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AL-AHBASH AND WAHHABIYYA: INTERPRETATIONS OF ISLAM

Islam is a universal religion and culture. Scholars who tend to focus on Islam in specific societies may overlook connections that, over the centuries, were important in shaping various Islamic intercultural dialogs. One case in point is the role of Ethiopia in the history of Islam. Although situated next door to the cradle of Islam, Ethiopia conveniently has been perceived by many Western historians of the Arab Middle East as an African "Christian island," and as largely irrelevant. In practice, however, the Christian-dominated empire has remained meaningful to all Muslims from Islam's inception. It has also been the home of Islamic communities that maintained constant contact with the Middle East. Indeed, one of the side aspects of the resurgence of political Islam since the 1970s is the emergence in Lebanon of the "The Association of Islamic Philanthropic Projects"[1] (Jamʿiyyat al-Mashariʿ al-Khayriyya al-Islamiyya), better known as "The Ethiopians," al-Ahbash. Its leader came to Beirut from Ethiopia with a rather flexible interpretation of Islam, which revolved around political coexistence with Christians. Al-Ahbash of Lebanon expanded to become arguably the leading factor in the local Sunni community. They opened branches on all continents and spread their interpretation of Islam to many Islamic as well as non-Islamic countries. This article is an attempt to relate some of the Middle Eastern–Ethiopian Islamic history as the background to an analysis of a significant issue on today's all-Islamic agenda. It aims to present the Ahbash history, beliefs, and rivalry with the Wahhabiyya beginning in the mid-1980s. It does so by addressing conceptual, political, and theological aspects, which had been developed against the background of Ethiopia as a land of Islamic–Christian dialogue, and their collision with respective aspects developed in the Wahhabi kingdom of the Saudis. The contemporary inner-Islamic, Ahbash-Wahhabiyya conceptual rivalry turned in the 1990s into a verbal war conducted in traditional ways, as well as by means of modern channels of Internet exchanges and polemics. Their debate goes to the heart of Islam's major dilemmas as it attracts attention and draws active participation from all over the world.

One protagonist, the Wahhabiyya, needs no introduction. After more than two and a half centuries of spearheading Sunni fundamentalism, the Wahhabiyya may be

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considered the more enduring modern movement representing rigidly the concept of *al-islām dīn wa-dawla*—Islam is inseparably religion and state. Although the integration of the Wahhabi doctrine in the modern Saudi state has not always been smooth—it was practically modified after Ibn Saʿud's victory over the Ikhwan in 1929—it is still, arguably, closest to the concept of Islam's universal political supremacy. After 1991, as the Saudis deepened their reliance on Western protection, and as their socioeconomic problems mounted, the tension between Wahhabi purists and the royal Saudi establishment has grown. Wahhabism, never really monolithic,[2] is experiencing a new period of inner conflicts between the state-oriented scholars and those further radicalized due also to imported concepts. Part of the newly reenergized religious radicalism in Saudi Arabia was channeled abroad, and the doctrine became publicly identified with the globalization of Islamic militancy. In fact, many proponents of political Islam, and many members of various other Islamic associations today, are widely referred to as Wahhabis. Most of the various trends that yearn for Islam's political victory are unanimous in combating al-Ahbash.

THE ETHIOPIANS AND ISLAM

Who are al-Ahbash, what Islam do they represent, and what message does their name symbolize? The people of Ethiopia, *al-ḥabasha*, or *al-aḥbāsh* (and also *al-ḥubshān, al-ḥubūsh*), were known to ancient Arabians as the neighboring Africans across the Red Sea. Because the state of Ethiopia had embraced Christianity nearly three centuries before Muhammad and was involved in Arabian affairs as such, its concept as a Christian, monotheistic "other" was well known to the Prophet and his generation. Indeed Ethiopia was the first foreign-relations case for Islam. It was the land of "the first hijra" in 615–16—the Christian *najāshī (negus* in Ethiopic, king) gave asylum to practically the entire Islamic community of that time. The righteous Christian Ethiopian king who saved the Muslims, thus, left an enduring message of grace regarding Ethiopia as a land of justice despite its Christianity. A saying attributed to the Prophet ordered believers to "leave the Ethiopians alone as long as they leave you alone" (*utrukū al-ḥabasha mā tarakūkum*). Conversely, a persistent traditional contention held that somewhat later, in 628, the king himself accepted Islam but that his people refused to follow. This situation left an entirely contradictory interpretation of the Ethiopian Christian "other" as illegitimate. For many, the "*islām al-najāshī*" legacy meant that Ethiopia was already a Muslim country and, therefore, should be redeemed by Islamic political victory. The notion of Christian Ethiopian illegitimacy was strengthened by the legacy of the pre-Islamic episode of the Ethiopian occupiers of Yemen who tried, in "the Year of the Elephant" (570), to destroy the Kaʿba. (The hadith, "The lean-legged Ethiopians, they will [eventually] destroy the Kaʿba,"[3] reflects this sense of suspicion and enmity.) This initial Ethiopian dichotomy has been recycled throughout the centuries and rendered Christian Ethiopia a major case for Islam. Needless to say, these different interpretations of the legitimacy of the Christian "other" have always been related primarily to the inner-Islamic debate on the nature of the Islamic "self."[4]

   Al-ḥabasha, however, also had another significant meaning in the world of Islamic concepts. Although the Ethiopian state was dominated by Christians, a good half of its population was, and still is, Muslim. The term *ḥabasha* in Arabic was never restricted

only to the Christian core of the Horn of Africa, but to its entire population, including the Muslims. It often referred to skin color rather than to religious affiliation.[5] In Arab and Muslim eyes, *al-ḥabasha* were distinguished from the blacker Africans, the *sudān* or *zunūj*. Here too, with regard to Habashi Muslims, there was some conceptual dichotomy. *Ḥabasha* were considered the best African slaves. The slave trade persisted in Arabia through WWI, and the *ḥabashī* enslaved were mostly animists and only rarely Christians. Thus, the term *ḥabasha* did not actually have a religious meaning but rather suggested a modicum of ethnic, racial inferiority. Precisely for that reason, and stemming from the supraethnic message of Islam, there consistently has been a marked effort by purists to emphasize and praise the religiosity of *ḥabashī* Muslims. For the advocates of moderate, universal, and all-humanistic Islam, the acceptance of Christian Ethiopia went together with praise of *ḥabashī* Muslims.[6] Many darker-complexioned Muslims were nicknamed *al-ḥabashī*, and throughout history, dozens of prominent personalities of various backgrounds adopted this name. Numerous traditions call on Muslims to respect Muslim Ethiopians and even accept them as leaders. Over the centuries, substantial literature has been produced praising Muslim Ethiopians and, thus, calling for the purification of Islam and rendering it more flexible and tolerant. We mention only a couple here: Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti's 15th century *Raising the Status of the Ethiopians*, and Ahmad al-Hifni al-Qinaʾi al-Azhari's *The Beautiful Diamonds in the History of the Ethiopians* of the early 20th century.[7] Muslim Ethiopians of prominence, such as Bilal bin Rabah (Bilal al-Habashi), the first *muʾadhdhin*, and the king himself, were enshrined as important historical Islamic figures. A 16th century manuscript written in Medina (in 1583–84) contains the following example of Arabian attitudes to slavery and the *ḥabasha*:

Praise be to Allah Who created man from a clay of mud and preferred some of them to others. The disparity between them was like the distance between the sky and the earth. Each group [however,] praises and pleases Allah . . . He made them servants and masters, rulers and ruled. Allah distinguished some of the descendants of Noah . . . with prophethood and sovereignty, and He predestined servitude and slavery for some of them until the Day of Resurrection . . . But he blessed some of the servants with distinction by which they became masters. He distinguished a group of Ethiopians with grace, leadership and faith—like Bilal,[8] like al-Najashi. . . . and others who believed [in Him] and adhered [to Islam]. Many of them became Companions [of the Prophet], successors and holy and righteous men. Moreover, they became eminent men on earth and in Paradise, and religious guides and temporal leaders.[9]

The dichotomy regarding Ethiopian Muslims was perhaps best reflected in the famous Sunni tradition, "Obey whoever is put in authority over you, even if he be a crop-nosed Ethiopian slave."[10] On the one hand, it showed that Ethiopians were capable of becoming leaders in Islam, even those who were descended from slaves or were themselves manumitted. On the other hand, it places the Ethiopians at the bottom of the ethnic or social ladder. Because the message of the tradition was clearly the sacredness of obedience, it meant that it should be applicable even in the most absurd case of an Ethiopian leader. Shaykh ʿAbdalla al-Habashi al-Harari, today's leader of the al-Ahbash transnational Islamic association, is a manifestation of Islam's dynamic dichotomies and controversies.

