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The Influence of Wahhabism in Pakistan

Simon Ross Valentine
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About the Author: Simon Ross Valentine is a free-lance writer, PSRU associate, and part-time lecturer on Islam and Religious Studies. He has just completed a book on Wahhabism titled “Force and Fanaticism: Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia and Beyond”, to be published later this year by Hurst & Co/OUP. Email contact, archegos@btinternet.com

Abstract: In the last few years there have been repeated claims concerning the growing deleterious influence of Wahhabism in the Indian sub-continent and the support by the Saudi Arabian government of militancy, activities resulting in the introduction of extreme interpretations of Shariah; the Arabization of language and culture and the persecution of minority groups in various localities. After briefly explaining Wahhabism, its beliefs and ideology, this paper will consider the indoctrination and propaganda war allegedly undertaken by the Wahhabi Movement in Pakistan especially, as critics claim, through its use of “charities” and the madrassah system. Attention is given to Wahhabi opposition to Shi’ism and Sufism, particularly the veneration of pirs and al-awliya (holy men), and the cult of shrines, practices associated with the Sufi, Shia and Barelvi traditions. Tentative conclusions will be presented for further debate, principally the need for reform of the education system and for political accountability by the Pakistani government and elsewhere in acknowledging and preventing overseas funding of militancy within its borders.

Keywords: Wahhabism; Abd’al-Wahhab; tawhid; madrassah; Ibn Taymiyyah; Sufism

Introduction
In the summer of 2013 the European Parliament made the startling claim that Wahhabi and Salafi groups based in the Middle East are involved, mainly via Saudi charities, in the "support and supply of arms to rebel groups around the world". Hillary Clinton in January 2010, (at that time serving as US Secretary of State), similarly warned the international community “that donors in KSA [Saudi Arabia] constitute the most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorist groups worldwide”. Such views, instead of being dismissed as sensationalist scaremongering, are shared by numerous other reputable scholars, organisations and think-tanks. The Council on Foreign Relations, in its Annual Report of 2007, claimed that KSA is “the largest source of financing for al-Qaeda and its fellow jihadis, to the tune of between $300 million and $500 million”. In December 2013 the Global Research Organisation reported that “US-Saudi funded terrorists were sowing chaos in Pakistan”, adding the alarmist note that such activity was “destroying a Nation State”. Likewise

1 The views expressed in the paper are entirely those of the author and should not be construed as reflecting the views of the PSRU, SGIA, DGSI or of Durham University.
identifying Pakistan as an area of intense Wahhabist activity, one of the WikiLeaks documents, (a cable from the US Consulate in Lahore in 2012), stated that “financial support estimated at nearly 100 million USD annually was making its way to Deobandi and Ahl-e-Hadith clerics” in Pakistan “from ‘missionary’ and ‘Islamic charitable’ organisations in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, ostensibly with the direct support of those governments”. In the autumn of 2012 Pakistan’s former law minister Iqbal Haider openly confirmed that “most jihadist and terrorist organizations operating in Pakistan were Wahhabis”. Whether they are the Taliban or the Lashkar-e-Taiba”, he declared, “their ideology is Saudi-Wahhabist without an iota of doubt”.

What is Wahhabism?
Wahhabism is an Islamic reform movement commenced by Muhammad ibn Abd’al-Wahhab, a Bedouin preacher in Arabia in the eighteenth century, arguing, like so many other Islamic reformers, that Islam, corrupted by bidah (harmful innovations) has moved away from the original teachings of the Islamic faith by adding practices and rituals alien to the teaching of the prophet Muhammad. Claiming to have been appointed by Allah to restore Islam to its original purity, Abd’al-Wahhab called on Muslims to adhere to tawhid (the uniqueness and oneness of God) and the worship of God alone. Utopian in his idealism he implored his fellow Bedouin to return to a so-called “golden age” in which Islam is supreme, and where Muslims are faithful to God and the Quran, or more specifically, faithful to his extreme and literal interpretation of the Quran. Acknowledging Abd’al-Wahhab as “a renowned religious teacher and a great reformer of his times”, and rejecting all other Muslims as non-Muslim, Wahhabis today see themselves as Muttaqūn, “the pious ones”, and Al-Abrār, “pious believers of Islamic monotheism”. For them their movement is “the religion of the Quran shorn of all superstitions”, the restoration of a faith which, in their opinion, other Muslims “have distorted”. Mainly found in Saudi Arabia and Qatar, Wahhabis like to argue there is no such thing as Wahhabism, that they are simply “Sunni Muslims”, the only “true Muslims”.

