


Saudi Arabia and the *da'wa* Mission: The Role of the Muslim World League and the Islamic University of Medina in Spreading Wahhabi-Salafi Doctrine in the 1960

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Abstract. Starting from the 1960s, Saudi Arabia began an international *da'wa* campaign with the aim of positioning itself as the representative of the international Muslim community and spreading its religious belief (*dīn*), identified in the Wahhabi-Salafi doctrine. At the head of the process, controlling the whole system, there were two institutions, the Muslim World League (*Rābiṭat al-‘ālam al-islāmī*, MWL) and the Islamic University of Medina (*al-Jāmi‘a al-islāmiyya bi-l-Madīna al-munawwara*, IUM). Focusing on the socio-political and ethical-academic aspects, MWL and IUM tried to exercise their influence over the *umma* by controlling Islamic institutional, religious, and youth centres globally, and taking care of the ideological formation by managing educational centres, school, and universities; most of the scholars formed in Medina – both professors and students – held positions of high relevance in some MWL-circuit organizations established in different countries, with the aim of disseminating the teachings and playing an active geopolitical role. MWL and IUM represented the primary tools for religious propaganda and worked towards creating an international network that directly or indirectly served the Saudi agenda.

Keywords: Wahhabi-Salafism, *da'wa*, Islamic University Medina, Muslim World League, Saudi Arabia.

ES Arabia Saudí y la Misión de *da'wa*: el Papel de la Liga Mundial Musulmana y la Universidad Islámica de Medina en la Difusión de la Doctrina Wahhābita-Salafista en los años 1960

Resumen. A partir de los años '60, Arabia Saudí emprendió una campaña internacional de *da'wa* con el objetivo de posicionarse como representante de la comunidad musulmana internacional y difundir su creencia religiosa (*dīn*), identificable en la doctrina Wahabita-Salafista. En el núcleo de este proceso, controlando el sistema entero, había dos instituciones, la Liga del mundo islámico (*Rābiṭat al-‘ālam al-islāmī*, MWL) y la Universidad Islámica de Medina (*al-Ĵāmi‘a al-islāmiyya bi-l-Madīna al-munawwara*, IUM). Centrándose en los aspectos socio-políticos y ético-académicos, MWL y IUM intentaron ejercer su influencia sobre la *umma*, controlando centros islámicos institucionales, religiosos y juveniles a nivel global, y ocupándose de la formación ideológica a través de la gestión de centros educativos, escuelas y universidades; la mayoría de los eruditos formados en Medina –tanto profesores como estudiantes– ocupaban posiciones de gran relevancia en algunas organizaciones del circuito de la MWL establecidas en los diferentes países, con el objetivo de difundir las enseñanzas y desempeñar un papel geopolítico activo. MWL y IUM representaban las principales herramientas para la propaganda religiosa y trabajaban hacia la creación de una red internacional que servía directa o indirectamente a la agenda saudita.

Palabras clave: Wahhābismo-Salafismo; *da'wa*; Universidad Islámica de Medina; Liga del mundo islámico; Arabia Saudí.

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1. Introduction

In the second half of the 20th century, Saudi Arabia began to consolidate its position internationally, playing a leading role in the geopolitical landscape. The kingdom's growth process coincided with the monarchy's desire to undertake a soft-power strategy involving the global dissemination of its religious belief, which aligned with Wahhabi postulate. Religion (*dīn*) constituted the central nucleus of the message, through which Saudi Arabia sought to reconstruct the global Islamic identity by rallying around the ideology all those movements identifying with a fundamentalist Islam. To achieve this, it used a series of organizations and institutions, created since the 1960s, dedicated to doctrinal promotion with the aim of creating a global network of political influence and a system to promote Islamic education under Wahhabi-Salafi concepts. The Muslim World League and the Islamic University of Medina represented the tools through which to develop the *da'wa* project.

Through a comparative and historiographical analysis of sources, the article aims to provide a study on the doctrinal connections that have facilitated the creation of an international Wahhabi-Salafi network, analysing the main personalities and centres involved, with a particular focus on MWL and IUM, considered as the main actors for the realization of the project. If religion (*dīn*) has been the basis upon which the *da'wa* campaign has developed, the network of Saudi organizations has constituted the channel of dissemination, capable of promoting the ideological diffusion. The aim of the investigation is to demonstrate the importance of religion within the Saudi political and educational program, emphasizing how religion forms the basis upon which to organize the community in terms of orthodoxy and orthopraxy, and the role played by MWL and IUM to favour the spreading of the ideology.

2. The Wahhabi-Salafi connections and the Saudi mission in the 20th century. *Dīn, da'wa* and the implications in politics and education

The study of Islam in the 20th century requires an analysis of historical, socio-political, economic, and geopolitical issues, considering the religious factor as the starting point for the investigation. The process of Islamic civilization has always given great importance to the religious aspect, contemplating the inseparable connection between religion, society, and politics. The foundation of society can be identified in the concept of *dīn*¹, which carries various important meanings.

The notion of *dīn* is linked to the idea of universal judgment associated with belief in God, the obligation to respect His will and follow His word. It guides human conduct along the path indicated by God and implies a sense of duty and submission before God. In religious terms, it states the relationship between humans and God, not as the relationship between God and individuals but as the set of obligations imposed by God on people. However, *dīn* can also refer to a genuine religious foundation, presented as *dīn al-ḥaqq* (religion of truth), *milla* (the true revealed religion revealed, incorporating in its meaning functions that characterize the union of temporal and spiritual power) and identifying *dīn wa-dawla* ("religion and state", in which life is governed by the laws of Allah) in contrast to *dīn wa-dunyā* ("religion and the material world")². It is important to emphasize the distinction between the term *dawla* and its direct translation as "nation-state". While the Western tradition identifies the state as a political and geographical entity, *dawla* refers to a more universal idea, not bound by pre-established geographical boundaries but rather by the political, governmental, and administrative structure³, along with the set of rules that a community must adhere to. *Dawla* can also allude to the term "government" (*ḥukm*), which is connected to politics (*siyāsa*), thus forming the territorial and conceptual framework of *dār al-islām* (the territory of Islam), a territory governed by the laws of Allah⁴.

