

FROM NAJD TO THE MODERN WORLD

The Rise, Expansion, And Legacy Of Reformist Theology

An excerpt from The Doctrinal Extremism of Salafi Reformism: A Critical Resource for Faith Leaders and Muslim Chaplains, examining the origins of Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s movement, its campaigns, and its evolution into contemporary Salafi currents

Ramzy Ajem

Executive Director, Risalah Foundation 2026

In collaboration with NORMM (Network of Reintegration and Muslim Monitorship)

From the First Extremists to Modern Reformist Extremism

The early manifestations of extremism—whether in the audacity of Dhū al-Khuwaysirah or the sectarian militancy of the Khārijites—demonstrate a recurring distortion in religious history: exclusive truth-claiming weaponized against the broader Muslim community and their religious representatives. These individuals did not err merely in temperament, but on a theological and spiritual level. They misapplied divine revelation, elevated personal judgment over Prophetic authority, and severed the text from the context—thereby departing from the path of the Sunnah while believing they alone embodied it. Their legacy is not confined to the past; it became a template for future movements whose excesses were framed as piety and whose theological innovations sowed division in the name of reform.

One such manifestation appeared in 18th-century Najd under the banner of “*tajdīd*” (renewal). While couched in the language of returning to Islam’s purity, it revived patterns familiar to Islamic history: takfīr of the broader Muslim community, rejection of inherited scholarly authority, and a reengineering of *tawḥīd* that broke with Sunni orthodoxy. What emerged was not a reawakening, but a new form of *ghulūw* clothed in reformist rhetoric.

In the Islamic paradigm, the concept of *tajdīd* is not revolutionary—it is restorative. It draws from the Sunnah, affirms scholarly consensus, and manifests through mercy, insight, and continuity of the Prophetic inheritance. In contrast, modern reformist extremism adopts the language of revival while reproducing the fractures and excesses it claims to correct.

When reform becomes untethered from the understanding preserved in the hearts of the ‘Ulamā’ and via the tradition of *isnād*, it risks being driven more by ideology or individual brilliance than by revealed guidance and inherited wisdom. It mistakes fervor for true understanding, elevates speculative knowledge to doctrinal certainty, and deepens division where unity is most needed.

The reformist movement that emerged in 18th-century Najd exemplifies this pattern. It did not engage tradition with humility; it accused it wholesale of deviation. Its founder claimed that generations of Muslims, including Muslim scholars of the Ḥijāz and beyond, had reverted to paganism. In one letter, he wrote to a contemporary Islamic Scholar and Judge:

"You, and your teachers, and their teachers, do not understand... Rather, you are upon the religion of ‘Amr ibn Luhayy [a noted pagan idol-worshipper from Quraysh]..."¹

From this premise emerged a movement that would interrupt the continuity of normative Islam—one that excommunicated generations of Muslims, dismissed scholarly consensus,

¹ Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, *Risāla ilā al-Qāḍī Dir’iyya ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Īsā*, al-risāla al-thāminah wa-al-‘ishrūn (Letter 28), in *Al-Rasā’il al-Shakḥiyya*, vol. 6, p. 186.

and sanctioned violence against Muslims under the guise of purification. These outcomes did not arise in a vacuum; they stemmed from a systematic shift in theological framing that replaced clear doctrinal truths with shallow ideological conjecture. The social cost was profound: communal trust eroded, religious leadership was delegitimized, and collective guidance gave way to sectarian judgment. What was presented as reform proved instead to be a paradigm of *ghulūw*.

The reformist creed redefined religion in ways that broke from the Sunni tradition theologically, jurisprudentially and esoterically. Its extremism appeared in two critical ways:

Excess in boundaries (*ifrāt*): It imposed overly narrow definitions of correct belief and practice, excluding a wide spectrum of scholarly views that had been accepted for centuries within mainstream Sunni Islam. This rigid boundary-setting undermined legitimate diversity and reduced the richness of the tradition to a single, new exclusivist interpretation.

Neglect of sanctity (*tafrīt*): Despite Muslims affirming the *Shahādatayn*—the two-fold testimonies of faith—many of them were declared apostates. This disregard for the sanctity of the Muslim led to grave violations, including violence and bloodshed carried out in the name of *jihād*.

For chaplains and community leaders, this history is more than a theological dispute—it is a case study in how a call to reform gave rise to exclusion, coercion, and spiritual disarray. Our task is to help individuals rediscover the Prophetic middle path—not by erasing the past or idolizing it, but by correcting misunderstandings and restoring the mercy, wisdom, and unity at the heart of this religion.

Meeting this challenge requires more than theological grounding. It calls for guided intellectual critique, emotional intelligence, cultural sensitivity, and a deep embodiment of the Prophetic ethic—one rooted in dialogue, restraint, and compassionate leadership.

