argument in general terms. John Voll, Nehemia Levtzion, and others fleshed it out, while Ahmad Dallal raised serious objections to it. (Crawford does not turn his gaze in the direction of Yemen where Bernard Haykel identified a tradition that shares much with Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's doctrine).⁹

Rather than put forth a strong case for one explanation or another of the shaykh's doctrine, Crawford probes encounters in the course of his sojourns in Medina and Basra for clues. Perhaps the reformist impulse was stirred in Medina while attending the lessons of the reformist shaykh Muhammad Hayat al-Sindhi or observing the ceremonies of Sufi orders. Or it could be that he concluded it was necessary to reinforce the boundary between true

⁷ Hamid Algar, *Wahhabism: A Critical Essay* (New York: Islamic Publications International, 2002).

⁸ Nabil Mouline, *The Clerics of Islam*. See also: Henri Laoust, *Essai sur les doctrines sociales et politiques de Taki al-Din Ahmad b. Taimiya* (Cairo: L'Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 1939).

⁹ See: Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1968); Nehemia Levtzion and John Voll, eds., *Eighteenth-Century Renewal and Reform in Islam* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1987); Ahmad Dallal, "The Origins and Objectives of Islamic Revivalist Thought, 1750-1850," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 113 (1993): 341-359; and Bernard Haykel, *Revival and Reform in Islam: The Legacy of Muhammad al-Shawkani* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

and false conceptions of God after spending time in Basra, with its mixed population of Sunnis, Shi'a, Jews, Armenian Christians, Dutch, British, and Indian traders. His stay in Basra coincided with the attempts of Nader Shah to extend his sway from Persia into Iraq. Perhaps the conqueror's ecumenical initiative to bridge the Sunni-Shi'i divide put the shaykh on alert to the perils of theological compromise. Crawford's discussion of possibilities stays within the evidence, and while that may not satisfy appetites for broad interpretation, it has the virtue of identifying new directions for research that may lead to more solid explanations than we now have.¹⁰

The other perennial question related to Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's mission is how it was related to the rise of Saudi power. Were conditions in Najd ripe for a catalyst to achieve political unification? Was there an implicit political thrust in the shaykh's theology? Do his writings on politics hold the key? Or is the historical record too scant to affirm any broad explanation?

Crawford considers a cluster of hypotheses that foreground changes in Central Arabian society which summoned forth the establishment of a unitary political power in place of fractious towns and independent tribes. Each hypothesis puts a slightly different twist on the idea that Wahhabism was a response to the need for a state in a stateless region. According to Uwaidah al-Juhany, in the century or so before the rise of the First Saudi State, Central Arabia had been the scene of increasing tribal migration and settlement, resulting in more and larger towns as well as the emergence of scholarly lineages that played important roles in stabilizing social relations.¹¹ Crawford views al-Juhany's hypothesis as a plausible scenario but one that is impossible to substantiate given the scarce historical sources. He also sees merit in Abdulaziz al-Fahad's suggestion that detribalization was dissolving the customary bonds that sustained social order and that Wahhabism represented a new basis for cohesion.¹² He is more critical of Khalid al-Dakhil's portrait of Najd as a society undergoing disintegration and increasing disorder, although it is not clear to me why he considers the evidence for that scenario less weighty than the first two.¹³ The problem with historical explanations that seek answers in social and economic conditions is, again, the thin supply of sources for Central Arabia in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century.

Rather than stretch the sources to fit a hypothesis, Crawford's approach to understanding Wahhabism's political success is to retrace Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's movements and preaching in the years before he settled in al-Dir'iyya.¹⁴ He sees no evidence that the shaykh had a plan for an expansive territorial empire or a blueprint for how to organize political power, much less anything like a defined notion of state institutions. Rather, he wished to create what Crawford aptly terms a "regime of godliness" dedicated to upholding *tawhid* and wiping out idolatry (*shirk*).

¹⁰ There is also the possibility that the shaykh reached his own conclusions and was not influenced by historical figures or contemporary tendencies. Michael Cook cites an early letter to that effect that the shaykh seems to have written during his residence in al-Uyayna. ("On the Origins of Wahhabism," 202).

¹¹ Uwaidah M. Al-Juhany, *Najd before the Salafi Reform Movement: Social, Political and Religious Conditions During the Three Centuries Preceding the Rise of the Saudi State* (Reading, UK: Ithaca Press, 2002).

¹² Abdulaziz H. Al-Fahad, "The 'Imama vs. the 'Iqal: Hadari-Bedouin Conflict and the Formation of the Saudi State," in *Counter-Narratives: History, Contemporary Society and Politics in Saudi Arabia and Yemen*, eds., Madawi Al-Rasheed and Robert Vitalis, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

¹³ Khalid S. al-Dakhil, "Wahhabism as an Ideology of State Formation," in *Religion and Politics in Saudi Arabia: Wahhabism and the State*, eds., Mohammed Ayoob and Hasan Kosebalaban (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2009).

