

Why Extremism Always Fails: Spanish Muslim Perspectives

by Abd el-Wahid Miranda

Two weeks after the World Trade Center disaster, a Black Muslim of my acquaintance visited a news store situated a few blocks from the site of the catastrophe. The store, which had reopened that day, was run by five Senegalese immigrants. Their Muslim background was clearly known to the lady who walked in, who came straight up to them and said: 'We're so sorry about what happened. Don't worry. We know it wasn't Muslims who did it. It was the Wahhabis!'

The Western world is now beginning to understand why Wahhabism is so unpopular among Muslims. Joseph Biden, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, not usually given to subtle understandings of Muslim *aqida* issues, has said that 'the Saudis are having to essentially buy off their extreme groups in order to maintain themselves ... They are essentially funding a significant portion of what we are now dealing with -- Islam gone awry.'

According to the Muslim journalist Stephen Schwartz, writing in the English journal *The Spectator*, 'Bin Laden is a Wahhabi extremist. So are his Egyptian allies, who exulted as they stabbed foreign tourists to death at Luxor not many years ago, bathing in blood up to their elbows and emitting blasphemous cries of ecstasy. So are the Algerian Islamist terrorists whose contribution to the purification of the world consisted of murdering people for such sins as running a movie projector or reading secular newspapers. ... The vast majority of Muslims in the world ... loathe Wahhabism because it is a violent break with tradition. ... To expose the extent of Saudi and Wahhabi extremist influence on American Muslims would deeply compromise many Islamic clerics in the US.'

Academic analysis has also concluded that Saudi Islam is at the core of the current crisis. Many studies cite the 1998 Harvard thesis of the Saudi dissident Nawaf Obeid, who writes: 'According to a high-ranking official in the [Saudi] Ministry of Justice, Sheikh Mohamed bin Jubeir [current chairman of the Saudi Consultative Council], who has been called the 'exporter' of the Wahhabi creed in the Muslim world, was a strong advocate of aiding the Taleban'.

Nonetheless, American daisy-cutter bombs are not landing on the Saudi universities in Madinah and Riyadh, in whose laboratories the new and hate-filled strains of Wahhabism are being designed. Neither is Saudi Arabia anywhere on the notoriously clumsy American list of states supporting terrorism. The Saudis, as usual, are exempted from any serious criticism, even when experts agree that while they may not themselves be the root of the problem, they are certainly watering it.

Muslim observers in Spain are speculating on the reasons for this strange contradiction. Not many believe that American policy is still so ignorant of the internal dynamics of the Middle East that it simply has no idea about Wahhabi involvement in international terrorism. The answer, they suggest, lies in the interests of American industry. Saudi Arabia is the most important US ally in the struggle to keep down the price of crude oil. No less significantly, it purchases American weaponry and thereby keeps afloat the enormous arms industry whose future seemed threatened by the closure of the Cold War.

Denis Halliday, the former UN assistant secretary-general who resigned in protest at the sanctions against Iraq, has this to observe: 'If you look at the sales of US military hardware, Saddam is the best salesman in town. I think over 100 billion has been sold to the Saudis, Kuwaitis, the Gulf states, Turkey, Israel and so on. It's thanks to Saddam. Just last week they sold \$6.2bn of military aircraft to the United Arab Emirates. What on earth does a little country need hardware like that for?' Clearly, this is a gravy-train the Americans will be reluctant to derail.

Other Muslims suspect that the reasons for American indifference to Wahhabism lie in a strategy to destroy Islam by supporting a movement that is destroying it from within. Mansur Reyes, a trustee of the El-Falah mosque in Barcelona, suggests that orthodox Islam, with its spiritual pathways and rich cultural and intellectual heritage, is perceived as the real threat to the United States. The West, according to this opinion, therefore allows the Wahhabi universities to continue to send their missionaries around the Islamic world, to eliminate every dimension of the religion that might attract Westerners, and hold the interest of educated people in the Islamic countries.

Reyes, who spent time at a university in Makkah only to become a longstanding critic of extremism, goes on to make a more purely religious observation. Like other Sunni Muslims, he believes that the current misfortunes of the Islamic world prove that because of the spread of false doctrines, the Muslims no longer deserve the divine favor which once gave them mastery of the planet.