The Reformists' Architect: Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb (1703–1792)

The Najdi reformist project was spearheaded by Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb, a native of 'Uyayna in central Najd. After studying the Ḥanbalī school of jurisprudence and traveling to major centers of learning such as Medina, Mecca, Basra, and al-Aḥsā', he became deeply influenced by the writings of Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-Qayyim. Over time, he developed a radical reformist stance that called for a return to what he considered “pure monotheism” (tawḥīd). He revived Ibn Taymiyya's tripartite division of tawḥīd—tawḥīd al-rubūbiyya (Oneness of lordship), tawḥīd al-ulūhiyya (Oneness of worship), and tawḥīd al-asmā' wa-l-ṣifāt (Oneness of names and attributes)—thereby fragmenting the unified conception of tawḥīd upheld in classical Sunni theology.

Under his new tripartite framework of tawḥīd, he judged that most Muslims of his time—including their leading scholars—had fallen into shirk by visiting the graves of the righteous, showing “excessive” reverence for the Prophet ﷺ in poetry and visitation, and by practices like tabarruk (seeking blessings) and tawassul (seeking intercession). What further compounded the matter was his misconception of 'ibāda (ritual worship), conflating customary expressions of reverence toward the righteous with acts of worship owed exclusively to God—thereby expanding the charge of shirk to encompass much of the devotional life that Muslims had long regarded as sound and praiseworthy.

Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb went further, advancing a stark literalism that rejected the nuanced, figurative readings of certain divine attributes upheld in the Quran and Sunna. By discarding the hermeneutical principles of classical Sunni exegetes, he opened the way for anthropomorphic (tajsīm) notions of God among his followers, while branding those who interpreted ambiguous verses as deniers of Allah's names and attributes —thus branding some Muslim scholars as disbelievers.

Compounding these errors, he marginalized numerous foundational prophetic and juristic texts affirming the inviolability and sanctity of Muslim life, thereby paving the way for unprecedented takfīr. His confrontational creed solidified into a movement that positioned itself as the sole custodian of true tawḥīd. From the late 18th century, this vision expanded through a series of military campaigns in Najd, the Hijāz, and beyond, led by Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb and his political allies:

“Our enemies are not the Jews and Christians, but those who claim Islam and oppose us. They are more harmful and more deserving of being fought.”²

² Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb, *History of Wahhabism*, section on classical Wahhabiyya (19th century), p. —. In *History of Wahhabism*, last updated June 2025.

Reformist Campaigns Against Muslim Communities

As the reformist vision gained momentum, it found support among the uneducated masses and segments of Arabian society discontented under Ottoman rule. In 1744, Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb forged a historic alliance with Muḥammad ibn Sa‘ūd in Dir‘iyya, fusing theology with statecraft. This partnership laid the foundation for the First Saudi State and transformed his movement into an expansionist project.

"From the start, the Wahhabi movement was expansionist. It viewed anyone who rejected its doctrines as outside Islam. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's alliance with Ibn Saud transformed his theology into a political project that involved warfare and coercion."³

What followed were military campaigns aimed not merely at correcting perceived errors but at coercing entire populations into a redefined "Islam." Central to Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s doctrine was his chilling assertion:

"Whoever does not declare the polytheists to be disbelievers, or doubts their disbelief, or considers their path correct—is himself a disbeliever."⁴

Entire tribes, villages, and towns were thus declared apostate and subjected to takfīr, military assault, and forced conversion. Proponents recorded these campaigns triumphantly, while independent chroniclers described them as campaigns of terror.

Sacking of Ḥuraymilā and Takfīr of Opponents

Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s early da‘wah activities caused unrest in towns like Ḥuraymilā and al-‘Uyaynah, where he labeled many of his opponents as disbelievers. He sanctioned the destruction of graves, including the tomb of the Companion Zayd ibn al-Khaṭṭāb.

"In al-‘Uyaynah, Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb ordered the destruction of the tomb of Zayd ibn al-Khaṭṭāb... this caused much outrage and forced him to leave."⁵

Campaigns in Najd and al-Aḥsā’

Villages and regions that resisted were attacked. The Eastern Province of al-Aḥsā’ faced a violent campaign justified by fatāwā from Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, declaring local Muslims to be idolaters.

"And when the people of al-Ḥasā’ did not enter into tawḥīd and persisted in visiting tombs and seeking intercession, the Imām [i.e., Ibn Sa‘ūd], with the

³ David Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 24–28.

⁴ Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, *Majmū‘at al-Tawḥīd*, p. 15.

⁵ Jon Hoover, "Ibn Taymiyya," in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, ed. Sabine Schmidtke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 619–621.

approval of Shaykh Muḥammad, declared them disbelievers and permitted fighting them until they submitted."⁶

"The people of Dir'iyya marched against those who persisted in the worship of graves... they destroyed the domes, levelled the graves, and imposed the true religion upon them."⁷

Historical Accounts

Eyewitnesses and later historians highlighted the profound ruptures caused by Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb's reformist extremism. His novel reading of *tawḥīd* and readiness to pronounce *takfīr* on dissenters opened the door to violence against fellow Muslims, rebellion against the Ottoman Caliph, and wholesale denunciation of Sufi devotion as shirk and kufr.