The story of the contemporary rivalry between al-Ahbash and the Wahhabiyya has its roots in the Ethiopian town of Harar, the old capital of Islam in the Horn of Africa. Harar's long history itself reflects the dilemmas of Muslims in Ethiopia. On one hand, the walled town was an Islamic emirate that maintained political independence from an obscure beginning in the 10th century until the late 19th century. During those years, Harar was connected in many ways to Arabia and was the center of the Islamic holy-war effort vis-á-vis the Ethiopian Christian state. On the other hand, after its conquest in 1887 by Ethiopia, Harar developed as the model of Islamic integration into all-Ethiopian culture, society, and Christian-dominated politics. In the aftermath of the short Fascist conquest of Ethiopia, 1936–41, Harari society was again split along the lines of these contradictory historical legacies. A group of local leaders, who had been sent by the Italians to make pilgrimage to Mecca and were inspired by Wahhabi influence, attempted throughout 1941–48 to revive Islamic independence from Ethiopia. After a long struggle with the Ethiopian government and its local collaborators, the group was defeated and dispersed.[11] Its leader, Shaykh Yusuf ʿAbd al-Rahman al-Harari, who had been educated in Mecca and Medina in 1928–38, returned to Medina in Saudi Arabia in 1976 and is currently one of the figures behind the Wahhabi verbal war on the Ahbash.

The leader of al-Ahbash, Shaykh ʿAbdalla ibn Muhammad ibn Yusuf al-Harari, was his chief rival in 1941–48 in Harar and Ethiopia. Reportedly born in 1910, he received an Islamic education in Ethiopia and grew to be a firm believer in Ethiopian Islamic–Christian coexistence. As such, he became involved in the struggle over Harar during those years. The struggle revolved around two issues, which will be mentioned here only briefly. One was the nature of Islamic education in Harar. In 1941, a group of Harari–Islamic nationalists reestablished the local modern school in the spirit of Wahhabi fundamentalism. A few months later, the Ethiopian authorities closed the school and sent those involved either to prison or into exile. The second was an attempt during 1946–48 to break away from the Christian state. The same Islamic, nationalist circles in Harar organized to collaborate with the then-active Somali nationalist movement to break Harar away from Ethiopia and annex it to Islamic Somalia. They were again exposed by the Ethiopian authorities, and their leaders were punished. In both cases, the defeated group accused Shaykh ʿAbdalla of being instrumental in helping the Ethiopian establishment. Shaykh ʿAbdalla and his followers continue to deny any anti-Islamic collaboration and point to the fact that, in 1948, the shaykh himself was suspected by the Ethiopian imperial regime, jailed for a time, and then forced to leave the country. Moreover, he and his followers accuse Shaykh Yusuf ʿAbd al-Rahman of collaborating with the Ethiopian government. (Shaykh Yusuf was later appointed to supervise the translation of the Qurʾan into Amharic.) As this is written, both of these old Habashi scholars are still alive. They continue to trade accusations between Beirut and Medina about these formative events in their lives, and their bitter rivalry splits Muslims in today's Ethiopia.[12] In 1995, for example, Shaykh ʿAbdalla distributed a leaflet in Ethiopia which said:

Beware of a man called Sheikh Yusuf ʿAbd al-Rahman who left Ethiopia for Medina a long time ago and learned the principles of the Wahhabiyya from his uncle who lives among the Wahhabis. They gave him money and he returned to Harar to spread their word. He then became close to Haile Selassie and helped him translating the Koran. The emperor gave him land in reward. When

Mangistu [Haile Mariam, Ethiopia's communist ruler, 1974–1991] came to power he fled back to the Wahhabis. They again gave him money and he returned to Ethiopia to spread their false belief. Beware of this man and warn everyone of him, warn the people of Harar and all the people of Ethiopia.[13]

Of wider, all-Islamic importance is the major Ahbash-Wahhabiyya debate that grew out of this peripheral Ethiopian story. After leaving Ethiopia, Shaykh ʿAbdalla spent some time in Mecca and Jerusalem in late 1948 and moved to Damascus. In 1950, the shaykh moved to Beirut, where he resides to this day.[14] He would not surface as a public figure in the Lebanese capital until 1983. He spent the early years in the company of leading local Islamic scholars. Shaykh Mukhtar al-ʿAlayli supported him through his Dar al-Fatwa association, and Shaykh Muhiyy al-Din al-ʿAjuz did the same through his Association of Islamic Philanthropic Projects. When Shaykh ʿAjuz died in 1983, Shaykh ʿAbdalla was declared leader of the Association.[15] Since then, it has been popularly called "The Ahbash."

By 1983 Shaykh ʿAbdalla had already gained fame as a thinker, an author—he would publish some twenty books—a mufti, and a preacher. His main message remained one that he had brought from Ethiopia and was centrally relevant to Lebanon, that of Islamic–Christian coexistence. He soon won the indirect support of the Lebanese Christian establishment and various Islamic publics. Moreover, his becoming head of the Association coincided with the Syrian takeover of Lebanon. The new Syrian masters of the land, with their secular Arab Baʿth doctrine, found the shaykh's Islamic–Christian message compatible with their approach. From that moment on, al-Ahbash entered Lebanese politics. In 1989, it won a seat in the Lebanese parliament for its member, Dr. ʿAdnan al-Tarabulsi. The unequivocal support of al-Ahbash for the Syrian Baʿth party and its collaborators in Lebanon, Christian presidents Ilyas al-Hawari (1989–98) and his successor Emil Lahud (1998–), together with Muslim prime ministers Salim al-Huss and Rafiq al-Hariri (assassinated February 2005), was rewarded by governmental support. The Association flourished in Lebanon. It has issued a monthly, *Manar al-Huda*, since 1992, and has had its own radio station, Nidaʿ al-Maʿrifa,[16] since 1998. Its members are very active on the internet and have websites that spread the word of the shaykh and his polemics with their rivals.[17] In addition, the Association runs networks of kindergartens, elementary and secondary schools, and Islamic colleges affiliated with Cairo's Jamiʿat al-Azhar.[18] Its messages—always spread quite boldly—and its well-felt presence in Lebanon's social and political life, have often provoked its rivals among local Salafi and Wahhabi circles. Occasional clashes and street violence began in the mid-1980s and climaxed in July 1995 with the assassination of the Association leader in Beirut, Nizar Halabi, an event that further escalated the enmity between the Ahbash and the Wahhabiyya. In the eyes of many in Lebanon, the Association remained identified with the Syrian occupiers. (In 2005, after the Syrian evacuation, there was raised the demand to expose the Ahbash as collaborators with Syrian intelligence and security services.[19])

The worldwide Lebanese diaspora helped the Ahbash to become a transnational association in the 1980s. Its main center in Europe is in Germany,[20] and active branches spread throughout most of Western Europe. Ahbash also has branches in Indonesia, Malaysia, India, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Canada, Switzerland, France,

Ukraine, Holland, Sweden, Australia,[21] and the United States.[22] They are also active in Africa (notably in Nigeria and Ghana), where they try to create a bridge between local Muslims and those of the Middle Eastern core.[23] By the end of the 1990s, the Ahbash had become one of the best organized transnational Islamic associations in non-Islamic countries, claiming nearly a quarter of a million members.[24]

The number of Ethiopian members in al-Ahbash is not known, but there are not many. With the exception of the shaykh from Harar, almost the entire movement is composed of Muslims from various other ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. They call themselves the Ahbash partly because of their admiration for their leader. They consider him one of the greatest scholars of Islam and refer to him with such titles as *al-imam al-muhaddith*, or *muhaddith al-ʿasr*, namely the leader of hadith scholarship and the hadith scholar of our time. He is also referred to as *al-hāfiz*, the keeper of wisdom and scholarship. The shaykh himself takes pride in his all Islamic and allegedly Arab background. His full name, ʿAbdalla ibn Muhammad ibn Yusuf al-Harari al-Shaybi al-ʿAbdari, alludes to Qurayshi origin. As we will see, he considers Arabism to be a sacred identity and a proper bridge between Muslims and Christians. At the same time, he takes full pride in his Ethiopian-ness. (He returned to Ethiopia three times [1969, 1995, and 2003] and was enthusiastically received by most Ethiopian Muslims.) It is also apparent that his many followers also identify with what Ethiopia symbolizes for the more moderate Muslims. They call themselves al-Ahbash in the hope of enhancing flexible Islam, capable of coexisting with the Christian "other."

