



Vol 25, No. 1 (2026)

Research Article

The Saudi–Ottoman Conflict and the Rise of Religious-Political Power in Arabia

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Submitted: May 3, 2026; Reviewed: Jun 1, 2026; Accepted: Jun 15, 2026

Abstract: This study examines the socio-religious background and political transformation of the Wahhabi movement in the Arabian Peninsula during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The objective of this research is to analyze how Wahhabism emerged in Najd as a response to religious fragmentation and how it evolved into a political force through its alliance with local rulers. This study argues that Wahhabism was not merely a puritan religious movement, but also a reformist project that redefined the relationship between religious authority and political power in the region. The findings show that the alliance between Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab and Muhammad bin Saud in 1744 marked a crucial turning point, transforming religious reform into a structured political movement. This alliance enabled territorial expansion and the establishment of the First Saudi State, which challenged the legitimacy of the Ottoman Empire as the dominant Islamic authority. The conflict culminated in the Ottoman military expedition led by Muhammad Ali Pasha between 1811 and 1818, which led to the fall of Dir’iyah. Despite its political defeat, Wahhabism persisted as a resilient ideological force. Its teachings continued to influence religious practices and political structures in Arabia, contributing to the emergence of the modern Saudi state. The study concludes that the Wahhabi–Ottoman conflict reflects a broader struggle over religious authority, political legitimacy, and Islamic reform in the modern era.

Keywords: Wahhabism; Ottoman Empire; Islamic reform; political power; Arabian Peninsula

Abstrak: Penelitian ini mengkaji latar belakang sosial-keagamaan serta transformasi politik gerakan Wahhabi di Jazirah Arab pada abad ke-18 hingga awal abad ke-19. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis kemunculan Wahhabisme di wilayah Najd sebagai respons terhadap fragmentasi kehidupan keagamaan serta menjelaskan bagaimana gerakan tersebut berkembang menjadi kekuatan politik melalui aliansinya dengan penguasa lokal. Penelitian ini berpendapat bahwa Wahhabisme tidak hanya merupakan gerakan pemurnian

ajaran Islam, tetapi juga sebuah proyek reformasi yang mendefinisikan kembali hubungan antara otoritas keagamaan dan kekuasaan politik di kawasan tersebut. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode sejarah dengan pendekatan studi kepustakaan melalui tahapan heuristik, kritik sumber, interpretasi, dan historiografi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa aliansi antara Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab dan Muhammad bin Saud pada tahun 1744 menjadi titik balik penting yang mengubah gerakan reformasi keagamaan menjadi gerakan politik yang terorganisasi. Aliansi tersebut memungkinkan ekspansi wilayah dan berdirinya Negara Saudi Pertama yang menantang legitimasi Kesultanan Utsmaniyah sebagai otoritas Islam yang dominan. Konflik mencapai puncaknya melalui ekspedisi militer Utsmaniyah yang dipimpin Muhammad Ali Pasha pada periode 1811–1818, yang berakhir dengan jatuhnya Dir'iyah. Meskipun mengalami kekalahan secara politik, Wahhabisme tetap bertahan sebagai kekuatan ideologis yang berpengaruh. Ajaran-ajarannya terus membentuk praktik keagamaan dan struktur politik di Jazirah Arab serta berkontribusi terhadap lahirnya negara Arab Saudi modern. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa konflik Wahhabi–Utsmaniyah mencerminkan pergulatan yang lebih luas mengenai otoritas keagamaan, legitimasi politik, dan reformasi Islam pada era modern.

Kata Kunci: Wahhabisme; Kesultanan Utsmaniyah; reformasi Islam; kekuasaan politik; Jazirah Arab

INTRODUCTION

Conditions in the Arabian Peninsula during the 18th century demonstrated a prolonged decline in religious and political life.¹ Islamic practices during this period did not fully reflect the pure principles of monotheism, but were instead mixed with local traditions such as the worship of saints, excessive grave visits, and the use of amulets and intermediaries.² This phenomenon signaled a crisis in the understanding and practice of Islamic teachings, leading to a weakening of religious authority in society.³ In this context, the emergence of the Wahhabism movement in the Najd region was a crucial response to this situation, oriented not only toward the purification of Islamic teachings but also with broad social and political implications.