The Wahhabi movement emerged from the beginning as a religious movement with strong political implications. The message aimed at restructuring a society in decline, with the goal of establishing a society that strictly followed the word of Allah. This meant referencing the primary sources and returning to the practices and behaviours of the early days of Islam⁵. It can be defined as a religious-reformist movement that emphasized the worship of the oneness of God (*tawḥīd*) in all its forms while rejecting all forms of association (*shirk*), innovation (*bid'ā*), allegorical interpretation (*ta'wīl*), and supplications (*tawassul*). Every teaching of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb was focused on the Qur'an and the Sunna of the Prophet⁶. The legal framework was based on the application of *sharī'a* in every sphere, primarily referencing the Hanbali jurisprudential-theological school and underscoring the importance of primary sources. It relied sparingly on analogy (*qiyās*) and consensus (*ijmā'*) reserved for the first three generations of Muslims (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*)⁷, limited attention was given to supplementary and generalized sources. Appealing to the legitimacy of Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb identified four important components in the doctrinal construction, of which *tawḥīd* represented the central point, accompanied by the concept of *takfīr*, *al-walā' wa'l-barā'* and *jihād*⁸.

1 Biancamaria Scarcia Amoretti, *Il mondo musulmano. Quindici secoli di storia*, (Roma: Carocci, 2015), 21.

2 Louis Gardet, "Dīn", in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*. Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. (Leiden: Leiden Brill, 2012), http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0168.

3 John L. Esposito, *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 68–9.

4 Scarcia Amoretti, *Il mondo musulmano. Quindici secoli di storia*, 29.

5 Esposito, *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, 333.

6 In *Kitāb al-tawḥīd*, of the 341 citations only 82 come from Qur'an, 64 from Muslims belonging to the first three generations and 195 are hadith. These data testify to the importance Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb gave the practical part, as well as the theoretical part. In Natana J. Delong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 51.

7 Delong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad*, 95–7.

8 Cole M. Bunzel, *Wahhābism. The History of a Militant Islamic Movement*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), 127.

The concept of *jihād* held significant importance, serving to combat both non-Muslims and Muslims whose beliefs did not conform to the true Wahhabi interpretation of Islam⁹. It also represented the instrument for expanding the first Wahhabi-Saudi state, starting from the region of al-Dir'iyya¹⁰.

The emphasis placed by Wahhabism on religion (*dīn*) in the formation and organization of the Islamic state (*al-dawla al-islāmiyya*) was based on the principle of necessity professed by Ibn Taymiyya, who was also one of the doctrinal inspirations for the movement. State and religion could not exist without each other, and the state's duty was to achieve justice and create a society devoted to the worship of God¹¹.

In its early days, Wahhabi ideology found a limited number of adherents, primarily among individuals associated with the Hanbali and neo-Hanbali schools. Professing Wahhabism became obligatory, but not everyone who declared their adherence genuinely accepted the message, and the ideological and military campaigns largely remained confined to the Arabian Peninsula.

The historical-political events of the 20th century have changed the scenario, allowing the ideology to spread on a global scale. The resurgence in the 20th century and the conquest of the Hijaz in 1926, leading to the official establishment of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932, can be attributed primarily to geopolitical strategies that characterized the early decades of the century and the interest of Western powers involved in supporting the rise of the Saudi dynasty as part of anti-Ottoman efforts. However, the ultra-rigorous Wahhabi interpretation of Islam had not crossed the borders of Arabia and remained associated exclusively with the Kingdom, many Muslims considered it to be a heretical expression of the religion, and its excessive rigidity was seen externally as a dangerous form of apostasy¹².

In the second half of the 20th century there has been a significant increase in Wahhabi propaganda beyond the borders of Arabia and, simultaneously, Saudi Arabia began to play a crucial role in the global-geopolitical scenario, converting itself from a regional power to a fundamental player on the world stage. The initial strategy involved a shift in both domestic and foreign relations, moving Saudi Arabia away from the isolation that characterized the ideology to reach the entire Muslim world and present itself as the custodian and protector of true Islam. King 'Abd al-'Aziz ibn Sa'ud's strategic program was based on integrating a political-economic system that would attract foreign powers into a market-oriented policy tied to oil¹³. It also aimed to establish a cross-border network for the mobilization of people with the purpose of socio-cultural and ethical-religious education, thus expanding influence and promoting the Wahhabi creed within the umma¹⁴. Education was at the core of the project, serving to solidify the new state and ideologically shape the community. The instrument for the realization was the *da'wa*, in a model based on the teaching of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb, where the primary purpose of knowledge was not knowledge itself but the spread of the message to other people. *Da'wa* played a fundamental role in the ethical journey and in new conversions, education and the true belief were fundamental to being a real Muslim¹⁵.

The Wahhabi doctrine found adherents especially in Salafi circles in the first half of the 20th century. This is not surprising when considering the ideological-theological aspect that characterizes both Wahhabism and Salafism. While the doctrinal explanation for Wahhabism leaves no room for interpretation, the matter is different for Salafism. Salaf is a term that refers to the "pious ancestors", specifically the first three generations of Muslims, considered the best example of Islamic experience. In some cases, it can also refer to the works of Hanbali theologians like Ibn Taymiyya and Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb¹⁶. Being a Salafist implies an identification with the sacred sources and the example of the *al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ* in both creed and conduct. It also indicates the position of those who recognized themselves in Hanbali theology as adherents to the doctrine of the pious ancestors (*madhhab al-salaf*)¹⁷. This underscores the importance of *tawḥīd* in its three components (*tawḥīd al-rubūbiyya*, *tawḥīd al-asmā' wa al-ṣifāt*, *tawḥīd al-'ibāda*), rejecting association (*shirk*), innovation (*bid'a*), allegorical interpretation (*ta'wīl*), and accepting the significance of primary sources (the Sacred Qur'an and hadith) and the consensus of the *salaf*. The doctrinal structure of Wahhabism and Salafism is nearly the same.

Analysing what Salafism has represented and continues to represent, contemporary historiography has focused on highlighting divisions. Henry Lauzière identified a significant distinction between modernists and purists. The modernists formed a liberal reformist current (Salafiyya) that emerged in the late 19th century and promoted moderation (*mu'tadil*), aiming to reform society by using the reason starting from the example of the Salaf. In contrast, purist Salafism positioned itself as the purest religious orientation within Sunni Islam, it sought to lead believers to practice the true religion and attain salvation through religious purity¹⁸.

9 Esther Peskes e W. Ende, "Wahhābiyya", in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition, Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs*, (Leiden: Leiden Brill, 2012), http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_1329.

10 Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 16–8.

11 Massimo Campanini, *Islam e Politica*, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2015), 21.

12 Hamid Algar, *Wahhabism. A Critical Essay*, (Oneonta, New York: Islamic Publications International, 2002), 2–5; Delong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad*, 5.

