

Wahhabi Perspectives on Pluralism and Gender: A Saudi – Indonesian Contrast

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In public discourse about Islam, “Wahhabi” is usually a synonym for intolerance, misogyny, and extremism. Though this is sometimes true it is an over-generalization. In this paper we contrast two very different forms of Wahhabi Islam focusing on education, religious pluralism and gender relations. The first is the Wahhabism of the Saudi state. Saudi Wahhabism couples this theological orientation with intolerance of all other forms of religion and a vision of moral order that includes severe restrictions on the role of women in public life, with gender segregation and discrimination being a central part of the Saudi Wahhabi moral vision.

The second is that of a mid-sized Wahhabi oriented *pesantren* (Islamic school) in Indonesia. Though it is as firmly rooted in al-Wahab’s theological vision as any Saudi school, its brand of Wahhabism could not be more different from that practiced in Saudi Arabia. It allows for diversity in ritual practice on controversial issues, readily interacts with other Muslim and non-Muslim religious communities, and teaches that the state does not have the right to establish one religion or a single interpretation of Islam as “official.” It also is equally progressive on gender issues and does not define rigid gender segregation as a component of moral order.

We show that core Wahhabi religious teachings are as compatible with religious tolerance and gender equity as they are with religious exclusivism and misogyny. Our larger purpose is to question conventional wisdom linking religious doctrine with specific modes of cultural, social and political practice.

INTRODUCTION

The teachings of the 18th century Arabian Muslim scholar Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahab (1703-92), commonly known as Wahhabism, have often been associated with violence, religious bigotry and misogyny. In previous postings, and in an article in *Perspectives on Terrorism*,¹ we have argued that some, but by no means all, violent Muslim movements are rooted in Wahhabi teachings. There are also organizations based on al-Wahab's religious thought strongly opposed to terrorism and other forms of political violence. The association between al-Wahab's teachings and violent extremism is a matter of correlation, not causation.

Violence typically associated with Wahhabism is the outgrowth of a pact between al-Wahab and Muhammad Ibn Saud (d. 1765), the founder of the dynasty that continues to rule Saudi Arabia. Under the terms of this alliance, al-Wahab and his successors were granted control of religious life in return for supporting the political agendas of the House of Saud.

Saudi expansionism, often justified by appeal to Wahhabi teachings, has led to sporadic outbreaks of political and sectarian violence since the 18th century.² Since the 1970s the fusion of Wahhabi religious teachings and Muslim Brotherhood activism—fueled by exiles from Egypt, Syria and Iraq, who staff many Saudi universities—has contributed to the development of the international jihadist movement.³ This does not, however, imply that Wahhabi religious teachings are inherently violent, only that they are compatible with violence. This is true of most religious teachings.

al-Wahab's teachings do not necessarily lead to religious extremism or mistreatment of women

Here we show that commitment to al-Wahab's teachings, as opposed to interpretations of them promulgated by the Saudi State and religious movements it sponsors in Indonesia and elsewhere, do not necessarily lead to religious exclusivism or discrimination against or mistreatment of women. These conclusions are based on observations at *Pondok Pesantren Madrasah Wathoniyah Islamiyah* (PPMWI), a private Islamic school in Kebarongan, Central Java, Indonesia. It has based the theological component of its curriculum on al-Wahab's core teachings for more than a generation. This school was founded in the late nineteenth century and currently has approximately 1,500 students at primary, middle and secondary school levels. The curriculum combines Islamic subjects with a government certified secular program.

WAHHABI TEACHINGS

Al-Wahab was not an “Islamist” in the sense that the term is used today. He was an *alim* (religious scholar), not a political leader. He did not call for the unification of religion and politics, but sought state support for his religious agenda. He understood himself as one of a series of *mujjadid* (renewers of the faith) who seek to purge Islam of religious innovation and restore moral order. He advocated literal readings of Islamic scripture, but also placed himself in well-established theological and juridical traditions, albeit, ones that were neither popular in the eighteenth century nor today. His most important contribution to Muslim thought was an uncompromising understanding of the core Islamic doctrine of *tauhid* (the unity of God). He also advocated harsh measures to enforce social and ritual provisions of Shari’ah.

Following the thirteenth century scholar Ibn Taymiyyah (1263-1328), al-Wahab taught that the doctrine of *tauhid* requires uncompromising monotheism and that nothing stands between individual humans and God. He denounced forms of religious devotion based on the idea of intercession with God, including the invocation of saints, spiritual beings and powers other than that of God and mystical practice, as *syirik*, the unpardonable sin of polytheism. He also condemned the practice of visiting and praying at tombs and prayers for the dead, which are common components of popular Muslim piety the world over.

SAUDI ARABIAN WAHHABISM – INTOLERANCE AND MISOGYNY

Saudi Wahhabism is intolerant of all other forms of religion and places severe restrictions on the role of women in public life

Saudi Wahhabism couples this theological orientation with intolerance of all other forms of religion and a vision of moral order that includes severe restrictions on the role of women in public life. This vision of moral order requires universal conformity to social as well as religious norms and is enforced by the religious police (*mutaween*). There is not, however, a necessary or causal relationship between these coercive practices and al-Wahab’s core religious teachings. They are the product of the interaction of a particularly patriarchal variant of Arab culture, the legacy of an expansionist theocratic polity and al-Wahab’s stern and exclusivist religious teachings.