Geographically and socially, the Najd region was relatively isolated from centers of Islamic scholarship such as Baghdad and Cairo. This isolation limited access to formal religious education and weakened the control of religious institutions over community practices. This situation encouraged the development of local religious practices considered deviant, while also creating space for the emergence of reform movements. In this regard, the teachings of Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab can be understood as a response to the social and spiritual crisis experienced by Arab society, emphasizing the importance of purifying monotheism as the primary foundation of religious life.

On the other hand, the political conditions of the time also influenced regional dynamics. The decline of Ottoman power in the 18th century led to a weakening of control over peripheral regions, including the Arabian Peninsula. This situation opened up opportunities for the emergence of more autonomous local powers, which then utilized

¹ D. Murtado dan M. Wachama, "Islamic Puritanism and Wahhabi Development," *FOCUS* 5, no. 1 (2024).

² Jabri, U., H., Firdiani, D., Assidiq, I., & H. (2023). HISTORY OF ISLAMIC REVIVALISM IN SAUDI ARABIA SHAYKH MUHAMMAD BIN ABD. WAHHAB. *International Journal Conference*. <https://doi.org/10.46870/iceil.v1i1.467>.

³ Agustono, Ihwan. "ISLAMIC PURITANISM MOVEMENT OF MUHAMMAD IBN 'ABD AL-WAHHAB." *LISAN AL-HAL: Jurnal Pengembangan Pemikiran dan Kebudayaan* (2023). <https://doi.org/10.35316/lisanalhal.v17i2.191-203>.

religious legitimacy as a basis for power. In this context, the alliance between Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab and Muhammad ibn Saud in 1744 marked the beginning of the formation of a significant religio-political force.⁴ This development ultimately sparked conflict with Ottoman rule, particularly when the Wahhabi movement expanded its influence into the Hijaz region, which held high symbolic and religious value.⁵

In academic studies, Wahhabism has been extensively studied from various perspectives. Several studies position Wahhabism as a religious purification movement that focuses on theological aspects, particularly the concept of monotheism⁶. Meanwhile, other studies highlight the historical context of its emergence in relation to the social and political conditions in Najd⁷. More recent studies also link Wahhabism to the dynamics of Islamic movements and militancy in modern development⁸. However, most of these studies tend to discuss these aspects separately, thus failing to provide a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between Wahhabi ideology and Ottoman rule in the context of regional conflict.

Based on these conditions, a research gap exists, indicating that the interaction between Wahhabism and Ottoman rule has not been widely studied as a dialectical relationship between religious ideology and political interests.⁹ Therefore, this article offers an approach that integrates theological, social, and political dimensions in analyzing Wahhabism. Thus, this research is novel in its attempt to understand Wahhabism not only as a religious movement but also as a crucial factor in the dynamics of the Arab-Turkish conflict during the period 1744–1818.

Conceptually, this research is based on the understanding that religion and politics in Islamic history have a mutually influential relationship. Religious ideology functions not only as a belief system but also as a source of legitimacy for power and a tool for social mobilization. In this context, Wahhabism can be seen as a form of ideological articulation that transformed into political power through alliances with local powers. This framework is used to analyze how the interaction between ideology and power shaped the dynamics of the conflict between the Wahhabis–Saudites and the Ottoman Turks.

Based on this description, this article seeks to answer several main questions: (1) what social and theological conditions underlie the emergence of the Wahhabi movement; (2) why the movement was viewed as a threat to the legitimacy of Ottoman Turkish power; and (3) how the conflict between the Wahhabis–Saudites and the Ottomans during the

⁴ Al-Wais, Ismail Mohammed Hassan. "Political and Military Conditions in the Najd and Hejaz (1745–1914)." *European Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences* (2025). [https://doi.org/10.59324/ejahss.2025.2\(2\).18](https://doi.org/10.59324/ejahss.2025.2(2).18).

