



Seizing the Opportunity: Dynamics of the Salafi-Wahabi Movement in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

Being a secular state after centuries under the Islamic sultanate of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey has been challenged by various internal political turmoil and controversies over religion and its relation to the state. As such, fierce debate has become unavoidable for Islamist and revivalist groups that feel discriminated against for practicing Islam in public spaces. This article discusses Salafism and Wahabism in contemporary Turkey, starting from its inception to its da'wah and development strategies in society. The article used a qualitative approach with a literature review. The data was collected from secondary sources, including research results by scholars and various pieces of information in the mass media that emerged during the era of Recep Tayyip Erdogan until 2022. This article scrutinizes (1) the history of the resurgence of Salafism and Wahabism in Turkey due to the influence of the social and political situation; (2) pro-Islamic political policies in the government providing an opportunity for Salafi and Wahabi to develop in Turkey; and (3) the form and strategy of a pro-active and non-confrontational Salafi group in Turkey. This third part is very urgent for this article because it relates to secular Turkey's social, political, and cultural contexts.

Introduction

As a product of Islamic thought and a socio-religious movement that originated in Saudi Arabia and emerged within the Ottoman era, Salafism and



Wahabism (Turkish: *vehhabi/vehhabilik*) has solely been associated with Saudi Arabia's agenda of expanding its influence in modern Turkey (Tabak, 2017). Meanwhile, the relationship between the two states has remained unsteady since the geopolitical antagonism between Turkey and Saudi Arabia has played a critical role in both states' narratives (Venetis, 2014). These conditions have been emotionally enacted in political and sociocultural experiences immersed within the Turkish people's memory for years (Canli et al., 2021; Coskun, 2020; Baskan, 2019; Türkel, 2017; Altun, 2015). The production of knowledge constructed in the historical and political contestation has influenced the bilateral and sociocultural relations of the two countries, which has also influenced the context of Turkey's own social and cultural life. The collective memory of the Turkish people sees the existence of Saudi Arabia mostly as "Britain's gift and pawn," which rebelled treacherously against the Ottomans (Bulut, 2021).

In the context of vigorous contestation of both countries, there has been an opportunity to allow Salafis and Wahhabis to emerge and spread their teachings and expand its following in Turkey. Salafism and Wahhabism has shown ways of approaching and promoting its existence through flexible strategies to gain more societal influence and attention (Taşdelen, 2022). In so doing, Salafism and Wahhabism started to exist and silently developed with meticulous approaches within the opportunity spaces provided by political disputes at the time. However, the opportunity spaces emerging in any context led the movement to find a flexible strategy by utilizing offline and online proselytizing through social media. Turkey has recently been shaken by the rapid emergence of Salafi groups (Uludağ, 2022).

The existence of Salafism and Wahhabism in Turkey has been widely discussed in academia both from internal and international. The trends of research on Salafism and Wahhabism in Turkey can be mapped into the following categories: Firstly, debates on monotheism and their implications related to heresy and radical Islam (Salman, 2020; Akin, 2015; Hammond, 2015). This first scope in research on the topic is massive in any discipline, both in the form of theses and dissertations as well as in journal articles mostly published in Turkey, which analyses it as anti-*tawassul* and anti-*shafa'a* (opposing supplication, intercession to prophets or saints) (Altun, 2015), and is

either focusing on monotheism (Akin, 2015; İşcan, 2015) or the concept of *takfir* (expulsion other Muslims from Islam) (Dalkilic & Bicer, 2017).

Secondly, a specific research on the history of the Wahhabi rebellion against Ottoman rule (Çiçek, 2017; Türkel, 2017; Hut, 2016). This aspect is very typical for the Turkish context because the collective memories of the state of Saudi Arabia cannot be separated from the historical context of the Turkish people. Thirdly, the patterns of actual Salafi and Wahhabi movement and groups on the ground (Aydin, 2018; Kocaoglu, 2017; Altun, 2015). These studies cover a range of historical and political phenomena in both countries and include in-depth investigations of recent developments such as Saudi-educated Salafi internet preachers assembling a following (Hammond, 2017). Fourthly, the studies targeting the broader aspects of bilateral ties between the two countries (Coskun, 2020; Karakuş et al., 2020). This fourth aspect is also very dynamic and related to multidisciplinary studies, which have attracted the attention of the discipline of international relations, especially during Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's era. The last scope in research interests concerns the issues of neighbouring countries around Turkey, such as the Balkans, in relation to Salafism and Wahhabism (Dalkilic & Bicer, 2017).