"They declare lawful the blood and property of Muslims and say that we are not upon Islam... they have revived the practices of the Khawārij."⁸

"Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb branded all who disagreed with him as heretics and apostates, thereby justifying the use of force in imposing his austere doctrines and political will. Hence he declared a jihad - otherwise religiously impermissible - against all other Muslims, including the Ottoman sultan - caliph. The shaykh in fact considered the sultan the major source of evil and urged Muslims in Arabia and elsewhere to overthrow him. His other major target was Sufism, since its beliefs and practices transgressed, in his view, the all-important principle of tawhid (oneness of God), and were thus acts of shirk and kufr, polytheism and unbelief."⁹

"Ibn Abd al-Wahhab not only gave theological sanction to fighting fellow Muslims but emphasized that those who resisted his call were to be treated as idolaters, their blood and wealth fair game."¹⁰

"The Shaykh's insistence on the centrality of tawḥīd, narrowly defined, and his willingness to pronounce takfīr on those who disagreed, directly supported armed campaigns against Muslims."¹¹

⁶ Ibn Ghannām, *Rawḍat al-Afkār wa-l-Afhām*, in *Tārīkh Najd*, ed. Ṣāliḥ al-'Alī (Riyadh: Dār al-Sharq, 1992), vol. 1, 221–222.

⁷ 'Uthmān ibn Bishr, *'Unwān al-Majd fī Tārīkh Najd*, vol. 1 (Riyadh: Dār al-Riyāḍ, 1982), 59–62.

⁸ 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Jabartī, *'Ajā'ib al-Āthār fī al-Tarājīm wa-l-Akḥbār*, ed. 'Abd al-Raḥīm 'Abd al-Raḥmān (Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Tawfiqiyya, 1997), vol. 3, 146.

⁹ Hassan Ahmed Ibrahim. 1998. "The Egyptian Empire, 1805–1885." In *The Cambridge History of Egypt, Volume 2: Modern Egypt, from 1517 to the End of the Twentieth Century*, edited by M. W. Daly, 198–216. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁰ Natana J. DeLong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 77.

¹¹ Bernard Haykel, *Revival and Reform in Islam: The Legacy of Muḥammad al-Shawkānī* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 239–240.

These events were not random tribal conflicts. They were carried out based on explicit rulings from Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s writings, which identified much of the Muslim world as engaged in shirk.

“We do not fight them except for abandoning tawḥīd. If they affirm tawḥīd and reject shirk, then their blood and wealth are safe.”¹²

Massacres Following His Death

Although Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb died in 1792, the doctrinal infrastructure he laid gave rise to even greater acts of violence under his ideological successors.

Massacre of Karbala (1802): Reformist fighters, under the leadership of Sa‘ūd ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, killed an estimated 2,000–5,000 Shī‘ā civilians, looted and desecrated the shrine of Imām al-Ḥusayn, and razed much of the city. Contemporary historians such as al-Jabartī described the blood running through the streets. Other sacred sites were desecrated, including tombs of scholars and companions.¹³

Massacre of Tā‘if (1803): The fighters attacked and killed hundreds of Sunni civilians—including scholars, women, and children—on accusations of "grave worship" and innovation. Reports from Ottoman and local sources describe entire neighborhoods being wiped out. The tombs of notable scholars and saints were demolished, and religious relics destroyed.¹⁴

Campaigns in Najd and the Eastern Provinces: Villages that resisted the ideological summons or maintained mainstream Islamic beliefs and practices were declared apostate and attacked. Some were forcibly converted; others were executed for "idolatry." Reports document the destruction of centuries-old shrines, domes, and cemeteries associated with early Muslim scholars and family members of the Prophet

صلی الله
عليه وسلم¹⁵

Early Scholarly Resistance to the Reformists

Among the scholars who stood firmly against Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s ideas were:

¹² Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, *Wahhabism*, section on theology: Tawḥīd, Encyclopedia of Wahhabism (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2025).

¹³ ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Jabartī, *‘Ajā’ib al-Āthār*, vol. 3, 235–236; also see Charles Allen, *God’s Terrorists: The Wahhabi Cult and the Hidden Roots of Modern Jihad* (London: Abacus, 2009), 126–128.

¹⁴ R. Bayly Winder, *Saudi Arabia in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1965), 118–120; also cited in DeLong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam*, 79.

¹⁵ Madawi al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 29–31.

1. Muḥammad Ḥayyan al-Sindī al-Ḥanafī al-Naqshbandī (d. 1750)
A distinguished Ḥanafī jurist, guide of the Naqshbandī order from Medina and one of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s teachers. He later condemned his student’s doctrines, reportedly labeling him “*dall mudill*” (misguided and misleading).¹⁶
2. Muḥammad ibn Sulaymān al-Kurdī al-Shāfi‘ī (d. 1780)
A respected Shāfi‘ī jurist and Muftī of Medina, Shaykh al-Kurdī authored a detailed fatwā rejecting Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s takfīr of mainstream Muslims as unjust and unwarranted.¹⁷
3. Sulaymān ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Ḥanbalī (1699–1793)
Muhammad’s elder brother and respected Hanbali scholar, Sulaymān published *Faṣl al-Khiṭāb* and *al-Shawā’iq al-Ilāhiyya*, condemning his brother’s doctrine as heretical and extremist.¹⁸
4. Muḥammad ibn Ismā‘īl al-Amīr al-Ṣan‘ānī al-Shāfi‘ī (1687–1768)
A Yemeni Shāfi‘ī jurist and Hadith scholar who initially praised Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb but later refuted his doctrines in *Irshād Dhawī al-Albāb*, warning against takfīr and deviation from Sunni orthodoxy¹⁹.
5. Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd Allāh al-Shawkānī al-Zaydī (1760–1834)
A Yemeni jurist who initially praised Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s call to purify tawḥīd but later rejected the reformists’ takfīr and violent methods as excesses against the Muslim ummah.²⁰
6. Ibn Faḡrūz al-Tamīmī al-Ḥanbalī (d. 1801)
A prominent Ḥanbalī jurist who openly repudiated Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s teachings, labeling him a Khārijī and accusing him of declaring bloodshed licit against Muslims.²¹
7. Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Ṣāwī al-Mālīkī (d. 1825)