FUNDAMENTALS OF THE AHBASH

In one of his addresses to his followers, Shaykh ʿAbdalla tried to define the movement's ideology by distinguishing it from its polar opposites:

> We are an Islamic association that represents no innovative deviations, like those introduced fifty, two hundreds, or six hundreds years ago. The first one are the ideas of Sayyid Qutb . . . the second one are those of Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab, and the third are those of Ibn Taymiyya, from whom ʿAbd al-Wahhab derived his thoughts. We are Ashʿaris and Shafiʿis. The Ashʿariyya is the basis of our belief, and the Shafiʿiyya is our daily code.[25]

He selected these figures as ultimate rivals for a reason. Sayyid Qutb was the Egyptian activist and scholar who worked to bridge the Islamic political ideas of the Muslim Brothers with the fundamentals of the Wahhabiyya. Pointing to ʿAbd al-Wahhab and at Ibn Taymiyya, the founder of and the historical source of inspiration for the Wahhabiyya, was stating the obvious. Ibn Taymiyya, the 14th century scholar, together with the modern Pakistani thinker Abu al-ʿAla al-Mawdudi—himself inspired by Ibn Taymiyya and the Wahhabiyya—provided Sayyid Qutb with the theological legitimacy for turning the Muslim Brothers as of the 1960s into a militant movement, working to purify Islam by undermining non-Islamic, nonfundamentalist regimes.[26] We will return below to the active Ahbash rivalry with the followers of this political, fundamentalist, radical Islam, be they purely Wahhabi or Muslim Brothers.

Studying Ahbash literature reveals four elements of their Islamic self-identity. One is merely legal, their adherence to the Shafiʿi school. Their core ideology lies in combining the theological legacy of the Ashʿariyya with some Sufi terminology, and in their

contention that they represent *ahl al-sunna wa-l-jamāʿa*—the community of orthodox Islamic beliefs—the consensual, central trend in Sunni Islam. This combination in itself is not a theological innovation, and in many ways, al-Ahbash follow the general approach of the great medieval thinker, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058–1111).[27] Claiming to represent mainstream Islam, the Ahbash are proud of their November 1999 cultural agreement with al-Azhar, which they see as their endorsement by the highest scholarly leadership of the Sunni establishment.[28]

The Sufi element is obvious. Shaykh ʿAbdalla and the Association are connected to three *ṭarīqas*: the Rifaʿiyya, the Naqshabandiyya, and the Qadiriyya.[29] Its publications, and the shaykh's works, are replete with Sufi terms, such as "the light of the certainty" (*nūr al-yaqīn*) or the love for the sake of God [and his creations] (*al-maḥabba li-allah*). In the Ahbash websites, Sufism is defined as *bidʿa ḥasana*, namely an innovation compatible with the Qurʾan and the sunna. Some forty *ṭarīqas* are endorsed, but certain Sufi beliefs and customs—such as the idea that man can unite with God, even temporarily—are strongly denounced.[30] There is no doubt that the shaykh, with his Harari–Ethiopian background—Harar, *madīnat al-awliyāʾ*, the town of the saints, has been always a vibrant center of Sufism—has roots in popular Islam as well, and especially in Sufism's social messages, cultural aspects, and its proven ability to inspire and mobilize revivalist movements. He conceives of pilgrimages to holy men's tombs, *ziyāra* (an important pillar of Sufism), a legitimate way to reach God through intercession (*tawaṣṣul*). Although Sufism is not the primary public face presented by the Ahbash, it is no doubt a central dimension of their identity. Their emphasis, however, is not on mysticism. Sufism is surely not the definition of the movement, as some observers have been led to think.[31]

The core of their ideology is not in the legalism of Shafiʿiyya nor in the mysticism of Sufism, but rather in the theological principles of Ashʿariyya. The early scholar Abu al-Hasan al-Ashʿari (born in Basra, died in Baghdad, 874–936) was first a follower of the Muʿtazila school of thought, which aspired to base Islam on dialectical rationality borrowed partly from Greek philosophy. The Muʿtazila followers were in their time the archrivals of mainstream Sunni orthodoxy, which rejected any such interpretation and any theological rationalization of the given texts. In time, however, al-Ashʿari moved halfway and began to preach compromise and moderation. The theological trend he established managed to prevent major schisms and he went on to serve as a mediator and a bridge contributing to stability in the Sunni world. In Shaykh ʿAbdalla's eyes, al-Ashʿari was "the imam of *ahl al-sunna wa-l-jamāʿa*." Although al-Ashʿari established no legal school, for Shaykh ʿAbdalla, he was like a founder of a fifth *madhhab*, a school of moderation and compromise. A group of the Shaykh's followers translated his general approach into a twelve-goal platform. The main ones are as follows.

1　Spreading the right religion of *ahl al-sunna wa-l-jamāʿa*, and do so by ways of wisdom and gentleness.

2　Preaching moderation, *iʿtidāl*, and good behavior as ways of implementing religious principles, while combating extremism and zeal.

5　The spreading of modern education and of universal, applied sciences, through the establishment of schools, institutes, and universities.

8　To work in harmony for the benefit of the motherland and the citizens and do so through constructive openness and fruitful cooperation with various personalities, institutes, and bodies.

12 Taking care of women's issues, help their organized activities, and work for the integration of able women in all various frameworks.[32]

The key word in most texts produced by the Association and in the Shaykh's speeches is *moderation*, *i'tidāl*. The main idea is that al-Ahbash, working in this spirit, are the bridge and the glue essential for the continuity and welfare of *ahl al-sunna wa-l-jamā'a* throughout the world. One of the Association's websites answered a question about its methods and how to work for Islamic unity: "By soft words, by middle-way wisdom, by gentle preaching. This is how our journey began . . . by cooperation and openness. . . . This is how we became a global association representing Muslims all over the world, giving them safe haven."[33]

The messages of the Ahbash are directed to both Muslims and non-Muslims. The message to Muslims, not surprisingly, is harsher. Despite the motif of moderation, the confrontation with rival wings, especially with the Wahhabiyya, is definitely not conducted only with soft words. The Ahbash often define their Islamic rivals as infidels and exclude them from the community of Islam. They use such rhetoric in their verbal war with practically all organizations of political Islamism and the regimes of Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Iran.

On the contrary, the messages directed to non-Muslims, always in the spirit of moderation, convey the idea of universal humanism. The Association's goal in this respect is to serve all mankind, *al-bashariyya jam'ā'* or *jamī' al-nās*. Non-Muslim minorities within Islamic societies are worthy of full respect by a moderate, flexible Islam. Both state identity and Arabism in the Middle East should be enhanced as common denominators. In their conceptualization of Middle Eastern politics, the Ahbash separate religion and state. They have almost no argument with any regime that does not prevent their activities, and would support anyone, even if leftist–socialist and secular, who would help to combat Islamic radicalism. The Ahbash declare they do not oppose lawful, established governments, and it is not their business to intervene in politics, surely not to change rulers through assassination.[34]

In Christian–Islamic Lebanon, to reiterate, the Ahbash have implemented most of their ideas. They participate in politics, on both the national and the municipal levels, and do so in full cooperation with the state system. Asked why the Association opened a branch in one of Beirut's mostly Christian neighborhoods, 'Adnan al-Tarabulsi replied: "In order to serve all people and enhance good Islamic–Christian coexistence."[35] The Ahbash attitudes and activities are often praised by the Christian leadership. Of the many relevant examples, we mention only the words of Elie Farazli, vice chairman of the parliament: "The Association of Islamic Philanthropic Projects, by its blessed activities, lives up to its name. Between us and its leaders there has been built a bond of friendship, and we see the association as a pillar and a symbol of our sublime national enterprise in Lebanon."[36] For their part, the Ahbash conceive of Lebanon as a fully legitimate, indeed an ideal, territorial nation-state. They praise Lebanese nationalism, *waṭaniyya lubnāniyya*, as the basis of society and combine it organically with Ba'th-style secular Arabism. They call the combination "the common path" (*al-masār al-mushtarak*) and define it as "a realistic strategic vision."[37] The Association's monthly, *Manar al-Huda*, dedicates issues to Lebanese and to all Arab holidays and anniversaries. The Association's schools made it a custom to celebrate the anniversary of Hafiz al-Asad's

coming to power in Syria, in October 1970, occasions on which the pan-Arab Ba'thist slogan, "A unified Arab nation of eternal legacy," is wielded. In the words of ʿAbd al-Qadir al-Fakhani, the editor of *Manar Al-Huda*, "The Lebanese *waṭan* is ours, and we are its guardians. . . . We have to defend it from any internal splits and treachery. . . . Lebanon knows that Syria is her defender and her backing, the way she knows that Arabism is her identity."[38]

The message to Western societies, especially to those that host Islamic communities, is also one of cooperation and appeasement. It aims to enhance the image of Islam as a set of moralities, surely not as a militant ideology. Answering a question about their goal in Europe and the United States, the Ahbash Website stated, "Like elsewhere in the world our aim there is to spread religious knowledge among those who suffer from ignorance, and also to warn people of those fanatics who claim to represent Islam but do so in the most negative way."[39] The governments of the United States, Europe, and Australia do indeed welcome the Ahbash activities among their Muslim citizens. In the eyes of the Ahbash, these governments are like the righteous Christian *najāshī*, who hosted the *ṣaḥāba* and helped them to build Islam.

