

# THE GLOBAL IMPACT OF WAHHABISM: SAUDI ARABIA'S IDEOLOGICAL EXPANSION AND GEOPOLITICAL INFLUENCE



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**Abstract**

This article examines Wahhabism as an Islamic ideological movement that developed from a local religious renewal movement in Najd into a global geopolitical force through the support of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The purpose of the study is to explore the impact of the spread of Wahhabism on the dynamics of politics, society, and foreign policy in various countries, especially in the context of bilateral relations between Saudi Arabia and the countries that are the targets of the spread of the ideology. The study uses a qualitative approach with a literature study method through analysis of primary and secondary sources, including books, journal articles, and policy reports related to Wahhabism and Islamic geopolitics. The results of the study show that the spread of Wahhabism is supported by Saudi Arabia's economic power through oil diplomacy and funding of transnational religious institutions. The main findings reveal that Wahhabism has created complex dynamics in countries, including the emergence of Islamic conservation groups, tensions with moderate local Islamic traditions, and challenges to socio-political integration. Although Saudi Arabia is trying to reform the image of Wahhabism under vision 2030, this ideology remains an important instrument in Saudi foreign policy and shapes the global Islamic geopolitical landscape.

**Abstrak**

Artikel ini mengkaji Wahhabisme sebagai gerakan ideologi Islam yang berkembang dari gerakan pembaruan keagamaan lokal di Najd menjadi kekuatan geopolitik global melalui dukungan Kerajaan Arab Saudi. Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah untuk mengeksplorasi dampak penyebaran Wahhabisme terhadap dinamika politik, masyarakat, dan politik luar negeri di berbagai negara, khususnya dalam konteks hubungan bilateral antara Arab Saudi dengan negara-negara yang menjadi sasaran penyebaran ideologi tersebut. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode studi pustaka melalui analisis sumber primer dan sekunder, meliputi buku, artikel jurnal, dan laporan kebijakan yang terkait dengan Wahhabisme dan geopolitik Islam. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa penyebaran Wahhabisme didukung oleh kekuatan ekonomi Arab Saudi melalui diplomasi minyak dan pendanaan lembaga keagamaan transnasional. Temuan utama mengungkapkan bahwa Wahhabisme telah menciptakan dinamika yang kompleks di berbagai negara, meliputi munculnya kelompok konservasi Islam, ketegangan dengan tradisi Islam lokal yang moderat, dan tantangan terhadap integrasi sosial-politik. Meskipun Arab Saudi berupaya mereformasi citra Wahhabisme di bawah visi 2030, ideologi ini tetap menjadi instrumen penting dalam kebijakan luar negeri Saudi dan membentuk lanskap geopolitik Islam global.

## INTRODUCTION

The emergence of Wahabism as a religious renewal movement in the 18th century in the Najd region of Saudi Arabia has had a significant influence in shaping the face of the modern Islamic world (Fata, 2020). The movement was spearheaded by Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab, a cleric who sought to return Muslims to the pure teachings of monotheism as reflected in the Qur'an and hadith. Wahabism later collaborated with the Saud family, resulting in a political-religious alliance that became the foundation of the



Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in the early 20th century. This success placed Wahabism as a state ideology, with full support from the Saudi government in spreading the ideology to various parts of the Islamic world (DeLong–Bas, 2004). In this context, Wahabism functioned not only as a religious movement, but also as a political tool to strengthen the authority of the Saud dynasty (Commins, 2006).

