

## The third wave of Americanized Wahhabism

### Reflections on geopolitical violence and the making of a new Syria

By Samar Zughool, a political scientist and intercultural researcher.

In this article, I introduce the term Americanized Wahhabism to describe the U.S.-sponsored Islamization that promotes Wahhabi ideologies, which are deeply misogynistic and glorify toxic, hypermasculine dictatorships as interchangeable tools for occupation and neo-colonialism. The development of Americanized Wahhabism is not a linear process with three distinct stages; however, I identify three phases that facilitated the fusion of American imperialism with Wahhabism. This fusion has created a geopolitical system of violence, where gender-repressive regimes are installed and maintained through imperialist-driven Islamization to sustain dictatorships rooted in gender apartheid and American hegemony.

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The most recent phase of Americanized Wahhabism began with the announcement of Saudi Vision 2030, part of which aims to attract 100 million tourists by 2030. This is happening while more than 21,000 workers, mostly foreigners<sup>1</sup> from low-income countries, have died during the making of this project. Meanwhile, migrant women face rape, abuse, and isolation under the oppressive Saudi *Kafala* system<sup>2</sup>.

In the Saudi Vision 2030, Saudi women remain subjected to restrictive Islamist gender apartheid rules, including male guardianship. While the Saudi government bragged about a 656% surge in leisure tourism in 2024, the same year, a Saudi woman was sentenced to 11 years in prison simply for posting on social media to demand the removal of male guardianship over women. In 2019, during what was called a reform campaign, the Saudi government loosened laws restricting women's clothing.

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<sup>1</sup> [Documentary alleges 21,000 workers have died working on Saudi Vision 2030, which includes The Line. \(2024\).](#)

<sup>2</sup> Kafala refers to sponsorship by the employer to the employee. Regardless some recent amendments Kafala in Saudi Arabia remains a tool for slavery giving control for the employers over their employees. [Rape, abuse, isolation: unveiling the horrors of migrants women' condition in Saudi Arabia.](#)

In practice, these reforms are only for tourists coming from elite countries to whitewash the suffering and oppression of Saudi women.

In 2022, Manahel al-Otaibi, a Saudi woman, was arrested for not wearing the abaya, a covering dress imposed on women. Manahel was tortured and forcibly disappeared in Saudi prisons. It was reported in April 2024 that, in a secret trial in January 2024, she was sentenced to 11 years in prison. Manahel faced multiple charges under Saudi Arabia's social media, counterterrorism, and male guardianship laws. The charges included calling on social media for an end to the country's male guardianship system, posting videos of herself wearing "indecent clothes," and "going to the shops without wearing an abaya<sup>3</sup>.

**“The most recent wave of Americanized Wahhabism is Saudi Vision 2030—a whitewashing mechanism born from American imperialism and fused with Wahhabism. It invites elite tourists to indulge themselves atop the prisons that confine Saudi feminists, sentenced to years simply for demanding an end to male guardianship. Now, Americanized Wahhabism extends its geopolitical violence, playing the role of a male guardian in the reconstruction of a new Syria.”**

Therefore, the Saudi Vision 2030 is nothing but a whitewashing mechanism resulting from the combination of American imperialism and Wahhabism. Now, this Americanized Wahhabism is practising geopolitical violence by assuming the role of male guardian over the making of a new Syria.

In a clear statement during an interview with BBC, Ahmad Al-Sharaa, also known as Al-Julani, firmly asserted that Syria would not undergo "Afghanization."<sup>4</sup> This raises an important question: what is the ideal model for the new transitional government of Syria, and does such a model even exist? Al-Sharaa did not hesitate to express admiration for Saudi Arabia, recalling his childhood and the special bond he claimed to have with Riyadh. In turn, Riyadh acted swiftly, hosting a prominent conference in support of the new Syria on January 12, just weeks after the fall of Bashar Al-Assad's oppressive regime.