RIVALRY WITH THE WAHHABIYYA

The fundamentals of al-Ahbash differ categorically from those of the Wahhabiyya and of all others who work toward reinstating Islam's political supremacy. The founders of the Wahhabiyya, in their writings—on which we cannot elaborate here—mostly ignored Islam's positive concepts of Ethiopia and Ethiopians. The more the Ahbash gained influence in Lebanon and internationally, especially since the mid-1990s, the more their verbal war with the Wahhabiyya escalated. It had, as mentioned, its personal roots in Ethiopia of the 1940s. It is clear, however, that once Shaykh Yusuf moved to Medina in 1976, he missed no opportunity to fight his archrival with the help of his hosts. He managed to convince the Saudi religious establishment that Shaykh ʿAbdalla, in collaborating with Haile Selassie's regime, was primarily behind the above-mentioned failure of the Islamic movement, which worked to liberate Harar from the Ethiopian–Christian yoke. The alleged foiling of political Islam in Harar by Shaykh ʿAbdalla and his associates came to be known as *fitnat al-kulūb*, "the fraternal strife of the Club."[40] Calling Shaykh ʿAbdalla "*al-shaykh al-fattān*,"[41] the Wahhabis and their supporters miss no opportunity to repeat their story about his formative sin against Islam in Harar and the failure to liberate Harar from Christian Ethiopia. The Ahbash, for their part, dismiss the story of *fitnat al-kulūb,* and do so without bothering about details. If anything, they accuse Shaykh Yusuf himself and his Wahhabi influence of failing Islam in Harar and in Ethiopia during the decade after Mussolini's occupation of Ethiopia (1936–41).[42]

In the mid-1980s, the Ahbash began to clash with their Islamic rivals, including Wahhabi and other groups in Lebanon. Although still a marginal movement, it had already drawn the attention of the Wahhabi establishment in Saudi Arabia. There is no doubt that Shaykh Yusuf in Medina did his very best to alert his Saudi hosts. In July 1986, Saudi Arabia's chief Islamic jurist, Shaykh ʿAbd al-ʿAziz bin ʿAbdalla bin Baz (d. 1999), issued a fatwa declaring that: "The association of al-Ahbash is a misguided group which is outside *ahl al-sunna wa-l-jamāʿa* . . . No one should rely on their fatwas because they are deviators and their word contradicts the Qurʾan and the Sunna. No

one should trust them and all should beware of them and of any group identified with them."[43]

The ensuing verbal clash was too extensive to describe systematically. In the early 1990s, it was still nonviolent. In November 1992, for example, the Saudi journal *al-Muslimun* (affiliated with ʿAbd al-ʿAziz bin Baz) ran a series of articles on the "Strange Ethiopian" who came alone from Harar and managed to establish a whole new religious community in Lebanon. *Al-Muslimun*'s journalist managed to interview Nizar Halabi and made a central point of the Ahbash attitude toward women. He asked Halabi why they accepted women who did not wear traditional Islamic dress. The answer was that the Ahbash prefer women to be active, they can wear jeans ("like in Ethiopia"), and that the Association took pride in the fact that they encouraged free communication between the sexes.[44] In 1994, the Ahbash-Wahhabi exchanges escalated further when Shaykh ʿAbdalla issued his book in Beirut entitled, *The Sublime Sayings in Exposing the Wrongs of Ibn Taymiyya*. This was a harsh attack on the spiritual father of Wahhabism, in which the head of the Ahbash stated that "Ibn Taymiyya's knowledge was larger than his brain. He deviated from Islamic consensus on more than sixty issues. He misled many people and was himself exposed by many scholars as one who spreads heretical innovations."[45] In the same book, Shaykh ʿAbdalla also attacked ʿAbd al-Wahhab himself. He accused the founder of the Wahhabiyya of inventing sayings he claimed to have been derived from the Qurʾan or the Sunna, and attacked him on issues such as forbidding cults of tombs and visiting shrines of holy men (a pillar of Sufi Islam).[46] The contention of the followers of Ibn Taymiyya and of ʿAbd al-Wahhab, that they are *salafi*, namely, that they follow in the path of the founding fathers of Islam, is absurd, wrote Shaykh ʿAbdalla. Their movement is not *salafiyya*. It rather leads believers through false innovations and away from the formative examples of the founding generations.[47]

One of many Wahhabi responses was issued a year later, in 1995. A leader of the Wahhabis in Sidney, Australia, Abu Suhayb ʿAbd al-ʿAziz al-Maliki, published a book entitled, *The Sublime Sayings in Exposing the Wrongs of the Ahbash Group*. One main aim of the book was to expose the Ahbash as collaborators with non-Muslims. No wonder, he wrote, that they were praised by the Christians in Lebanon. They celebrate together with Christians as if they were the same nation. They also share their culture. They cooperated with the Christian "Lebanon's Youth" movement in organizing a "Festival of Joy and Smiles," he wrote sarcastically, "and a band of al-Ahbash, under the maestro of *ahl al-sunna wa-l-jamāʿa*, Jamal Shamaʿa, played Islamic music on electronic drums, to make it sound western."[48] The book included quotations about the Ahbash by other leaders of Wahhabi and Muslim Brothers groups in the Middle East. Shaykh Saʿid Shaʿban, for example, the leader of al-Tawhid al-Islami in Lebanon, called the Ahbash "a group which shed the spirit of Islam," whereas Fikri Ismaʿil, an official in the Egyptian Ministry of *awqāf* lamented the schism within *ahl al-sunna wa-l-jamāʿa* and blamed it all on the Ahbash. There is no precedent, he wrote, for Muslims accusing such leading scholars of heresy and doing it in such blunt language. He added, "It is the first time that a foreigner comes from the land of Ethiopia, who is a strange man in his conduct and his ideas, and in the style through which he works to tear *ahl al-sunna* apart . . . He is a radical *shuʿubi* who hates Arabs on one hand, and a *shiʿi* who bears a grudge against the *sunna* on the other."[49]

The Wahhabi counterattack is tridimensional. They blame the Ahbash for combining what they consider Sufi polytheism, *shirk*, with Shiʿi covert anti-Sunna tactics. The Wahhabis accuse the Ahbash of endorsing the Shiʿites' historical enmity with the Umayyads and add that they do so to cooperate with the Shiʿa in combating the Sunna. The Ahbash contention, the Wahhabis say, that they are Ashʿaris and thus they represent Sunni consensus, is just a cover for subverting Islam. Shaykh ʿAbdalla's persistent praise for Arab nationalism would not be accepted by the Wahhabis. The Ahbash are rather the enemies of the Arabs, they say, like the early Shuʿubiyya movement, which denied any privileged position of the Arabs. Moreover, Shaykh ʿAbdalla's claim to a Qurayshi origin is false. He is an Ethiopian and a foreigner.[50]

Wahhabi anti-Ahbash contemporary literature, it should be emphasized, turned only rarely to such ethnic, racial arguments. Just as the supporters of the Ahbash the world over were proud to be named after what symbolized the supraethnic universality of Islam, so their rivals were cautious not to fall publicly into a racial trap. The origin of Shaykh ʿAbdalla is rarely openly held against him, only hinted at indirectly and subtly. One exception, like this of Fikri Ismaʿil, was the famous *salafī* preacher, the Egyptian Ahmad Shalabi, who explained why the Ahbash were so narrow-minded: "They do not have a wide perspective on Islamic ideas because their leader, ʿAbdalla al-Habashi, was brought up in Ethiopia, in an environment lacking basic religious scholarship, and it was for that reason that his group developed on the basis of primitive concepts."[51] A prominent leader of the *salafī*, Wahhabi-oriented movement in Jordan, Shaykh Abu Malik (Muhammad Shaqra) attacked Shaykh ʿAbdalla in an Internet interview and described him as "a skin-diseased, stranger raven." He further suggested that all Ethiopians are as much infidels as Christians and Jews.[52] In countering such arguments, Shaykh ʿAbdalla himself avoids overemphasizing the ethnic issue. Proud of his Ethiopian-ness, he nevertheless occasionally preaches about Islam's disregard of color. In one of his "Lessons by Sheikh ʿAbdalla" series, published in *Manar al-Huda*, he wrote:

The prophet attached no importance to look or origin. Usama was the son of Zayd the grandson of Haritha, [who had been an Ethiopian from Yemen]. The Prophet married Zayd, who was his servant, to Umm Ayman the Ethiopian, who was the Prophet's nurse. Usama was black. The Prophet's cousin al-Fadl ibn al-ʿAbbas was a handsome fellow and fair-skinned. But the Prophet attached no importance to that. When he would make his way to Mecca he would first take Usama as a companion, because Usama had adopted Islam earlier. Only then would he take al-Fadl.[53]

The journal of al-Ahbash, *Manar al-Huda,* is another platform for conveying their messages, including their attacks on the Wahhabis. These attacks became harsher after the assassination of Nizar al-Halabi. The Wahhabis were now referred to as "extremists" and "terrorists." "We are not prepared to give in to those who only damage Islam with their thoughts and deeds," ran one piece, "we will not allow them to spread their black, extreme ideas."[54] Readers from all over the world send letters identifying with this stand. Some denounce the Wahhabis boldly; some more indirectly. "Your journal is important in directing the believers on the right path of the Prophet," wrote a reader from India, "and in fighting the false innovations and the lies of those deviators who believe in the personification of God."[55]

The introduction of the internet added a very vital dimension to this inter-Islamic battle. The Wahhabi–Ahbash debate turned into one of the more heated issues on

various Islamic websites. The Ahbash opened their own website, "The Boat of Salvation" (http://www.safeena.org), alluding perhaps to the boat(s?) that carried the first Muslims to their salvation in Ethiopia. Their rivals countered by opening the website http://www.antihabashis.com. In addition to endless variations on the accusations already mentioned, the "anti-habashis," to add one more example, denounced a statement made by ʿAdnan al-Tarabulsi that he was ready to make peace with Israel if its conditions met the approval of an Arab consensus. "Better that the Ahbash make peace with other Muslims," was the response, "before they make peace with the Jews."[56] The Ahbash readiness to accept Jews as legitimate neighbors, almost as they accept Christians (on the basis of righteousness), was occasionally used by the Wahhabis against them. In "Exposing the Wrongs of the Ahbash," Abu Suhayb al-Maliki quoted scholars from Beirut who testified that Shaykh ʿAbdalla had issued a fatwa during the Israeli invasion of the town in 1982 forbidding to resist them. Having issued this fatwa, these scholars said, Shaykh ʿAbdalla fled to the Christian-controlled area of eastern Beirut.[57]

Another website identified with the Wahhabiyya accused the Ahbash of collaborating with the United States against Islam. It reported on an American secret document, which recommended destroying all branches of the Muslim Brothers throughout the Arab world, together with all those who called for a holy war against Israel, and replacing them with branches of al-Ahbash.[58]

POINTS OF THEOLOGICAL AND CONCEPTUAL DISPUTES

The contemporary bitter conflict between the Ahbash and the Wahhabiyya is over major, principal issues: the unity (or disunity) of Islam on one hand, and how Muslims should conceive of Christians and Jews on the other. Beyond those concrete accusations and different conceptualizations of the "other," there is a deeper dispute over the essence of the Islamic "self." Below, we discuss some of the main points over which these rivals trade arguments in the same spirit of mutual intolerance.

The Personification of God and His Omnipotence

The central fundamental of the Wahhabiyya is the all-Islamic concept of *tawḥīd*, the uniqueness, oneness, of the omnipotent and ever-involved God. (Indeed the Wahhabis rather call themselves *muwaḥḥidūn*.) The Ahbash, however, attribute to the Wahhabis, and to all other *salafī* movements, the idea that they actually conceive God as a human being. They call them *mushabbihūn*, those who personify God through such resemblance, and thus, in fact, act like *mushrikūn*, pagans.[59]

One famous case in point are the interpretations of the Qurʾanic sentence describing God seated (*istawā*) on his throne after creating the world.[60] According to Wahhabi texts, this means that he sat like a human being (*jalasa*). According to Shaykh ʿAbdalla, it meant that he took control of the world.[61] Based on that, ʿAbdalla tries to disprove the Wahhabi contention that they conceive God as omnipresent. He told his followers: "They say God is anywhere and not in a defined place, because he is above his throne and this is not a defined place. But any vacuum has a defined volume, and thus by the Wahhabi approach the volume where God is present is definable, it has a beginning and has an end." This is very different from his own interpretation:

Every object in this world has not been here forever. There was a force which had created it. This force has existed forever, it has no beginning. The knowledge of God cannot be true only through the belief that this world has a creator that resembles nothing. His volume is not material nor substantial. It is not big or small, it is not fixed or mobile. It is beyond any materialistic concept of volume. Anyone who knows that can know God. Anyone who does not know this is ignorant, he is not a Muslim nor a believer.

   He continued:

The Wahhabis and their predecessors among the *mushabbihūn* think that God has a body. They rely on superficial interpretations of Qurʾanic sentences and traditions. This superficiality creates the impression that God has a body, a movement, a presence in a certain place, he has limbs, laughter, etc. All these sentences and traditions have deeper meanings than those superficial interpretations.

In his lectures, Shaykh ʿAbdalla often mocked the Wahhabis on this issue and said that they "fell into the trap of heresy by such simplistic interpretations."[62]

   The al-Ahbash accuse the Wahhabis of personifying God, but the latter accuse the former of limiting his abilities. The consensual Islamic concept is that God is omnipotent ("*Allahu qādir ʿalā kulli shay*"), but according to a Wahhabi book critical of Shaykh ʿAbdalla, he in fact deviated from this consensus when he stated that God could not be an oppressor or a tyrant, which suggested that there were things beyond God's abilities. The Wahhabi approach, based on a famous traditional saying, is that God forbade himself to be oppressive.[63]

The Word of the Qurʾan and Its Eternal Nature

The Wahhabis attribute to Shaykh ʿAbdalla quotations that they interpret as expressions of doubt regarding the origin of the Qurʾan. They say he follows the contention of the *muʿtazila* that the Qurʾan was created like all other entities and accuse him of suggesting it is, therefore, not eternal.[64]

   In his responses, Shaykh ʿAbdalla does not deny the *muʿtazila* approach and his explanation is not fully compatible with the consensus of *ahl al-sunna*: "The word of God is a trait inseparable from God himself," he wrote. "It is ancient and eternal, a word with no specific beginning. Anything which is part of God cannot take the shape of a letter or a sound."[65]

   Elsewhere, he further explained:

God, the exalted, does not resemble any of his creatures. He has abilities that they do not have, has will they do not have, has knowledge they do not have, has speech they do not have. God speaks words of no voice or letters, he does not speak like human beings. They speak in letters and voices because this is a human trait. But it does not befit God to speak like that, and his word is not a voice or letters. Gabriel listened to His word, understood it, and passed it on to the prophets and the angels.[66]

Reaching God Through Cult of Saints

In his lectures and fatwas, Shaykh ʿAbdalla encourages his followers to perform the *ziyāra*, visiting the graves of *awliyyāʾ*, the holy men of early Islam. Reaching God through intercession (*tawaṣṣul*) is not only a principle that developed to become a main

characteristic of Sufism but also a custom prevalent among Muslims of all walks of life.[67] It is, however, strictly forbidden by the Wahhabiyya, which considers *ziyāra* an expression of *shirk*, paganism. In his writings, Ibn Taymiyya often recycled the tradition connecting this custom to Christian Ethiopians as a model of heresy:

God's curse on the Jews and the Christians who turned the graves of their prophets into houses of prayer. It was transmitted by the name of ʿAisha that Umm Habiba and Umm Salma [who had been among the emigrants to Ethiopia] told the Prophet of a church they had seen in Ethiopia with paintings in it. He [the Prophet] said: those people, if one of their righteous men died, they built a house of prayer over his grave and painted those paintings in it. These are the worst of human beings in the eyes of God on the day of insurrection.[68]

In his book attacking Ibn Taymiyya, Shaykh ʿAbdalla preferred not to mention the Ethiopian point (visiting graves is widespread in Ethiopia's popular Islam), but to turn to the Wahhabi's home court:

Know that turning to dead saints and holy men for favors and visiting their graves with the aim of speeding their responses is an old custom of the early Muslims, *al-salaf*. One proof is that the Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal [the founder of the legal school followed by the Wahhabis] supported it, which contradicts the false innovations introduced by Ibn Taymiyya and his followers. . . . We have to clarify here that a consensus among the scholars asserted the legitimacy of turning to dead holy men, and that visiting their graves is not *shirk*, and not forbidden.[69]

