

Variations Within the Salafi Movement: Salafism Today

To understand Salafism today, you have to go back to the 1700s, when a powerful wave of revival movements swept the Muslim world. The most successful, and in fact the most enduring of these movements, started in the deserts of Central Arabia in the mid-1700s.

This movement, often known as the Wahhabi movement, although its supporters don't like the term, combined the Salafi teachings of a Muslim scholar from Central Arabia, named Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahhab with the political ambitions of the local ruler and his family, namely the house of Saud.

This alliance still exists today, combining the Salafi teachings of Wahhabi scholars with the political interests of the Saudi state. This has two important consequences when we look at Salafism and Salafi militias in the world today.

One is that there is a strong overlap between Saudi political interests and Salafi teachings around the world. Because of the immense amount of wealth at the hands of the Saudi government, it is able to sponsor and fund Salafi teachers and centers and institutions around the world, from Nigeria to the United States, from India to Afghanistan.

This means that oftentimes Salafi religious scholars are also helping to advance Saudi political interests. You can see this very clearly in current events today in 2013, where some of the main Salafi groups in Egypt are promoting the Saudi government's interests in the current shape of the Egyptian government.

You can also see it in the strong anti-Shiite tendencies of the Salafi movements, which also supports Saudi government interests today, particularly because of the cold war, sometimes burgeoning into a hot war, between Saudi Arabia and the Shiite state of Iran.