The puritanical and textualist nature of Wahabism has attracted international attention, mainly due to its extensive influence through Saudi Arabia's foreign policy. With its oil wealth, Saudi Arabia has become a major player in the geopolitics of the Islamic world, using its economic clout to spread Wahabism through the construction of mosques, madrassas, and Islamic organizations (Bronson, 2006). Saudi Arabia has amassed thousands of madrassas in various countries, including more than 10,000 in Pakistan that promote Wahhabi teachings. Many of these madrassas are located in the border region with Afghanistan to spread the teachings of conservatism (Bruinessen, 2016a). Saudi Arabia has also built large mosques in Europe and North America, such as the Islamic Cultural Center in London and the King Fahd Mosque in Los Angeles. These mosques have become centers for the spread of Wahhabi ideology to local Muslim communities. One important institution is the Islamic University of Medina, which has graduated thousands of scholars from various countries with a curriculum focused on Wahhabism. Institutions such as Rabithah al–Alam al–Islami (World Muslim League) and the Haramain Foundation have become the main means of spreading Wahhabism globally through funding religious projects and missionary missions (DeLong–Bas, 2004).

This strategy has created a new dynamic in diplomatic relations, especially in countries with significant Muslim populations, such as Indonesia. Saudi Arabia has used a soft power approach to build its image as a global Muslim leader, while strengthening bilateral relations through economic and religious cooperation (Al–Rasheed, 2010). In the Indonesian context, the impact of the spread of Wahabism can be seen in the increasing activity of Islamic groups that share similar views (Bruinessen, 2016a). Saudi Arabia actively supports religious and educational projects in Indonesia, aiming to introduce Wahabism to the local Muslim community (Hasan, 2006).

The dispute between Wahabism and the Nusantara Islamic tradition often occurs in the context of religious practices and approaches to local culture. Wahabism, which emphasizes Islamic teachings and tends to reject practices that are considered heretical, often criticizes local traditions such as the celebration of the Prophet's Maulid, tahlilan, and grave pilgrimage that are prevalent in Indonesia. Islam Nusantara, on the other hand, is known to be more inclusive and accommodating of local culture, incorporating traditional elements into its religious practices. This difference in approach can lead to tensions in society. For example, in Surabaya, there was a rejection of the existence of educational institutions that were considered affiliated with Wahabism due to the emergence of those who were against local religious traditions (Faisol, 2019). This sometimes creates friction with the more inclusive traditions of Islam Nusantara, as well as changing socio–political dynamics in various regions. It has also created a more complex relationship between the two countries, with Indonesia often regarded as Saudi Arabia's strategic partner in spreading global Islamic ideology (Hefner, 2001).

The geopolitics of Wahhabism has also played a role in shaping the global narrative of Islam, especially amid growing concerns about radicalism and religious extremism (Kepel, 2002). Wahhabism is often associated with an ideology that espouses conservatism and rejection of certain values of modernity, although the Saudi government has sought to reform its image under the leadership of Mohammad bin Salman (Haykel, 2009). This narrative is often the subject of international content, especially in Saudi Arabia's relations

with Western countries. Thus, the influence of Wahhabism has become a global issue that transcends national boundaries, encompassing ideological, economic, and political aspects (Mohammed Ayoob and Hasan Kosebalaban, 2009).

This article aims to analyze in more depth how Wahhabism, as a transnational ideology, affects the global order through Saudi Arabia's foreign policy. The main focus is to explore the geopolitical applications of the spread of Wahhabism, with particular attention to the bilateral relationship between Saudi Arabia and Indonesia. In addition, this article will also examine how such dynamics reflect challenges and opportunities in understanding the interaction between religion and politics in the modern era. Studies on Wahabbism have been conducted by many researchers and can be classified as follows. First, articles that discuss the history and doctrine of Wahhabism as a religious movement (Commins, 2006). Second, a study of the influence of Wahhabism on radicalization and religious extremism (Kepel, 2002). Third, the article shows the response of local Islamic traditions in Indonesia to Wahhabism, highlighting the role of Nahdlatul Ulama in countering this ideology (Bruinessen, 2015).

Existing articles have not provided an explanation of the integration of geopolitical, social, and religious perspectives in analyzing the impact of Wahhabism at the global and local levels. This journal article differs from previous research as it focuses on the geopolitical influence of Wahhabism in the context of Saudi Arabia's international relations and foreign policy, particularly through oil diplomacy and transnational funding. The article also discusses ideological tensions with more moderate and inclusive local Islamic traditions, such as Islam Nusantara, while balancing them with socio-political challenges in various countries, including Indonesia. It also pays particular attention to the Saudi reform strategy under vision 2030 and its application to the spread of Wahhabism.