13 David Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia*, (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006), 4.

14 Michael Farquhar, *Circuits of Faith. Migration, Education, and the Wahhabi Mission*, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2017), 3.

15 Delong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad*, 198.

16 Esposito, *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, 274–5.

17 Henry Lauzière, *The Making of Salafism. Islamic Reform in the Twentieth Century*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 20–1.

18 Lauzière, *The Making of Salafism. Islamic Reform in the Twentieth Century*, 4–6.

Considering the importance of orthodoxy and orthopraxy in Islam, Lauzière further categorizes purists, dividing those who operated as scholars from jihadists. In any case, the pursuit of religious purity justified any form of political violence.

Bernard Haykel focused on the doctrinal aspect, highlighting the role that Salafis attribute to the purification of society through strict adherence to principles that define a true Muslim. Returning to the authenticity of the *salaf*, accepting the principle of *tawhīd* while rejecting all association, and recognizing and exclusively following the sources would qualify a true believer according to Salafi principles. They could demonstrate the religious adherence by transforming their faith into action, even if it involved violence¹⁹. A fundamental division within the Salafi movement is further highlighted by Quintan Wiktorowicz. Emphasizing the link between Salafism and Wahhabism, three distinct factions within the movement are identified: the purist, the political, and the jihadist²⁰. Purists focus on maintaining the purity of the religion, emphasizing creed (*‘aqīda*), combating deviations through *da‘wa* and the defence of *tawhīd*, and engaging in education. The political faction aims to apply Salafi beliefs in the political context, invoking jurisprudence and believing they have a better understanding of contemporary issues. The jihadist faction, on the other hand, supports the use of violence to create an Islamic state²¹. They fight against those who do not profess Salafi-Wahhabi beliefs and concentrate on propaganda related to military struggle and martyrdom.

Even presenting differences, both in terms of legislation and in the realm of practices and ideas, the two movements share the same sources and the same doctrinal apparatus. While Salafism comprises various facets, the Wahhabi ideology can be described as Salafist in creed, just as the integral Salafist form is synonymous with Wahhabism. For this reason, part of Salafism embraced the Saudi openness, participating in the strategy of the Saudi Royal House. Among these individuals was Rashīd Riḍā, who in the 1920s first worked to defend and rehabilitate Wahhabism outside the Arabian Peninsula²², and later began using the two terms almost interchangeably²³, encouraging the mobilization of all Muslims who considered themselves Salafi in creed to support the policies of the new Saudi state. At the same time, the Saudi establishment underwent a change by opening its doors to Salafism: *‘ulamā’* and members of the Saudi Royal Family initiated a narrative policy aimed at emphasizing the Wahhabi creed and comparing it to that of the *al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*, with the objective was to seek an official and nearly common doctrinal legitimacy²⁴.

The Saudi global expansion strategy of Wahhabism found complete realization in the new foreign policy line developed from the 1960s. The Saudi Royal Family, in the “Arab Cold War” context²⁵, proposed itself as religious representant in the Middle East and started an important indoctrination campaign inside the umma. The strategy was financed significantly by oil wealth, which started to enrich the kingdom’s portfolio. The campaign was articulated through the creation of religious institutes dedicated to proselytism, education and above all coordination, reaching a very high level of influence inside the umma²⁶.

The Islamic University of Medina was initially created in 1961, welcoming some of the most important figures in the Salafist world. Additionally, various charitable-solidarity associations, NGOs, Islamic organizations, played a crucial role in the strategy, including Muslim World League (1962), Organization of the Islamic Conference (1969), World Assembly of Muslim Youth (1972)²⁷, which set up offices worldwide. The student sphere was not neglected, and several associations were established to serve as channels for ideological support. Among these, the most important was the Muslim Student Association of North America and Canada (1963), which primarily supported the Saudi crown and disseminated Wahhabi literature²⁸.

It was particularly the relationships developed with the United States that facilitated the creation of a network among various associations. Under the pretext of Islamic solidarity, numerous Saudi investment funds and *waqf* were established to finance a global network of organizations, and the propaganda activities within these associations ranged from education to the promotion of Wahhabi ideology. In practice, this included personal radicalization and the construction and control of mosques and religious centres²⁹. Controlling places of worship was essential for spreading the message to the entire community of believers. In many cases, even if the activities of these associations turned in some cases was transformed into form of supporting and financing Islamic extremist groups, the Saudi soft-power strategy contemplated the creation and use of these institutions for ethical and political objectives.

19 Bernard Haykel, “On the Nature of Salafi thought and Action”, in Roel Meijer, *Global Salafism: Islam’s New Religious Movement*, (Oxford University Press, 2014), 38–40, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199333431.001.0001>.

20 Quintan Wiktorowicz, “Anatomy of the Salafi Movement”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29/3 (2006): 207, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100500497004>.

21 Wiktorowicz, “Anatomy of the Salafi Movement”, 217–25.

22 Lauzière, *The Making of Salafism. Islamic Reform in the Twentieth Century*, 70.

23 Namira Nahouza, *Wahhabism and the Rise of the New Salafists. Theology, Power and Sunni Islam*, (I. B. Tauris, 2018), 77.

24 David Commins, “From Wahhabi to Salafi”, in Bernard Haykel, Thomas Hegghammer, Stéphane Lacroix, *Saudi Arabia in Transition. Insight on Social, Political, Economic and Religious Change*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 165.

25 Jacob Lypp, *From territorial conquest to global calling. The roots and transformations of the Saudi-Wahhabi da‘wa*, (Sciences-Po Kuwait Program, 2017), 6, https://www.sciencespo.fr/kuwait-program/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/KSP_Paper_Award_Spring_2017_LYPP_Jacob.pdf.

26 Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia*, 4.

27 Farquhar, *Circuits of Faith. Migration, Education, and the Wahhabi Mission*, 71.

28 Algar, *Wahhabism. A Critical Essay*, 50–1.

29 Jamaluddin B. Hoffmann, “Guide to Wahhabi Organizations in North America”, *Center for Policy Terrorism*, s.d., 3, <http://soerenkern.com/pdfs/islam/GuideWahhabiNorthAmerica.pdf>.