There are two Turkish terms used interchangeably in research on the Islamic transnational movement orchestrated by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states in the region: *selefi* or *selefilik* (Salafism) and *vehhabi* or *vehhabilik* (Wahhabism), which reveal a conceptual confusion in Turkish public discourse. These two are generally used when referring to *vehhabi* or *vehhabilik* and *selefi-vehhabi* (Kocaoglu, 2017). As a school of thought, *selefi* or *selefilik* existed during the Ottoman era, with prominent figures such as Civizade Muhyiddin Mehmed Efendi (d. 954/1547) and Birgivi Mehmed Efendi (d. 981/1573) who had been mentioned in recent academic research (Yalçın, 2022). In this regard, this article uses both terms directly related to *Suud vehhabiliği* (Wahabism originated in Saudi Arabia) to not confuse a massive development of Salafism with new branches such as Salafi-jihadi and other various organizations. This article uses Wahhabism as a subset of, but not synonymous with, Salafism (which has been sponsored by Saudi Arabia with distributive capacity towards the cause of propagating its own variant of Islam (Mandaville, 2014). In short, the article regards Salafism

within the Saudi spectrum, which has intensified with the global movement of Wahhabism, particularly in Turkey.

This article examines how Salafism and Wahhabism emerged and took advantage of the democratic process and political movement to gain influence and followers in Turkey under Erdogan's administration. No matter how tight Turkey is in containing Wahhabism ideology, its geopolitical and economic conditions also open up opportunities for Wahhabism to grow in Turkey. Throughout Erdogan's first and second terms in office, it was a political obligation to follow the protocols of human rights, freedom of speech, and democratization in order to access the European Union (EU) (Taşpınar, 2018; Özgüzer & Pensieroso, 2017), which, at the same time, allowed other religious movement including Salafism to flourish in Turkey. Indeed, Erdogan and the AK Party's ideology has offered a red carpet to many Islamic groups to actively engage with society (Yılmaz, 2020) but also introduced a hierarchy of officially sanctioned interpretations and those not. Since then, Salafism and even jihadist have gained momentum to openly engage with several organizations in carrying out social and religious programs in Turkey (Karmon & Barak, 2018; Knights, 2014). In this way, it has become more culturally familiar with the people and negotiated with broader audiences by using both online social media and offline activities. In a political aspect, it has an advantage due to the fact that Erdogan's administration accommodated and supported Islamism, which has become a crucial factor in accommodating its local base and structure (Sujibto, 2023; Yavuz & Ozturk, 2020; Sujibto, 2019; Choksy & Choksy, 2015).

Opportunity in Political and Social Movement

Opportunity refers to the capacity of social actors on both a personal and a communal level to make movement or change (Musterd & Andersson, 2005). Every social actor has the chance to engage in social action in a variety of contexts, including educational, political, social, economic, and cultural ones (Thompson & Simmons, 2013). The concept of opportunity, if drawn from theoretical discourse, is often formulated in the context of political opportunities. In political opportunity theory (POT), the role of political factors in the emergence and success of social movements is a main point to take into consideration. POT argues that the success

or failure of a social movement is affected by the political opportunities available to it. POT was developed in the 1980s by Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly (Demetriou, 2012). They argued that social movements are more likely to emerge and succeed when there are political opportunities available to them. POT is a useful resource for comprehending how politics plays a part in social movements. It is crucial to remember that POT is not the only factor that determines whether or not social movements are successful. Other elements, including the movement's funding, level of organization, and mobilization of followers, are also important (Meyer & Minkoff, 2004).

Furthermore, political opportunity theory is employed to analyze the emergence and development of Wahhabism in Turkey. The theory states that the success and failure of the social movement are affected mostly by political opportunity (Hanagan & Tilly, 2014). By analyzing the role of the government in conducting and implementing its policy in domestic and bilateral contexts, it has offered a very flexible and dynamic opportunity to use the democratic channels to secure the interests of every group in Turkey. Wahabism has used its potential and capital in negotiating power relations with the state and other formal agencies and in attracting the people's interest in what it has prepared.

Meanwhile, political opportunity could be applied to the world outside of a social protest movement or political protest (Meyer & Minkoff, 2004) by taking advantage of the political structure in Turkey. In spite of the diversity of understandings of political opportunity, the concept is very well connected to the social movement environment by neglecting the importance of activist agency (Meyer, 2004) and, at the same time, by opening more possible opportunities to produce the movement by various agencies with or without resistance. In the Turkish context, the opportunity has a general meaning for the religious agencies since they could prepare themselves by building networks and spreading the teachings.

Political opportunity theory must be juxtaposed in the context of social movements where actors and structures play a major role in the desired social change (Ibáñez & Sabatini, 2009). Social movements in the context of opportunity theory lie in how agencies like Wahhabism utilize social and cultural situations as a basis for their movements in developing their influence. Moreover, opportunity

and ability are fundamental in predicting behavior change (Tweneboah-Koduah et al., 2020). This article employs the term “opportunity in between political and social movements” to address how Wahabism in Turkey emerged and developed from a silent, disguised, to an open and public movement.