Traditionally Wahhabis were known as Al-Muwahhiddun, “the Unitarians”, or the Ahl-al-Tawhid, “the people of monotheism”, those proclaiming tawhid, or simply as the dawah, “preaching”. The expression “Wahhabi” was originally used in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries mainly as a pejorative term by opponents of the new movement, who wished to identify, and castigate, the followers of Abd’al-Wahhab for their alleged cruelty and


intolerance. Some contemporary Saudi writers, as well as referring to themselves as “Unitarian”, or “true Muslim”, occasionally use the term “Salafi” as a point of self recognition, emphasising their claim that they, and they alone, are directly linked to Salaf as-Saleh, the "pious predecessors", the first generation of Muslims. Similarly they will also use the term Ahl-e-Hadith, “the people of hadith”, those who place greater emphasis on the traditions of the prophet rather than taqlid, or precedent. Many mainstream Muslims regard Wahhabism as firqa, a new faction, a “vile sect”, or, in stronger vitriolic terms, as the “horn of Satan”, the profane movement that the prophet Muhammad predicted would arise out of Najd. One of many conspiracy theories believed by Muslims worldwide depicts “Abd’al-Wahhab, as a dupe of the British secret service”, and Wahhabism as a creation of the British to undermine and divide Islam.

Wahhabi belief and practice

Critics of Wahhabism perceive it as an intolerant sect, which attempts to ensure religious conformity by force (as seen in the use of mutawwa’in, religious police in KSA), and which prohibits the practice of any other religion other than Wahhabism on Arabian soil, including any other form of Islam. Abd’al-Wahhab, the founder of Wahhabism, condemned what he perceived to be “the medieval superstitions that had collected around the teachings of Islam”. His aim, as is the aim of Wahhabism today, was to promote tayyibât, all that is good regarding food, daily practices, and the people that we mix with, and the rejection of al-khabîth, all that is evil. Abd’al-Wahhab condemned, not only the idolatry and the Cult of Saints practiced by many Muslims in the Najd region of Arabia, but also many other practices such as smoking, music, singing, dancing, drinking coffee, and the use of silk, gold, ornaments and jewellery. As such Wahhabi clerics today declare that “listening to music, going to the cinema, mixing of the sexes in public, taking photographs in public places; celebrating birthdays or Valentine’s Day”, even the use of dolls and teddy bears by little

15 Noble Quran 3:179; 5:100.
children, are haram, forbidden. Wahhabi intolerance is seen particularly in its treatment of women. Wahhabism demands that women, for reasons of modesty, cover their bodies completely in public with abaya (full length cloak), hijab (head covering), niqab (face covering) and even gloves. Under Wahhabi teaching women can do almost nothing (including opening a bank account, travelling abroad, have a job or even have surgery) without the permission of a mahram, a male guardian. As recently as the autumn of 2012 a Saudi scholar announced on twitter that female fast-food workers were prostitutes because they worked with men. Under Wahhabism women are not allowed to drive cars. The blind Wahhabi cleric Abdul Rahman Al-Barrak recently described female drivers as “women who open the gates of evil, seeking to westernize the country”. Applying the strict, literal Hanbali school of jurisprudence, Wahhabis list more than twenty crimes punishable by execution including rape, murder, armed robbery, repeated drug use, adultery, homosexuality, drug-trafficking, witchcraft and sorcery, prostitution and apostasy. As discussed below, with the growing influence of Wahhabism, such an extreme interpretation of Islam is being enforced in many parts of Pakistan and India.