¹⁶ Muḥammad Ḥayyan al-Sindī. *Fatāwā and commentaries preserved in Najdī Hanbali archives*. Cited in Aḥmad ibn Zaynī Dahlān, *al-Hujja al-Bayyina fī Radd al-Wahhābiyya* (Mecca, 1875), 12–14.

¹⁷ Muḥammad ibn Sulaymān al-Kurdī al-Shāfi‘ī. *Fatāwā fī Radd Takfīr al-Muslimīn*. Medina, ca. 1775. Quoted in Sulaymān ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, *al-Shawā’iq al-Ilāhiyya...* (Cairo: Dār al-Insān, 1987), 45–47.

¹⁸ Sulaymān ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Ḥanbalī. *Faṣl al-Khiṭāb...* Najdī manuscript, ca. 1792. Reprinted in *al-Shawā’iq al-Ilāhiyya...* (Cairo: Dār al-Insān, 1987), 10–30.

¹⁹ Muḥammad ibn Ismā‘īl al-Amīr al-Ṣan‘ānī al-Shāfi‘ī. *Irshād Dhawī al-Albāb...* Ṣan‘ā’: Maṭba‘at al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1765. Quoted in Sulaymān ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, *al-Shawā’iq al-Ilāhiyya...* (Cairo: Dār al-Insān, 1987), 51–55.

²⁰ Al-Shawkānī, *al-Durr al-Bahiyya fī al-Masā’il al-Fiḡhiyya*, Ṣan‘ā’: Maṭba‘at al-‘Ilmiyya, 1825, pp. 45–47

²¹ Ibn Faḡrūz al-Tamīmī al-Ḥanbalī. *Al-Radd ‘alā man Kaffara Ahl al-Riyāḍ*. Najdī manuscript, 1801. Cited in Cole Bunzel, *Wahhābism...* (Princeton, 2016), 89–92.

8. An Egyptian Mālikī jurist, theologian, and commentator on *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*. In his *Ḥāshiyā ‘alā al-Jalālayn*, he warned against the Wahhābī movement, describing them as a sect resembling the Khawārij for their extremism and bloodshed against Muslims. Later printings of his *Ḥāshiyā* reportedly censored this passage.
9. Ibn ‘Ābidīn al-Ḥanafī (1784–1836)
A leading Hanafi jurist of Damascus, Ibn ‘Ābidīn included in his legal commentary (*Radd al-Muḥtār*) explicit criticism of reformist doctrines, likening their approach to that of the Khārijites.²²
10. Ahmad ibn Zaynī Dahlān al-Shāfi‘ī (1816–1886)
Serving as Muftī of Mecca under Ottoman rule, Ibn Dahlān authored *al-Ḥujja al-Bayyina*, defending saint veneration and intercession against reformists’ attacks.²³
11. Abū al-Hudā al-Ṣayyādī al-Ḥanafī al-Rifā‘ī (1849–1909)
Sheikh al-Islām under Sultan ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd II and guide in the Rifā‘ī order, al-Ṣayyādī vigorously opposed Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s doctrines and advocated for Ottoman-backed Sunni unity.²⁴
12. Yūsuf al-Nabhānī al-Shāfi‘ī al-Qādirī (1849–1931)
An Azharī Shāfi‘ī jurist and guide in the Qādirī order, al-Nabhānī authored numerous works defending the practices of Muslims and theological stances of mainstream scholars against the ideas and takfīr of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb.²⁵
13. Mustafa Sabri al-Ḥanafī (1869–1954)
An Ottoman Shaykh al-Islām in Istanbul, Sabri condemned the doctrinal extremism of the reformists and wrote extensively in defence of mainstream theology represented by the Ash‘arī-Māturīdī schools.²⁶
14. Muḥammad Zāhid al-Kawtharī al-Ḥanafī (1879–1952)
A leading Ottoman-era hadith scholar, jurist and theologian of the highest caliber, al-Kawtharī wrote against reformist doctrines and literalism and defended the Ash‘arī-Māturīdī schools.²⁷

²² Ibn ‘Ābidīn, ‘Alī al-Khāṭib al-Shāmī al-Ḥanafī. *Radd al-Muḥtār*.... Damascus: Dār al-Kutub, 1829.

²³ Ibn Zaynī Dahlān al-Shāfi‘ī. *al-Ḥujja al-Bayyina*.... Mecca, 1875.