Minority Group-Threat Theory

The interaction between majority and minority groups in society has been perpetually studied in many research studies to underline how social orders are shaped and understood in a wider context (Craig et al., 2018). A sociological viewpoint that investigates the interaction between majority and minority groups in society is the minority group-threat theory, sometimes referred to as group-position theory or realistic group conflict theory (King, 2007). According to the minority group-threat theory, an outgroup’s size affects how much the corresponding ingroup sees it as a threat to its own interests, which leads to the ingroup’s members’ more hostile sentiments toward the outgroup (Hjerm, 2007).

Hubert M. Blalock first put out the thesis in his 1967 book, *Toward a Theory of Minority-Group Relations*. According to Blalock, a minority group can constitute an economic, political, or cultural threat. When a minority group is thought to be in competition with the dominant group for jobs, housing, and other resources, there is an economic danger. When a minority group is thought to pose a political threat to the majority group, political instability results. When a minority group is seen as endangering the cultural values of the majority group, there is a cultural threat (Lieberson, 1968). In the discipline of sociology, notably in the investigation of intergroup relations and social inequality, Blalock has had a significant impact. The American sociologist Blalock was well-known for his work on racial and ethnic diversity.

To create a theoretical framework for comprehending the dynamics and patterns of minority-majority interactions, Blalock looked into a number of intergroup relations-related topics, such as prejudice, discrimination, social stratification, and the function of power dynamics (Chiricos et al., 2020). This idea is crucial when taking into account how Wahabism has been branded and subjected to discrimination in Turkey, where Sunni and Hanafi make up the majority. As a minority group, the movement of Wahabism in Turkey is able to

analyze its conflict with the country's majority religion in relation to the political and social setting in order to have an impact on society.

Method

The article employed a qualitative approach through the collection of secondary data from the literature on Wahhabism in Turkey, both in the form of research and information on online media covered during Erdogan's first administrative office until 2022. The collected data were analyzed with a comparative historical analysis approach and, at the same time, with discourse analysis. A comparative historical analysis approach was employed to widely cover the range of historical contexts and a set of events over Wahabism under Erdogan's era. It is concerned with causal analysis, an emphasis on processes over time, and the use of systematic and contextualized comparison (Ohemeng, 2020). These two methods are used to analyze various written sources, commentaries, and signs and symbols related to Wahhabism in Turkey (Fairclough, 2010; Keller, 2006). In particular, discourse analysis is legitimately used and applied to written language, and written texts are "communicative acts in their own right" (Tannen et al., 2015).

Aspects of historical analysis cannot be separated from existing research sources related to the topic. These rich sources were then categorized and discussed in a contextual manner with the current developments in the religious, social, and political aspects of Turkey. It is important to use this analysis solely to pay attention to and place it in the right context, both as a product of historical events themselves and as a responsive socio-political product from a diachronic perspective (Castigliano, 2022). Comparative historical analysis gives emphasis and attention to causal analysis, exploration of temporal processes, and the use of systematic and contextual comparisons, which are usually limited to a small number of cases and, in a very strict way, do not cover all comparative and historical work on major social structures, cultural patterns, and processes of change (Mahoney & Rueschemeyer, 2008). After this aspect is distributed proportionally, the latest developments related to Wahhabi discourse in Turkey require their own system and method of analysis, namely discourse analysis.

In this regard, for historical data and other inscriptions that appear as discourses in media, discourse analysis is employed to strengthen the analysis

of the data. Here, discourse analysis theories and methods are not just one approach but a series of interdisciplinary approaches that can be used to explore many different social domains in different types of studies. There is no clear consensus on what discourse is or how to analyze it because perspectives on discourse and 'discourse analysis' are still contested. However, early definitions of discourse were seen as specific ways of talking about and understanding the world (or aspects of the world). There is a key premise about discourse analysis, namely how entities such as 'language' and 'subject' should be understood and critically analyzed (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002).

In the aspect of writing and analyzing the data, there are standard procedures, for instance, data presentation, data reduction, coding, and conclusions. To strengthen the analysis of research data, researchers carry out a triangulation process (Yin, 2016), which is an attempt to check the veracity of data and information obtained by researchers from various different perspectives through other data sources such as documents and archives. The triangulation process is based on the massive amounts of data and information collected through secondary resources. In the last step, the researcher is loyal to the inductive method (Leavy, 2014) in which the data become the foundation to be discussed with existing theories and concepts and at the same time become the main map for writing conclusions.

Results

Turkish Views on Wahhabism

Historically, Turkey has a special memory regarding Wahhabism and its history which inevitably influenced the people's understanding. What has been a tension between the two countries, particularly in the historical aspect, cannot be turned away from the year 1744, when the Saudi state began to be established through a small government in the region of Diriyah (*Imāra ad-Dir'iyya*), especially after an agreement was reached between Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1791) and the king Muhammad Ibn Saud (1685-1765) (Kocaoglu, 2017). The power of the Saudi clan emerged as a religious reform movement, such as the purification of monotheism, which is the hallmark of Wahhabism, and at the same time as a new alliance to undermine the power of

the Ottoman Empire in the Arabian Peninsula. Meanwhile, another decisive aspect of Arab nationalism under the Ibn Saud clan strengthened along with the weakening of Ottoman authority in the region (Kurşun, 2014). This last aspect is referred to in modern Turkish history as a form of betrayal against the Ottomans (Hut, 2016; Akin, 2015). Such historical backgrounds have become part of the process of forming the understanding and perception of the Turkish people towards Saudi Arabia and Wahhabism (İşcan, 2015).