To counter this attack on one of the fundamentals of Wahhabiyya, the antihabashis.com website responded that the imam al-Shafiʿi, founder of the legal school followed by the Ahbash, had himself forbidden the custom. The scholars of the Ahbash answered by quoting another tradition attributed to al-Shafiʿi, in which he described himself as daily visiting a holy grave, praying to the saint, and noting that the saint duly responded. They also immediately added a passage from Ibn Hanbal endorsing *ziyāra*.[70]

One example often mentioned by the Ahbash of the prevalence of *ziyāra* in the early, holy period of Islam, is that of Bilal ibn Rabah. Bilal al-Habashi, an Ethiopian slave emancipated by Abu Bakr, was the fourth man to follow the Prophet (and "the first fruit of Ethiopia"). He was later the first *muʿadhdhin* and became one symbol of the purity attributed to Ethiopian Muslims.[71] (It was due to him that a traditional saying asserted that "the caliphate will go to Quraysh, judicial authority to the Auxiliaries, and the calling for prayers to the Ethiopians."[72]) It was said of Bilal that, after the death of the Prophet, he used to visit his grave, prostrate himself, kiss the stone, and pray.[73]

Rulers, Islam, and Politics

The relationship between religion, state, and politics is undoubtedly the most important question separating the Ahbash and the Wahhabis. This question can be divided into two categories: the nature of these relations in countries outside the "land of Islam" and their relations within it.

When it comes to citizenship in non-Islamic countries, the Ahbash approach is clear: Muslims should abide by local laws and take an active part in the politics of the host countries. The principal model, clearly, is the Prophet-*najāshī* story. It was the Prophet himself who told the early believers that the Christian *najāshī* was a righteous king, and

he himself ordered them to seek asylum with him, live, and prosper in Christian Ethiopia. It was Ja'far bin Abi Talib who negotiated with the king and befriended him. As long as the Ethiopians "left [the Muslims] alone" to live like Muslims, the *ṣaḥāba* supported the Ethiopian ruler. In the spirit of this precedent, Muslim communities should participate in the lives and politics of nonoppressive non-Islamic regimes. In the eyes of Shaykh 'Abdalla, all authentic and righteous monotheistic believers are indeed Muslims. There are Jewish Muslims and Christian Muslims, he explains, and the *najāshī* was the model of the latter. As a righteous king, he was of the closest to God, and all Muslims should learn about him and his humanity.[74]

The approach of the Islamic fundamentalists and the Wahhabis to cases outside the land of Islam is, needless to say, the polar opposite.[75] Here again, a principal precedent often discussed is that of the early Muslims and Ethiopia. One example among many is that of Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, an exiled Egyptian Islamic thinker, widely regarded as the supreme religious authority of contemporary Islamic fundamentalism. "Islam will return to Europe as a conqueror," he wrote in December 2002 in a fatwa. "I maintain that the conquest this time will not be by the sword but by preaching and ideology."[76] On the one hand, al-Qaradawi prohibited Muslims' participation in the 1996 Israeli parliamentary elections. (He thus caused a split in the Islamic Movement in Israel. The wing that did participate also relied on the Islamic-Ethiopian precedent.) On the other hand, al-Qaradawi permitted participation in American elections. In his February 2002 fatwa, he explained:

America is a nation composed of immigrant communities from all over the world . . . It is a young country. Its cultural patterns are still open to influence from Islam. It also provides Islam with an opportunity to contribute to its growth. It is a country that respects the freedoms of all religions to exist regardless of some shortcomings. Based on the above mentioned . . . it is incumbent upon Muslims to participate in politics effectively in America.

The Ethiopian–Islamic precedent, Shaykh al-Qaradawi continued, has a relevant lesson:

In order for Muslims to gain their rights in this country, and their positive interaction with the native people of this country, it requires from us consultation and agreement on the main principles of Islam, and we should excuse each other on the minor differences. The righteous Companions of the Prophet set up an example hundreds of years ago when they met to consult each other on the best response to the critical situation during their migration to Ethiopia . . . Exactly as Ja'far b. Abi Talib did in his speech in front of the Najashi, when he stated the principles of Islam and the difference between Islam and darkness. In doing so, Muslims not only gain support and sympathy of others but an encouragement to others to follow the path of Islam. Muslims in America should familiarize themselves with the art of communication and public relations. Again, Ja'far's example . . . when he ended his speech addressing the [Ethiopian] king saying, "we have come to your country, we have chosen you among kings, we seek your neighborhood, and seek not to be dealt with unjustly.[77]

Whereas the Ahbash's emphasis is on the human friendliness of the *najāshī*, and potentially of other non-Muslims,[78] the fundamentalists' emphasis is on unifying Islamic action for obtaining rights, spreading influence, and gaining victory. The difference is sharper when the issue is the relations with rulers within the land of Islam. In practice, we saw, the Ahbash cooperate politically with the Christians of Lebanon and with the Syrian

Ba'thist and 'Alawi regimes. They praise the latter as champions of Arab nationalism and the former as defenders of Lebanese patriotism. For that, they come under Wahhabi attack, accused of supporting rulers who are not Muslims and who do not make an effort to apply Islamic law. The Ahbash position is that, in so doing, they follow in the old path of *ahl al-sunna wa-l-jamāʿa* and their scholars who always preferred stability over anarchy within Islam.[79] Shaykh ʿAbdalla explained this approach: "We do not find it necessary to undermine our rulers and leaders even when they act like tyrants. We do not call to topple them or disobey them. We consider obeying them as an extension of our obeying God. It is our duty to do so as long as those rulers do not try to force us to disobey God."

To strengthen this argument, the shaykh quotes a saying attributed to the Prophet: "He who did not like his ruler's deeds, let him restrain himself." The best the believers can do is "pray to God to amend their ways."[80]

The Wahhabi doctrine recognizes no separation of religion and state. Abu Talal al-Qasimi, one of the important Wahhabi preachers, delivered one of the many sermons against the Ahbash support for rulers who themselves had abandoned Islam. He quoted Shaykh Ahmad Shakir, a well-known mufti:

> In many Islamic communities there are those who have faith in leaders who deviated from Islam and who do not follow the shariʿa. These leaders undermine Islamic law explaining that they seek modernity and progress. No true Muslim can support such action or ally himself with such rulers. Anyone who does so, plainly, clearly and unequivocally, is committing a blunt and an absolute heresy.[81]

CONCLUSION

Lebanon and Ethiopia bear some historical similarities. They are mountainous citadels in which Christians managed to retain their political identity: "Christian islands" in an "Islamic sea." In Lebanon, as it was reconstructed in 1861, the Christians enjoyed hegemony within a multireligious arrangement. For over a hundred years, Lebanon existed as a model of religious coexistence. This structure and atmosphere came to an end in the 1970s. The internal interreligious politic and the culture of moderation that maintained it were both shattered. The land that used to be a source of inspiration for Islamic–Christian dialogue became itself an unstable home for various radicals. The Ahbash, we have seen, occasionally add to the fire. Their message, however, is one of flexible Islam, able to redefine various cultural, social, and theological issues, and able to coexist peacefully with non-Muslims.

Ethiopia's Christian hegemony was more solid and more ancient. Ethiopia was a Christian state for over sixteen centuries, perhaps the last political entity to integrally combine the Cross and the Crown, and did so until 1974. Muslims comprised a good half of the population, but their communities were marginalized and disunited along linguistic and ethnic lines. Their Islam was only rarely revitalized to inspire political action, and very seldom did it seek victory over Christianity. Most Muslims, especially since the 1880s, conceived themselves first as Ethiopians. Their Islam had vivid Sufi dimensions, often combined with the flexible, sober rationality needed for interreligious coexistence.

Ethiopia's Christian hegemony collapsed at roughly the same time as Lebanon's. The Communist regime of Mangistu Haile Mariam, 1974–91, systematically undermined the

Ethiopian church. Although it declared religious equality, it also alienated the Muslims. The new regime that came to power in Addis Ababa in 1991 has redefined Ethiopia as a multiethnic federation and, for the first time in history, energized processes that enable Muslims to make it into the very core of culture, society, economy, and politics. The Muslims in today's Ethiopia are in fact quite divided in coping with their own new momentum. The majority continue to conceive themselves as Ethiopians first. Like their fellow "Ethiopians" in Lebanon, they aspire to an Ethiopia of open dialogue on equal footing. Their minority, strong enough to be a rising factor, consider the land of the *najāshī* an integral part of the land of Islam. The more activist cells, popularly known as Wahhabiyya, aspire and work toward an Islamic victory. Indirectly at least, they do benefit from intensive Saudi economic involvement in Ethiopia's young market economy. Thus, the struggle between Shaykh Yusuf al-Harari and Shaykh ʿAbdalla al-Harari that began in Ethiopia of the 1930s has gone full circle through Arabia, Lebanon, and back. In fact, in 2003, Shaykh ʿAbdalla paid another visit to Harar during which he distributed an Amharic translation of his anti-Wahhabi text *Mukhtaṣar sharḥ kitab al-ʿAqida*.[82] In 2004, Shaykh Yusuf also returned to Harar. Both aging rivals are doing their very best to energize an already heated struggle in Harar—radiating strongly to other Muslim communities in the country—between Habashis and Wahhabis, as each party stigmatizes the other as infidels.