The study of Wahhabism is very important, so that readers can understand that Wahhabism is not just a religious movement, but also a political instrument that has extensive power over regional stability and international relations. Highlighting its impact in Indonesia, this article provides a concrete picture of how religious ideologies can influence state and societal policies at the local to global level. This understanding is important in the context of an increasingly connected world, where the influence of ideologies is no longer limited to their region of origin, but has spread globally.

This research uses a qualitative approach with a literature study method. Data were collected from a variety of primary and secondary sources, including academic articles that discuss doctrinal, historical, and geopolitical aspects of Wahhabism, studies that explore Wahhabism's relationship with radicalization, soft power, and Saudi diplomacy, academic books that provide in-depth insights into Wahhabism's transformation into a political force, works that discuss the global influence and challenges of Wahhabi ideology, reports from international organizations or academic institutions that highlight the strategic and social impact of Wahhabism in target countries. A historical approach is used to trace the origins and development of Wahhabism from a local movement in Najd to an ideology that dominates Saudi Arabia's policies.

Geopolitical analysis is applied to disseminate the impact of Wahhabism on international relations, focusing on the spread of ideology through oil diplomacy and financial support. The geopolitical analysis in this study refers to how Wahhabism, as a transnational Islamic ideology, is used by Saudi Arabia to strengthen its influence on the international stage such as oil diplomacy and transnational funding, soft power and global image, local social and political tensions, bilateral and international relations, influence on regional conflicts. This overall geopolitical analysis highlights how Wahhabism is not only

a religious phenomenon, but also a strategic instrument in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, which includes economic, social, and political aspects at the global level. This research uses geopolitical theory to analyze the role of Wahhabism as a foreign policy tool of Saudi Arabia in influencing international dynamics.

The geopolitical theory used is the soft power theory introduced by Joseph Nye, this theory explains how non – military forces such as culture, values, and foreign policy are used to influence other countries (Nye, 2004). Saudi Arabia uses Wahhabism as a soft power instrument by adding religious institutions and building religious infrastructure such as mosques and madrasas to expand its influence globally. To provide a comprehensive context, this research examines case studies in various regions, including Southeast Asia, South Asia, Africa, Europe, and North America. Each case is described in terms of local socio – political dynamics and responses to Wahhabism's influence. It also discusses internal reforms in Saudi Arabia and their application to the spread of Wahhabism globally. Through source triangulation, this research seeks to ensure data validity and provide a balanced analysis (Bryman, 2016). This research integrates data from multiple sources to ensure validity and consistency of results.

## THE HISTORY AND ROOTS OF WAHHABISM IDEOLOGY

Wahhabism originated in the mid – 18th century in the Najd region of the Arabian Peninsula as an Islamic reform movement led by Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab. He was born in 1703 in Uyainah, a small town in Najd, and received a traditional Islamic education before developing his ideas (DeLong – Bas, 2004). Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab was inspired by the teachings of Ibn Taymiyyah, a 14th – century Muslim scholar who advocated a return to the teachings of the Qur'an and Hadith, while rejecting practices considered deviant (Commins, 2006). In 1744, he formed an alliance with Muhammad ibn Saud, a local leader in Najd, who used Wahhabism as an ideological base for the political expansion of the Saud dynasty (Al – Rasheed, 2010). This collaboration became the main foundation for the spread of Wahhabism and the consolidation of power in the region.

Wahhabism's doctrine centers on puritanism, with a strong emphasis on tawhid (pure monotheism) as the core of Islamic teachings (DeLong – Bas, 2004). Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab strongly criticized religious practices that he considered to be a mixture of faith with polytheism, such as grave worship, the use of amulets, and other mystical traditions (Esposito, 1999). Wahhabism also rejects innovations or innovations that are considered as lessons from the original teachings of Islam (Haykel, 2009). In practice, the Wahhabis adopted a literal interpretation of the Qur'an and hadith, which created a strict and conservative character in religious life. These principles later became the basis of the Saudi government's ideological legitimacy in regulating society and enforcing sharia law (Kepel, 2002).