'The Ottoman Caliph Mehmed was given divine permission to capture the holy city of Constantinople when he sent his dervishes to the front of his army, and they held a Sufi ceremony in full view of the city walls,' he recalls. 'So many *awlija* (saints) were praying for the Muslim army in those days that Islam was victorious even in places where it had never succeeded before.'

The courageous Reyes, who claims that his life has been repeatedly threatened by Wahhabi extremists in Barcelona, insists that 'we must consider why the prayers of these Wahhabists are not answered. In Algeria they pray every day for the destruction of the government, but their prayers are refused. In Afghanistan, they pray for the defeat of America, but their prayers are refused. In Egypt they pray for the death of Mubarek and the Christians, but their prayers are refused. If they claim that they are the kind of Muslims that Allah loves, they should look at their hands, and ask themselves why their prayers fail.'

Many believe that this orthodox criticism of Wahhabism holds the key to its downfall. 'Wahhabism is popular because of a sense of political and social frustration', says Salih del Campo, a journalist from Galicia who has also met Wahhabis at first hand. 'And if it is rooted in political emotions, then it will die quickly when its political causes turn out to

be failures.' He points out that in Spain, North African Wahhabis who declared their support for the World Trade Center attacks have 'gone quiet' following the sudden collapse of the Taleban, the key Wahhabi allies in Afghanistan.

The flashpoint of the Caucasus has also forced many former Wahhabi sympathizers to wonder about the failure of their prayers. In Azerbaijan, attempts by small Wahhabi groups led by Mubariz Aliev to attack the government have produced only a general anti-religious drive by the regime. Aliev, arrested in Baku for the December 1998 attack on the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development, led a group which is also thought to have been involved in a series of threats against 'headquarters of idolatry', which culminated in 1999 with the murder of the famous astrologer Etibar Yerkin and his two sons. The Azerbaijan government has, for now, suppressed Wahhabi terror, but the price paid by ordinary non-Wahhabi Muslims has been a heavy one, as mosques and periodicals come under increasingly heavy scrutiny, threatening both to weaken the Islamic revival among the republic's Sunni minority, and to drive unemployed and angry youth into revenge attacks which bring about further government repression.

In the North Caucasus republics, Wahhabism is being increasingly blamed for the failure of attempts to reintroduce Sharia law and to present a united Muslim front against Russian military occupation. The website of the official Chechen government in exile, www.amina.com, identifies the spread of Wahhabi ideas as one major cause of the fall of independent Chechnya two years ago.

The rise of Wahhabism in this region, devastated by seven decades of official atheism, is usually traced back to 1991, with the establishment of the Al-Hikma madrassa in the Daghestani town of Kizilyurt. Its director, Bagauddin Kebedov, accepted funds and guidance from two Wahhabi organisations, Al-Haramayn, and Al-Igase. While neither of these groups advocated armed revolt, the beliefs they encouraged led some of the madrassa's 700 pupils to declare most ordinary Caucasian Muslims to be apostates (*murtad*). When Kebedev left for Chechnya in 1998, and his relatively moderate Wahhabist successor Ahmad-Qadi Akhtaev died the next year, a sudden radicalisation took place. Under the leadership of the Saudi Wahhabi fighter Abd al-Rahman Khattab, and his Chechen associate Shamil Basayev, the local Wahhabis attacked Daghestani police stations and traditional Sunni mosques. The revolt was quickly defeated, resulting in an increasing reliance by Daghestan on Russian forces, and the Wahhabi leaders fled into Chechnya.

The Chechen president Aslan Maskhadov at this time led a fully independent Chechen nation. Saudi Arabia, fearful of angering Moscow, had refused to recognize it (even though the tiny but evidently more courageous state of Estonia had recognized it without hesitation). Perhaps because of Saudi policy, Maskhadov adopted a strongly anti-Wahhabi line. In 1998, announcing the success of the Chechen National Guard in repulsing an attack by Wahhabis in the city of Gudermes, he announced that 'the Chechen leadership has enough force to stop the spread in Chechnya of the anti-Islamic pernicious Wahhabi doctrine.' He went on to say, 'Military formations of the Wahhabi stamp will be disarmed and disbanded. Ringleaders and ideologues of these movements will be held criminally responsible. Before being allowed to leave, they must stand before a Sharia court and be punished for their bid to fuel a civil war in Chechnya.'