¹⁴ Crawford gives a detailed study of the period before his settlement in al-Dir'iyya in "The Da'wa of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab before the Al Sa'ud," *Journal of Arabian Studies: Arabia, the Gulf, and the Red Sea*, 1 (2011): 147-161.

At the end of his travels in pursuit of learning, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab settled in Huraymila, where his father was a judge. At first, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab held back from launching a campaign to wipe out idolatry out of respect for his father, who held conventional views on theology.¹⁵ Upon his father's death, he began his public mission and his radical message soon polarized the town. Under pressure from enemies, he relocated to his birthplace, al-Uyayna. There the amir supported the shaykh's effort to erect a regime of godliness marked by compulsory prayer and enforcement of *shari`a*. Again, his actions, such as the stoning of an adulteress and the destruction of the putative tomb of one of the Prophet's Companions, stirred furious opposition. When al-Uyayna's tribal overlords in al-Ahsa ordered the amir to kill Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, he made the fateful move to al-Dir`iyya, ruled by the Saudi clan.

Most accounts of the origin of Wahhabism's alliance with Saudi dynastic power describe a foundational pact between the shaykh and the Saudi amir, but Crawford notes that the story is not given in Ibn Ghannam's early chronicle and argues that the pact is a literary invention of the mid-nineteenth century chronicler Ibn Bishr. Crawford suggests that when Ibn Abd al-Wahhab arrived in al-Dir`iyya, he had some influential supporters in the Saudi clan and a desire to establish a regime of godliness, but no ambition to create an empire. Rather, Saudi and Wahhabi expansion unfolded in an *ad hoc* fashion after the shaykh consolidated his position and reached out to clerics and rulers in nearby towns. What caused the preacher's mission to change from a local focus to an expansionist project is a point of contention.

In the Wahhabi sources, we get the impression that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's success at gathering a following elicited a backlash from hostile clerics—in Najd, the Holy Cities, al-Ahsa, and Basra—who initiated a campaign of persecution and excommunication. Resorting to arms was the only way to defend the cause. Crawford, however, maintains that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab first injected excommunication into the religious polemics of Najd when he cast Sufis and holy men as polytheists. In response to excommunication, his adversaries turned it around on him and his camp. As theological controversy escalated to warfare, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab declared offensive jihad two years after his arrival in al-Dir`iyya. On top of Central Arabia's perennial divisions between settled lineages, towns, and tribes, a new cause of division was added: support for or opposition to the shaykh's message, now tethered to the Saudi banner.

Success did not come quickly or easily, but in the course of three decades of skirmishes, gains, reverses, and recoveries, the Saudi-Wahhabi alliance subjugated Central Arabia. In doing so, it curtailed incessant strife and established a single political authority. Consequently, the *outcome* of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's mission aligns with historical interpretations that view his movement as a response to the need for a stabilizing political force, but it is not clear that that was his *goal*. It appears that he would have been satisfied to achieve the conversion of Najd to his vision of *tawhid* through preaching, with the support of amirs, as was initially the case in al-Uyayna, but not necessarily through conquest.

And yet, there are hints that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab harbored political ambitions all along. If the Saudi chronicles are accurate on these points, he took an oath of allegiance (*bay`a*) from followers in Huraymila and in al-Uyayna. In the early years of his al-Dir`iyya career, towns entering the Saudi fold pledged allegiance to him, and at some point they pledged allegiance to the Saudi amir along with him. It is part of Sunni practice for a Muslim ruler to receive an oath of allegiance upon succession to power, but not for a religious teacher to do

¹⁵ The sources on this detail embody a tension between the obligation to pronounce *tawhid* and customary filial respect that the shaykh's teachings insisted were secondary.

so. Perhaps the shaykh was obtaining a pledge to join his religious cause and not a pledge of obedience to his rule. Perhaps the Saudi chronicles embellished to emphasize that the shaykh was re-enacting a scene from the Prophet's life when he took the oath of allegiance. It is hard to know, but receiving the oath of allegiance is not the only departure from the usual role of a religious scholar. According to Sunni doctrine, declaration of jihad is a function of the ruler, but Ibn Abd al-Wahhab initiated military expansion by proclaiming offensive jihad in 1746. He performed other functions that Sunni political writings normally assign to rulers: appointing local amirs, distributing booty, and managing tax revenues. When he withdrew from public affairs, he passed military, political, and fiscal powers to the Saudi amir rather than to another cleric, suggesting that he exercised broad powers as a matter of expediency rather than operating from a model for governance.