The collaboration between Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab and Muhammad ibn Saud marked the transformation of Wahhabism from a local religious movement into a powerful political force (Polk, 2006). As the House of Saud expanded its territory, Wahhabism became an instrument to integrate heterogeneous societies under a single religious ideology (Lacroix, 2011). Financial and military support from the House of Saud enabled the spread of Wahhabism across the Arabian Peninsula, often accompanied by bloody conflicts and conquests (Bronson, 2006). After the establishment of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932, Wahhabism was institutionalized as an official state ideology, giving religious legitimacy to the Saudi monarchy (Mohammed Ayoob and Hasan Kosebalaban, 2009).

As a state ideology, Wahhabism plays a central role in shaping Saudi Arabia's domestic and international policies (Gerges, 2005). In the early 20th century, Saudi Arabia's oil wealth provided a major resource for the spread of Wahhabism across the Muslim world (Hasan, 2006). The Saudi government supports the construction of mosques, religious schools, and religious programs. Sermons promoting Wahhabism, creating an ideological influence that extends from South Asia to Africa (Bruinessen, 2016a). These efforts are often accompanied by a political agenda that supports Saudi Arabia's interests on the international stage (Hegghammer, 2010).

Saudi Arabia used its oil wealth as a major instrument in international diplomacy, which enabled the global spread of Wahhabism. Oil revenues provided Saudi Arabia with tremendous financial power to support the construction of mosques, madrassas and Islamic institutions in various countries. The 1973 oil crisis was a watershed moment, during which oil prices solidified Saudi Arabia's position as one of the world's largest oil exporters. This wealth was used not only to support religious projects but also as a geopolitical tool to strengthen political and strategic alliances with Muslim and non-Muslim countries. This approach has created great influence in shaping the global Islamic narrative based on Wahhabi teachings (Kepel, 2002). Saudi Arabia also uses oil diplomacy to advance its political and ideological agenda through the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and other international organizations. This strategy not only enhances Saudi Arabia's image as the leader of the Islamic world, but also strengthens the kingdom's position in global geopolitical dynamics (Bronson, 2006).

The spread of Wahhabism has however also led to various challenges and controversies (Kepel, 2002). His influence is often attributed to the rise of more radical Islamic movements, although the Saudi government denies any direct links to these groups (Al-Rasheed, 2010). In recent decades, under the leadership of Mohammad bin Salman, Saudi Arabia has sought to reform its image of Wahhabism, emphasizing a more moderate vision to accommodate the demands of globalization and modernization (Diwan, 2017). Nonetheless, the puritanical roots of Wahhabism remain an important factor in understanding the socio-political dynamics of Saudi Arabia and its influence in the Islamic world (Esposito, 1998).

## **WAHABISM'S GLOBAL SPREAD AND EXPANSION STRATEGY**

Saudi Arabia has played an active role in spreading Wahhabism to various countries through its substantial financial support, especially since the mid-20th century (DeLong-Bas, 2004). One of the main strategies is the establishment of mosques, madrassas, and missionary centers in countries with Muslim populations (Al-Rasheed, 2010). Organizations such as Rabithah al-Alam al-Islami (Muslim World League) and the Haramain Foundation have been the main means of channeling funds for these projects (Bronson, 2006). The main goal is to spread Wahhabism as the official interpretation of Islam, while strengthening Saudi Arabia's position as the leader of the Islamic world. In many cases, this support also includes providing scholarships for Muslim students around the world to study at Saudi universities, such as the Islamic University of Medina (Esposito, 1998).

