

Scholars

Steinberg on Religion and State in Saudi Arabia

Wahhabism

When leading Saudi scholars did support the presence of American troops on the sacred soil by a *fatwa* of *hay'at kibar al-'ulama'*, هيئة كبار العلماء, ten years before the turn of the millennium, a longstanding dispute gained momentum. This quarrel touched upon the role of the '*ulama'*', as well as the subject of reforms for political participation in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. German researcher Guido Steinberg takes this row as a starting point for his history of Wahhaby scholarship in the first half of the 20th century. This Wahhabism, الْوَهَّابِيَّة, is derived from the name Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1791), محمد بن عبد الوهاب. Steinberg's study focus on the central question, how the scholars, succeeded in preserving their position in Saudi Arabia until 1953. The author divides his study into twelve chapters. After introducing the research methodology, definitions and sources, he turns to core matters:

- the education of the scholars;
- the centers of al-Wahhabiyya 1900-53;
- the social structure and the tribal affiliation;
- their functions in education, as reviewers, judges and religious policeman;
- their involvement in policy 1911-1930;
- the politics in the captured provinces of al-Ahsa' and Hijaz;
- and the scholarly involvement in policy 1930-53.

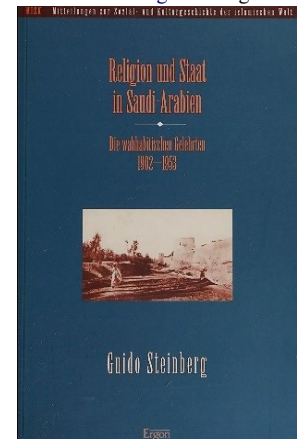
The study is based on American and British archival sources, personal meetings with native scholars, and published sources.

Plurality

Steinberg finds a huge discrepancy between the high Wahhabiyya ideals and the resources given to fulfill them in the society of the Najd area. Thus, just a minimal intellectual development in certain areas was possible. Until the 1950s there was even a shortage of well-trained scholars. Nevertheless, they followed a coherent curriculum (at least on the paper) that was oriented on an Islamic state according to the *as-salaf as-salih*, السلف الصالح, "the righteous forebears". Steinberg opines that the scholars were neither isolated nor unwilling to accede to limited reforms. On the contrary, some traveled as far as India to study new developments. Others interacted with reformers in nearby Arab lands.

The author concludes that the Wahhaby scholars were a heterogenous group – different in their religious and intellectual behavior. Moreover, he observes, there was a considerable plurality of opinions in the Najd area with respect to the puritan and egalitarian tradition that they had inherited, presumably from Ahmad Bin Hanbal ash-Shaibany, أحمد بن حنبل الشيباني (780-855). The Wahhaby scholars were mostly conservatives and not too much interested in extensive reforms. They integrated some new institutions of religious learning and adult education in the late 1940s.

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Turn

Then Wahhaby scholars took over the religious police in 1930, a watershed year in the Kingdom's history. So, they secured a major position in the system of the developing statehood.

Traditional conflicts between the Wahhaby scholars on the one hand and most of the local Muslim Brotherhood on the other lingered on. In times of crisis, high ranking scholars remained always loyal to the House of Al Sa'ud. Often, they mediated between lower ranking Wahhaby scholars and Muslim Brothers, who tended to the opposition.

Unique

Of general interest are also the detailed findings about methods of expansion, ruling and power sharing in the Kingdom. The mighty position of the scholars until the 1950s was a factor of stability for the country.

So it was a game of social balancing – of mutual benefit to the rulers and the scholars in mostly internal matters. The latter never gained a great influence on foreign policy, at least during the first half of the past century. Meanwhile, due to the eminent position of the scholars, a process of secularization as such hardly emerged.

All in all, Guido Steinberg has produced a groundbreaking study of the Wahhaby scholarship in Saudi Arabia. Together with Reinhard Schulze's seminal work, *Islamic Internationalism in the 20th Century* (1990), *Religion und Staat in Saudi-Arabien* illuminates the unique development of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, one of the few really most traditional and independent states of the region.

Readers may await a study equally well researched and incisive about the period 1954 onwards, a period marked by a striking spread of Wahhabism around the world into other Islamic countries and regions.

Wolfgang G. Schwanitz

Guido Steinberg, *Religion und Staat in Saudi-Arabien*. Die wahhabitischen Gelehrten 1902-1953. Reihe Mitteilungen zur Sozial- und Kulturgeschichte der islamischen Welt, Bd. 10, Würzburg, Ergon Verlag 2002, 3899132661, 698 pp.

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Map in *Voyages & Travel*, London 1765, Herman Moll, Thomas Osborne Wiki

