

P R E F A C E

THIS BOOK has its origins in a much more modest plan to study the life and career of a single Wahhābī religious scholar, Sulaymān ibn Siḥmān. Born in the western Arabian region of ‘Asīr in the mid–nineteenth century, Ibn Siḥmān migrated at an early age to central Arabia, where he rose to become one of the leading Wahhābī scholars of his generation. At the time of his death, in 1349/1930, he was the most prolific author in the Wahhābī movement’s history, having written numerous refutations, in prose and in verse, of the movement’s many enemies. His prodigious literary output shed extraordinary light on the travails of the Wahhābī community during a tumultuous half-century that witnessed both the decline of Saudi political power in the late nineteenth century and its later resurgence in the form of the modern Saudi state in the early twentieth century. His writings also helped to clarify what the Wahhābīs stood for and believed at this time. Ibn Siḥmān, along with his colleagues, was adamantly opposed to what he saw as the mainstream religious currents in the Islamic world, in particular the popular customs of grave visitation, which he considered to be polytheism. Those who participated in such customs, or merely tolerated them, were in his view not Muslims at all but, rather, polytheists and were to be condemned as such. Ibn Siḥmān pronounced *takfir* on the Ottoman Empire on the grounds that it espoused polytheism, he opposed the travel of Wahhābī Muslims to any area outside Wahhābī control, and he repeatedly stressed that true Muslims were duty-bound to show hatred and enmity to those deemed polytheists. Wahhābism was, at this point, still a radical Islamic movement: intolerant, adversarial, and uncompromising. Ibn Siḥmān was that movement’s chief spokesman and defender. He was perhaps the most important Wahhābī scholar alive during the turn of the twentieth century, yet almost nothing had been written about him in English.

The problem with writing a biography of Ibn Siḥmān, however, was that in the context of Wahhābism his religious views were not exactly novel. His fiery tone and passion for refutations were to some extent unique, as was his

penchant for writing in verse, but the ideas that he articulated were anything but original. Nor should they have been, as this was not a religious community that prized originality in the first place. Ibn Siḥmān's role, as he understood it, was to continue the mission (*da'wa*) of Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb, the eponymous founder of Wahhābism, by reiterating his ideas and those of his successors among the Wahhābī scholars. Appropriately, his writings were shot through with lengthy quotations of earlier Wahhābī authorities, including, in addition to Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb, Ḥusayn ibn Ghannām, 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Ḥasan Āl al-Shaykh, 'Abd al-Laṭīf ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān Āl al-Shaykh, and Ḥamad ibn 'Atīq. These were the leading lights of the Wahhābī tradition from its inception up to the late nineteenth century, and to a very large extent they bore a consistent religious message. That message consisted of an emphasis on purifying the religion of all perceived elements of polytheism, as well as a requirement that true Muslims dissociate from, and show hatred and enmity to, the so-called polytheists. What these scholars represented, together with Ibn Siḥmān, was what might be called traditional or unreconstructed Wahhābism—a radically exclusivist and fiercely provocative Islamic movement. This militant Wahhābism was the version championed by the movement's religious authorities for nearly two centuries, from the 1150s/1740s to the 1340s/1920s, when the modern Saudi state sought to tame the Wahhābī religious establishment and come to an accommodation with the broader Islamic world. In this context, Ibn Siḥmān's writings can be seen as the last major articulation and defense of the militant Wahhābī heritage.

In the course of my research on Ibn Siḥmān, I gradually came to the realization that I could not tell his story without first coming to grips with the Wahhābī tradition that he so passionately sought to defend. Accordingly, the scope of my inquiry broadened to include the entire Wahhābī period from the movement's origins in the 1150s/1740s up until the establishment of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1351/1932. Here I found that much work remained to be done. With few exceptions, Western scholars of Islam had not taken a serious interest in Wahhābism. A great deal of source material had yet to be scrutinized, and some had yet to be uncovered. Much of the secondary literature fundamentally misunderstood key aspects of Wahhābī history and doctrine, and while several important and pathbreaking studies of the Wahhābī movement were available, none of these adequately captured what I found to be one of the key Wahhābī doctrinal tenets—namely, the duty to show hatred and enmity to those accused of polytheism. There was also a gap in the literature as regards the nature of the Wahhābī doctrine and its relationship to the

ideas of Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya. All of this would need to be addressed in a proper study of Wahhābism from its origins to the period up to and including the founding of the modern Saudi state. The result of my expanded research is a book of considerably wider scope than a biography of Ibn Siḥmān. It probes the nature of the Wahhābī doctrine, examines the early history of the Wahhābī movement, and covers the efforts of subsequent Wahhābī scholars to refine, preserve, and defend the Wahhābī heritage into the early twentieth century.

While the book was written primarily with a view to understanding Wahhābism on its own terms and in its own context, it should be noted that it is also informed in some degree by my parallel interest in the modern Sunnī *jihādī* movement. In recent decades, *jihādī* groups and actors have embraced the premodern Wahhābī tradition as their own, seeing it as the embodiment of sound Islamic creed with its emphasis on doctrinal exclusivism and militant activism. Wahhābism has become the *jihādī* movement's ideological backbone. Wahhābī texts abound on *jihādī* websites and are frequently quoted by *jihādī* scholars and leaders, who see themselves as the proper heirs of the Wahhābī tradition. There is of course more to *jihādī* ideology than the premodern Wahhābī tradition; the influence of certain Muslim Brotherhood ideas remains key. However, to the extent that Wahhābism forms a crucial part of *jihādī* ideology, this book may be read for background on the ideology of modern Sunnī *jihādism*.

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