Oil diplomacy has been a key factor in strengthening Wahhabism's influence globally. Saudi Arabia's soaring oil wealth, especially after the 1973 oil crisis, allowed the country to spread Wahhabi teachings on a large scale (Kepel, 2002). As the world's leading oil exporter, Saudi Arabia uses its revenues to support religious activities abroad and build an extensive missionary network (Haykel, 2009). Recipient countries, especially in the Muslim world, often adopt policies that are more in line with Saudi views as this imbalance of

financial and diplomatic support (Gerges, 2005). The influence of oil diplomacy is also seen in Saudi Arabia's efforts to build a strategy of deception with most Muslim countries through international organizations such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OKI) (Ayoob, 1981).

Wahhabism in Southeast Asia found fertile ground, especially in Indonesia and Malaysia, where Saudi Arabia facilitated the construction of mosques, Islamic boarding schools, and universities (Hasan, 2006). In Indonesia, institutions such as the Indonesian Islamic Da'wah Council (DDII) received support from Saudi Arabia to introduce Wahhabi teachings (Bruinessen, 2016b). In Malaysia, the influence of Wahhabism is seen in several religious institutions that promote conservative teachings (Osman, 2014). However, the spread of Wahhabism in Southeast Asia also poses challenges, especially as more tolerant and moderate local Islamic traditions often clash with Wahhabism's puritanical approach (Azra, 2002).

South Asia, including Pakistan and India, also became a focus for the spread of Wahhabism (Commins, 2006). In Pakistan, Saudi funds have been used to support madrassas that teach conservative views of Islam, many of which are located in the border region with Afghanistan (Fair, 2015). This has contributed to the emergence of more radical Islamic groups (Kepel, 2002). In India, despite a proportionally smaller Muslim community, Saudi assistance remains significant, especially in supporting the construction of mosques and Islamic study centers (Sikand, 2004). The rise of Wahhabism in the region has often contributed to greater social and political polarization (Nasr, 2006).

Wahhabism in Africa has spread mainly to countries like Nigeria and Somalia (Ehrhardt, 2018). Its influence in Nigeria is seen in the rise of Islamic groups such as Boko Haram, some of whose members are inspired by Wahhabi ideology (Thurston, 2018). Saudi Arabia has also expanded mosques and schools in the region, often facing challenges from local Islamic traditions such as Sufism (Hassan, 2009). Saudi aid in Somalia helped build religious infrastructure, but also created ideological competition with local Islamist groups (Marchal, 2002).

Wahhabi influence in Europe and North America has emerged through funding for mosques and religious organizations aimed at Muslim immigrant communities (Laurence, 2012). Mosques such as the Islamic Cultural Center in London and the King Fahd Mosque in Los Angeles, built with Saudi support, became important centers for the spread of Wahhabi ideology (Wiktorowicz, 2006). This influence is however often criticized for encouraging radicalization in some Muslim communities (Vidino, 2010). A key challenge in Western countries is how to balance religious freedom with efforts to prevent extremism (Cesari, 2013).

Case studies in Europe show that Wahhabism often poses integration challenges for Muslim communities (Roy, 2004). The influence of Wahhabi teachings in conservative France, Germany and Belgium is seen in certain communities that tend to reject secular values and pluralism (Kepel, 2004). Government policies in these countries often focus on stricter control of Saudi-funded mosques and institutions (Hegghammer, 2010). Similar challenges have arisen in the United States with some Wahhabi mosques designated as sites for the propagation of extremist views (Mogahed, 2007).

On a global scale, the spread of Wahhabism through financial strategies and oil diplomacy has created a significant influence on the development of Islam in various countries (Gerges, 2016). This influence, however, has also generated controversy, especially regarding its relationship with radicalization and social polarization (Lacroix, 2011). Despite this, Saudi Arabia continues to use Wahhabism as a political and diplomatic tool (Al-Rasheed, 2010).