Wahhabi Islam is the only form of religion that can be openly taught or practiced in Saudi Arabia. Shia, Sufis and other minorities live in constant fear of persecution. Religion is a required subject in Saudi schools and universities. The curriculum focuses on Wahhabi

teachings to the exclusion of all others. It also promotes hatred of non-Wahhabi Muslims (especially Sufis and the Shiah), Christians, Jews and Hindus. Other Muslim theologies can be (and are) taught only in private.

Gender segregation and discrimination against women are a central part of the Saudi Wahhabi moral vision. Women are required to wear black *abaya* (loose fitting robes) and the *niqab* (face veil) in public. Educational and employment opportunities are limited. Women are prohibited from practicing law, studying architecture, engineering, biology, chemistry and political science and from participating in political and religious affairs – and are not allowed to drive. Gender segregation in schools is complete.

WAHHABISM IN KEBARONGAN – RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND GENDER EQUITY

Pondok Pesantren Madrasah Wathoniyah Islamiyah (PPMWI) is as firmly rooted in al-Wahab's theological vision as any Saudi school. The study of al-Wahab's works on *tauhid* form the core of the theological curriculum. It also adheres to Wahhabi positions concerning intercession with God and prayers for the dead. It is one of the few Indonesian *pesantren* at which visiting the grave of the founder is not required. Students are strongly discouraged from participating in this form of devotionism. PPMWI does not have a cemetery in the conventional sense. As is the case in Saudi Arabia, the dead are buried in unmarked graves.

PPMWI Wahhabism could not be more different from that practiced in Saudi Arabia

In other respects, PPMWI Wahhabism could not be more different from that practiced in Saudi Arabia. While Saudi Wahhabism recognizes only Hanbalite jurisprudence, PPMWI recognizes the validity of all four of the Sunni legal schools. It also allows for diversity in ritual practice on controversial issues, including the inclusion of supplications (*qunut*) in the dawn prayer. Saudi Wahhabis consider this practice to be an unacceptable innovation (*bid'ah*). Traditionalist Indonesian Muslims believe it to be a highly recommended practice, without which the prayer is "less than perfect." PPMWI takes a neutral position on this issue and other ritual matters that do not conflict with the core Wahhabi teaching of the absolute sovereignty of God. The importance of these forms of toleration may not be apparent to those unfamiliar with the nuances of Islamic discourse, but are strong indicators of PPMWI's rejection of the exclusivism characteristic of Saudi Wahhabism.

The strength of PPMWI's commitment to religious diversity is readily apparent in its interaction with other Muslim and non-Muslim religious communities. It is not affiliated with any of Indonesia's major Islamic organizations, but maintains cordial relations with all of them, except those advocating intolerance or violence. The punishment for students who express radical views or engage in radical activities is the same as for those guilty of other breaches of moral order including theft or drinking alcohol -- expulsion.

PPMWI's senior religious teacher participates in inter-faith forums and has delivered sermons in a Roman Catholic cathedral concerning unity of religions

K. H. Fata Mu'min Asifudin, the *pesantren's* senior religious teacher, and one of the few considered qualified to lecture on al Wahab's works, also participates in inter-faith forums that include Protestant and Roman Catholic Christians and Buddhists, as well as representatives of other Muslim schools and organizations. He has also delivered sermons in a Roman Catholic cathedral concerning the unity of religions. In an interview he stated that there is good in almost all religions. A Roman Catholic priest, who counts Fata as a personal friend, describes him as the "leader of a Wahhabi *pesantren* who is very familiar with and friendly towards other religions."

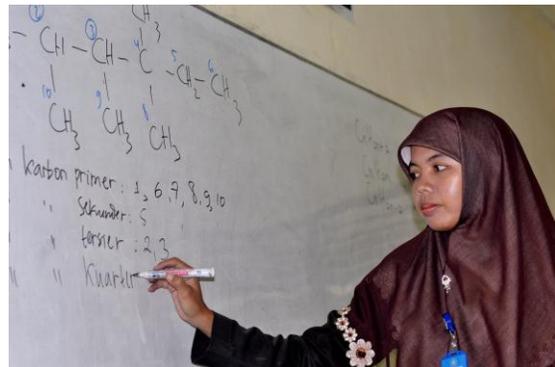


PPMWI's commitment to religious diversity was apparent in a lesson on state-religion relations we observed on March 9, 2012. The *pesantren* embraced Indonesian nationalism in 1920's and continues to support the Indonesian official semi-secular definition of the state, in which "Devotion to God" and religious pluralism are fundamental concepts. The theme of the lesson we observed was the state does not have the right to establish one religion or a single interpretation of Islam as "official," because to do so would make the followers of others second-class citizens.