However, the expansion of the Saud clan to gain more power was indeed not smooth because they had to deal with the Ottoman authorities in the region that was directly controlled, especially in Mecca and Medina, the main cities of Muslims. The most violent resistance of the Ottoman authorities occurred from 1811 to 1818 known as the Ottoman-Saudi War (*Osmanlı-Suudi Savaşları*). In the war, command was held by the governor of Egypt, Muhammad Ali Pasha, and then continued by his own son, Ibrahim Pasha. On this campaign, the Ottoman troops succeeded in crippling the power of the Emirate of Diriyah and brought one of Ibn Saud's sons, Abdullah bin Saud to Istanbul to be beheaded (Emecen, 1988).

The breakout of World War I became an important moment for King Abdulaziz, in which the British government intensively cooperated with an emerging power under the family trait of Ibn Saud. In fact, Britain's goal to tackle the power of the Ottoman Empire was excessive, particularly after cooperating with a new king in the Arabian Peninsula who also wanted to establish a government in the region. Through the Treaty of Darin in December 1915, the British and Ibn Saud agreed that Ibn Saud's power was under British protection and also designed the limits of his power (Nonneman, 2001). The cooperation of the Saudi state with Britain is what the Turks regard as British pawns. Finally, in 1932, the modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was formed by King Abd al-Aziz.

The brief description of the historical context is part of the history of power and Turkish politics toward Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, the geopolitical antagonism has also been strengthened by religious experiences in which two countries have different paths to practicing Islam. It has been generally understood that Islam spread under the Ottoman Empire was very close to

the Sufi tradition and preserved those traditions as part of its Islamic process (Qaddoura, 2017; Anjum, 2006; Papas, 2006). Practicing traditions along with religious rituals has made the Wahhabi ulema more aggressive because such practices are considered acts of infidels and deviate from comprehensive (*kaffah*) Islam. In fact, by referring to Tarık Zafer Tunaya, Bilgenoğlu (2006) explains the Wahhabism as:

“...Peygamber ve evliyalarından yardım, şefa'at istemek küfürdür, türbe yapmak, kandil yapmak, şarap, tütün vb. Maddeler kullanmak, resim ve müzikle ilgilenmek, evliyalara adak adamak küfürdür; bunları yapanlar da müşriktirler, Müslüman sayılmazlar (asking for help from the prophets and saints is an act of infidel (kufr); building tombs, celebrating prophet birthdays, using wine, tobacco, etc., liking painting and music, and swearing allegiance to saints is kufr; those who do this are polytheists, they are not Muslims)”

In contemporary Turkish context, the Salafi and Wahhabi expert who is mostly referred to is Prof. Zekeriya Kurşun, a Middle East researcher and lecturer with mastery of foreign languages such as Arabic and English. Kurşun has written important books on Wahhabism and the Middle East, including *At the Crossroads: Arab-Turkish Relations* (1992), *Ottoman Power in Najd and Hasa* (1998), *Ottoman-British Conflict in the Persian Gulf: Ottomans in Qatar 1871-1916* (2004), and *Al-Qur'an Ideologies in the Middle East* (2019). Meanwhile, other researchers and academicians who have also become references regarding Wahhabism in the religious aspect are Prof. Mehmet Zeki İşcan with his book titled *The History of Salafism and Islamic Fundamentalism* (2017), Prof. Mehmet Ali Büyükkara through the book *Saudi Arabia and Wahhabism from Ihwan to Juhayman* (2018), and other freelance researchers who are diligent in studying Islamic studies. Apart from that, Turkey also has experts in the fields of political science, defense, and socio-economics who specifically study the Middle East and Saudi Arabia, such as Prof. Mehmet Şahin, Metin Gurcan, Ismail Numan Telci, Gülsüm Polat, and research institutes at various Turkish campuses that focus on studying the development of the Middle East.

Salafi and Wahabi's Milestones in Turkey

While constructing the narration and undertesting of Salafism and Wahabism as a dissenting opinion for the majority of the Turkish people, the Wahhabi movement has managed to develop its influence in Turkey by utilizing the political and social opportunities to reach a larger and more massive audience. There is one theory that has become the basis for research on the development of Salafism and Wahhabism in Turkey, namely that it is related to political changes with the emergence of democratic-nationalist parties in 1980. The emergence of the Homeland Party (*Anavatan Partisi*, ANAP) after Turkey underwent a coup in 1980 has provided a comfortable space for Islamist groups from various streams, including Salafism and Wahhabism, to develop (Tasdemir, 2016). In terms of the general Islamic trend in Turkish politics, Hakan Yavuz argued that these periods had started to become the opening of new opportunity spaces in which Özal years have demonstrated the official legitimization of radically new perspectives on the role of Islam and the Ottoman heritage in contemporary Turkish society (Yavuz, 2003).