Most prominent members of the Syrian transitional government are affiliated with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, HTS<sup>5</sup>, whose leadership has publicly distanced itself from

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<sup>3</sup> [Manahel al-Otaibi is imprisoned for her women's rights activism critical of state imposed religious systems.](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Al Sharaa to BBC: we do not want to transform Syria to Afghanistan](#) [الشرع لبي بي سي: لا نريد تحويل سوريا إلى نسخة من أفغانستان](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Who are the most prominent figures shaping the scene in the new Syria?](#) [من هي أبرز الشخصيات التي تدير المشهد في سوريا الجديدة؟](#)

Al-Qaeda. HTS went through various stages before its formation. It initially began as an ally of the Islamic State, known as Jabhat al-Nusra, before breaking away and joining al-Qaeda. Subsequently, it formed alliances with other militias in Syria and began distancing itself from al-Qaeda under the name Jabhat Fath al-Sham. Eventually, it fully separated from al-Qaeda and adopted the new name HTS<sup>6</sup>.

HTS carries a Salafist jihadist ideology, and Wahhabism is a stream within Salafism. Researchers have studied the relationship between Wahhabism and Jihadi Salafism in various ways, especially after September 11. Some research distinguished between Saudi Wahhabism, which is a U.S. ally, and Jihadi Salafism, which the U.S. claims to fight. In another research, which makes more sense, Jihadi Salafism is considered a stream within Wahhabism. Wahhabism is an ideology that can be used differently by various actors, including individuals, countries, and organizations. It contains both Jihadi Salafism and "السلفية الجامية" (al-Salafiyya al-Jāmiyya) known as Madkhalism in English. Madkhalism is named after Sheikh Rabee al-Madkhali and it is part of salafism<sup>7</sup>. It refers to full obedience to the ruler, which the Saudi royal family has long employed and later on the U.S. has nurtured to maintain its hegemony. Meanwhile, Salafi Jihadism within Wahhabism represents an alternative approach to opposing rulers.

The formation of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and its public disavowal of al-Qaeda in 2017 received full support from Salafi-Wahhabi jihadist Abdullah al-Muhaysini, who is listed on Saudi Arabia's terrorist list. However, Saudi Arabia has actively sponsored and expanded Wahhabi Salafi Jihadism in Syria as a means of severing ties with al-Qaeda. This strategy stems from al-Qaeda's declaration of war against the Saudi government in 2003, which resulted in the killing of its leaders and the expulsion of the remaining members from the country. In other words, Saudi Arabia strategically utilizes both Jihadi Salafism and Madkhali Salafism (Madkhalism) to advance its interests. With Saudi Arabia now supervising the making of a new Syria to consolidate its control, it is time for the patriarchal Islamists of HTS to openly declare their loyalty to Saudi Wahhabi ideology. They publicly align with Wahhabi Madkhalism, demonstrating obedience to the Al Saud regime and serving as a political tool for the expansion of Wahhabism.

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<sup>6</sup> [Sawab Center. \(2023, February 15\). هيئة تحرير الشام](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Wahhabism and Salafi Jihadism: The Question of the Relationship الوهابية والسلفية الجهادية: سؤال العلاقة](#)

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As of 2025, the leader of HTS and the Syrian Transitional Government is reportedly moving toward dissolving the Salafist Jihadist HTS and, in his words, working toward the creation of a 'new Syria.' The Islamists of HTS have frequently shifted their allegiance from one Islamist ideology to another. Alongside Saudi Wahhabi supervision of the new Syria, we are also witnessing Zionist expansion in the occupied Golan Heights. This Zionist expansion often parallels the rise of Americanized Wahhabism. This raises a critical question: are we witnessing the creation of a new Americanized Wahhabism or the emergence of a new Syria? And is the Golan Heights the price that has already been paid, or merely a payment check on hold?

**“Zionist expansion is a fundamental component of Americanized Wahhabism. With Zionism asserting control over the Golan Heights, the deal of Americanized Wahhabism in the creation of a new Syria may be a payment check on hold, or it has already been paid.”**

To understand the creation of Americanized Wahhabism, we must first examine the formation of the modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. British imperialism played a crucial role in enabling the rise of Saudi Arabia under the leadership of Abdulaziz Al Saud, particularly after their other ally, Sharif Hussein bin Ali, refused to relinquish historical Palestine to the British Empire. Sharif Hussein, one of the leaders of the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire, had his own vision of establishing an Arab kingdom<sup>8</sup>. However, when he resisted British demands to cede Palestine, Abdulaziz Al Saud seized the opportunity to align with the British. In exchange for British support, Al Saud agreed to sacrifice Palestine, paving the way for the establishment of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as an authoritarian state.