⁵ Alishahi, A., Esmail Dashtban, and Zahra Hossein Pour. "Wahhabi Thoughts in Pakistan and the Challenges in Pakistan-Iran Relations." *Journal of Religion and Theology* (2019). <https://doi.org/10.22259/2637-5907.0303003>.

⁶ Long, D. E. "Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad." *Middle East Journal* 59 (2005): 316. <https://doi.org/10.5860/choice.42-3352>.

⁷ George S. Rentz, *The Birth of the Islamic Reform Movement in Saudi Arabia*, ed. William Ochsenwald (London: Arabian Publishing, 2004),

⁸ Cole M. Bunzel, *Wahhabism: The History of a Militant Islamic Movement* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011),

⁹ Harkot, Michał. "Wpływ wahabizmu na pozycję społeczno-polityczną Arabii Saudyjskiej." 27 (2020): 97-110. <https://doi.org/10.17951/k.2020.27.1.97-110>.

period 1744–1818 influenced changes in power structures and political ideology in the Arab region.

Accordingly, this study aims to comprehensively analyze the relationship between Wahhabism and the Arab-Turkish conflict, emphasizing the interaction between religious ideology and political power. This research aims to

RESEARCH METHOD

This research employs a historical research method with a library research approach, focusing on analyzing past events related to the emergence of Wahhabism and the conflict between the Wahhabi-Saudites and the Ottoman Turks from 1744–1818. Research data were obtained from various written sources, both primary and secondary, such as books and scholarly articles discussing Wahhabism, the socio-religious conditions of the Arabian Peninsula, and the dynamics of Ottoman politics. The use of diverse sources aims to obtain comprehensive and academically sound data.

The research process was conducted through four stages of the historical method: heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography. The heuristic stage involves collecting relevant sources, followed by source criticism to assess the validity and credibility of the data. The interpretation stage then analyzes the causal relationships between social, theological, and political factors in the emergence of Wahhabism and the conflict with the Ottomans. The final stage, historiography, is carried out by compiling the results of the analysis into a systematic and chronological historical narrative, so as to produce a complete understanding of the dynamics of the Arab–Turkish conflict during that period.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Socio-Religious Context of the Emergence of Wahhabism in Najd

In the 18th century, the Najd region of the Arabian Peninsula was in a fragmented socio-religious situation and relatively isolated from centers of Islamic scholarship such as the Hijaz and Istanbul. This geographic isolation limited access to formal religious education and weakened the control of religious authorities. Furthermore, the influence of the Ottoman Empire in the Arabian interior tended to be ineffective, allowing religious practices to develop locally without systematic oversight.¹⁰

The social conditions of the Najd community were dominated by a strong tribal structure with a self-sufficient and conservative lifestyle. In this environment, religion was practiced based on inherited traditions, rather than on in-depth scientific understanding.¹¹ As a result, Islamic teachings blended with local elements that were not fully aligned with the principles of monotheism, creating a heterogeneous and deviant religious climate.

This phenomenon is evident in the development of religious practices such as the cult of saints, the use of amulets, and excessive visitation to graves. While some consider these practices to be forms of religious expression, others view them as deviations

¹⁰ George S. Rentz, *The Birth of the Islamic Reform Movement in Saudi Arabia*, ed. William Ochsenwald (London: Arabian Publishing, 2004), 15-17.

¹¹ Rentz, 19-20.

potentially leading to polytheism¹². This situation became a crucial factor in triggering the awareness of the need for more fundamental religious reform.

In this context, Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab emerged as a figure who brought the idea of purifying Islamic teachings. He believed that the decline of religious practices in society was caused by the community's drift away from the pure principles of monotheism. Therefore, he called for a return to the Qur'an and Sunnah as the primary sources of Islamic teachings.¹³

Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab's thinking did not emerge suddenly, but was shaped by his intellectual experiences in various regions such as Basra and the Hijaz. His interaction with the Hanbali tradition of scholars, which emphasized a textual approach to the Qur'an and Sunnah, influenced his perspective on religious practices¹⁴. From this background, he developed a critique of various practices deemed to lack a basis in Islamic law.