PPMWI is equally progressive on gender issues. It does not define rigid gender segregation as a component of moral order. It has been coeducational since the early twentieth century. Classes are mixed, as is the teaching staff. Here, PPMWI is more progressive than many non-Wahhabi *pesantren* that are either single sex schools or have single sex classes. At some high walls separate boys and girls and gender segregation is so strict that they give the impression of being single sex schools.

Female students are encouraged to pursue university level education in religious and secular fields and to participate fully in public life. In 2010, four PPMWI graduates received scholarships to study at Al Azhar University in Cairo. All were women.

At PPMWI, girls and women cover their hair, but not their faces. School uniforms resemble those of secular government schools. The pseudo-Arabic clothing, including the *abaya* and *niqab* for women and calf-length trousers (*isbal*) or robes (*jalabiyya*) for men, common among Indonesian



While the PPMWI understanding of Islamic theology is based on al-Wahab's teachings, it sees no need to mimic Saudi social and cultural practice to establish Islamic authenticity

Islamists who follow the Saudi lead, are nowhere to be seen. In a more general sense, while the PPMWI understanding of Islamic theology is based on al-Wahab's teachings, it sees no need to mimic Saudi social and cultural practice to establish Islamic authenticity. In this respect it is very different from schools funded by the Saudi government and Saudi charitable foundations in which Saudi social and cultural practices are treated as Islamic orthodoxy.

There are many formal and informal opportunities for students to socialize in mixed company. The marching band, the Red Cross youth organization and even the Karate Club include female and male students. Girls and boys can almost always be seen sitting chatting together between classes. Many of the older girls have motorcycles.

PPMWI's more relaxed stance on gender segregation can be attributed in part to cultural differences. Javanese and other Indonesian cultures are less focused on gender segregation than Arab cultures. PPMWI's position is also based on an understanding of the difference between culture and religion. It is as self-consciously culturally Javanese as it is

theologically Wahhabi. Unlike the neo-fundamentalists described by Roy, who equate Saudi cultural practice with Islam, PPMWI's position is that only those aspects of local culture conflict with core theological teachings are problematic.⁴ PPMWI is not part of what he calls the "new global Ummah." PPMWI is as supportive of moral order as the Saudi establishment, but defines it differently, and does not employ or advocate coercion as a means for establishing it.

CONCLUSIONS

Theologically, Saudi Wahhabism and Kebarongan Wahhabism are very similar. Both are inspired by the teachings of al-Wahab and seek to put them into practice. There are, however, fundamental differences. Saudi Wahhabism demands conformity and relies on force to establish it. Kebarongan Wahhabism embraces plurality and relies on teaching and persuasion to establish a particular moral order as one component of a plural society. The differences concerning pluralism and gender are very clear.

There is also a far more basic difference. Saudi Wahhabism assumes that moral order is the exclusive property of a single community, that it is inherently fragile and that people fall into sin in the absence of coercion. PPMWI Wahhabism assumes that divergent communities share elements of a durable moral order that can be established by persuasion and teaching. These are very different types of religiosity that transcend confessional differences. They can, however, be treated as differential understandings of the Quranic injunction *al-amr bi'l-ma'ruf wa nahy 'an'l-munkar* (to command the good and forbid the evil).⁵ This is another core Islamic principle in which Wahhabis place great stock. Saudi Wahhabism stresses prohibiting the evil to establish the good. Kebarongan Wahhabism stresses commanding the good to prevent evil.

This difference reflects very divergent views of religiosity and human nature. Even when applied to the interpretation of a single body of religious texts and doctrines, they produce very different ways of being religious. Recognition of the importance of these "religious styles," and the contributions they make to the establishment of social and religious practices, renders the use of doctrine as a predictor of social and political behavior questionable at best.

There is a tendency in Western and much Indonesian discourse to view Wahhabi teachings as dangerous and to equate them with violence and extremism. The contrast between Saudi and Kebarongan Wahhabism shows that this view, as a generalization, is misguided. It

is crucial to separate theological, ritual, social and political characteristics of religious movements from the analysis of religion, conflict and violence. Analysts should give more attention to elements of what we call religious styles, including tendencies towards exclusivism, the blending of religion and culture, and belief that the establishment of moral order requires coercive measures. Failure to do so risks confusing devout and conservative yet benign religious practice with dangerous extremism, and alienating contested populations in the former category.

ENDNOTES

¹ Woodward, Mark, Amin Ali and Rohmaniyah, Inayah. "Muslim Education, "Celebrating Islam and Having Fun as Counter-Radicalization Strategies in Indonesia" *Perspectives on Terrorism*, October 2010.

² Algar, Hamid. *Wahhabism: A Critical Essay*, New York: Islamic Publication International, 2002 and Habib, John. *Ibn Sa'ud's Warriors of Islam: The Ikhwan of Najd and Their Role in the Creation of the Sa'udi Kingdom, 1910-1930*. Leiden: E. J.Brill, 1978.

³ On Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia see: Commins, David. *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia*, New York: I. B. Taurus, 2009; De Long-Bas, Natana. *Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

⁴ Roy, O., *Globalized Islam. The Search for the New Ummah*, London: Hurst and Company, 2004.

⁵ On this teaching see: Cook, Michael. *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001.