The incursion of Basayev's fighters in August 1999 provoked the war that ordinary Chechens had dreaded. According to the official Chechen website, 'People knew all that summer that teenage boys were being recruited from the Wahhabi areas. Anyone could see that there would be a new war with Russia if the commanders started trouble in Dagestan. So the clan elders went to Shamel Basayev and asked him to drop his plan. But he took no notice.' The presence of Khattab was particularly provocative. In an interview with Greg Myre of Associated Press he made explicit threats: 'Let Russia await our explosions blasting through their cities. I swear we will do it.'

The Wahhabi incursion brought about, as feared, a massive Russian invasion. Unlike the first Chechen war, documented by Anatol Lieven in his book *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power*, this new conflict contained a significant Wahhabi ingredient. Failure was thus inevitable; and Chechnya is now firmly in Moscow's grip. 'Local anger against the Wahhabis', says one Chechen commentator, 'is now white-hot.'

After the catastrophe in the Caucasus, Khattab sought refuge in Afghanistan, where he may have died in the recent fighting for the northern city of Kunduz. Also dead in Kunduz was Juma Namangani, head of the pro-Wahhabi Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. Namangani rose to fame in the summers of 1999 and 2000, when his warriors invaded remote areas of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, setting up a small Wahhabi utopian camp in the Tavildere region near the Tajik capital Dushanbe. After their raid in Kyrgyzstan, the mayor of the town of Osh, which had been ransacked by the Wahhabi forces, observed, 'I cannot say that there are no problems. Wahhabis are active among the youth, who know little about Islam.' In Tajikistan, however, the government peacefully decimated the ranks of Namangani's supporters when the Supreme Court legalized Islamic opposition parties. Over half of Namangani's former activists accepted an amnesty and chose careers in the army or police. The last significant rebel formation, numbering 800 men under the command of Mirza Zia'ev, was completely integrated into the Tajik government, and Zia'ev himself was appointed Minister of Civil Defense. A hardcore of mainly Arab and Chechen fighters remained in the hills, calling those who switched sides 'apostates' and 'brothers of devils'.

The failure of extremism in the Caucasus and Central Asia has now been repeated in Afghanistan. Reyes believes that the Chechen failure mirrors exactly the extremist failure in Afghanistan. An indigenous Sunni Islamic government was unable to resist allowing its territory to be used by Wahhabi activists, many of them hailing from the Middle East. 'The most obvious explanation of the sudden failure which followed,' he adds, 'is the provocation to more powerful states represented by the radicalization and growing xenophobia of the populations. But the true Muslim explanation is that wherever these people go, they bring Allah's rejection. They show disrespect to the saints, they reject the Hanafi scholars, they frighten women and Christians, and they introduce *fitna* into every mosque. In that situation Allah will not help a Muslim state. Just look at Algeria. Allah says that "you will be uppermost if you are true believers". They need to think about this verse.'

Reyes believes strongly that the Taleban would still be in power had Mullah Omar not allowed himself to be drawn into an alliance with Bin Laden's mainly Saudi supporters. He quotes Mullah Muhammad Khaksar, the former Taleban Deputy Interior Minister, who denounced Mullah Omar's policies after the fall of Kabul, as saying: 'Mullah

Omar's personality changed 95% since the beginning of the movement. I don't think the Arabs should be forgiven. It was because of them that US aircraft came to Afghanistan and bombed our country, killing thousands of people.'

Many Spanish Muslims commentating on the crisis on the main Spanish-language Muslim websites, www.webislam.com, and www.verdeislam.com, seem to support Khaksar's analysis. The alliance with Bin Laden was a catastrophe for the Afghan Muslim people, and a godsend to the Americans, who are now entrenching themselves in Uzbekistan and are already working on a new oil pipeline across the entire region. Some even blame the acute Afghan drought (which began in earnest in 1998, the year of Bin Laden's *fatwa* advocating the indiscriminate murder of American citizens) on Mullah Omar's decision, citing the Quranic verse 'Had the people of the villages believed truly, We would have poured down on them blessings from the skies.' Tragically, the 'people of the villages', and their rulers, received cluster bombs instead.