## THE GEOPOLITICAL IMPACT OF WAHABISM

Wahhabism has had a significant impact on Middle Eastern politics, particularly through Saudi Arabia's role in various regional conflicts. In Syria, Saudi support for Sunni opposition groups during the civil war reflects an ideological and strategic interest in countering Iranian influence, which supports the Bashar al – Assad regime (Gerges, 2014). Wahhabism in Yemen, instrumental in bolstering Saudi – led forces against Shiite Houthis rebels, a campaign that has faced international criticism for its humanitarian impact (Al – Rasheed, 2010). Saudi Arabia among the Gulf states has used its ideological clout to maintain geopolitical supremacy, as seen in its pressure on Qatar for perceived proximity to dissenting Islamic groups (Farouk, 2019a).

The relationship between Wahhabism and global radicalization has been widely discussed, especially as the ideology is often associated with extremist groups such as Al – Qaeda and ISIS (Kepel, 2002). Wahhabism, with its literal and puritanical interpretations, provides an ideological foundation for some of these groups to enable their violent actions (Haykel, 2009). While the Saudi government officially condemns these groups, the support of wealthy Saudi individuals for radical networks has been controversial (Bronson, 2006). This relationship illustrates how the spread of Wahhabism has led to unintended consequences, including the radicalization of some Muslim communities around the world (Hegghammer, 2010).

The spread of Wahhabism has also fueled sectarian tensions, particularly with the Shia and Sufi communities (Nasr, 2006). For example, in Iraq and Lebanon, Wahhabism is often used to counter the political and religious influence of Iranian – backed Shi'ites (Matthiesen, 2014). In addition, the more moderate Sufi communities often face strong criticism from the Wahhabis, who consider practices such as pilgrimages to the tombs of saints as heretical (Thurston, 2016). These ideological conflicts often fuel broader social and political tensions in Muslim – majority countries (Commins, 2006).

The influence of Wahhabism is also visible in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, which often focuses on building strategic alliances with Western countries (Halliday, 2002). Saudi Arabia has used its position as the world's leading oil exporter and custodian of two Islamic holy sites to strengthen ties with its allies, the United States and Europe (Cooper, 2011). In international organizations such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Saudi Arabia has also pushed an agenda in line with Wahhabi principles, despite often facing resistance from countries with different Islamic traditions (Ayoob, 1981).

The spread of Wahhabism has also affected internal political dynamics in other Muslim countries (Auty, 2012). For example, in Pakistan, the ideology has emboldened radical groups that target the Shia community and other religious minorities (Fair, 2015). The influx of Saudi funds in Indonesia to support Wahhabi teachings is often driven by more pluralist local Islamic traditions, such as Nahdlatul Ulama, which is based on the teachings of Islam Nusantara (Bruinessen, 2016).

Wahhabism's influence in Africa has deepened conflicts in regions such as the Sahel and Nigeria (Ehrhardt, 2018). Extremist groups such as Boko Haram often draw ideological inspiration from Wahhabism, although it is not directly supported by Saudi Arabia (Marchal, 2014). The spread of this ideology has also helped fuel inter – community conflicts in countries with rich Islamic traditions (Cook, 2005).

The geopolitical impact of Wahhabism in Europe and North America is seen in the challenges to the integration of Muslim communities (Laurence, 2012). Funding of mosques and religious organizations in Saudi Arabia has raised concerns about the spread of conservative views that are less compatible with liberal values (Cesari, 2013). However,

the Saudi government has sought to change this image by claiming that the spread of Wahhabism is focused on peaceful proselytization, not radicalization (Vidino, 2010).

Geopolitics of Wahhabism's impact shows the complexity between Saudi Arabia's ideological ambitions and political interests (Al-Rasheed, 2018). Wahhabism on the one hand has become a soft power tool to strengthen Saudi influence in the Islamic world (Kepel, 2004). Its spread on the other hand often poses serious challenges, both in the context of regional stability and international relations (Roy, 2004).