Even long before this betrayal, the House of Al Saud, the ruling family of Saudi Arabia, established a religious-political alliance with the Wahhabi extremist Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab for the political interest of creating and expanding a

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<sup>8</sup> [The Birth of Saudi Arabia](#)

Saudi authoritarian regime. Meanwhile, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the founder of Wahhabism, sought political support to propagate his extremist Salafist ideology. This convergence of interests led to a strategic alliance between Wahhabism and the House of Al Saud, forming a powerful union that was instrumental in the creation and maintenance of the kingdom, grounded in imperialist support and religious legitimization<sup>9</sup>.

Driven by its greed for oil and power, U.S. imperialist foreign policy was among the first to recognize the Wahhabi-led Islamist kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1931. Shortly afterwards, the Wahhabi ruler from the Al Saud dynasty signed a concession agreement for oil exploration with the Standard Oil Company of California (SoCal) in 1933.

While some may believe that U.S. interest in Wahhabism is solely driven by business interests, such as oil and neocolonial expansion, it is also deeply ideological. Specifically, Madkhali Salafism within Wahhabism serves as an ideal tool for the U.S. to establish a divinely sanctioned form of control through Islamism. By supporting dictatorial regimes that oppress more than half the population—particularly women, people of all genders, and those who are agender—the U.S. ensures that anti-imperial resistance is crushed before it can even begin.

**“The U.S. interest in strengthening Americanized Wahhabism is not just about profit; it is deeply ideological. By backing Wahhabi Islamist regimes that oppress more than half the population—particularly women, people of diverse genders, and those who are agender—the U.S. ensures that anti-imperial mobilization is crushed before it can even begin.”**

The second phase of shaping Americanized Wahhabism occurred during the Gulf War. The Saudi government used a fatwa<sup>10</sup> from Wahhabi religious scholars to justify allying with U.S. forces and permitting their presence on Saudi soil during the conflict. This strategic move allowed the dictatorial Saudi regime to portray the U.S. as the "white saviour" from the evils of Saddam, using religious loyalty to silence critics of U.S. imperialism, including its involvement in Zionism, occupation, and neo-colonialism. Further, this alliance later facilitated the U.S. invasion of Iraq<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> ["The Wahhabis and the Formation of the Saudi State. الوهابيون وبناء الدولة السعودية"](#)

<sup>10</sup> Fatwa is a formal religious ruling or opinion issued by a qualified Islamic scholar to guide legal, social, or personal matters.

<sup>11</sup> Al-Rasheed, Madawi. "Saudi Arabia: The Challenge of the US Invasion of Iraq." In *The Iraq War: Causes and Consequences*, edited by Rick Fawn and Raymond Hinnebusch, 153-162. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006.

Although the Saudi Islamist government disapproved of the 2003 invasion, it allowed the U.S.-led coalition to use its airspace<sup>12</sup>.

Therefore, while the Saudi government disapproved of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, it used the Wahhabi-Saudi religious-political alliance to justify American-Saudi military cooperation against Iraq during the Gulf War. Furthermore, it allowed the U.S.-led coalition to use its airspace during the invasion. Thus, the phrase that defines the second wave of Americanized Wahhabism is “The White American Savior is Halal<sup>13</sup>.”

**"Making the White American Savior Halal coins the second wave of Americanized Wahhabism. The Saudi government used religious scholars to justify its alliance with U.S. troops during the Gulf War to win over Iraq."**

In a 2018 interview, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman revealed that Saudi Arabia spread Wahhabism at the request of the West as a strategy to counter Soviet expansion in the Middle East<sup>14</sup>. However, in another interview a year later, he asserted that Wahhabism does not exist in Saudi Arabia, describing religion in the country as simply a matter of faith, not an ideology of expansion or international control<sup>15</sup>. This later declaration not only erases the long history of Americanized Wahhabism but also denies its ongoing reality, where the Saudi government acts as a legal guardian over Syria to secure the benefits of Americanized Wahhabism in the region.

