

## The Muslim World League: Creeping Wahhabi Colonialism?

**Teresa Harings**

Analyses of the Muslim world's responses to the ongoing Arab uprisings rarely mention the Saudi-affiliated Muslim World League (MWL, *Rabita al-'Alam al-Islami*). And yet the influential Islamic umbrella organization, flush with Saudi wealth and known for its involvement in spreading the Saudi state's particular form of Islamic ideology, has not been silent regarding regional events. In April 2011, MWL Secretary-General Dr. `Abdullah bin `Abdul Mohsin al-Turki condemned Iran's interference in the affairs of Kuwait and Bahrain, suggesting that Tehran was "planting espionage networks ... to arouse division and sectarian sedition."<sup>1</sup> In July 2011, a MWL conference in Mecca, "Issues and Challenges of the Muslim World," was attended by more than 250 representatives of Muslim communities worldwide.<sup>2</sup> In an opening statement, Saudi King `Abdullah claimed that the upheavals in the Muslim world stemmed from "attempts at destroying the unity of Muslims" (he did not say by whom) and suggested that the solutions would lie in "laying out practical measures to achieve Islamic unity." For the MWL, one such practical measure was to send delegations to Muslim countries to "exchange views on how issues can be tackled based on the right Islamic approach."<sup>3</sup> And that, for the MWL, is Saudi Wahhabism—a puritanical doctrine known for its intolerance of other forms of Islamic belief and practice.

Consequently, non-Wahhabi Muslims have referred to the MWL's ever-expanding activities, and in particular, Saudi attempts to associate disaster relief with the acceptance of Wahhabi religious teachings, as "Wahhabi colonialism."<sup>4</sup> These efforts take a variety of forms. For example, Somalis suffering from the civil war have reported that MWL representatives, along with offering humanitarian aid, have

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<sup>1</sup> "Muslim World League condemns Iran's interference in Kuwait's affairs," *KUNA (Kuwait)*, 7 April 2011.

<sup>2</sup> "Saudi King Meets Top Muslim Leaders, Urges Defence of Islam," *SPA (Saudi Press Agency)*, 25 July 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Badea Abu Al-Naja, "King asks scholars to help find solutions to people's problems," *ArabNews.com*, 24 July 2011, <http://arabnews.com/saudiarabia/article476877.ece>.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Woodward, "Turning up the Heat on Wahhabi Colonialism," *COMOPS Journal*, 2 September 2009, <http://comops.org/journal/2009/09/02/turning-up-the-heat-on-wahhabi-colonialism/>

pressured Somalis to change their Islamic practices from traditional Sufi interpretations to “the true Islamic way.”<sup>5</sup>

The Muslim World League was established in 1962 by then-prince (later king) Faisal bin `Abd al-`Aziz to secure the legitimacy of the Saudi regime by globalizing Wahhabism, particularly in the face of Gamal Abd al-Nasser’s popular Arab nationalism.<sup>6</sup> Today, the MWL describes itself as an international organization dedicated to the propagation of Islam (*da`wa*) and to uniting “the ranks of Muslims” by removing what it calls “divisive forces and obstacles ... in the way of establishing the Muslim world union.”<sup>7</sup> Headquartered in Mecca, the MWL manages central offices on five continents. It directly oversees fourteen subsidiaries, among them: the World Organization for Presenting Islam; the World Foundation for Reconstruction and Development of Mosques; the Islamic Fiqh Council; the Makkah Charity Foundation for Orphans; and the International Islamic Relief Organization of Saudi Arabia (IIRO).<sup>8</sup> Altogether, regardless of specific focus, the fourteen institutions are engaged in the propagation and support of Wahhabi Islam. Efforts include public relations and press services; Saudi-approved translations and distributions of the Qur’an and other religious texts; the construction of mosques and the training of officials to serve in them; financial assistance and charity work to Muslims affected by disasters; implementation of *shari`a* (Islamic religious jurisprudence), including the Islamization of law in Muslim lands and responses to Muslims living as minorities outside of Muslim lands; and collaboration with other Islamic bodies as well as with the United Nations, which has given it observer and consultative status.<sup>9</sup> These activities, while supposedly relegated to the sphere of “religious and cultural” rather than “political” work, have enabled the Saudis to exert great influence on Muslim communities worldwide, to the occasional consternation of other Muslim majority countries.<sup>10</sup>

Unlike the League of Arab States, the MWL is an association of global Muslim communities. Its members are prominent Muslim religious leaders whose main qualification is that they are active in the field of Islamic propagation.<sup>11</sup> The UN has accredited the MWL non-governmental status. However, since its founding, the organization’s highest officials, including current Secretary-General al-Turki, have come exclusively from Saudi `ulama, religious scholars who are appointed and supported by the king. The MWL’s funding alone demonstrates strong governmental influence. While the organization does not publicly release its financial records, official announcements and external investigations have led researchers to conclude that nearly all of its funding comes from the House of Sa`ud. For example, in 1997, the *New York Times* reported that the MWL’s Secretary-General thanked then-King Fahd for Saudi Arabia’s support, including its more than \$1.33 billion in financial aid to the organization since its founding. The CIA has also released reports that Prince

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<sup>5</sup> From interviews and research conducted by the author in the Somali American diaspora, 2010-2012.

<sup>6</sup> Reinhard Schulze, *Islamischer Internationalismus im 20. Jahrhundert* (Leiden and New York: E.J. Brill, 1990), 123, 184.