In the regional context, the Iraq-Iran war in the 1980s could become a turning point in examining the history of Salafism and Wahhabism in Turkey. In addition to the political-economic effects of the war, another cost that must be recognized by Turkey is the large number of Iraqi refugees who later migrated to become Turkish citizens. Apart from being the start of the entry of Wahhabi agents into Turkey, the conflict in Iraq—particularly in northern Iraq under Saddam Hussein's regime—also had to bear Kurdish refugees who had fled from the cruelty of the regime at that time. These refugees, years later, contributed to the situation on the Turkey-Iraq and Turkey-Syria borders, such as Turkey's conflict with Kurdish rebel (Yaycı, 2019; Öğür et al., 2014).

Abdullah Yolcu who was a refugee from the Turkmen tribe in Iraq became the first Wahhabi preacher (mostly called his *ilk Vehhabi davetçi*) in Turkey (Altun, 2015). The important figure, whose full name was Abdullah ibn Abdul Hamid ibn Abdul Majid Alu İsmail al-Bazzaz al-Türkmanî al-Eserî al-İrâkî, was born in Kirkuk in 1958. After studying Islamic studies with Islamic scholars in his country, Yolcu continued his education in Saudi Arabia. There are several Islamic preachers affiliated with Wahhabism who thought him, and their works

have also affected his stance on understanding Islam. The books to which he mostly referred during his lifetime in preaching Islam were Abdul Aziz bin Baz's, Muhammad ibn Salih ibn Muhammad ibn al-'Uthaymin's (Sheikh ibn 'Uthaymin), Muhammad ibn Salih el-Useymîn's, Abdullah ibn Abdurrahmân el-Cibrîn's, Sâlih ibn Fauzân el-Fauzân's, Abdülaziz ibn Abdullah er-Racihî's, and Muhammad Mahmud As-Sawwaf's.

Yolcu served as a military assistant during the six-year war between Iraq and Iran, which also affected Turkey along the border. Consequently, when Turkey opened the Iraqi border in 1986, thousands of Iraqis entered Turkey as refugees, living in tents provided at some point by the Turkish government. After that, Yolcu began to live permanently in Turkey and continued his preaching until 1990. An important step he took was to establish a publisher called *Guraba Yayinevi* which was prepared to spread Salafi-Wahhabi teachings in Turkey at the time. In Altun's notes (2015), the publishing house published more than 150 books, including Abdullah Yolcu's translations of Wahhabi scholars from Arabia. While publishing some publications, Yolcu started teaching on Islam covering topics such as faith and Islamic law on certain days of the week. The students came from various regions, then set up a kind of *madrasa* (Islamic school) to solidify and consolidate the path of their calling. These students, in order to deepen their knowledge, were sent to Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.

After 2002, students who were sent abroad to study Islam with the Wahhabi schools finally returned and moved to Turkey, such as Ubeydullah Arslan and Mehmet Emin Akin, and became preachers. In order to spread their teachings, they then built organizations and publishing houses in big cities such as İstanbul, Bursa and İzmir and started to teach at home. Until now, they have developed an institution for Koran courses and have also taken advantage of the digital world as a way of preaching by uploading video and audio recordings of the lectures to official websites they built, like Twitter and YouTube channels.

After the development of Wahabism through some agencies for decades, Turkey began to pay close attention to their movements on the field. A secret letter dated September 21, 2015, sent by the Intelligence Department of the General Directorate of Security (MIT) of Turkey to intelligence branches in 50 provinces is based on information records of intelligence services. In the article,

it was stated that “the people who advocate for radical salafi or takfiri views number 10 thousand to 20 thousand” in Turkey (DOĞRU, 2017). This means that the Turkish state is even more vigilant in monitoring the development of the Wahhabi movement.

Wahhabi’s School of Thought

In addition to the general narrative stating that the school of thought of the Wahhabi group is Hambali (Büyükkara, 2012), the debate over its school has been blatantly referring to the specific school that developed in Saudi Arabia. However, some Turkish people also claimed Wahhabism as a separate *mazhab* (school of thought) because they are considered to have formed their own *tawheed/kalam* (theology) and *fiqh* (jurisprudence) (Türkel, 2013; Kocaoglu, 2017). It is generally understood that the concept of *tawheed* doctrine constructs the fundamentality of Ibn abd al-Wahhab’s theology. Other theological views, namely, *shirk* (associations), *bid’a* (innovations), and *shafa’ah* (intercession), are all based on this principle (Pasha, 2019; Bayram, 2014). This narrative is quite spread in Turkey since Wahhabi teaching is different from that of one of their main ulama, like Ibnu Taymiyah, for instance, on prohibiting people from visiting the Prophet’s tomb and other holy places (Kocaoglu, 2017). This fact emphasizes that Wahhabism is a movement that is practically more radical than Ibn Taimiyah (Tasdemir, 2016).