Through his work, *Kitab at-Tawhid* (The Book of Tawhid), Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab asserted that the oneness of God must be the center of all religious activity. He rejected all forms of intermediary in worship, including the practice of *tawassul* (religious supplication) to other than God and the cult of a specific.¹⁵ This critique was not only theological but also had social implications, challenging long-entrenched religious practices in society.

These ideas later developed into a broader reform movement. Wahhabism focuses not only on purifying the faith but also on establishing a more disciplined social order through the enforcement of enjoining good and forbidding evil and rejecting superstition.¹⁶ Thus, this movement has interconnected ideological and social dimensions.

Support for the Wahhabi movement emerged from the people of Najd, who saw this teaching as a solution to the unstable social conditions rife with inter-tribal conflict. The values of simplicity, equality, and adherence to sharia provided a new direction for their social life.¹⁷ This suggests that Wahhabism's initial success was determined not only by the strength of its ideology but also by its suitability to the social needs of the local community.

Thus, the emergence of Wahhabism resulted from the interaction between socio-religious conditions experiencing crisis, the emergence of theological reform ideas, and social support that enabled the formation of an organized movement. This process shows that Wahhabism was not only a religious phenomenon, but also became the initial foundation for social and political transformation in the Arabian Peninsula in the 18th century.¹⁸

The Wahhabi–Saudi Alliance: From Proselytising to Domination

¹² Rentz, 23.

¹³ Long, D. E. "Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad." *Middle East Journal* 59 (2005): 316. <https://doi.org/10.5860/choice.42-3352.44-46>.

¹⁴ Long, D.E. 51-52.

¹⁵ Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, *Kitab at-Tauhid: The Book of Monotheism* (Riyadh: Darussalam, 1996), 3–4.

¹⁶ Rentz, 27.

¹⁷ Rentz, 28-29.

¹⁸ DeLong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam*, 55–57; Rentz, *The Birth of the Islamic Reform Movement*, 30–31.

The alliance between Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab and Muhammad ibn Saud in 1744 marked a turning point in the political and religious history of the Arabian Peninsula. This agreement was not simply a meeting between religious scholars and local rulers, but the beginning of a synergy between religious and political forces that changed the course of regional history. Through this alliance, the Wahhabi movement transformed from a theological missionary movement into a political force that directly challenged the authority of the Ottoman Empire in the Arabian region.

In its early stages, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's mission focused on the purification of monotheism and the rejection of practices that he regarded as innovations and polytheism. Although his teachings gained followers in Najd, they also encountered resistance from local authorities whose political and religious interests were challenged by his reformist message. A decisive turning point occurred when he formed an alliance with Muhammad ibn Saud in Dir'iyah¹⁹. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab obtained political protection for the expansion of his religious mission, while Ibn Saud gained religious legitimacy for territorial consolidation and state-building²⁰. This partnership laid the foundation for the emergence of the First Saudi State, which would later become involved in a prolonged conflict with the Ottoman Empire.

The agreement at Dir'iyah established a clear division of roles: Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab assumed religious authority, while ibn Saud assumed political and military control. This relationship was symbiotic and mutually reinforcing. More than mere pragmatic cooperation, this alliance reflected the ideal model of the relationship between ulama and umara in Islamic tradition, where political power derives legitimacy from the values of sharia.²¹

From the Wahhabi perspective, the legitimacy of leadership is not based solely on the claim to the caliphate, but on the ability to uphold pure monotheism. On this basis, Ottoman rule was viewed as illegitimate due to its perceived tolerance of deviant religious practices, such as the cult of saints and excessive grave visits. Conversely, Muhammad ibn Saud was considered the legitimate leader because of his commitment to the purification of Islamic teachings. Thus, the Wahhabi-Saud alliance had a strong theological foundation, not merely political considerations.²²

Following the formation of this alliance, the Wahhabi-Saud movement began expanding into surrounding territories. This expansion aimed to establish monotheism and eradicate religious practices deemed deviant. In the process, they encountered numerous conflicts with local communities who resisted the new authority. However, with military

¹⁹ DeLong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 32–35.