In the Wahhabi-jihadist mindset, the world is polarised, a world torn between East and West; between the mazlum (oppressed Muslims) and the mustakbiri, the oppressor (allegedly, the west). Wahhabism, in its school textbooks used in KSA and its clerical fatwa (legal opinions), depicts the west as jahiliyyah-madiyya, civilization characterized by ignorance-materialism, godlessness, similar to the pagan society of pre-Islamic Arabia. Linked with this is an innate siege mentality, the Wahhabi belief in an unending conflict between Islam and “the crusader-Zionists”, between belief and disbelief. Shaykh ‘Abdul-’Azeez bin Baaz, former Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, argued that, as Islam faces alghazwa al-fikree (an ideological attack) from Christians and Jews, there is a duty for Muslims to propagate “Deen (true religion, viz., the Wahhabi ideology) and spread it by the word and sword until it is dominant over all other religions and ways of life”. Musa Al-Qarni, a prominent Wahhabi preacher and scholar, openly declaring that “Jews and Christians are enemies of Allah”, similarly petitioned his fellow Saudis: “We must realize that Allah obligated us to disseminate this religion all over the globe”. Conflict in the form of jihad, either by the dissemination of religious literature or by violent struggle, is therefore considered to be inevitable, if not imperative, according to the Wahhabi-jihadist mindset. Believing it is expedient to “purify acts of worship from all filth of shirk (polytheism, associating God with the physical world)”,

18 The enforcement of this dress code varies from place to place in KSA with rigid observation in Riyadh yet a more liberal approach in other cities such as Al-Khobar.
19 Sheikh Ali Al Mutairi, expressing his views on twitter, see Al-Arabiya, 30 November 2012.
22 Shaykh ‘Abdul-’Azeez bin Baaz, in Bayaan wa Tawdeeh, pp.9-10, op.cit.
Wahhabis are actively involved in propaganda and proselytising campaigns in Pakistan, India and elsewhere.

**Wahhabist influence in Pakistan: the madrassah network**

With millions of Pakistani and Indian expatriates working in Saudi Arabia, countless more annually visiting the country to perform *hajj* and *umrah* (the lesser and the greater pilgrimages), and as neighbours on opposite sides of the Persian Gulf, there has long been a strong link between the Indian sub-continent and KSA. Driven by a desire to re-educate Muslims worldwide, bringing them to embrace the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam, and fearing the spread of Iranian Shi’ism in Pakistan, India and Kashmir, the Saudi Arabian government has needed little persuasion to involve itself in the region. Historic Wahhabism first appeared in India in the late nineteenth century with the arrival of Wahhabi preachers from Arabia stirring up hostility against British rule. In the 1970s a network of “charitable organisations” was setup in Pakistan, mainly by KSA, to provide a practical front for channelling billions of dollars to finance *jihad* against the Soviets in Afghanistan. However, despite such early inroads, Wahhabism gained its first real foothold in Pakistan under the regime of General Zia-ul-Haq in the 1980s, being a useful ally, and instigator, in his policy of Islamization. There is strong evidence to show that “the General used Wahhabi groups against minority groups, including the Shiites, who . . . had sympathies with Iran”. Iqbal Haider, law minister under former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, informs us “there was no doubt that Saudi Arabia was supporting Wahhabi groups through General Zia to kill Iran's support in Pakistan”. During this time millions of Pakistanis left their homeland to find work in the Middle East, especially Saudi Arabia, a significant number of whom, it is argued, later returned to Pakistan after being radicalised during their stay in KSA by militant Wahhabi clerics.

Despite strenuous denials by the Saudi government, and recent criminalization of terrorist activity in KSA (on Saudi soil anyway), Saudi charities, and the ubiquitous “Zakat boxes” throughout the desert kingdom, have provided much of the funding for the promulgation of Wahhabi ideology in Pakistan. Such promulgation has taken place, not only by the publication and distribution of large amounts of Wahhabi literature, but by use of the Deobandi

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27 The words of Pakistan’s former law minister Iqbal Haider, see “The ‘Wahhabi Republic’ of Pakistan”, DW Deutsche Welle, 24 August 2012, op.cit.