²⁴ Abū al-Hudā al-Ṣayyādī al-Ḥanafī al-Rifā‘ī. *Diwān Abū al-Hudā*.... Aleppo, 1895. Cited in B. Abu-Manneh, *Die Welt des Islams* 19, no. 1 (1979): 45–68.

²⁵ Al-Nabhānī, Yūsuf al-Shāfi‘ī al-Qādirī. *Rasā’il fi al-Tawassul*.... Cairo: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1910.

²⁶ Sabri, Mustafa al-Ḥanafī. *al-Nakir ‘alā Munkiri al-Ni‘ma*.... Constantinople, 1921.

²⁷ Al-Kawtharī, Muḥammad Zāhid al-Ḥanafī. *Tahdīd al-Fāṣil fi al-Tashhīd*.... Cairo: al-Maktabah al-Azharīyah lil-Turāth, 1940.

The “Revival” They Warned Against

What stands out most in the Najdī reformist movement is that the doctrinal extremism of Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb gave rise to violence—not against the enemies of Islam, but against fellow believers. This was not simply a call to purify the religion; it was a reengineered vision of Islam in which Muslims themselves became its primary targets.

Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s theology cannot be separated from the bloodshed it unleashed—beginning with the campaigns of his own followers against other Muslims. His project revived and systematized elements of Ibn Taymiyya’s thought (d. 728 AH / 1328 CE), giving new force to a theological trajectory that had been vigorously challenged in its own time.

Fortunately, in the 8th and 10th centuries AH, eminent Sunni scholars such as Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 756 AH / 1355 CE) and Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī (d. 974 AH / 1567 CE) delivered decisive refutations of these doctrines. With intellectual rigor and profound spiritual insight, they sealed the door to what they rightly identified as a looming fitnah. For centuries thereafter, the ‘Ulamā’ safeguarded the ummah’s integrity through the isnād—preserving not only the sacred texts, but also the sound understanding inherited from the Salaf.

That door—shut firmly by scholarly resolve and reinforced by political authority—was violently forced open in the 18th century amid the unraveling collapse of the Ottoman Empire. The reformist zeal of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb reintroduced a mode of theology preoccupied with excommunication, suspicion, and a rigid uniformity that left no room for inherited diversity. One cannot help but recall the words of the Prophet ﷺ when he was asked to bless the region of Najd. He replied:

“From there will emerge earthquakes, trials (fitan), and the horn of Satan.” (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, no. 1037)

Many scholars understood this ḥadīth to signify an ideological trial—a corruption emerging not from outside the religion, but from within it. And indeed, Najd produced a figure whose theological project would become the blueprint for movements obsessed with takfīr, rigidity, and intra-Muslim violence.

The pattern is now unmistakable. The doctrinal trajectory is clear. But the task before us is not merely to trace the historical lineage of prohibited violence—it is to discern where and how this theology diverged from the Prophetic middle path. Not every theological error leads to violence, and not all violence stems from theology alone. Yet history shows that when doctrinal distortion merges with political grievance and social fragmentation, the conditions for fitnah are set.

As we examine the contemporary echoes of Najdī reformism, it becomes imperative to understand how this legacy continues to shape global Muslim thought—and how its extremes have birthed some of the most destructive offshoots in modern times.

The Reformist Legacy: From Global Influence to Extremist Offshoots

Many observant Muslims today assume that the version of Islam they practice is simply “Islam”—pure, unbiased, and free from innovation or sectarian leanings. They often pride themselves on avoiding what they perceive as “blind following” of legal schools, “excessive” love and reverence for the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم, or cultural practices they deem *bid'a* and therefore un-Islamic. Few realize, however, that this so-called neutrality often reflects the imprint of the reformist movement that arose in 18th-century Najd—a movement whose theological framework has quietly but profoundly reshaped Muslim discourse over the past two centuries.²⁸

In the 20th century, this vision of Islam expanded globally through a combination of state sponsorship and Saudi custodianship of the Haramayn. As millions of pilgrims visited Mecca and Medina each year, the Saudi religious establishment distributed pamphlets and booklets—translated into dozens of languages—designed to “correct” what they viewed as widespread errors in mainstream Muslim beliefs and practices. Warning against shirk and *bid'a*, these materials were reinforced by mosque sermons and state-backed media, while the religious police systematically enforced this reformist agenda across the kingdom.²⁹

By the 1970s and 1980s, this outreach expanded through institutional channels. The Islamic University of Medina became a key training ground for students from across Africa, Asia, and the West, producing a cadre of graduates who returned to their communities as ambassadors of this rebranded ideology.³⁰ Their *da'wa* was presented as authentic Islam, urging Muslims to adhere directly to the *Quran* and *Sunnah* without reliance on the interpretive frameworks of classical Sunni scholarship. In doing so, it marginalized centuries of rich legal, theological, and spiritual tradition, casting them as distortions to be discarded.³¹

By the time the digital revolution arrived, the reformist paradigm had already taken root far beyond the institutions and publications that initially spread it. Decades of state-backed education and *da'wa* had shaped generations of Muslim leaders, teachers, and preachers—many of whom, knowingly or not, carried these ideas back to their home countries and presented them as the authentic expression of Islam. As these voices began to dominate local mosques, publishing houses, and media outlets, the reformist outlook gradually became normalized in the minds of ordinary Muslims.