²⁰ Murtado, Diran, and Muhammad Roflee Waehama. "Islamic Puritanism and Wahhabi Development." *FOCUS* (2024). <https://doi.org/10.26593/focus.v5i1.7658>.

²¹ Alrebh, Abdullah F. "A Wahhabi Ethic in Saudi Arabia." *Sociology of Islam* 5 (2017): 278-302. <https://doi.org/10.1163/22131418-00504001>.

²² Al-Wais, Ismail Mohammed Hassan. "Political and Military Conditions in the Najd and Hejaz (1745–1914)." *European Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences* (2025). [https://doi.org/10.59324/ejahss.2025.2\(2\).18](https://doi.org/10.59324/ejahss.2025.2(2).18).

support from the Dir'iyah, they succeeded in capturing strategic areas in Najd, including Riyadh and Qasim.²³

The success of this expansion was determined not only by military strength but also by the social conditions of the Najd community. The strict and independent tribal structure made Wahhabi teachings, which emphasized simplicity and discipline, easily accepted. Furthermore, the abolition of traditional religious hierarchies attracted support from previously marginalized groups. Economically, the stability brought by Wahhabi-Saud rule also opened new trade routes in the region.²⁴

However, the growing power of the Wahhabi-Saud raised serious concerns among the Ottomans. Their expansion into the Hijaz, including control of Mecca and Medina, was seen as a direct threat to the legitimacy of the Ottoman Caliphate as the custodian of the two holy cities. Furthermore, the destruction of sites deemed heretical exacerbated tensions between the two sides.²⁵

From a Wahhabi perspective, the conflict with the Ottomans was not understood as a rebellion against Islam, but rather as a rejection of a leadership deemed theologically illegitimate. Power that failed to uphold pure monotheism was deemed to have lost its legitimacy. Therefore, armed confrontation was viewed as part of a purifying jihad, not as a form of resistance to religion itself. This suggests that the Wahhabi-Ottoman conflict was a clash between two concepts of legitimacy in Islam.

The culmination of this alliance's development occurred in the early 19th century with the establishment of the First Saudi State, centered in Dir'iyah. The established system of government integrated the teachings of monotheism into the political and legal structures. Religion and state were fused into a single system, establishing Wahhabism as the state ideology. Although later destroyed by an Ottoman expedition in 1818, the ideological foundations established by this alliance remained intact and served as the basis for subsequent political revivals.

Thus, the Wahhabi-Saud alliance not only transformed a religious movement into a political force but also created a new model of the relationship between religion and power in the Arabian Peninsula. This transformation marked the birth of a form of religious-based political legitimacy that later became the foundation for the modern Saudi state.

The First Saudi State and the Ottoman Campaign Led by Muhammad Ali Pasha (1811–1818)

The conflict between the Wahhabi-Saud movement and the Ottoman Empire reached its peak in 1811–1818, when a major military expedition was launched by Muhammad Ali Pasha, the Ottoman-affiliated governor of Egypt. This conflict was not only a territorial struggle but also an ideological struggle between two Islamic authorities with differing views on the purity of teachings and the legitimacy of power. Thus, the war

²³ Sirriyeh, Elizabeth. "Wahhabis, unbelievers and the problems of exclusivism." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 16 (1989): 123-132. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530198908705492>.

²⁴ Halevi, Leor. "Arabians for guns: Wahhabi matchlocks, world trade, and the rise of the first Saudi state." *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 33 (2023): 401 - 442. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1356186322000219>.

²⁵ Sirriyeh, Elizabeth. "Wahhabis, unbelievers and the problems of exclusivism." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 16 (1989): 123-132. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530198908705492>.

reflected the clash between the weakening central Caliphate and religious reform movements emerging from the fringes of the Islamic world.