29 The number of Pakistani expatriates in Saudi Arabia has consistently increased from the 1980s and currently exceeds 1.5 million, see report by the Saudi Bureau of Emigration & Overseas Employment (BEOE), Arab News, 5 April 2014.

madrassah system, Quranic schools attached to mosques throughout the country. In its attempt to disseminate what it believes to be “Islamic values”, “Saudi Arabia pumped millions of petro-dollars into the madrassahs and mosques of the sub-continent, training young Pakistanis in the details of Wahhabi theology”. In this process of “education” Wahhabis are greatly aided by the fact that the theology of such Deobandi schools is “an uncompromising fundamentalism, mirroring that of Wahhabism” itself. Using this Deobandi madrassah system, it is argued that Wahhabism has indoctrinated two generations of young Muslims in Pakistan and India with its curricula of intolerance and extremism. It is further claimed that Wahhabi based clerics, financed by Saudi money, have “targeted families with multiple children and severe financial difficulties, initially under the pretence of charity”. Such clerics allegedly indoctrinate the children, while teachers “assess their proclivity to engage in violence and acceptance of jihadi culture”. Such manipulating of young Muslim minds occurs partly due to the failure of the Pakistani government to provide universal state education, especially for the poor. Statistics show the growth and influence of such schools, which continue to be nurseries of militant Wahhabi activity. In 2002 for example, there were 10,000 registered madrassahs in Pakistan: 400 were Shia, 400 Ahli-hadith, 500 Jamaat-i-Islami, while over 7,000 were Deobandi, the teaching of which, as noted previously, is very similar to Wahhabi principles and dogma. By 2012 there were 24,000 registered madrassahs “the vast majority of these, and of unregistered schools, linked to the Deobandi system”.

The use of “charities” to spread Wahhabi ideology

Funded and approved by the Saudi government, Saudi “Charities” have been effective instruments for globally exporting the Wahhabi faith and militant Islam. Following the defeat and withdrawal of the Russians from Afghanistan in 1979, many of the mujahedeen, some of whom were young militant Saudis, turned their attention to other jihadi causes such as Kashmir, Bosnia, Algeria and Gaza. Concerning Pakistan, with the benefit of “petro-dollars” gained from oil revenue, it is claimed that millions of dollars of “annual financial support for Salafi, Deobandi and Ahl-i-Hadith clerics, particularly in southern Punjab, has originated in Saudi Arabia and the UAE”. The Muslim World League [MWL], founded in 1962 by Saudi Prince Faisal, was one such “charity” created, not only to counter Nasserist Egypt’s influences and the appeal of its Arab nationalist ideology, but to facilitate the global propagation of Wahhabism, and challenge the teaching of Shia, Sufis, and other allegedly “heretical” Muslim

34 “Saudi Arabia, UAE Financing Extremism in South Punjab”, ibid.
35 Many madrassahs remaining unregistered are highly militant in their theological teaching, see C. Allen, God’s Terrorists: The Wahhabi Cult and the Hidden Roots of Modern Jihad, op.cit., p. 275.
groups. As Gilles Kepel put it, the MWL was “the first coherent and systematic institution whose avowed interest was to ‘wahhabize’ Islam worldwide . . .” by “sending out religious missionaries, distributing the works of its main ideologists [Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Abd’al-Wahhab notably], and above all by raising funds for building mosques and subsidizing Islamic associations” usually aligned with Deobandi and Salafi fundamentalists. Various other subsidiary Saudi charities (including the World Assembly of Muslim Youth; al-Haramain Foundation; the Islamic Conference Organization (ICO, now the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation); the Supreme Committee for Islamic Propagation; and the World Supreme Council for Mosques) have emerged from the MWL, all of them contributing to the spread of Wahhabi doctrine in Pakistan and elsewhere. In 1979, the International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO) was formed as another “front” propagating Wahhabi ideology in Pakistan and elsewhere. Similar to the MWL the IIRO is supervised by the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, and funded by the Saudi government, thus ensuring a Wahhabi orientation and drive behind its “charitable” activities. It has been claimed various militant groups benefitted from such “charitable activities” such as the Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (the “Army of the Prophet’s companions”), which “represented a state-sponsored and Saudi backed movement against Pakistan’s pro-Iran minority”.