3. Saudi global influence. The Muslim World League between Islam, politics and the universal umma

The religious aspect represented the central point of the Wahhabi ideological campaign, considering the fundamental role that religion (*dīn*) plays in the lives of Muslims, and being a Muslim is a distinctive and identity-defining characteristic³⁰. It involves accepting the message with faith (*imān*) as a completion of *dīn* and conducting the life in accordance with the laws prescribed by Allah, observing norms in both orthodoxy and orthopraxy. By promoting the unity and uniqueness of religion according to the principle of *tawhīd*, considering the umma as the true and unique community of Muslims, the socio-ideological promotion planned by Saudi Arabia passed through a unified global spread of their Wahhabi-belief.

For the implementation of the strategy, it was necessary to have a comprehensive control over the territories, starting with the management of religious affairs. This control allowed for the transmission of the traditionalist Wahhabi-Salafi interpretation of Islam. Additionally, it was crucial to guide all aspects of people's lives, with a particular focus on social matters.

While the domestic policy perspective aimed at reconstructing identity through religious purity standards under the banner of unity and unifying the "Islamic bloc" against colonialism, nationalism, and religious deviations³¹, foreign policy considered the unique nature of the umma to which the message was directed, emphasizing the need to exclude different interpretative forms. It was therefore essential to establish a direct institutional managed network in different territories, connected from one region to another, which deal with various aspects that concerned the life of the community.

In 1962, the Saudi government sponsored an important Islamic conference in Mecca to set the groundwork for the new strategy, and on May 18, the Muslim World League, was officially established. It was an international organization founded by 111 individuals, including '*ulamā*' and members of the Wahhabi-Saudi establishment, with the purpose of propagating the true message of Islam. MWL's headquarter was established in Mecca and it was under the complete control of Saudi Arabia. It represented the first centralized international Islamic organization that had ever been created. The Founding Council consisted of prominent members of the Saudi establishment, with the grand mufti Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm Āl al-Shaykh (a descendant of Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb)³² serving as its president, and the future Saudi Minister of Justice, Muḥammad ibn 'Alī al-Ḥarkān, serving as the successor to the role of secretary-general³³.

At the 1962 presentation conference, members of associations considered extremist, such as Sā'īd Ramaḍān (stepbrother of Ḥasan al-Bannā and a member of the Muslim Brotherhood), Mawlana Mawdudi (leader of *al-Jamā'ah al-Islāmiyya*), and influential figures in the purist Salafi network participated³⁴. In addition, the founding ceremony took place in a highly significant space-time context, in the city of Mecca during the hajj pilgrimage. During the presentation, one of the sermons emphasized the importance of Islamic solidarity and the unity of all Muslims, highlighting the importance of obtaining new conversions³⁵.

The MWL was described as a "tentacular organization" due to the many areas it was involved in and its modus operandi³⁶. It mainly focused on propagating the religious message and applying it to all aspects of human existence³⁷. It centralized the coordination between communities in different geographical areas, established offices globally to maintain centralized and uniform management of the faith on various continents and oversaw religious initiatives within the international Muslim community³⁸. The MWL became the official organization for promoting Wahhabism-Salafism worldwide, and it was associated with all those organizations that sponsored the ideology and engaged in activities related to traditionalist doctrinal and behavioural principles³⁹.

It is precisely by examining the direct-indirect activism of the MWL and its umbrella organizations that it is necessary to analyse the role that it has played within the international panorama. The adherence to the ideology has, in some cases, led to support for that form of radical and violent Islam when put into practice. Wahhabism is considered the most radical form within Sunni Islam, and from the origin of the movement, it has promoted religious purification and encouraged the practice of *jihād*. Its targets were not limited to non-Muslims but often included those Islamic interpretations deemed inconsistent with the message of original monotheism⁴⁰. The doctrine has maintained its integralist dogmatic characteristics and an intolerant approach, especially towards Shi'i Islam⁴¹, and has attracted and united major groups associated with

30 Malise Ruthven, *Islam*, (Torino: Einaudi, 1999), 5.

31 Lauzière, *The Making of Salafism. Islamic Reform in the Twentieth Century*, 104.

32 The Al al-Shaykh family has always held great prominence within the Saudi establishment, especially in the educational-scholarly sphere. Scheme presented in Bunzel, *Wahhābism. The History of a Militant Islamic Movement*, x.

33 Dore Gold, *Hatred's Kingdom. How Saudi Arabia Supports the New Global Terrorism*, (Washington D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2003), 76.

34 Algar, *Wahhabism. A Critical Essay*, 48-49. New York, "ISBN": "1-889999-13-X", "publisher": "Islamic Publications International", "publisher-place": "Oneonta, New York", "title": "Wahhabism. A Critical Essay", "author": [{"family": "Algar", "given": "Hamid"}], "issued": [{"date-parts": [{"year": 2002}]}], "locator": "48-49", "schema": "https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json"

35 Naveed S. Sheikh, *The New Politics of Islam. Pan-Islamic Foreign Policy in a World of States*, (London: Routledge, 2003), 35.

36 George Bouteiller (de), «La Ligue islamique mondiale, une institution tentaculaire», in *Revue Défense Nationale*, 439, 1984, 73-4.

37 Jacob M. Landau, *The Politics of Pan-Islam. Ideology and Organization*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 284-5.

38 Algar, *Wahhabism. A Critical Essay*, 50.

39 Nile Green, *Global Islam. A very short introduction*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 71.

40 David Cook, *Storia del jihad. Da Maometto ai giorni nostri. A cura di Roberto Tottoli*, (Torino: Einaudi, 2007), 108.

41 Guido Steinberg, "Jihadi-Salafism and the Shi'Is", in Roel Meijer, *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 108.

Islamic radicalism, renewing its political form through opposition to nationalism, colonialism, and secularism. Saudi Arabia has played a leading role in coordinating these movements, using the tool of solidarity to provide them with uniformity, structures, services, and social outreach. By managing the prayer spaces and utilizing *da'wa* globally, Saudis launched its international campaign while legitimizing its hegemonic position. The socio-educational sector occupied a fundamental part of the plan.

Exporting Wahhabism and coordinating individuals who adhere to the doctrine meant bringing together geographically distant groups that shared the same extremist doctrinal framework. The system composed of charitable organizations, with the MWL as its central nucleus, became the tool through which these groups could connect and organize, creating the conditions that later developed into the global jihadist movement on Afghan territory. The idea of global Islamic unity and identity under the Wahhabi-Salafi concept was exercised through a network of organizations engaged in solidarity and support for minorities and weaker categories⁴².