²⁸ Natana J. DeLong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad*, Oxford University Press, 2004, 32–35.

²⁹ Madawi al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, Cambridge University Press, 2010, 90–92.

³⁰ Stéphane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia*, Harvard University Press, 2011, 41–43.

³¹ Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, Princeton University Press, 2002, 17–18.

This transition was reinforced by early strategic investments in digital da‘wa infrastructure. Funded websites such as IslamQA³², official fatwa portals like al-Ifta’³³, and other digital libraries began appearing in the late 1990s and early 2000s.³⁴ These platforms projected the reformist version of Islam as universal and definitive, creating a digital echo chamber that amplified their reach.

Today, digital platforms like YouTube and Tiktok and Instagram—with algorithms favoring sharp, binary messaging—accelerated this dominance. As Mira Baz observes, “websites and online preachers aligned with this trend dominate the digital Islamic space, often eclipsing more nuanced voices”³⁵. For many young Muslims—particularly in Western contexts—this digital da‘wa became their primary encounter with Islam: seemingly universal and untainted, yet disconnected from the intellectual and spiritual richness of Sunni orthodoxy.

The Rebranding of Reformism: Salafi Currents and their Contemporary Spectrum

As the reformists’ cover was increasingly “blown” and their movement widely labeled as “Wahhabi” by critics—both within the Muslim world and beyond—their scholars and institutions reacted to the growing stigma attached to the name of their founder, Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb. Over time, “Wahhabi” had become synonymous with sectarianism, takfīr, and even violence, prompting a deliberate effort to sever ties with this label and rebrand their project.³⁶ This rebranding began early, as David Commins notes, with Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb and his followers consciously adopting alternative labels; a later monograph even declared: *The Call of Imam Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab: Salafiyya not Wahhabiyya*.³⁷

Later generations continued the calculated strategy to recast their da‘wa as a direct “return to the Quran and Sunnah” in the footsteps of the Salaf (pious predecessors), deflecting accusations of innovation and distancing themselves from the contentious legacy of their founder’s 18th-century campaign in Najd. Saudi publications and official narratives reinforced this repositioning, framing Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s mission as part of an unbroken Salafī tradition rather than a parochial reformist uprising.³⁸

As this rebranded vision gained global traction, it fractured into distinct currents—each professing fidelity to the Salaf yet diverging sharply in their approaches to politics, society,

³² islamqa.info, launched in 1997 by Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ al-Munajjid a Syrian-born scholar based in Saudi Arabia and a key figure in the digital expansion of the reformist da‘wa. He was a student of leading reformist scholars such as ‘Abd al-‘Azīz ibn Bāz and Muḥammad ibn Ṣāliḥ al-‘Uthaymīn.

³³ alifta.gov.sa, maintained by the Saudi Permanent Committee for Scholarly Research and Ifta’.

³⁴ Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia*, 2006, pp. 150–152; Meijer, “Global Salafism: Islam’s New Religious Movement,” 2009, pp. 88–90.

³⁵ The Digital Salafi Ecosystem: Influences on Generation Z, *Journal of Contemporary Islam* 15, no. 2 [2023]: 220–22.

³⁶ Namira Nahouza, *Contemporary Wahhabism Rebranded as Salafism*, University of Exeter, 2009, p. 76.

³⁷ David Commins, *The Wahhabi Myth*, 2006, 58.

³⁸ Henri Lauzière, *The Making of Salafism: Islamic Reform in the Twentieth Century*, Columbia University Press, 2016, 58–60.

and modernity. Academic experts on the subject today identify three broad tendencies within contemporary reformist circles: quietists, activists, and jihadists.

Quietists: Guardians of Creed

The quietist strand emphasizes personal piety, ritual observance, and strict adherence to creed while discouraging political activism or rebellion against rulers. Figures such as Muḥammad Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Albānī (d. 1999), ‘Abd al-‘Azīz ibn Bāz (d. 1999), and Muḥammad ibn Ṣāliḥ al-‘Uthaymīn (d. 2001) typify this approach.³⁹ Their da‘wa sought to purify religious belief and practice by emphasizing literal interpretations of scripture and deliberately avoiding engagement with contemporary political or social upheaval.

Within this quietist camp, an even stricter current emerged in the form of the Madkhalī movement. Founded by Shaykh Rabī‘ al-Madkhalī (d. 2025) and influenced by his teacher Muqbil al-Wādī‘ī (d. 2001) of Yemen, this tendency became known for its unyielding loyalty to rulers and sharp denunciation of fellow Salafīs who deviated from this apolitical stance.⁴⁰ Madkhalīs are infamous for their “jarḥ wa-ta’dīl” (criticism and validation) methodology, applied not only to hadith transmitters but also to living scholars and activists, branding dissenters as “people of innovation” (ahl al-bid‘a).