Tensions escalated when the Wahhabi movement gained control of Mecca and Medina in the early 19th century. Both holy cities had previously been under the direct protection of the Ottoman Sultan as *Khadim al-Haramayn al-Sharifayn*. This takeover was seen as a serious threat to Ottoman spiritual legitimacy. Furthermore, Wahhabi policies restricting pilgrimages and destroying sites deemed heretical exacerbated the conflict, as they were seen as a form of opposition to established religious authority.²⁶

In response, Sultan Mahmud II commissioned Muhammad Ali Pasha to restore Ottoman rule in the Hijaz. This expedition served not only political purposes but also to restore Islamic orthodoxy from an Ottoman perspective. In 1811, Egyptian forces under the command of Tusun Pasha began military operations and successfully recaptured Mecca in 1813. However, resistance from Wahhabi forces led by Abdullah ibn Saud caused the conflict to continue into the interior of Najd.²⁷

In the following phase, the war developed into a protracted conflict that demonstrated significant differences in the military strategies of the two sides. The Ottoman forces, supported by the Egyptian military, possessed advantages in organization, logistics, and modern weaponry. In contrast, the Wahhabi forces relied more on tribal power and religious fervor. Despite their superior mobility and knowledge of the terrain, they were unable to match the overall military might of the Ottomans.

This superiority enabled the Ottoman forces to systematically conquer Wahhabi-held territories. They continued their push toward the center of power in Dir'iyah. In 1818, forces led by Ibrahim Pasha successfully besieged and destroyed the city. Abdullah ibn Saud was subsequently captured and executed in Istanbul, marking the end of the First Saudi State.²⁸

However, the military collapse did not mean the end of the Wahhabi movement. Ideologically, the movement survived and even underwent transformation. DeLong-Bas asserts that this defeat actually provided the impetus for the spread of monotheism to other regions of the Arabian Peninsula (DeLong-Bas 2004, 87). Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab's followers continued their *da'wah* through education and social networks, maintaining their ideological continuity amidst political pressure.

This conflict also demonstrated a deeper ideological clash between two conceptions of Islamic leadership. For the Ottomans, legitimacy was based on their role as protectors of the Islamic world and guardians of the two holy cities. Conversely, for the Wahhabis, legitimacy was determined by the purity of monotheism and the consistent application of *sharia*. This difference made the conflict not only military but also symbolic between the central authority and the reform movement from the periphery.

²⁶ Alrebh, Abdullah F. "A Wahhabi Ethic in Saudi Arabia." *Sociology of Islam* 5 (2017): 278-302. <https://doi.org/10.1163/22131418-00504001>.

²⁷ Rentz, 53.

²⁸ Hamdi, Saipul. "DE-KULTURALISASI ISLAM DAN KONFLIK SOSIAL DALAM DAKWAH WAHABI DI INDONESIA." *Jurnal Kawistara* (2019). <https://doi.org/10.22146/kawistara.40397>.

After the destruction of Dir'iyah, the region of Najd experienced a power vacuum. However, this situation did not last long. The remnants of the Saud family, along with their Wahhabi followers, began to rebuild their power. In a relatively short time, they succeeded in re-establishing power in the form of the Second Saudi State in 1824 in Riyadh. This demonstrates that the Ottoman expedition only destroyed the political structure but was unable to eradicate the Wahhabi.²⁹

Thus, the Wahhabi–Ottoman conflict of 1811–1818 reflected a major shift in the power structure of the Islamic world. On the one hand, the Ottomans sought to maintain their traditional authority, while on the other, Wahhabism presented a new model of legitimacy based on religious purification. This conflict not only closed a phase of history, but also paved the way for the emergence of new political and religious configurations in the Arabian Peninsula that were influential until the modern era.

Impact and Legacy of the Wahhabi–Ottoman Conflict

The political defeat of the Wahhabi–Saudi movement in 1818 did not signify the end of its influence in Islamic history. Instead, this moment marked the beginning of a new phase of socio-religious and ideological transformation in the Arabian Peninsula. Although the First Saudi State was dismantled by Ottoman forces, the core ideas of Wahhabism continued to survive and evolve within society. This persistence demonstrates that the conflict between the Wahhabi–Saudi alliance and the Ottoman Empire was not merely a military confrontation, but also a turning point that reshaped religious authority and political legitimacy in the region. In this sense, the impact of the conflict extended far beyond its immediate political consequences, contributing to the long-term formation of the modern Saudi state and its ideological foundations.