   The story of these two old rivals reflects Islam's globalization and its discourse today. Until recently, the town of Harar was a remote microcosmos in Africa, seldom connected to the major centers of Middle Eastern Islam. Ethiopia, as both a Christian land and a country of large Islamic communities, was "left alone" for centuries, mostly ignored by the greater Islamic world. Western scholars, following separate African and Middle Eastern specializations, tended to overlook what contact there was across the Red Sea and up the Nile basin. As exemplified here, this is no longer the case. What began in the 1930s as a local quarrel in a forgotten walled city in Ethiopia has developed into a prism that reflects a transcontinental, all-Islamic debate. Readdressing the formative dichotomies stemming from the initial episode of Christian Ethiopia as the first foreign relations case of Islam, the struggle between Shaykh Yusuf and Shaykh ʿAbdalla helps to define some of today's major dilemmas. It helps to clarify the different conceptualizations of the non-Islamic "other" and of the Islamic "self." The debates between Ahbash and Wahhabis delve into questions such as the nature of politics, the legitimacy of the nation state and of ethnic nationalism, the place of women in society, the significance of race and color, the essence of God and how to reach Him, the legacies of history, the role of law, and the messages of morality.

   What we have reconstructed here is indeed one dimension of the struggle within Islam. The confrontation between the Ahbash and the Wahhabiyya is arguably harsher than the clash between Muslims and non-Muslims. The Ahbash represents a moderate interpretation that developed in countries where Muslims experienced lengthy dialogs with Christians. The Wahhabis developed their puritan concepts in the desert and recently have combined with branches of the Muslim Brothers to reemerge as leaders of transnational fundamentalism. The latter, needless to say, should not be identified automatically with today's wave of violent radicalism. Militant, terrorist Islam is a different set of concepts whose story is outside our scope here. Yet, if we had to deal with this aspect, we would also return to Harar. The "Ethiopian Islamic" messages of

Shaykh ʿAbdalla and the Wahhabi fundamentalism of Shaykh Yusuf are not the only voices in town. In 1991, young Hamdi Ishaq left his native Harar and, together with many of his generation, moved to Europe. He changed his name to Hussein ʿUthman and, on 21 July 2005, attempted to blow up a London Underground station in protest of Western aggression and in the service of Islam's global victory.

NOTES

[1] In Europe and the United States, it is also called AICP, the Association of Islamic Charitable Projects.

[2] For an analysis of Wahhabi–Saudi inner conceptual dualities as reflected in a 1982 public argument over the significance of Christian Ethiopia, see Haggai Erlich, "The Saudis and Ethiopia—Which Islam?," in *Proceedings of the XV International Conference of Ethiopian Studies,* ed. S. Uhlig (Hamburg: in press).

[3] al-Bukhari, *Sahih,* vol. 2., ed. al-Bagha (Beirut: 1997), 577–99; Muslim, *Sahih,* vol. 4., ed. ʿAbd al-Baqi (Beirut: 1983), 2232. The tradition about the "lean legged (*dhū al-suwayqatayn*) Ethiopians, they will [eventually] destroy the *kaʿba*" in the end of time, is widely quoted and can be found in the earliest and the most revered canonical hadith compilations, those of al-Bukhari and Muslim.

[4] For an analysis of this dichotomy in Islam's conceptualization of Ethiopia, as well as for relevant sources, see H. Erlich, "Muhammad's Message: Leave the Abyssinians Alone," in *Ethiopia and the Middle East* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1994), chap. 1 and H. Erlich, "Christianity and Islam: The Formative Concepts," in *The Cross and the River, Ethiopia, Egypt and the Nile* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002), chap. 2. For a detailed analysis of Saudi–Ethiopian relations as of the 1930s, see H. Erlich, *Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia: Islam, Christianity, and Politics Entwined* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, in press).

[5] "*Habash,*" in Ibn Manzur (al-Ifriqi), *Lisan al-ʿArab,* vol. 6 (Beirut: n.d.), 278–79.

[6] See a detailed analysis in Bernard Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East, An Historical Inquiry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); see also the section "habasha" in P. Fernando de Moraes Farias, "The Enslaved Barbarian," in *Slaves and Slavery in Muslim Africa,* vol. II, ed. John Ralph Willis (London: Frank Cass, 1985), 36–41; also Reiner Voigt, "Abyssinia," in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica,* vol. I, ed. S. Uhlig (Wiesbaden: Harrassovitz Verlag, 2003), 59–65.

[7] Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti, *Rafʿ shaʿn al-hubshan* (al-Suyuti died in Cairo in 1505); Ahmad al-Hifni al-Qinaʾi, *Jawahir al-hisan fi taʾrikh al-hubshan,* Cairo 1902–03.

[8] On Bilal bin Rabah, "Bilal al-habashi," see Erlich, *Ethiopia and the Middle East,* 6, 10, 37, 81.

[9] The author of this manuscript is ʿAbd al-Baqi al-Bukhari al-Makki. Akbar Muhammad, "The Image of Africans in Arabic Literature: Some Unpublished Manuscripts," in Willis, *Slaves and Slavery,* vol. I, 47–74.

[10] Patricia Crone, " 'Even an Ethiopian Slave': The Transformation of a Sunni Tradition," *BSOAS,* 1994, 59–67; Lewis, *Race and Slavery,* 34.

[11] H. Erlich, "The Wahhabiyya and Ethiopia 1936–1948," in *Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2007), chap. 3.

[12] For the story of Harar, Wahhabi influence in the 1940s, the rivalry between the two shaykhs, and details on their lives, see also two unpublished manuscripts available in the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University. The first was written by Muhammad Yusuf Ismaʿil in Cairo in 1997, and is titled "Qissat al-kulub" ("The Story of the Club"), 126 pp. See note 41. The second is titled "al-Rasaʾil al-thalath" ("The Three Messages"), 148 pp., which was written by Shaykh Yusuf in Medina in 2002 in response to "Qissat al-kulub."

[13] Yusuf, *Al-Rasaʾil al-thalath,* 121.

[14] http://www.alhabashi.info/

[15] See more in Daniel Nassif, "Al-Ahbash," *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin* 3 (2000).

[16] On the radio station, see http://www.namradio.com/

[17] On the Ahbash usage of the Internet, see Thomas Pierret, "Internet in a Sectarian Islamic Context," *The International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World* 15 (2005): 50.

[18] On those activities, see, for example, *Manar Al-Huda* 93 (December 2000): 36–42.

[19] http://www.metransparent.com/

[20] http://www.aicp.de and www.islami.de/

[21] "Some of AICP Centers Worldwide," http://www.aicp.org

[22] See, for example, the English translation (and appendixes) of Shaykh ʿAbdalla's "Mukhtasar al-ʿaqida al-sunniyya," *The Summary of Abdullah al-Harari, The Guarantor of the Islamic Obligatory Knowledge,* 1412 A.H.–1992 R.C. (Wallingford, PA: Association of Islamic Charitable Projects, Islamic Studies and Research Division).

[23] *Manar al-Huda* 130 (May 2004): 3–5.

[24] One high-ranking activist of the Association gave the authors the following estimate of members: Lebanon, 100,000; Jordan, 500–600; Egypt, a few hundred; East Asia, 50,000–70,000; Australia, 10,000; Europe and the United States, 50,000–70,000.

[25] Harsi Muhammad Haylula, *Mukhtasar al-ʿaqida al-sunniya li-l-ʿalama ʿAbdalla al-Harari* (Malaysia: n.d.), 13.

[26] Emmanuel Sivan, *Radical Islam: Medieval Theology and Modern Politics* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985), especially 94–104; Muhammad Hasanayn Haykal, *Kharif al-ghadab* (Beirut: 1986), 284–87.