However, the narrative of Wahhabism as a separate sect is not popular, but Canip Kocaoglu, Rifat Turkel and other researchers in Turkey have theorized about another form of the Hanbali school. Turkel writes that the Wahhabis are “the continuation of the Hanbali school of thought”, confirming that this sect is considered a new school of thought since Wahhabism in practice does not use the Hanbali school of thought proportionally (Türkel, 2013). Thus, the assumptions and claims that Wahhabism is their own sect need to be considered as a discourse that is worth exploring to find common ground and agreement. Without such an effort, in which scholars who are experts in this field produce a solid discourse, the assumption that Wahhabism is a sect itself cannot be evaluated comprehensively, apart from only appearing as a claim.

Discussions

Formulating Movement Strategies

Based on the various literatures regarding the strategies by which Salafism and Wahhabism developed its movement in Turkey, the following points can be apprehended as secondary research data in Turkey. In order to preach Islam through the lens of Wahhabism on *tawheed*, jurisprudence, and the *salafus shalih* which is claimed as the pure practice of Islam, these groups have been using various media and methods as well, from publishers, social and religious associations, madrasas, and Koran course institutions to preaching on online media networks to utilize the political opportunity (Meyer & Minkoff, 2004). In Turkish contexts, they have formulated strategies for expanding their influence in society in some ways. The first step was establishing a publisher. The first publisher they used for expanding the network was *Guraba Yayinevi*. Following the publishing house in Istanbul, Feyzullah Birisik founded another publisher called *Karinca ve Polen Yayilari* in 1999. After 2002, Necmettin Sari founded *Ummulkura* Publishing House, and Huseyin Cinisli founded *Tevhid ve Sunnet* Publishing House. In Ankara, Mehmet Emin Akin founded *Medarik* and Hüseyin Alici and Harun Yildirim founded *Kitap ve Sünneti İhya*. Meanwhile, in Bursa, publishers such as *Tevhid ve Sünnet Yayinevi* set up branches in different cities. Many of these books are free of charge, including in PDF format (Altun, 2015).

As the first institution initiated by Yolcu, Guraba Publishers set up the objectives such as spreading the true version of Allah (*gerçek İslam*) in the midst of Turkish society which has been exposed to Westernization, sectarian sects, extreme Sufism, the spread of Shia and even Christianization; proclaiming their paths as the most valid and authentic Islam by campaigning the principles of Ahlus Sunnah wal-Jamaah (*dupduru bir Ehl-i Sünnet ve'l-Cemaat*) in Turkey; educating a new generation with true Islam and spreading teachings like this to the public; and providing Islamic books, sending them to educational institutions, associations, scientists, preachers/clerics, scholars, teachers, and young people who are aware and ensure that everyone can easily access Islamic books. By taking advantage of the political framework of Turkey, their technique might be adapted to the world outside of a social protest movement or political protest (Meyer & Minkoff, 2004).

The second path was establishing associations and waqf institutions. Turkey has a deep-rooted history of social philanthropy, a tradition that has been ingrained since the Ottoman Empire, namely non-profit institutions in the form of endowments with the aim of helping the lives of the surrounding community. Moreover, associations and institutions have also become an inseparable part of the socio-political history of Turkey and have been immersed in everyday life. For this reason, one of the urgent factors in the process of spreading Wahhabism in Turkey was the establishment of an association in 2002. They invite people around through the association, and on certain days of the week there is communal preaching (*sohbet*). To attract more people, they started holding seminars with invited participants from local and foreign countries, and they capitalized on the opportunity and ability to attract society (Tweneboah-Koduah et al., 2020).

In line with that, tours and picnics are organized to strengthen emotional bonds between people who have adapted to the Wahhabi path. Almost all the associations operating today were founded after 2002. The main ones are the Association of *Garuba* (*Guraba Derneği*) (<https://www.guraba.com.tr/>), Association for the Spread of Monotheism and Sunnah (*Tevhid ve Sünnet İlimlerini Yayma Derneği*) (<http://tevhidvesunnet.com/>), Association for the Spread of Culture and Social Solidarity (*Ülfet-Der*), Association for Science, Culture, Education, Books, and Social Assistance (*Kitap-Der*), and Association of Books, Sciences, Culture, Education, and Solidarity (*Okur-Der*) in Istanbul. In Bursa there is the *Uludağ Research and Education Association*, in Izmir there is *Science, Education, Culture and Solidarity Research Association (İlim-Der)*, and the *Asr-ı Saadet Research Association* in Gaziantep. Apart from these associations, these institutions have spread to many cities in Turkey, such as Ankara, Konya, Kayseri, Yozgat, Nevşehir, Adana, Usmaniye, Antalya, Denizli, Manisa, Kahramanmaraş, Diyarbakır, Iğdır, Malatya, Erzurum and Bayburt (Altun, 2022). In socio-political contexts, the days have been associated with the resurgence of Islamic discourse due to the victory of the AK Party as a symbol of Islamic political power in contemporary Turkey. This momentum could cordially be regarded as opportunity space for Islamic groups to develop their influence in Turkish society. Indeed, AK Party's rhetoric has flourished the Islamic discourses to be part of its political campaigns on a

