

WAHHABISM AND ISLAM IN THE U.S.

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U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Terrorism, Technology and Homeland Security

Chairman Jon Kyl, Rep-Ariz

Thursday, June 26, 2003

Members of the Senate, witnesses, spectators, ladies and gentlemen.

I come before this body today to describe how adherents of Wahhabism, the most extreme, separatist, and violent form of Islam, and the official sect in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, have come to dominate Islam in the U.S.

Islam is a fairly new participant at the “big table” of American religions. The Muslim community only became a significant element in our country’s life in the 1980s. Most “born Muslims,” as opposed to those who “converted” – a term Muslims avoid, preferring “new Muslims” – had historically been immigrants from Pakistan and India who followed traditional, peaceful, mainstream Islam.

With the growth of the Islamic community in America, there was no “Islamic establishment” in the U.S. – in contrast with Britain, France, and Germany, the main Western countries with significant Islamic minorities. Historically, traditional scholars have been a buffer against extremism in Islam, and for various sociological and demographic reasons, American Islam lacked a stratum of such scholars. The Wahhabi ideological structure in Saudi Arabia perceived this as an opportunity to fill a gap – to gain dominance over an Islamic community in the West with immense potential for political and social influence.

But the goal of this operation, which was largely successful, was multiple.

First, to control a significant group of Muslim believers.

Second, to use the Muslim community in the U.S. to pressure U.S. government and media, in the formulation of policy and in perceptions about Islam. This has included liaison meetings, “sensitivity” sessions and other public activities with high-

level Administration officials, including the FBI Director, that we have seen since September 11th.

Third, to advance the overall Wahhabi agenda of “jihad against the world” – an extremist campaign to impose the Wahhabi dispensation on the global Islamic community, as well as to confront the other religions. This effort has included the establishment in the U.S. of a base for funding, recruitment and strategic/tactical support of terror operations in the U.S. and abroad.

Wahhabi-Saudi policy has always been two-faced: that is, at the same time as the Wahhabis preach hostility and violence against non-Wahhabi Muslims, they maintain a policy of alliance with Western military powers – first Britain, then the U.S. and France – to assure their control over the Arabian Peninsula.

At the present time, Shia and other non-Wahhabi Muslim community leaders estimate that 80 percent of American mosques are under Wahhabi control. This does not mean 80 percent of American Muslims support Wahhabism, although the main Wahhabi ideological agency in America, the so-called Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) has claimed that some 70 percent of American Muslims want Wahhabi teaching in their mosques.¹ This is a claim we consider unfounded.

Rather, Wahhabi control over mosques means control of property, buildings, appointment of imams, training of imams, content of preaching – including faxing of Friday sermons from Riyadh, Saudi Arabia – and of literature distributed in mosques and mosque bookstores, notices on bulletin boards, and organizational solicitation. Similar influence extends to prison and military chaplaincies, Islamic elementary and secondary schools (academies), college campus activity, endowment of academic chairs and programs in Middle East, and most notoriously, charities ostensibly helping Muslims abroad, many of which have been linked to or designated as sponsors of terrorism.

The main organizations that have carried out this campaign are the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), which originated in the Muslim Students’ Association of the U.S. and Canada (MSA), and CAIR. Support activities have been provided by the American Muslim Council (AMC), the American Muslim Alliance (AMA), the Muslim American Society (MAS), the Graduate School of Islamic and Social Sciences, its sister body the International Institute of Islamic Thought, and a number of related groups that I

have called “the Wahhabi lobby.” ISNA operates at least 324 mosques in the U.S. through the North American Islamic Trust (NAIT).

Both ISNA and CAIR, in particular, maintain open and close relations with the Saudi government – a unique situation, in that no other foreign government directly uses religion as a cover for its political activities in the U.S. For example, notwithstanding support by the American Jewish community for the state of Israel, the government of Israel does not intervene in synagogue life or the activities of rabbinical or related religious bodies in America.

According to saudiembassy.net, the official website of the Saudi government, CAIR received \$250,000 from the Jeddah-based Islamic Development Bank, an official Saudi financial institution, in 1999, for the purchase of land in Washington, DC, to construct a headquarters facility.²

In a particularly disturbing case, the Islamic Development Bank also granted US\$295,000 to the Masjid Bilal Islamic Center, USA, for the construction of the Bilal Islamic Primary and Secondary School in California, in 1999.³ Hassan Akbar, an American Muslim presently charged with a fatal attack on his fellow-soldiers in Kuwait during the Iraq intervention, was affiliated with this institution.

In addition, the previously-mentioned official website of the Saudi government reported a donation in 1995 of \$4 million for the construction of a mosque complex in Los Angeles, named for Ibn Taymiyyah, a historic Islamic figure considered the forerunner of Wahhabism.⁴ It should be noted that Ibn Taymiyyah is viewed as a marginal, extremist, ideological personality by many traditional Muslims. The same website reported a donation of \$6 million, also in 1995, for a mosque in Cincinnati, Ohio.⁵

The website stated in 2000, “In the United States, the Kingdom has contributed to the establishment of the Islamic Center in Washington DC; the Omer Bin Al-Khattab Mosque in western Los Angeles, the Los Angeles Islamic Center, and the Fresno Mosque in California; the Islamic Center in Denver, Colorado; the Islamic center in Harrison, New York City; and the Islamic Center in Northern Virginia.” (Direct quote)⁶

How much money, in total, is involved in this effort?