## RESPONSES AND CRITIQUES TO THE SPREAD OF WAHABISM

The spread of Wahabism has faced international criticism, particularly regarding its influence on radicalisation and intolerance. Many highlight that puritanical and literal interpretations of Wahabism can provide ideological legitimacy to extremist groups such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda (Kepel, 2002). Criticism has also come from more moderate Muslim communities, who see Wahabism as destructive to the diverse traditions of Islam (Roy, 2004). Western governments and international organisations have donated funds to Saudi Arabia for the construction of mosques and religious schools that are perceived to propagate exclusive views and instil distrust of democratic values (Vidino, 2010).

Countries directly affected by the influence of Wahhabism, such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Europe, have taken steps to counter extremism. Organisations such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in Indonesia actively promote moderate Islam to counter the influence of Wahhabism (Bruinessen, 2015). Malaysia has also launched a deradicalisation initiative that includes a community-based approach and foreign funding monitoring (Osman, 2014). Governments in Europe have tightened controls on foreign funding for mosques and launched integration programmes aimed at preventing radicalisation among Muslim communities (Cesari, 2013).

Saudi Arabia itself on the other hand has begun to adopt internal efforts to address criticisms of Wahhabism, especially under the leadership of Mohammed bin Salman (Al-Rasheed, 2018). Mohammed bin Salman under his Vision 2030 reform framework, is pushing for social and economic modernisation, including measures to limit the powers of the religious police (mutawa) and introduce previously banned public entertainment (Farouk, 2019b). These reforms also included a shift in focus from ideology to national development, reducing the dominant role of Wahhabi clerics in State policy (Lacroix, 2011).

Saudi Arabia's reform efforts, however, have also encountered obstacles. Some argue that Mohammed bin Salman's reforms are cosmetic and have not fully addressed the roots of Wahhabism (Haykel, 2009). In addition, criticism has also come from conservative groups within the country who feel that these reforms are eroding Saudi Arabia's Islamic identity (Commins, 2006). Observers also note that these reforms are often used to silence political opposition and justify the suppression of human rights activism (Riedel, 2017).

There are signs that Saudi Arabia is beginning to change its global approach to the spread of Wahhabism (Sarah, 2021). Foreign policy is now more focused on economic co-operation and pragmatic diplomacy than promoting Wahhabi ideology (Gerges, 2016). The Saudi government has also tightened controls on the funding of religious institutions abroad to reduce their links to extremism (Bronson, 2006). This change is part of an effort to improve its international image and strengthen Saudi Arabia's geopolitical position (Hegghammer, 2010).

The global response to the spread of Wahhabism reflects an awareness of the urgent need to balance religious freedom with the threat of extremism (Kepel, 2004). While criticism continues, Saudi Arabia's reform efforts and counter-radicalisation efforts in other countries offer hope for reducing the negative impact of this ideology (Roy, 2016).



The success of this endeavour will however depend heavily on the consistency and commitment of the Saudi government and the international community (Al – Rasheed, 2010).

## FUTURE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Recent developments in Syria reflect the complex dynamics of Middle Eastern geopolitics. The fall of the Bashar al – Assad regime, long a symbol of Shia dominance in the region, opened up space for extremist groups like IS to expand their hold on power. IS has capitalised on the power and political instability in Syria to seize significant territory, impose an extreme interpretation of Islamic law, and pose a new threat to regional stability (Spencer, 2024). ISIS dominance not only challenges local geopolitical forces but also affects international relations in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia, which previously supported the Sunni opposition to Assad, faces a dilemma in its political strategy. On the one hand, Saudi Arabia seeks to counterbalance Iran's influence in the region through support for the Sunni opposition. The emergence of ISIS on the other hand as an extreme force poses a threat to wider stability, including Saudi Arabia's own domestic security (RI, 2024).

The conflict in Syria is also a test of the role of Wahhabism ideology. ISIS, while differing in interpretation from traditional Wahhabism, draws inspiration from similar puritanical principles, posing a challenge to Saudi Arabia's efforts to reform its international image under the leadership of Mohammad bin Salman. Diplomatic measures and reform strategies such as vision 2030 are crucial to mitigate the negative geopolitical impact of this conflict and create opportunities to strengthen the role of moderation in international relations. (Elizabeth, 2023).