<sup>7</sup> The Muslim World League website, “Profile,” <http://www.themwl.org/Profile/default.aspx?l=EN>

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, “Bodies.”

<sup>9</sup> Jacob M. Landau, *The Politics of Pan-Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 284; The Muslim World League, “Profile.”

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Sami Kohen, “Row Erupts in Turkey over Saudi Funding of State Clergy,” *Middle East Times* (Cyprus), March 1987.

<sup>11</sup> The Muslim World League, “Profile.”

Salman, full brother to former King Fahd, controls International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO) aid distributions.<sup>12</sup>

Because of its relationship to the Saudi state, the Muslim World League does not receive the scrutiny that other aid organizations do. This is particularly disturbing in light of allegations that the MWL's subsidiaries, particularly the IIRO, have been involved in financing groups with links to terrorist organizations. In 2003, the *Wall Street Journal* reported the discovery of links between the MWL and al-Qa`ida during a raid of IIRO offices in Bosnia, including a "handwritten account on IIRO stationery from the late 1980s of a meeting attended by the Secretary General of the Muslim World League and bin Laden representatives, indicating the IIRO's readiness to have its offices used in support of militant actions."<sup>13</sup> Later reports would indicate that the MWL had funneled cash to Hamas in Gaza and al-Ittihaad al-Islami in Somalia, among other organizations on U.S. terrorist watch lists. For their part, the MWL and the Saudi regime have categorically denied involvement in terrorist activity. In 2002, the MWL adopted a statement limiting jihad to very specific circumstances and forbidding the killing of innocents.<sup>14</sup> Still, after the May 2003 al-Qa`ida bombings in Riyadh, when the Saudis did begin to audit charities more thoroughly, it appears that the MWL was expressly excluded from oversight.<sup>15</sup>

To some degree, MWL *da`wa* activities in war-torn Somalia have been successful, as seen in Somali women's adoption of stricter clothing guidelines and in certain ideological tenets espoused by the jihadi group al-Shabab. Wahhabism's appeal to those in difficult situations lies in the illusion of empowerment achieved by "complying with rigid rules and *fatwas* to regulate almost every aspect of one's life, body, and relations with others."<sup>16</sup> The problem is that there is a "clear association between the spread of Wahhabi religious teachings and political extremism."<sup>17</sup> While only a small minority of Wahhabis are actually violent, this political extremism can take the form of anti-democratic movements and provide breeding ground for radical jihadis.

Nor does the MWL seem to support democratic institutions. In Jakarta in December 2011, the MWL co-sponsored another conference addressing upheavals in the Muslim world, this time on the theme of "New Media and Information Technology." According to a visiting professor at the conference, whereas Indonesian speakers tended to embrace the new media because it "promotes democratic change and freedom of expression," MWL representatives expressed concern about it "for exactly the same reason." He quoted an excerpt from an issue of the *MWL Journal* distributed at the conference: "If the changing dynamics of media are not understood in [their] proper perspectives and an effort is not made to discipline the youth, [new

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<sup>12</sup> Quoted in J. Millard Burr and Robert O. Collins, *Alms for Jihad* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 34.

<sup>13</sup> Dore Gold, "Saudi Arabia's Dubious Denials of Involvement in International Terrorism," *Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs*, No. 504 (October 2003), 5.

<sup>14</sup> David Thaler, "The Middle East: The Cradle of the Muslim World," Rand Corporation, 2004, 109-110.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew Levitt, *Hamas: Politics, Charity, and Terrorism* (New Haven: Yale, 2006), 193-194.

<sup>16</sup> Madawi al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 132-133.

<sup>17</sup> Woodward, "Turning up the Heat on Wahhabi Colonialism."

media] can create havoc in the society, as is being witnessed in many places.”<sup>18</sup> While stressing that technology is morally neutral, MWL officials called for the establishment of Muslim alternatives. They went so far as to issue a “code of honor” to Muslim journalists and media institutions, calling on them “to safeguard the Islamic identity from the negative effects of globalization and westernization and to ensure freedom that is responsible and disciplined by *shari`a* guidelines.”<sup>19</sup>

Given that most of the Muslim World League’s activities occur behind the scenes, it is difficult to judge the extent of its influence on the Muslim world. Yet the strong attendance at its events as well as the concerns expressed by non-Wahhabi Muslims suggest that its influence is greater than its lack of coverage in Western papers would indicate. The Saudi pan-Islamic project has been successful in that it has managed to convince many Muslim communities outside of the country to adopt stricter, Wahhabi-inspired practices. It has failed, however, in confining that puritanism to ritual and reverence for the Saudi regime.

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**The Moshe Dayan Center publishes TEL AVIV NOTES, an analytical update on current affairs in the Middle East, on the 10th and 26th of every month, as well as occasional Special Editions.**

**TEL AVIV NOTES is published with the support of the V. Sorell Foundation.**

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<sup>18</sup> Mark Woodward and Inayah Rohmaniyah, “Contesting New Media: Indonesia vs. the Muslim World League,” COMOPS Journal, 19 December 2011, <http://comops.org/journal/2011/12/19/contesting-new-media-indonesia-vs-the-muslim-world-league/>

<sup>19</sup> Erwinda Maulina, “Muslim World League issues ‘code of honor’ for Muslim journalists,” *The Jakarta Post*, 15 December 2011, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2011/12/15/league-issues-code-honor-muslim-journalists.html>