If we accept a low figure of control, i.e. NAIT ownership of 27 percent of 1,200 mosques, stated by CAIR and cited by Mary Jacoby and Graham Brink in the *St. Petersburg Times*,⁷ we have some 324 mosques.

If we assume a relatively low average of expenditures, e.g. \$.5m per mosque, we arrive at \$162m.

But given that Saudi official sources show \$6m in Cincinnati and \$4m in Los Angeles, we should probably raise the average to \$1m per mosque, resulting in \$324m as a minimum.

Our view is that the number of mosques under Wahhabi control actually totals at least 600 out of the official total of 1,200, while, as noted, Shia community leaders endorse the figure of 80 percent Wahhabi control. But we also offer a number of 4-6,000 mosques overall, including small and diverse congregations of many kinds.

A radical critic of Wahhabism stated some years ago that \$25m had been spent on Islamic Centers in the U.S. by the Saudi authorities. This now seems a low figure. Another anti-extremist Islamic figure has estimated Saudi expenses in the U.S., over 30 years, and including schools and free books as well as mosques, near a billion dollars.

It should also be noted that Wahhabi mosques in the U.S. work in close coordination with the Muslim World League (MWL) and the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY), Saudi state entities identified as participants in the funding of al-Qaida.

Wahhabi ideological control within Saudi Arabia is based on the historic compact of intermarriage between the family of the sect's originator, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, and the family of the founding ruler, Ibn Sa'ud. To this day, these families divide governance of the kingdom, with the descendants of Ibn al-Wahhab, known as *ahl al-Shaykh*, responsible for religious life, and the Saudi royal family, or *ahl al-Sa'ud*, running the state. The two families also continue to marry their descendants to one another. The supreme religious leader of Saudi Arabia is a member of the family of Ibn al-Wahhab. The state appoints a minister of religious affairs who controls such bodies as MWL and WAMY, and upon leaving his ministerial post he becomes head of MWL.

The official Saudi embassy website reported exactly one year ago, on June 26, 2002, "The delegation of the Muslim World League (MWL) that is on a world tour promoting goodwill arrived in New York yesterday, and visited the Islamic Center there."

The same website later reported, on July 8, 2002, “During a visit on Friday evening to the headquarters of the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) [Secretary-General of the MWL Dr. Abdullah bin Abdulmohsin Al-Turki] advocated coordination among Muslim organizations in the United States. Expressing MWL’s readiness to offer assistance in the promotion and coordination of Islamic works, he announced plans to set up a commission for this purpose. The MWL delegation also visited the Islamic Center in Washington DC and was briefed on its activities by its director Dr. Abdullah bin Mohammad Fowaj.”⁸ These are direct quotes.

In a related matter, on June 22, 2003, in a letter to the *New York Post*, James Zogby, president of the Arab American Institute, a civic lobbying organization, stated that his attendance at a press conference of WAMY in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, had been organized by the U.S. Embassy in the kingdom. If this is true, it is extremely alarming. The U.S. Embassy should not act as a supporter of WAMY, which, as documented by FDD and the Saudi Institute,⁹ teaches that Shia Muslims, including even the followers of Ayatollah Khomeini, are Jewish agents. This is comparable to Nazi claims that Jewish business owners were Communists, or Slobodan Milošević’s charge, in the media of ex-Yugoslavia, that Tito was an agent of the Vatican. The aim is to derange people, to separate them from reality completely, in preparation for massacres.

There is clearly a problem of Wahhabi/Saudi extremist influence in American Islam. The time is now to face the problem squarely and find ways to enable and support traditional, mainstream American Muslims in taking their community back from these extremists, while employing law enforcement to interdict the growth of Wahhabism and its financial support by the Saudis. If we fail to do this, Wahhabi extremism continues to endanger the whole world – Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Thank you for your attention.

NOTES

¹ Council on American Islamic Relations, *The Mosque in America: A National Portrait, A Report from the Mosque Study Project*, April 26, 2001.
www.cair-net.org/mosquereport/Masjid_Study_Project_2000_Report.pdf.

² Saudi Embassy Press Archive, August 15, 1999, www.saudiembassy.net.

³ Islamic Development Bank, http://www.isdb.org/english_docs/idb_home/news_SESSION.htm; also, "IDB Allocates \$202 Mln to Finance Islamic Development Ventures," Arabic News, 1/25/2000, www.arabicnews.com.

⁴ Saudi Embassy Press Archive, July 8, 1995.

⁵ Saudi Embassy Press Archive, November 10, 1995.

⁶ Saudi Embassy Press Archive, March 5, 2000.

⁷ "Saudi Form of Islam Wars With Moderates," *St. Petersburg Times*, March 11, 2003, at www.sptimes.com.

⁸ Saudi Embassy Press Archive.

⁹ Ali al-Ahmed and Stephen Schwartz, "Saudis Spread Hate Speech in U.S.," Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, Washington, copublished with Saudi Institute.