The spread of Wahhabism faces major changes in the era of globalisation and digitalisation. While Saudi Arabia continues to use modern media and technology to spread Wahhabi teachings, digital platforms have also enabled the emergence of alternative discourses that challenge this doctrine (Al – Rasheed, 2010). Globalisation on the one hand has increased exposure to pluralist views which can increase the influence of Wahhabism among young Muslims (Kepel, 2004). Extremist groups on the other hand are also using technology to expand Wahhabi – based ideology into new territories (Hegghammer, 2010).

Countries seeking to balance diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia while reducing the influence of Wahhabism face complex challenges. For many Muslim countries, economic co – operation with Saudi Arabia is often necessary, but also carries the risk of Wahabi ideological influence through the funding of mosques and educational institutions (Bronson, 2006). Indonesia, for example, faces a dilemma between maintaining good relations with Saudi Arabia and protecting the Islamic traditions of the archipelago from the influx of Wahhabism (Bruinessen, 2016). Similar challenges arise in Europe as countries must work with Saudi Arabia to stabilise global energy, while monitoring the influence of ideologies in domestic Muslim communities (Vidino, 2010).

The era of globalisation, however, has also opened up opportunities for interfaith and inter – sect dialogue in response to the influence of Wahhabism. Forums such as the Parliament of the World's Religions and initiatives such as the Amman Message offer space to promote mutual understanding between Islamic and other religious traditions (Abu – Nimer, 2003). In this context, moderate religious organisations such as Nahdlatul Ulama in Indonesia have played an important role in balancing the influence of Wahhabism with an inclusive approach (Winter, 2008). Such reforms have also paved the way for strengthened cooperation between countries in promoting the values of tolerance and diversity (Commins, 2006).

There are also more opportunities for internal reform in the Muslim world, especially with the emergence of Muslim leaders who promote a more inclusive interpretation of Islam (Farouk, 2019b). Saudi Arabia itself, under the leadership of Mohammed bin Salman, has taken steps to limit the influence of conservative clerics and introduce social reforms (Al-Rasheed, 2018). These reforms, although often considered controversial, offer the potential to reduce the dominance of Wahhabism in state policy (Haykel, 2009). However, the effectiveness of these reforms still depends on the long-term commitment of the Saudi government (Halliday, 2002).

Challenges remain, including how Muslim countries can create an Islamic narrative that is in line with modern values without losing its roots in tradition (Roy, 2004). Wahhabi ideology, with its emphasis on scripturalism, often begins with a pragmatic need to adapt to a global context (Cesari, 2013). In this context, the Muslim world needs to develop educational models that balance tradition and innovation to face the challenges of the modern era (Sachedina, 2001).

Looking ahead, these challenges and opportunities underscore the importance of collective efforts to foster dialogue and reform (Kepel, 2002). An inclusive approach involving the government, religious organisations, and civil society is key to responding to the influence of Wahhabism (Roy, 2016). By adopting a balanced strategy, the Muslim world can benefit from globalisation while minimising the negative impact of overly exclusive ideologies (Al-Rasheed, 2010).

## CONCLUSION

Wahabism has evolved from a local religious reform movement to an ideology that influences politics, economics and social dynamics at the global level. Through financial support, oil diplomacy and strategic influence, Saudi Arabia has managed to make Wahhabism a significant geopolitical tool. However, the spread of this ideology also poses major challenges, such as radicalization, sectarian conflict, and polarization within Muslim communities in various countries. The era of globalization and digitalization has opened up new opportunities and challenges. Information technology allows for a faster spread of Wahhabi ideology, but it also gives room for a more inclusive and pluralist narrative of Islam to flourish. On the other hand, internal reform efforts in Saudi Arabia, especially under the leadership of Mohammed bin Salman, have shown signs of change that could potentially reduce the dominance of Wahhabism as a state ideology. However, these reforms must be continued with consistent commitment to ensure their positive impact.

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