local and international level in the same way that AK Party introduced Turkish power in the region.

At the very beginning, the terms and names used for their associations are matched with the local context by avoiding attributing strange terms like Arabic language and their figures' names, who are mostly Arabic. These ways, to some extent, could adjust the social and cultural memory of Turkish people in order to bring their teachings into greater acceptance. As a foreign agency, they understood the sensitive issues that emerged and were problematized by Turkish society, so they could anticipate the possible resistance generated due to their appearances and movements in the social milieu. As a minority, this awareness has been a vital factor in the process of building the social movement without many sentiments (Hjerm, 2007).

Their greater influence within Turkish society, however, has ignited controversy over the comments by some of their preachers (Cumhuriyet.com.tr, 2017; Istanbulgercegi, 2017). In 2014, a foundation called the *Imam Ahmad Foundation for Research and Dissemination of Knowledge (İmam Ahmed Vakfi)* was established in Istanbul under the control of the Turkish Wahhabi figure, Ebu Zerka. The foundation, which is located in a complex in an eight-floored building, includes Madrasah Imam Ahmad in which there are separate male and female classrooms such as dining rooms, libraries, mosques, meeting rooms, and recreation rooms. These facilities meet the needs of students' lives, and there is a special section where Abu Zerka welcomes his guests.

The third strategy was building madrassas, Koran courses, and mosques as well. This was an important step in producing Wahhabi teaching massively through the madrasah system as educational institutions, which were mostly in demand in Turkey at the time. The secular system enacted in the social and cultural experience of Turkish society has produced massive opposition from Islamic groups. Thus, such institutions became an alternative religious education for parents who supported Islamic values and its teachings for their generation or, in an ideological aspect, became members of right-wing political parties with Islamic ideology. The demand of Islamist Turkish society has been matched with the intent of the Wahhabi movement, which eventually came into social life in general, where the teaching and dissemination of Wahhabi

ideas began to influence society effectively. Their madrasas have continued to grow massively until now, along with the acceptance of society. At this point, Wahhabism has succeeded in establishing its foundations in Turkey in enormous ways, particularly in the teaching and education systems. Their existence has finally come into visible and blatant form by establishing another madrasa that uses the name of the founder of Wahhabism, like Imam Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhâb Madrasa (Altun, 2015).

The flexible approaches conducted tightly by Wahhabis have taken them into wider audiences and given them more comfortable access to spread their teaching through various institutions, for example, Koran courses, which are open to the public and become the medium to share the Wahhabi teaching continuously introduced to the participants. The Koran course institutions include the Koran Course for Women in *Tevhid ve Sünnet İlimlerini Yayma Derneği* in Istanbul, the Quran Course for Men in *Asr-ı Saadet Derneği* Gaziantep and the Koran Course in *Çağrı Derneği* in province of Izmir.

The massive support both from internal members and from Saudi Arabia has made them grow rapidly in some cities in Turkey. They concerned very clearly on the employee and member's wellbeing as capital to navigate the organization into future. In *Tevhid ve Sünnet İlimlerini Yayma Derneği* there is a mosque called Masjid İman which was built for association employees, madrasas and students of Quran courses to perform the five daily prayers and Friday prayers. The imam of the mosque is Emrah Orhan Kurugöllü, the same person teaching at the madrasa. Other associations also have mosques, but they only pray five times a day. In general, Turkish mosques are controlled by the state with strict rules, including selecting imams and administrators for mosques, which are fully funded by the state from the public service. Therefore, the Wahhabi group cannot massively and freely build mosques in Turkey.

The fourth strategy is taking advantage of cyberspace. The development of information technology, cyberspace, and, in particular, social media has become one of the massive strategies carried out by the Wahhabi group in Turkey in spreading and developing their network. Almost every association has a website and an official social media page like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Most of them have also developed video channels using YouTube

and Dailymotion. These sites contain audio and video files of lectures and seminars held by the association in general, including excerpts from books, articles, and fatwas from their leaders. The implementation of solid, compact, and massive strategies carried out by Wahhabis has obviously reflected how the minority organizes personally (Liebersson, 1968). In addition, activities such as walks, seminars, lectures, and social solidarity are announced through these sites. Their site and social media already have thousands of followers on both Facebook and Twitter pages.