The MWL presented itself at the time of its founding as an international non-governmental organization, although its total dependence on the Saudi monarchy is widely recognized. It was established with the purpose of spreading true Islam, providing assistance and aid to Muslims scattered around the world, and promoting dialogue and cooperation. On its official website, it supported that the organization aims to pursue moderation to realize the message of Islam, rejecting extremism, violence, and exclusion in favour of peace, justice, and coexistence⁴³. It is difficult to establish clear boundaries between propaganda and reality, as these two aspects seem to follow different and parallel trajectories. This is particularly true when considering the use of the Wahhabi message by extremist groups and the support provided to these groups by influential figures within the organization. It received full financial support from the monarchy, although not always directly. In most cases, this support was provided through specially created funds for solidarity, wealthy members of the Saudi establishment and clergy played a significant role in these initiatives. These individuals were not necessarily direct members of the royal family, but they were politically and ideologically aligned with it.

The organization's financial resources grew significantly over the years, demonstrating the long-term continuation of the strategy in the following decades and the significant economic growth and investments. If in 1959 Saudi revenues reached \$655 million, by 1970 they had already doubled, reaching nearly \$1.2 billion. After 1973, profits exceeded \$4 billion, reaching \$108 billion by 1981⁴⁴. This economic growth was accompanied by significant investments outside Saudi Arabia (Safa Reza estimated that these investments totalled around \$87 billion from 1973 to the 2000s⁴⁵). While the primary market remained North America, the Saudis began to shift their focus to Asia, Eurasia, and Europe. Between 1962 and 1980, approximately 210 Islamic centres, 1500 mosques, 202 colleges, and around 2000 schools for Muslim education were built worldwide and the MWL was at the forefront of this financial growth⁴⁶. In just a few years after its founding, its income increased from 7 million Saudi riyals (\$1.9 million) in 1972/73 to 45 million Saudi riyals (\$12 million) in 1979-1980⁴⁷. The organization began to evolve its strategy, aligning it with the Saudi agenda of soft power. This included managing mosques (including leading prayers), religious and educational centres, public Muslim institutes, and associations, effectively tracking Muslim communities worldwide. Most of the organization's funding, approximately 99%, came from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia⁴⁸. Private funding channels first focused on urban aspects, addressing the housing issues of Muslims. These private entities often sought local political endorsements from municipal administrations and engaged in the construction of mosques and institutes, often in collaboration with local Muslim associations that justified the projects by emphasizing the need to provide facilities for believers. Afterward, these initiatives sought approval and endorsement (*tazkiyya*) from the local office of the MWL. Upon acceptance, the organization was responsible for recruiting staff to manage these centres. Other forms of funding included *zakat*, *ṣadaqa* and *waqf*⁴⁹.

A careful analysis of the parties involved reveals that the system operated cohesively. The network developed according to the plan outlined by Saudi Arabia, initially taking shape within the country, and later expanding globally, disseminating the doctrine that was intended to become the primary reference for the international Muslim community. To achieve this, the Saudis used their own funds, leveraging the wealth generated by oil. Their proselytizing campaign integrated into Muslim communities in various countries, with particular attention to immigrants and converts, taking advantage of concessions obtained through political agreements. This complex network of organizations was dedicated to controlling the system and operated on behalf of the Saudi system, which, in turn, was created and funded by Saudi Arabia. Given that the Saudis were the primary architects of the project, it follows that the MWL and all associated organizations would answer to the directives of Saudi Arabia, functioning as its satellites.

The League was the main tool for exporting Wahhabism, using Saudi capital, meticulously facilitating the distribution of Wahhabi literature within its circles⁵⁰. Missionary work involved the dissemination of sacred texts and the major works of important Wahhabi-Salafi theologians, such the movement's founder

42 Rachel Ehrenfeld, "Their Oil Is Thicker Than Our Blood", in Sarah Stern, *Saudi Arabia and the Global Islamic Terrorist Network. America and the West's Fatal Embrace*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 126.

43 The Muslim World League, "Introduction to Muslim World League", s.d., <https://themwl.org/en/MWL-Profile>.

44 James Wynbrandt, *A Brief History of Saudi Arabia*, (New York: Facts on File, 2010), 251.

45 Ehrenfeld, "Their Oil Is Thicker Than Our Blood", 131.

46 J. Millard Burr e Robert O. Collins, *Alms for Jihad. Charity and Terrorism in the Islamic World*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 42.

47 Thomas Hegghammer, *The Caravan. Abdallah Azzam and the Rise of Global Jihad*, (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 110.

48 Gold, *Hatred's Kingdom. How Saudi Arabia Supports the New Global Terrorism*, 76.

49 Gilles Kepel, *Jihad. Ascesa e declino. Storia del fondamentalismo islamico*, (Roma: Carocci, 2016), 80-1.

50 Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia*, 152.

Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb and the key-jurist Ahmad ibn Hanbal. Further contents distributed in Rābiṭa’s circles were those works directly or indirectly related to the *al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ* and other scholars who adhered to traditionalist beliefs. One notable figure was Ibn Taymiyya, perhaps the most influential theologian in the history of fundamentalist Islam. He was a Syrian *‘ālim* that lived in the 14th century who settled in Egypt. He developed his thinking by focusing on the defeats that Muslims had faced in recent years, arguing that these defeats needed to be addressed both on a religious and military level⁵¹. Ibn Taymiyya concentrated his studies on Quranic exegesis, hadith, *fiqh*, and began issuing legal opinions (fatwas) on political and social matters, emphasizing the importance of the literal application of *sharī‘a* and independent reasoning (*ijtihād*)⁵². He theorized (in “*al-Siyāsa al-Sharī‘iyya*”) the creation of a non-territorial state (*dawla*) based on divine principles where *sharī‘a* would be applied in every sphere of life, and society would be devoted to the worship of God (*‘ibāda*)⁵³.

He shared with the Wahhabi-Salafi creed an emphasis on the sacred sources and the concept of divine unity (*tawḥīd*). He rejected allegorical interpretation of sources (*ta’wīl*), adhering to the doctrine of the Salaf⁵⁴. He fought against innovations (*bid‘a*), deviations, and religious forms that diverged from the revealed message. In his writings, *jihād* had a significant role, interpreted as military engagement in defence and support of the religion, for which he presented, encouraged, and outlined the modes of participating in the struggle⁵⁵. He is often regarded as the originator of the new neo-Hanbali trend, which was later taken up by his student Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya.