One of the most significant consequences of the conflict was the emergence of a new consciousness among the people of Najd regarding the importance of political and religious autonomy from external powers. Although the Ottomans succeeded in destroying Dir'iyah, they failed to establish stable administrative control over the interior regions of Arabia. This inability created a political vacuum that empowers local communities, particularly the remnants of the Al Saud family, to maintain their influence at the regional level. As a result, the Wahhabi movement, which had previously functioned as a political force, transformed into a more decentralized religious movement that continued to operate through informal networks of scholars and communities.

The ideological legacy of Wahhabism is also evident in the strategic shift undertaken by its followers after 1818. Rather than continuing armed resistance, many Wahhabi scholars redirected their efforts toward religious education and the dissemination of doctrinal teachings. They established centers of learning across Najd and the Hijaz, focusing on the study of *Kitab al-Tawhid* and other works by Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab. This transition from military struggle to intellectual propagation ensured the continuity of Wahhabi teachings and allowed them to penetrate deeper into the social

²⁹ Parawati, Erina Dwi. "The Global Impact of Wahhabism: Saudi Arabia's Ideological Expansion and Geopolitical Influence." *Islamic Thought Review* (2024). <https://doi.org/10.30983/itr.v2i2.8803>.

fabric of Arabian society. Over time, this educational approach contributed to the formation of a more uniform and puritanical understanding of Islam in the region.³⁰

From a social perspective, Wahhabi teachings brought profound changes to the structure of Arabian society. Its strong emphasis on monotheism and rejection of practices such as saint veneration, superstition, and religious innovations led to the emergence of a more egalitarian religious order. By challenging traditional hierarchies of spiritual authority, Wahhabism promoted the idea that all Muslims were equal before God, regardless of tribal or social status. In the context of a tribal society like Najd, this message played a crucial role in fostering a sense of collective religious identity that transcended clan divisions. Consequently, Wahhabism not only functioned as a theological movement but also as a unifying social force that helped reduce internal fragmentation.

Politically, the aftermath of the Wahhabi–Ottoman conflict marked a significant shift in the balance of power between Arab regions and the Ottoman center. While the Ottomans managed to suppress the Wahhabi–Saudi state militarily, their influence in the Arabian interior weakened considerably. This decline in central authority created opportunities for the resurgence of local forces, particularly the Al Saud family, which reestablished its rule in Riyadh in 1824 and founded the Second Saudi State. This development illustrates that Wahhabi ideology had already become a viable alternative source of political legitimacy, replacing the traditional authority of the Ottoman caliphate in the region.³¹

The long-term legacy of Wahhabism is most clearly reflected in the formation of the modern Saudi state in the twentieth century. The core principles articulated by Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab including strict monotheism, moral discipline, and adherence to Islamic law became the ideological foundation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The enduring alliance between the Al Saud ruling family and Wahhabi religious scholars represents a continuation of the historical partnership established in the eighteenth century. This relationship has played a central role in shaping the political and religious identity of Saudi Arabia, where state authority is closely intertwined with religious legitimacy.

From a broader religious perspective, the influence of Wahhabism extended beyond the Arabian Peninsula and contributed to the emergence of various reformist movements across the Muslim world. Its emphasis on returning to the foundational sources of Islam the Qur’an and Sunnah inspired movements such as Salafism in Egypt and Ahl al-Hadith in India. However, it is important to note that the spread of Wahhabi ideas was not inherently linked to violence, as is often assumed. At its core, Wahhabism emphasized doctrinal purification and moral reform, with militancy arising only in specific political contexts where the movement faced opposition or repression.³²

Moreover, the conflict between the Wahhabi–Saudi alliance and the Ottoman Empire highlighted a deeper ideological divide within the Muslim world. On one side stood the

³⁰ Agustono, Ihwan. "ISLAMIC PURITANISM MOVEMENT OF MUHAMMAD IBN ‘ABD AL-WAHHAB." *LISAN AL-HAL: Jurnal Pengembangan Pemikiran dan Kebudayaan* (2023). <https://doi.org/10.35316/lisanalhal.v17i2.191-203>.