The poverty of Wahhabi political thought is natural given its roots in the Hanbali tradition.¹⁶ Theology is paramount, politics an afterthought. Expulsions from Basra, Huraymila, and al-Uyayna taught Ibn Abd al-Wahhab the hard lesson that political power was necessary to establish *tawhid*, but the sources for God's guidance—the Quran and the Sunna—do not give details on how to organize a political system. It is no surprise, then, that his writings do not contain a plan for how to enforce prayer, uphold *shari`a*, or command right and forbid wrong. From his perspective, a community of believers under an upright ruler would do all that as a matter of conscientious fulfillment of duties. His writings do, however, reiterate the standard Sunni view that political power is necessary to preserve communal solidarity and to uphold religion, as defined by the religious scholars. In that scheme, obedience to the ruler is incumbent on believers in order to ward off anarchy, which is the greatest threat to religion. Under a tyrant, believers can still observe religious duties whereas anarchy removes the power necessary to enforce *shari`a*. The emphasis on obedience, however, introduces a tension in the Wahhabi-Saudi political order that Crawford illuminates when he turns to the history of Wahhabism since the death of its founder.

At heart, there lies an incipient radicalism in Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's theology that has no logical resolution in his political thought. In his day, commitment to *tawhid* imposed the duty to fight unbelief. That duty meant that believers had to overthrow rulers who were apostates in the shaykh's eyes. At the same time, the shaykh and Wahhabi clerics down to the present have emphasized that believers must obey Saudi rulers. But what if the Saudis tolerated idolatrous practices or shrank from their duties for the sake of holding onto power? Would that not jeopardize the regime of godliness and justify rebellion against the Saudis? Two crushing defeats in the span of twenty years (1818 to 1838) drove home the necessity of accommodating to foreign (in Wahhabi terms, infidel) powers, and dynastic collapse (1865 to 1891) illustrated the perils of internal dissent.¹⁷ Since then, Wahhabi clerics have compromised to secure political order at the expense of doctrinal purity.¹⁸ The priority of theology, however, is not easily washed out of Wahhabi doctrine. In modern times, it has offered a foothold for challenges to Saudi legitimacy. The most prominent instances include the Ikhwan revolt of the late 1920s, Juhayman's seizure of the Meccan sanctuary in 1979, and the Awakening (*Sabwa*) protests in the 1990s. The collision between purism and

¹⁶ On the necessity of a sovereign in order to safeguard religion, see: Mouline, *The Clerics of Islam*, 26, 39, 65-66; and al-'Uthaymin, *Muhammad ibn `Abd al-Wahhab*, 144-145.

¹⁷ Michael Crawford, "Civil War, Foreign Intervention, and the Question of Political Legitimacy: A Nineteenth-Century Sa`udi Qadi's Dilemma," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 14 (1982): 227-248.

¹⁸ Abdulaziz Al-Fahad, "From Exclusivism to Accommodation: Doctrinal and Legal Evolution of Wahhabism," *New York University Law Review*, 79 (2004): 485-519.

expediency has surfaced in less momentous fashion, for instance, over the introduction of television and girls' education. Preserving the regime of godliness in a world of sin and temptation is a constant challenge, in ways great and small.

Crawford's book is an excellent introduction to the career, thought, and impact of Wahhabism's founder. At the same time, he sheds new light on questions about where Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab fits in the scheme of Islamic history and how to explain the rise of Saudi power. That the reader does not come away with a judgment in favor of one or another interpretation or with a new interpretation is not, to my mind, a shortcoming. Crawford does not merely surrender to the limits imposed by problematic sources. Instead, his thoughtful interrogation of the sources tells us what conclusions are tenable and what questions need further research. One important question yet to be answered is the degree to which Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's doctrine reflected the teachings of the medieval Hanbali scholars Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya.¹⁹ For those who suppose that he uncritically depended on Ibn Taymiyya, Shahab Ahmed's study of the Satanic verses holds the surprising discovery that the shaykh, and subsequent Wahhabi clerics, rejected Ibn Taymiyya's position, but without mentioning him by name.²⁰ A second promising target for fresh research is the body of primary materials recently published in Saudi Arabia pertaining to local, family, and tribal history dating to the early years of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's career.²¹ These and other questions are posed in this stimulating and judicious re-examination of modern Saudi Arabia's religious founding father.

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¹⁹ Michael Cook raised this point more than twenty years ago (Michael Cook, "On the Origins of Wahhabism," 198 fn68).

²⁰ Shahab Ahmed, "Ibn Taymiyyah and the Satanic Verses," *Studia Islamica*, 87 (1998): 67-124; on this particular point, pages 118-119.

²¹ Crawford suggests that analysis of these sources could help historians better assess the reliability of Ibn Ghannam and Ibn Bishr. See: "Notes on *Ibn `Abd al-Wahhab* by Michael Crawford," page 4, for page 16, line 22.

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