Ibn Taymiyya’s theory which led to his prominence addressed the ethical issue of internal warfare within the Muslim community and the governance of society under Mongol rule. He advocated for a separation between individual Muslims and the Muslim state, identifying a true Muslim as someone who adhered to Allah’s laws and fought for His victory, while considering those in opposition to be infidels. Therefore, fighting against an apostate tyrant or a ruler who did not apply Islamic principles was presented as an obligation for every Muslim. This position was unprecedented because it did not rely solely on a declaration of religious affiliation but also required a commitment to fight for the religion. Practicing *jihād* was seen as the first obligation after faith, distinguishing a true believer from a false one⁵⁶. Ibn Taymiyya’s position continues to be the subject of debate regarding the right to declare some regimes and even other Muslims as infidels. In the contemporary era, especially since the mid-20th century, there has been a notable resurgence in his works and their use as justification or legitimization for violent actions under the pretext of religion. Without contextualizing theories developed many centuries ago, Ibn Taymiyya’s authority remains intact and serves as a perfect model for many groups and movements with Wahhabi-Salafi inspiration. It’s worth noting how essential Ibn Taymiyya has been within Wahhabi ideology, which can be considered a historical continuation of the neo-Hanbalism he professed.

The MWL’s propagation of these works clearly indicated the specific intention to garner support within extremist-jihadist movements with the aim of increasing their number of adherents. The MWL also expanded its proselytizing efforts by establishing its own means of publication, such as the weekly “News about the Muslim World League” (“*Akhbār al-‘ālam al-islāmī*”) and the monthly “Journal of the Muslim World League” (“*Majallat rābiṭat al-‘ālam al-islāmī*”), including its English version, “Muslim World League Monthly Magazine”, in addition to the monthly magazine “*Da wat al-ḥaqq*”⁵⁷. They paired their activism with publishing houses and news agencies that produced works by writers associated with or employed by the League. Through this extensive network of publications, schools, Islamic centres, and mosques sponsored by Saudi Arabia, the MWL strengthened the conservative Wahhabi-Salafi religious impulse across five continents while maintaining a favourable relationship with the United States⁵⁸. Alongside the works of theologians and theorists, the dissemination of sacred texts was central to its mission.

The League promoted the spread of the Wahhabi-Salafi perspective that Saudi Arabia was also promoting domestically. This involved the distribution of classical texts, monographs exploring facets of beliefs and practices in line with the Salaf, and biographies of luminaries according to the Salafi tradition as conceived by the *‘ulamā*⁵⁹. It’s essential to highlight the ideological openness and Saudi alignment with the growing impulses of the umma: the ideology brought its vision closer to that of Salafi groups and traditionalists in general. The success of the propaganda campaign was due to the resonance of its ideas within a segment of the umma that identified with traditional religious forms. Wahhabism effectively merged its ideas with those of purist Salafis, emphasizing the ideological connections between the founder of the Wahhabi movement and the Salaf, accentuating similarities and common ground while seeking compromises on differences. It also attempted to cleanse the violent image of Wahhabism by revisiting pious ancestors associated with purity and authenticity, anchoring the narrative to a revival according to their values, bearing witness to the divine mission⁶⁰.

51 Cook, *Storia del jihad. Da Maometto ai giorni nostri. A cura di Roberto Tottoli*, 99.

52 Richard Bonney, *Jihād. From Qur’ān to bin Laden. Foreword by Sheikh Dr Zaki Badawi*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 111–2.

53 Campanini, *Islam e Politica*, 15.

54 Nahouza, *Wahhabism and the Rise of the New Salafists. Theology, Power and Sunni Islam*, 51.

55 Bonney, *Jihād. From Qur’ān to bin Laden. Foreword by Sheikh Dr Zaki Badawi*, 112.

56 Glenn E. Robinson, *Global Jihad. A Brief History*, (Stanford University Press, 2021), 43.

57 Landau, *The Politics of Pan-Islam. Ideology and Organization*, 71.

58 Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia*, 110.

59 Commins, “From Wahhabi to Salafi”, 162.

60 Commins, “From Wahhabi to Salafi”, 166.

4. *Da'wa*, Islamic education and the Wahhabi-Salafi doctrine. The influence of the Islamic University of Medina

The dissemination of Wahhabi-Salafi works significantly contributed to ethical formation. Beyond the external ideological propagation with a predominantly socio-political and geopolitically strategic orientation, even within the borders of the Arabian Peninsula, proselytizing activities were extensive and founded on ethical and social principles. The literature aimed to construct a model that adhered to the true revealed message, in line with the Wahhabi-Islamic approach. For the successful spread of this ideology, it was crucial to have a central reference structure under control. In 1961, one year ahead of the MWL's creation, Saudi Arabia established the IUM. This institution became the primary tool for Wahhabi religious expansion to exert control over education⁶¹, in a system where the ethical domain had historically been monopolized by powerful religious scholars or *'ulamā'*, the establishment of the university marked a significant change.

Following its path, other universities were founded in the following years, including 'Abd al-'Aziz University in Jeddah (1967), Muḥammad ibn Sa'ud University in Riyadh (1974), King Faysal University (1975), and the College of Shari'a in Mecca (which became Umm al-Qura University in 1981)⁶². The number of students enrolled in Saudi universities increased significantly, growing from 33,000 in 1953 to over 2 million in the 2000s⁶³; it was crucial to offer a centralized system of education that adhered to their principles. The university served as the vehicle to complete and disseminate religious knowledge, which was considered essential since the creation of the Saudi Kingdom for the development of correct faith, morality, and conduct⁶⁴. The propagation of the ideology remained both a social and political objective.

The two institutions, the MWL and the IUM, were the basis of the Saudi ideological export system, representing the "Islamic solidarity movement"⁶⁵. Together, they touched and controlled every aspect of the political line and constituted the practical part of the international proselytizing strategy that aimed to place Saudi Arabia at the centre of the global Islamic map. They were the perfect means to legitimize their position, spread their ideas, and gain support and new recruits. The funding sources were the same: the League worked to support the university by inviting individuals to mobilize towards Saudi Arabia (offering significant scholarships) to receive education. The IUM educated Muslims according to Wahhabi-Salafi principles, and once these individuals returned to their home countries, they could serve as a support network. According to the Higher Committee for Educational Policy of Saudi Arabia, the most important educational aspect was to instill Islamic values that made individuals proficient in propagating the (right) Islamic vision⁶⁶.