While this quietist strand rejects jihadist militancy, its rigid theology and relentless policing of intra-Salafi boundaries have deepened ideological fractures within the movement. Proclaiming themselves the guardians of “true Salafism,” Madkhalī zealots have waged aggressive campaigns of takfīr and delegitimization, silencing rival Salafi voices and fueling sectarian rancor.⁴¹

Activists: Reforming Society

In contrast to the quietists, the activist strand sought to combine reformist theology with calls for political and social change. Emerging prominently during the Saudi Sahwa (Islamic Awakening) of the 1980s and 1990s, figures such as Safar al-Ḥawālī and Salmān al-‘Awda challenged state policies and criticized Western military presence in Muslim lands. Their sermons and writings inspired a generation of politically engaged Muslims across the globe.⁴²

While sharing the core reformist theology of tawḥīd and opposition to bid‘a, activists departed from quietist loyalty to rulers by advocating greater political participation and, in some cases, reform of ruling systems. However, their rhetoric at times blurred the line between civic engagement and revolutionary agitation. This ambiguity has led some scholars

³⁹ Jonathan Brown, *Salafism and Its Critics*, Oxford University Press, 2015, 103–104.

⁴⁰ Madawi al-Rasheed, *Muted Modernists*, Hurst & Company, 2015, 87–89.

⁴¹ Roel Meijer, *Global Salafism: Islam’s New Religious Movement* (London: Hurst, 2009), 225–230; Daniel W. Brown, *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 101–105.

⁴² Stéphane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 97–99.

to describe activist Salafism as a “gateway” between theological rigidity and militant tendencies.⁴³

Despite this, most activists did not embrace violence. Instead, they attempted to offer a religio-political alternative to both quietism and militancy, although their suppression in the Gulf states has limited their influence in recent years.

Jihadists: Enforcing Purity through Violence

The most notorious offshoot of the reformist legacy is the jihadist strand, represented by groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS. These movements explicitly draw on theological foundations laid by Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb and later reinforced by Salafi thinkers.⁴⁴ Their takfirī logic expands the circle of disbelief to include rulers, security forces, and even civilians who do not conform to their vision of *tawḥīd* which entails implementing *hakimiyyah* (divine oneness in rule) and *al-wala’ wa al-bara’* (loyalty and repudiation), thereby legitimizing violence against vast segments of the Muslim ummah.⁴⁵

Jihadist leaders such as Osama bin Laden and Abu Muṣ‘ab al-Zarqāwī invoked the writings of Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb to justify armed struggle. They framed their campaigns as a continuation of the reformists’ original mission to purge Islam of shirk and bid‘a.⁴⁶ This militant trajectory represents a violent culmination of theological doctrines that prioritize ideological “purity” over communal unity and the sanctity of life.

Although jihadists are rejected by quietists and activists alike, their ability to exploit shared reformist frameworks—particularly on issues of *tawḥīd*, bid‘a, and loyalty/disavowal (*walā’ wa-l-barā’*)—has proven effective in radicalizing segments of disillusioned Muslim youth.

The Influence of a Shared Theological Core

Though these strands diverge in their political and social engagement, they share more than a common lineage; they embody a theological paradigm that marginalizes alternative Sunni voices and undermines centuries of scholarship transmitted through unbroken chains of authority (*isnād*). At its core, this paradigm promotes a reductive literalism, a fragmented understanding of *tawḥīd*, and narrow, often problematic conceptions of *ibāda*, *bid‘a*, and *shirk*. Together, these tendencies foster sectarian attitudes—even among adherents who reject militancy.

⁴³ Madawi al-Rasheed, *Muted Modernists: The Struggle over Divine Politics in Saudi Arabia*, Hurst & Company, 2015, 81–82.

⁴⁴ Cole Bunzel, *The Kingdom and the Caliphate: Duel of Political Islam*, Carnegie Endowment, 2016, 18–20.

⁴⁵ Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, quoted in “An Analysis of Al-Baghdadi’s 26 August 2019 Audio Message”, Briefing Paper VII, Languages, Identities and Divisions: Voices from the Middle East and North Africa, Durham University, 2019, p. 2.

⁴⁶ Cole Bunzel, *Kingdom and the Caliphate: Duality and Conflict in Saudi Arabia’s Islamic State Movement* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016), 22–23.

This theological orientation can be characterized as doctrinal extremism, and has profoundly shaped Muslim identities worldwide, particularly among younger generations whose primary exposure to Islam is through online spaces.

For many Muslims, this is the only Islam they have encountered. Unaware of its modern origins and departures from Sunni orthodoxy—which historically embraced Ash‘arī theology, the four schools of law, and the spiritual science of *tasawwuf*—they perceive it as the unmediated essence of the faith. This dominance has contributed to an erosion of Sunni intellectual and spiritual heritage, leaving some disoriented when confronted with the rich diversity of classical Islam.⁴⁷

Pastoral Diagnostic: Recognizing Reformist Influence

Chaplains often encounter individuals whose religious outlook is shaped less by conscious choice than by unseen historical and ideological currents. For many, this outlook has become the default understanding of Islam—seemingly simple, neutral, and uncontroversial—yet quietly distant from much of the Sunni mainstream intellectual and spiritual heritage. Recognizing these subtle indicators can help chaplains engage with such individuals thoughtfully and support them in navigating questions of faith critically with balance and clarity.