³¹ Dujovski, Dr.Sc. Nikola, St, Kliment Ohridski” – Bitola Dr.Sc. Cvetko, Andreeski, Dr.Sc. Zoran Djurdjevic, Dr.Sc. Tudorel Toader, Dr.Sc Rusi Yanev, et al. "45 YEARS HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE AREA OF SECURITY – EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES AND SECURITY PERSPECTIVES." (2023).

³² Dujovski et al., "45 Years Higher Education,"

Ottoman model of centralized authority, which derived legitimacy from its claim to the caliphate and its role as protector of the holy cities. On the other side was the Wahhabi vision of decentralized religious authority based on strict adherence to monotheism and scriptural authenticity. This ideological tension reflected broader questions about the nature of Islamic governance, the role of religious authority, and the relationship between tradition and reform in Muslim societies.

In conclusion, the impact and legacy of the Wahhabi–Ottoman conflict extended far beyond its immediate historical context. It marked a transition from centralized imperial authority to localized forms of political and religious organization in Arabia. Through a combination of ideological resilience, educational efforts, and strategic adaptation, Wahhabism succeeded in reshaping the religious and political landscape of the region. Its legacy continues to influence contemporary debates on Islamic reform, state legitimacy, and the role of religion in politics, both within Saudi Arabia and across the wider Muslim world.

CONCLUSION

The conflict between the Wahhabi movement and the Ottoman Empire (1744–1818) illustrates the complex relationship between religious reform and political power in the Islamic world. This study finds that the emergence of Wahhabism in Najd was deeply rooted in the socio-religious crisis of Arabian society, which encouraged the call for purification of *tawhid* as articulated by Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab. The alliance with Muhammad bin Saud transformed this reform movement into a political force, creating a new model of governance that combined religious legitimacy with territorial authority.

The findings further show that the Wahhabi–Saudi expansion challenged Ottoman authority both politically and ideologically, leading to confrontation. Although the Ottoman response through the expedition of Muhammad Ali Pasha succeeded in destroying the First Saudi State, it failed to eliminate the ideological foundation of Wahhabism. This demonstrates that the conflict was not merely a military struggle, but a contest between competing concepts of Islamic leadership and legitimacy.

In conclusion, the legacy of the Wahhabi–Ottoman conflict lies in its long-term impact on the formation of political and religious structures in Arabia. Wahhabism endured as an intellectual and spiritual force, shaping the emergence of the modern Saudi state and influencing broader Islamic reform movements. Future studies are encouraged to further examine the interaction between religious ideology and political authority in different historical and regional contexts to better understand its continuing relevance.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author would like to express sincere gratitude to the CIHCS Community for providing valuable guidance and support in developing research skills throughout the writing of this article. Special appreciation is also extended to Tolib Rohmatillah, lecturer in the Department of Islamic History and Civilization at UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, for his continuous mentorship, insightful feedback, and encouragement as the research supervisor, as well as for his role as the founder of the CIHCS Community.

This research was conducted independently without external funding; therefore, no research contract number is applicable.

NOTES

This section provides additional clarifications that support the main discussion but are not included in the main text. First, the term “Wahhabism” in this article refers to the reform movement initiated by Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab in the eighteenth century. The term itself is commonly used in academic discourse, although its followers prefer to identify their teachings as a call to *tawhid* and a return to the Qur’an and Sunnah.

Second, the notion of “religious deviation” discussed in the context of Najd reflects the perspective of Wahhabi reformist thought. Practices such as saint veneration, tomb visitation, and the use of amulets have been interpreted differently across Islamic traditions; therefore, this study situates such practices within a specific theological framework rather than presenting them as universally accepted deviations.

Finally, the conflict between the First Saudi State and the Ottoman Empire should be understood not merely as a theological dispute but as a struggle shaped by broader political, strategic, and regional considerations. While religious differences contributed to the tensions, the Ottoman military response particularly the campaign led by Muhammad Ali Pasha was primarily aimed at preserving imperial authority and restoring control over strategically important regions such as the Hijaz.

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