[27] G. Makdisi, "The Sunni Revival," in *Islamic Civilization, 950–1150,* ed. D. S. Richards (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973); for Shaykh ʿAbdalla's admiration for al-Ghazali, see his book *al-Sirat al-mustaqim* (Beirut: Burj Abi Haydar Mosque, 1993), 21; see also an article in the association's periodical: Shaykh Muhammad Yaʾrub Basaj, "al-Imam al-Ghazali: Ashʿari, sufi, ʿarif bi-allah," *Manar Al-Huda* 87 (May 2000): 48–51.

[28] http://www.alhabashi.info/. On al-Azhar and Ethiopia, see Erlich, *The Cross and the River,* 40, 68, 91–93, 104, 130, 186.

[29] For the shaykh's relevant studies and authorizations, see http://www.alhabashi.info/ and Nizar Hamza and H. Dekmejian, "A Sufi Response to Political Islamism: Al-Ahbash of Lebanon," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 28 (1996): 217–29.

[30] "al-Tasawwuf al-sahih," http://www.arabray.com/

[31] Hamza and Dekmejian, "A Sufi Response to Political Islamism."

[32] Haylula, *Mukhtasar al-ʿaqida,* p. 14.

[33] Shaykh ʿAbdalla's lecture in Amman, January 2003; Haylula, *Mukhtasar al-ʿaqida,* 13.

[34] Haylula, *Mukhtasar al-ʿaqida,* 13–14.

[35] *Manar Al-Huda* 40 (February 1996): 13; *Jamʿiyyat al-mashariʿ al-khayriyya al-islamiyya fi lubnan, sira wa-injazat* (Beirut: n.d.), 40–45.

[36] *Manar Al-Huda* 24 (August 1994): 57.

[37] *Manar Al-Huda* 89 (July 2000): 3–4.

[38] *Manar Al-Huda* 101 (October 2001): 3; see also *Manar Al-Huda* 60 (November 1997): 4, 5, 17, 24.

[39] http://www.safeena.org

[40] Muhamad Yusuf Ismaʿil, "Qissat al-kulub." See note 12. The story of Harar in 1947–48 and what came to be known as *"fitnat al-kulūb"* is too complicated to be told here. On 21 January 1948, the Ethiopian authorities arrested 81 members of the Somali Youth Club branch in Harar. Thus, there ended a long story, beginning in 1941, of a local Islamic, Wahhabi-inspired effort, led by Shaykh Yusuf, to gain Harari independence from Ethiopia. Shaykh Yusuf blamed Shaykh ʿAbdalla in collaborating with the Ethiopians and in tricking the Harari activists to join the pan-Somali cause. He thus helped exposing them to the authorities and killed the chance of gaining Islamic independence. For British reports, see PRO, FO 371/63216, 371/69423, and WO 230/236, 170/1454.

[41] Z. al-Zamil, "Islamic Sects and Followings: Al-Ahbash, Their History and Their Beliefs," http://www.islamicweb.com/; see more at http://www.albarghothy.net and http://www.anthihabashis.com/

[42] *Manar Al-Huda* 31 (May 1995); Haylula, *Mukhtasar al-ʿaqida,* 6–11.

[43] "Fatwat hayʾ at kibar al-ʿulamaʾ fi ʿAbdalla al-Habashi" [fatwa no. 19606], http://www.antihabashis.com/

[44] *Al-Muslimun* [Riyadh], 20 November (1992). On the contrary, the Ahbash Websites insist women remain obedient to their husbands and acknowledge their superiority. The idea of female liberation is presented as dangerous to society and family. "Tahdhir al-nisaʾ min al-khuruj bila faʾida" and "Husn al-ʿishra bayna al-zawjayn," http://www.alhabashi.info/

[45] ʿAbdalla al-Harari, *al-Maqallat al-saniyya fi kashf dalalat Ahmad ibn Taymiyya* (Beirut: 1994), 12. Of those sixty issues, for example, are Ibn Taymiyya's contention that some dimensions of God are found in

his creatures [*al-Maqallat*, 16] and his concept of God's personification (*tajsīm*). *Manar Al-Huda* 34 (August 1995): 2.

⁴⁶ꜥAbdalla, *Dalalat*, 43–48.

⁴⁷Ibid., 5–9.

⁴⁸Abu Suhayb ꜥAbd al-ꜥAziz al-Maliki, *al-Maqalat al-sunniya fi kashf dalalat al-firqa al-habashiyya* (Sidney: 1995), 74.

⁴⁹Ibid., 167–69.

⁵⁰Ibid., http://www.antihabashis.com/

⁵¹al-Maliki, *Maqalat*, 167–69.

⁵²"Qadaya wa-hiwarat," 3 May 2004, http://www.islamtoday.net/

⁵³*Manar Al-Huda* 130 (May 2004): 44.

⁵⁴*Manar Al-Huda* 37 (November 1995): 82.

⁵⁵*Manar Al-Huda* 95 (January 2001): 71.

⁵⁶http://www.antihabashis.com/

⁵⁷al-Maliki, *Maqalat*, 127.

⁵⁸http://www.albarghoty.net/

⁵⁹*Tafnid mazaꜥim al-mudꜥi fi ma nasabahu ila shaykh ꜥAbdalla al-Harari* (Beirut: Jamꜥiyyat al-Thaqafa al-Islamiyya, 1995), 41–45.

⁶⁰*Qurʾan*, Sura 7, 54, or 20, 5.

⁶¹ꜥAbdalla al-Harari, *al-Matalib al-wafiyya fi sharh al-ꜥaqida al-nasfiyya* (Beirut: 1997), 39–40.

⁶²The above passage is based on a tape of a lecture delivered by Shaykh ꜥAbdalla in Jordan, 26 January 2003, and on his book *Bughyat al-talib li-maꜥrifat al-ꜥilm al-dini al-wajib* (Beirut: 1995), 31.

⁶³al-Maliki, *al-Maqalat*, 23.

⁶⁴http://www.antihabashis.com/

⁶⁵ꜥAbdalla, *Bughyat al-talib*, 31

⁶⁶Shaykh ꜥAbdalla's lecture, 26 January 2003.

⁶⁷For discussions of saint shrine visitation, see Valerie Hoffman, *Sufism, Mystics, and Saints in Modern Egypt* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1995); Julian Johansen, *Sufism and Islamic Reform in Egypt: The Battle for Islamic Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); Frederick de Jong and Bernd Radtke, ed., *Mysticism Contested: Thirteen Centuries of Controversies and Polemics* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1999).

⁶⁸Taymiyya, *Sharh al-ꜥumda*, vol. 4, 427.

⁶⁹al-Harari, *al-Maqalat al-saniyya*, 9.

⁷⁰*Tafnid*, 41.

⁷¹See note 8.

⁷²Hussein Ahmed, "The Historiography of Islam in Ethiopia," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 3 (1992): 12–46.

⁷³*Tafnid*, 41.

⁷⁴Shaykh ꜥAbdalla al-Harari, *al-Sharh al-qawim fi hal alfaz al-sirat al-mustaqim* (Beirut: 2002), 7, 32. Shaykh ꜥAbdalla's lecture, 26 January 2003.

⁷⁵Faris Noor, "What is the Victory of Islam," in *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism*, ed. Omid Safi (Oxford: 2003), 320–32.

⁷⁶http://www.memri.org/bin/opener_latest.cgi?ID=SR3004/. The fatwa was found at http://www.islamonline.net/ on 2 December 2002.

⁷⁷Reuven Paz, "Sleeping with the Enemy: Participation of Muslims in U.S. Elections," in *PRISM Series of Global Jihad, Occasional Papers*, ed. R. Paz (Herzliyya, Israel: The Interdisciplinary Academic Center, 2003), vol. 1, no. 9, http://www.islamonline.net/fatwa/english/FatwaDisplay.asp?hFatwaID=74388/

⁷⁸In his book, *al-Sharh al-qadim fi asl al-sirat al-mustaqim* (Beirut: 2002), 32, Shaykh ꜥAbdalla al-Harari wrote, "There were righteous people from *ahl al-kitāb*, Jews and Christians, like ꜥAbdalla ibn Salam the scholar of the Jews in Medina, and the *najāshī*, Ashama, the Christian king of Ethiopia. The *najāshī* followed the Prophet fully and died when the Prophet was still alive. He prayed over him like over a departed Muslim. There was light radiating from his grave. This is the proof that he was a holy man."

⁷⁹See more on this debate in "Munazara" at http:www.alislam.be/debate.htm/

⁸⁰al-Harari, *Mukhtasar al-ꜥaqida*, 82.

⁸¹See the text of his lecture at http:/www.Arabic.islamicweb.com/

⁸²al-Harari, *Kamukhtasar Abdalla al-Harari mashaf yaʾemnat kifl atchru tenatna* (Harar: 2003).