Common Indicators of Reformist Influence:

1. **Limiting Knowledge to Ibn Taymiyya and His Circle:**
An overreliance on the writings of Ibn Taymiyya and his students (e.g., Ibn al-Qayyim) as definitive, coupled with a neglect or dismissal of the rich diversity of Sunni scholarship across centuries and of his contemporaries who have denounced many of his ideas.
2. **Hadith Preoccupation:** A noticeable focus on grading *ḥadīth* and a tendency to question or reject any religious practice not explicitly supported by rigorously authenticated narrations.
3. **Oversimplification of Legal Reasoning:** Holding to erroneous assumptions such as “if the Prophet ﷺ didn’t do it, it must be ḥarām,” resulting in a de facto principle that non-performance implies prohibition—an approach alien to Islamic legal theory and its nuanced understanding of *ṣukūtī* (silent) evidences.

⁴⁷ Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 17–18.

4. **Overextended View of Innovation:** An inflated interpretation of *bid'a* that brands long-standing communal practices—rooted in the Sharī'a—such as performing twenty raka'āt of tarāwīḥ in Ramadan or celebrating the Prophet's ﷺ birthday (*mawlid*)—as illegitimate innovations.
5. **Suspicion Toward Expressions of Love for the Prophet ﷺ:** A tendency to view mainstream devotional expressions—like the recitation of the *Burda*, *Hamziyya*, or *Dalā'il al-Khayrāt*—as exaggeration or even *shirk*, leading to discomfort or outright rejection of these time-honored litanies and literary works.
6. **Grave Visitation Suspicion:** Reluctance or opposition toward visiting graves of the righteous, with concerns about falling into *shirk* (polytheism).
7. **Intercession as Shirk:** A belief that intercession (*tawassul*) and seeking aid from the righteous (*istighātha*) constitute *shirk* (polytheism).
8. **Wariness of Gatherings of Dhikr:** A discomfort or outright opposition to communal *dhikr* circles and litanies, often dismissing them as unlawful innovations (*bid'a*).
9. **Refusal to Join Congregational Supplication:** A tendency to refrain from raising hands in the communal *du'ā'* after obligatory prayers, often as a form of protest against what they view as an “unlawful innovation” (*bid'a*).
10. **Caution Toward “Ahl al-Bid'a”:** A strong wariness of associating with scholars or communities labeled as “people of innovation” (*ahl al-bid'a*).
11. **Anthropomorphic Tendencies:** Treating every scriptural reference to God's attributes as literal, ignoring cases where figurative interpretation is warranted, thereby risking anthropomorphism (*tajsīm*).
12. **Cancel Culture in Tradition:** A tendency to dismiss or “cancel” respected scholars of the Islamic tradition—past and present—on the grounds that they were associated with *bid'a* or theological schools like the Ash'arīs, as seen in recent efforts to discredit even luminaries such as Imām al-Nawawī.
13. **Walā' wa-l-Barā' Framing:** An emphasis on absolute loyalty (*walā'*) to their own framework and disavowal (*barā'*) of others, fostering rigid in-group/out-group dynamics within the Muslim community and a suspicious or hostile stance toward non-Muslims and wider society.
14. **Takfir of Muslims Who Neglect Prayer:** A tendency to declare Muslims who abandon prayer (*ṣalāh*) as disbelievers (*kuffār*), disregarding the nuanced positions of majority mainstream Sunni jurists who treated such neglect as a grave sin but not necessarily disbelief.

15. **Universal Damnation of Non-Muslims:** A tendency to claim all non-Muslims are destined for hellfire, overlooking the majority Sunni view that accountability depends on receiving the unadulterated message of Islam,⁴⁸ as in the verse: “*We do not punish a people until We send them a messenger*” (Q 17:15).

Recognizing the Fracture, Guiding Toward Divine Unicity and Community Unity

This reformist inheritance has left a profound imprint on the minds and hearts of many Muslims today. For some, it provides a sense of clarity and simplicity; for others, it has fostered doubt, rigidity, and even alienation from their communities. At its root lies a novel redefinition of *tawḥīd*—not as the all-encompassing divine unicity affirmed by centuries of Sunni tradition, but as a fragmented checklist of human actions and acknowledgments, used to measure one’s faith and belonging. This shift has turned *tawḥīd* from a source of spiritual anchoring into, at times, a tool for suspicion and exclusion.

By recognizing this doctrinal reconfiguration, chaplains can respond with clarity and compassion—helping restore an awareness of Islam’s classical balance, rooted in its legal, theological, and spiritual traditions.

The Quran reminds us: “*Indeed this, your ummah, is one ummah, and I am your Lord, so worship Me*” (Q 21:92). Restoring this holistic vision of *tawḥīd* to the hearts of believers is not only a theological task but a pastoral imperative—one that can heal divisions and renew the ummah’s sense of unity with its Lord and with one another. The next chapter explores how *tawḥīd* became fragmented and how reclaiming its original meaning is key to countering sectarianism and extremism.

⁴⁸ Al-Ghazālī, Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad. *Fayṣal al-Tafriqa bayna al-Islām wa al-Zandaqa*. Cairo: Dār al-Ma’ārif, 1961, pp. 93–95.