The University of Medina followed the trajectory set by the Saudi Scholastic Institute, which was established in Mecca in 1926/1927 with the aim of propagating Islamic culture and Salafi creed, legitimizing the fundamental principles of Wahhabism⁶⁷. Efforts to cleanse the image of Wahhabism have been a constant theme throughout its history. The movement has always been characterized by intolerant and violent interpretative forms, directing its attacks against those who did not adhere to their creed and conduct, even if they were Sunni Muslims⁶⁸. Notably, they displayed extreme hostility towards Shi'ism. The violent image did not align with the Saudi vision of representing the entire Sunni Muslim world, which is why they considered it necessary to provide a new image of themselves.

In 1926, King 'Abd al-'Aziz opened the doors of the Hijaz to many Salafi creed scholars, academics, and reformers. They were welcomed in the peninsula, influenced especially by Rashīd Riḍā, and given prominent positions in religious and educational institutions in Mecca and Medina⁶⁹, and the educational programs at the institute were fully aligned with Salafi ideology. Emphasis was placed on the importance of *tawḥīd*, the rejection of all forms of *bid'a*, the primacy of the Sacred Sources, and the adherence to the Salaf. The promotion of *dīn* was at the core of the educational project. A significant focus was given to the juridical interpretation of *fiqh*, exclusively within the Hanbali school of thought. The institute's need to establish an international dimension and attract personnel from the entire Arab world led to substantial financial investments. A significant number of scholarships were offered, covering expenses including accommodation and food⁷⁰. The institute grew and inserted new disciplines, without changing the pedagogical traits that always responded to the same religious interpretative form.

In the mid-20th century, the new Saudi foreign policy strategy recognized the need to establish an educational centre that would serve as an alternative to the nationalist-secularist universities emerging in the Arab-Islamic world⁷¹. The growing influence of Nasserism in Egypt and its impact on the prestigious Al-Azhar University were an element of particular attention for the Monarchy.

Saudi authorities and scholars, including prominent figures and *'ulamā'* in Saudi Arabia, founded the IUM in 1961 with the aim of making it a significant political-religious tool. The creation of the Centre was

61 Farquhar, *Circuits of Faith. Migration, Education, and the Wahhabi Mission*, 18.

62 Hegghammer, *The Caravan. Abdallah Azzam and the Rise of Global Jihad.*, p. 108; Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, 117.

63 Sebastian Maisel e John Shoup, *Saudi Arabia and the Gulf. Arab States Today. An Encyclopedia of Life in the Arab States*, vol. I&II (London: Greenwood Press, 2009), 446.

64 Farquhar, *Circuits of Faith. Migration, Education, and the Wahhabi Mission*, 45.

65 Gerhard Bowering et al., *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought*, (Princeton University Press, 2013), 486.

66 Millard Burr e Collins, *Alms for Jihad. Charity and Terrorism in the Islamic World*, 37.

67 Farquhar, *Circuits of Faith. Migration, Education, and the Wahhabi Mission*, 51.

68 Nahouza, *Wahhabism and the Rise of the New Salafists. Theology, Power and Sunni Islam*, 32.

69 Lauzière, *The Making of Salafism. Islamic Reform in the Twentieth Century*, 71.

70 Farquhar, *Circuits of Faith. Migration, Education, and the Wahhabi Mission*, 53.

71 Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia*, 126.

also a result of the influx of Muslim Brotherhood members and traditionalist Salafis⁷² into Saudi Arabia following persecutions⁷³. In addition, as a consequence of the new kingdom's strategic line of external political opening, the reception of individuals from various parts of the world was substantial and needed a centralized institution to control belief and practices. If the Scholastic Institute represented the experimental seed of the new Saudi internal educational system, the University of Medina was the means of propagating Wahhabi ideology externally responding to the *da'wa* mission, serving as the most important international Islamic university⁷⁴.

The university did not fall under the jurisdiction of the Saudi Ministry of Education. Instead, it reported to the grand mufti, Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm Āl al-Shaykh, who held the title of President, while his deputy was 'Abd al-'Azīz ibn 'Abd Allah ibn Baz⁷⁵. The members of the Advisory Council, later replaced by the Supreme Council, were selected from different geographical regions, demonstrating the university's homogeneity and consisted of scholars, luminaries, and experts in Islamic sciences primarily associated with the Salafi network. Their role was to assess the university's operations and suggest structural improvements⁷⁶.

The first Advisory Council of the IUM included two Saudis, Ibn Baz (effectively the head of the institute) and 'Abd al-Muhsin al-Abbad (who would later succeed Ibn Baz). It also had three prominent Asian activists: Mawlana Mawdudi (leader of the al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya), Ali Nadwi, and Muḥammad Dawud al-Ghaznawi (member of the Ahl al-Hadith group in Pakistan). The council featured Egyptians like 'Abd al-Razzaq Afifi (leader of the Salafist group *Anṣār al-Sunna al-Muḥammadiyya*) and Hasanayn Muḥammad Makhluḥ (Egyptian grand mufti); were also included the Iraqis Muḥammad al-Sawwaf (member of the Muslim Brotherhood) and Muḥammad Bahja al-Athari, the Syrians Muḥammad al-Mubarak (co-founder of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria), Ali al-Thantawi and al-Bitar⁷⁷.

The presence of personalities affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood and other Salafi groups on the Board of Directors was significant. The University's campus was frequented by members of two major extremist groups in Asia and the Middle East too, Ahl al-Hadith and Ansar al-Sunna al-Muḥammadiyya. Ahl al-Hadith's ties with Wahhabism dated back to the late 19th century⁷⁸, while the Ansar group had strong connections with the Saudi establishment since the Hijaz conquest in 1926 (and the consequent Kingdom of Saudi Arabia foundation in 1932). These students held significant positions at the university, published their own journals ("*al-hādī al-nabawī*" and "*al-tawḥīd*"), and emphasized the concept of God unity in all their activities. Other members of these groups assumed important teaching positions at the university⁷⁹, showing the importance they had within the network.

In the following years, more figures who played significant roles in the traditionalist Muslim landscape, such as Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, Yūsuf al-Qaraḏāwī, and Muḥammad Quṭb (all affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood), would join the IUM and its advisory council. Their work in attracting students and followers to Medina helped expand the pool of potential adherents and students for the Wahhabi project. During a historical period in which socialism was on the rise and Saudi Arabia and Egypt were on the brink of confrontation, the University of Medina became an amplifier of Saudi propaganda and served as a means of academically training communities in accordance with Wahhabi principles. Given that 75% of the university's students came from outside Saudi Arabia, the proselytizing work included specific training to enable students to promote Wahhabi doctrine upon returning to their home countries⁸⁰.