Erdogan's Roles

The figure of Erdogan is a vital figure to mention in this section since his power has continued to control Turkey. On the one hand, Erdogan's sympathy with several Islamic groups opened up opportunities including Salafi-Wahhabi to develop, but on the other hand, the attitude and position of the Turkish state, which makes it difficult to be friendly with Saudi Arabia, is also a problem. This means that the existence and development of Wahhabis in Turkey do not go smoothly because, even though they can take advantage of the opportunities for Erdogan's policies, direct control from the government can also hinder them.

The position of Erdogan in the political context is very fundamental in seeing the potential change of vibrant foreign policy with the countries of the Middle East like Saudi Arabia. Understanding the importance of Saudi Arabia, Erdogan initiated some economic relations with them, Qatar, and other Gulf countries. In 2004, for example, Turkey led the launch of a NATO initiative known as the Istanbul Initiative to develop close security cooperation with the Middle East. Among those invited to join the initiative were also Saudi Arabia and Qatar, but only Qatar responded positively. A milestone in the relationship occurred when the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), of which Saudi Arabia and Qatar are members, declared Turkey a strategic partner on September 2, 2008. It is noteworthy that this was the GCC's first declaration of any country as a strategic partner (Baskan, 2019).

After the Arab Spring, the geopolitical map of the Middle East has changed. In particular, the massive development of Salafi under Erdogan was

marked by a prolonged conflict in Syria. Apart from being a place of refuge and transit before going to other European countries, the rise of ISIS has impacted Turkey as well, which controlled oil in northern Syria. For this reason, Erdogan confidently continued to maintain good relations with other Arab countries as can as possible. Even in his remarks at a conference organized by the International Strategic Research Organization (USAK) in 2010, Erdogan clearly said that there was a change of perspective in Turkey after the 1940s (Haber7, 2010).

Erdogan emphasized that some Arab tribes rebelled during World War I and that this uprising affected broad masses as a result of the wrong practices and policies of the government in Istanbul at that time. Although the founder of the Republic of Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, personally fought on many fronts, after 1923 he started diplomatic relations with almost all the countries that joined the war, such as France, Britain, Italy, the Soviet Union, and Greece. In fact, to show his relationship with the Saudis, Erdogan said that in 1932 Turkey had recognized the existence of the Saudi Kingdom.

Until recently, Turkey-Saudi Arabia relations have looked complex, with special characteristics and patterns that are not easily resolved. There is a historical burden that has been ingrained and filled the memories of the two nations, supported by ethnic sentiments and political interests that have often become a serious problem for efforts to bring the two together. In the brief description above, the experience of conflict and tension between the two countries is a latent issue that continues to overshadow it from time to time. There is prestige, pride, big names, and the desire of the two countries to jointly dominate and become important actors in the Middle East region.

Conclusion

It is a fact that the emergence of Salafism and Wahhabism and their activities in Turkey have been gaining momentum day by day. There are many aspects that influence Turkish society, such as political circumstances and social opportunities. By understanding the historical context regarding the tension of religious contestation in Turkey, Wahhabism could take flexible approaches by using cultural and social aspects while closely looking at the political context. As a minority, the Wahhabi group in Turkey does not show

an overly controversial or confrontational attitude because they are aware of the context of the country and the socio-cultural system they are in. Even so, the opening of space for democracy and human rights promoted by Erdogan as a condition for entering the European Union has had an important influence on the development of Wahhabism in Turkey.

From the data and discussion analyzed above, this article has validated its findings on the following important points: firstly, the social and political circumstances at the time, when Iraq was at war and some of its citizens fled to Turkey, had a significant impact on the history of Salafi-Wahhabi entering Turkey; secondly, pro-Islamic political policies in the government provide opportunities and spaces for Salafi-Wahhabi groups to develop in Turkey. The flow of Islamic politics since under Necmettin Erbakan until finally under Erdogan has provided an opportunity and supportive space that were used by them to grow and develop; and thirdly, the forms and strategies of the Wahhabi group's preaching in Turkey. This third part is very urgent for this article because it narrates the real forms of the struggle and development of the Wahhabi group in Turkey.

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Author's Declaration

Authors' contributions and responsibilities

We are B.J. Sujibto (Author 1/A1) and Ikram Filiz (Author 2/A2) hereby declare that the manuscript has been prepared, written, read and approved to submit to this journal by us. All sources used in researching and writing it are fully acknowledged and all quotations properly identified based on research data we have conducted. A1 contributed to create a research design and developed the theoretical framework. A2 added empirical data and together with A1 categorized the results. A1 carried out the processing data, performing data analysis and interpretation of research results. A1 wrote of the draft manuscript preparation, A1 and A2 wrote the final manuscript with input from us. A1 and A2 discussed and reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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