Mohammad bin Salman also introduced Vision 2030, a plan that purportedly aims to shift the Saudi kingdom away from religious extremism toward a focus on tourism and economic diversification. This so-called transformation can be understood through the metaphor: “The best way to keep a person in prison is by making them believe that they are not in a prison.” The gaslighting by Mohammad bin Salman—denying the existence of Wahhabism while actively spreading it in Syria—and the invention of Vision 2030 as a whitewashing mechanism for gender-based oppression are yet more evidence of how Americanized Wahhabism continues to evolve. It

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<sup>12</sup> According to a 2002 report by The Guardian, the Saudi government agreed to allow American planes to use its bases in a war with Iraq, despite publicly opposing an attack on Iraq.

<sup>13</sup> Halal is an Arabic term meaning "permissible" or "lawful" according to Islamic law (Sharia). It refers to actions, foods, and behaviors that are allowed under Islamic teachings.

<sup>14</sup> [Cold War-era Wahhabism used as tool against Soviets on US demand, Saudi Crown Prince Salman confesses](#)

<sup>15</sup> [The world according to Mohammed bin Salman](#)

illustrates how Wahhabi scholars constantly learn from their American imperialist masters, adapting to maintain control while presenting a facade of reform.

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Furthermore, bin Salman’s approach—announcing a \$6 billion investment in high-tech initiatives with the United States while continuing to export crude oil that fuels Zionist military machines<sup>16</sup>—is just another element in the third phase of shaping an Americanized version of Wahhabism. In this third wave, the gender apartheid inherent in Islamist Wahhabism becomes even harder to dismantle. This is because Wahhabi Islamists, under their American masters, have refined strategies such as Vision 2030 to whitewash their actions and perfected the art of gaslighting to deny the continued existence of Wahhabism.

But feminists will never forget the ongoing imprisonment and torture of Saudi feminists and women who refuse to live under the pathetic system of male guardianship. No Americanized Wahhabi vision can whitewash the sentencing of Salma al-Shehab to 34 years in prison in 2022, merely for her social media activism advocating for gender equality and human rights. No Americanized Wahhabism can erase the torture and forced disappearance endured by Manahel al-Otaibi for two years before she was sentenced to 11 years in prison in 2024—punished solely for her choice of clothing and for posting about the need to abolish male guardianship. The continuous evolution of Americanized Wahhabism makes Islamized gender apartheid regimes harder to dismantle, as they are normalized internationally through American imperialism. It is now moving toward tourist-profitable projects, where concerts for the elites are held atop the prisons capturing Saudi feminist women seeking liberation.

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<sup>16</sup> [New Research Exposes Countries and Companies Supplying the Oil Fueling Palestinian Genocide](#)

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Finally, the question of Americanized Wahhabism as a form of geopolitical violence in shaping the new Syria is not a question but a fact, one that began even before the fall of Al-Assad's oppressive regime.

The conference held in Riyadh on January 12th brought together the Syrian Minister of Foreign Affairs, who previously served in various roles as a Salafist jihadist, including during different phases of HTS, and now serves in Syria's current transitional government. The Saudi-Americanized Wahhabi regime acts as a guardian to Syria's transitional government.

Mainstream media described the Riyadh conference as Syria's "return to Arab arms." Whether this metaphor intentionally excluded the Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces is unclear, but what is evident is that the transitional government in Syria is now firmly in the embrace of Americanized Wahhabism. The only question that remains is whether the price for this alignment has already been paid, or if the check is still on hold until the full security of Americanized Wahhabism in Syria is guaranteed.

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The demographics and political struggle for liberation in Syria extend far beyond HTS, with Syrian feminist movements establishing their own solid base<sup>17</sup>.

However, if a deal between the Trump administration and Russia has already been finalized—allowing Russia to quietly withdraw from its two military bases in Syria—then the declaration of an Americanized Wahhabism in Syria becomes merely a matter of time. Such an outcome would represent yet another Americanized betrayal of the true liberation in the region. A liberation where gender and sexuality are not secondary elements but central battlefields in the ongoing struggle for freedom.

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<sup>17</sup> [Syrian feminist political movement](#)