Of great interest was the figure of Muḥammad al-Majdhūb⁸¹, a Syrian scholar and member of the Muslim Brotherhood (Syrian branch) who certainly had ties to the network of al-Sawwaf, the Saudi establishment, and components of intelligence from various countries, including Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United States. As a delegate of the MWL, for which he held the role of responsible for *da'wa* work⁸², he became the coordinator of the MWL office in Peshawar in the late 1980s (right during the period of significant Arab mobilization in Afghanistan) making contact with Abdallah Azzam and the *Maktab Khadamāt al-Mujāhidīn al-'Arab* and writing a book in memory of the experience ("Unforgettable Memories with the Mujahidin and Emigrants in Afghanistan"). He held the role of professor at the IUM, where he also served as the official biographer, heading the editorial team of the university newspaper ("*al-Jāmi'a al-Islāmiyya bi-l-Madīna al-Munawwara*")⁸³.

72 Lypp, *From territorial conquest to global calling. The roots and transformations of the Saudi-Wahhabi da'wa*, 9.

73 Gold, *Hatred's Kingdom. How Saudi Arabia Supports the New Global Terrorism*, 90.

74 Farquhar, *Circuits of Faith. Migration, Education, and the Wahhabi Mission*, 65.

75 Gold, *Hatred's Kingdom. How Saudi Arabia Supports the New Global Terrorism*, 90.

76 Michael Farquhar, "Saudi Petrodollars, Spiritual Capital and the Islamic University of Medina: a Wahhabi Missionary Project in Transnational Perspective", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 47/4 (2015): 707.

77 Farquhar, *Circuits of Faith. Migration, Education, and the Wahhabi Mission*, 93.

78 The proximity of Ahl al-Hadīth with Wahhabism occurred in the late 19th century, after some 'ulama' undertook journeys to the Indian subcontinent. Contacts remained frequent, and the mobility of personnel entering and exiting allowed the idea to remain stable and develop, especially in Pakistan. Stephane Lacroix, "Between Revolution and Apoliticism. Nasir al-Din al-Albani and his Impact on the Shaping of Contemporary Salafism", in Roel Meijer, *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 62-5.

79 Farquhar, "Saudi Petrodollars, Spiritual Capital and the Islamic University of Medina: a Wahhabi Missionary Project in Transnational Perspective", 710.

80 Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia*, 112.

81 Bibliographical information about his life is scarce and contradictory. Analysing his academic career and activities, it would seem that he was born in the early years of the 20th century, probably in 1907 (in 1981, when he was a professor at the IUM, it was reported that he was 74 years old).

82 Hegghammer, *The Caravan. Abdallah Azzam and the Rise of Global Jihad*, 156.

83 Farquhar, "Saudi Petrodollars, Spiritual Capital and the Islamic University of Medina: a Wahhabi Missionary Project in Transnational Perspective", 708.

Muḥammad al-Majdhūb later wrote several important works, including “*‘Ulamā’ wa-Mufakkirūn*”. Given his position, it can be assumed that he also collaborated in writing – or revising – the booklet published by the MWL in 1982 (“The Muslim World League: twenty years on the path of *da’wa* and *jihād*”)⁸⁴. Al-Majdhūb was also responsible for the university supervision system, collaborating with Saudi intelligence, and overseeing foreign students⁸⁵. In the academic field, he played a prominent role in education and the purpose of teaching, focusing on the Qur’an and the life of the Prophet, and emphasizing the understanding of teaching as a living practice, adapting and improving one’s life based on the received teachings. In consideration of his mansions, it’s possible to estimate that he represented one of the most important elements within the system, although his figure did not have much space in contemporary historiography.

In the 1960s, and subsequently in the 1970s, the University of Medina effectively implemented the Saudi-Wahhabi missionary project in every field, focusing on belief and practices, as well as religious knowledge (*‘ilm*), transmitted through *ta’līm* (teaching). The subjects taught were numerous and were particularly related to religion (the concept of *tawḥīd*, *tafsīr*, hadith studies), jurisprudence (*fiqh*, *uṣūl al-fiqh*), the Arabic language (reading, calligraphy, rhetoric), history, literature, and art, leaving no detail overlooked. The true and only form of Islam was promoted following the tradition of the Prophet and the example of the first three generations of Muslims (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*). Students were offered comprehensive training to accept the Wahhabi doctrine to purify themselves and spread it globally. It’s important to underline that many of the students formed at IUM either returned to their home countries or chose new destinations. The Saudi project could only be realized if the teachings of its adherents were able to disseminate the ideology in all aspects of life all around the world⁸⁶.

5. Conclusion

The Islamic University of Medina and the Muslim World League have emerged as two actors in the same global doctrinal *da’wa* mission. The IUM provided education, exporting its teachings to an area controlled by the MWL, and where the MWL itself had created opportunities. In essence, it was the same type of propaganda carried out in a different way, adapted to its intended purpose. They have served as the perfect instruments for the global spread of Wahhabism-Salafism and have set the direction for major Muslim organizations. Religion (*dīn*) represented the core of the political and educational project, serving as the concept to follow in terms of orthodoxy and orthopraxy.

The Muslim World League and the Islamic University of Medina could be described as the command centre of the system, the main organizations for the realization of the Saudi project. To bring their plan to fruition, however, it was necessary to have affiliated associations and personnel to be placed within them first. Secondly, it was essential to find the funds required for the execution of the plan, to finance the management of facilities, materials, and personnel. Finally, the recipients of the propaganda could not be missed, namely members of the Muslim community. Through the network they created, managed, and funded, the Saudis succeeded in developing a network of contacts that effectively implemented a part of the plan, spreading the Wahhabi-Salafist ideology and overseeing every aspect of human life.

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84 From the reading of the text, published on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the League’s foundation, the political strategic choice of the Rābiṭa is evident, the concept of *jihād* for the Muslim community is emphasized in every aspect of human life. In *The Muslim World League, rabīṭat al-‘alam al-islāmī: ‘ashrun ‘aman [The Muslim World League: Twenty Years on the Road of Da’wa and Jihad]*, (Mecca: The Muslim World League, 1982).

85 Farquhar, *Circuits of Faith. Migration, Education, and the Wahhabi Mission*, 122.

86 Farquhar, *Circuits of Faith. Migration, Education, and the Wahhabi Mission*, 129–30.

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