Examples of Wahhabi influence

Reliable sources confirm that “the increasing influence of radical streams, especially Wahhabism”, is causing “communal polarisation” and “increasing radicalisation of Muslims”, in both Pakistan and neighbouring India. Muslims throughout the Indian sub-continent have a long tradition of Sufi Islam and the Barelvi tradition, characterised by the veneration of pirs and al-awliya (holy men) and visiting their tombs in the belief that such can intercede for their devotees with Allah, because of their personal taqwa or righteousness. Many shrines, such as the numerous sites at Multan, near Lahore, are dedicated to various Sufi Saints, mystics believed to have achieved union with God by fana, self-denial and the complete realization of Allah. Although mainstream Islam finds ample support within the Quran and hadith to legitimize such practices Wahhabis reject them as shirk and bidah. Muslims who practice such things are regarded by Wahhabis as non-Muslim, mushrikun (polytheists), and “grave worshippers”, allegedly guilty of taghut (worshipping things other than Allah). The promotion of Wahhabism and its rejection of these and other practices has led to Wahhabi-Sufi conflict in various localities in Pakistan. Examples of such can be seen in the bombing of Sufi dargahs, holy sites, in Kashmir and in the recent attacks on graves and tombs at Charar-ei-Sharief in India. In 2010, extremists bombed the shrine of Hazrat Data Ganj Baksh Ali Hujweri, a well-known Sufi master and wali (holy man), in Lahore, killing 42 people.

year later, in April 2011, two suicide bombers set off an explosion killing more than forty worshippers and injuring hundreds more, during a festival at a large Sufi shrine in southern Punjab. In recent years there have been “terrorist attacks” on the mazars (enshrined tombs) of Data Ganjbaksh, Abdullah Shah Ghazi and of Baba Farid Ganjshakar, a holy man “considered the first poet of the Punjabi language”. Throughout 2013 and up to the present time there have been regular attacks by Wahhabi-militants on the Dargah Ghulam Shah Gazi shrine, and at other Sufi holy sites in Sehwan Sharif, in Sindh province. Such Wahhabi-Sufi clashes occurring regularly throughout the Indian sub-continent, are usually characterised by the banning of Sufi publications, the burning of Sufi houses, the desecration of Sufi graves, and the demolition of holy Muslim sites. As Dr. Mubarak Ali, a Pakistan historian and analyst claims: "Wahhabis are against any cultural plurality so they attack shrines, music festivals and other cultural centres that are not Islamic in their view". In various regions in Pakistan, particularly in rural areas of Sindh province and in the mountainous region of Balochistan, Wahhabi backed groups try to enforce child marriage, discourage women from studying, and actively campaign for Muslim families to live according to Wahhabi interpretations of Shariah law on dress code and segregation. Perceiving such as bidah, Wahhabis have declared a ban on music, (a prominent feature of the sub-continent’s Sufi Islam); introduced prayer rituals in line with Wahhabi teaching and issued directives to make the wearing of the burqa by Muslim women compulsory. These Wahhabi based groups, while trying to impose a strict Shariah code of conduct in Muslim households, are also changing the language of Pakistani and Indian Muslims. It is claimed “they advocate the use of Allah hafiz as a parting phrase as opposed to the traditional khuda hafiz”; and the use of Allah, an Arabic word for God, as opposed to khuda, which is a Persian word. Similarly, “these Wahhabi groups force Muslims to address the Islamic holy month as Ramadan (which is Arabic), as opposed to Ramzan”. While teaching such “arabization” in local madrassahs, those who refuse to conform to such changes are often beaten by Wahabbi supporters as an example to other would-be nonconformists.

The effects of Wahhabi teaching on Shia Muslims

The infiltration of Wahhabi doctrine into Pakistan society has also led to conflict, not only between Sunni and Sufi Muslims, but also between Sunni and followers of Shi’ism. “After the Islamic revolution of 1979 in Iran”, states one writer, “the conflicts between Shias and Sunnis had decreased tremendously” in the Indian sub-continent. However, “the re-energising of Wahhabis in India [and Pakistan] is precipitating renewed conflicts”. Amongst other things

exposes_wahhabi_agenda, accessed 12/8/12.


49 “Wahhabi Impact”, Frontline, ibid.
“Wahhabis teach that killing Shias will lead them (its followers) to jannat (heaven)”. Reports indicate that the "sectarian cleansing" of Shia by Wahhabi groups is taking place for example in various areas such as in the north-western Gilgit-Baltistan region of Pakistan. In August 2012 twenty-two Shia Muslims were brutally murdered by the Wahhabi inspired groups in Mansehra while they were travelling in a bus from Rawalpindi to Gilgit, the gunmen first identifying them as Shia before killing them at point blank range. Wahhabi-Taliban groups regularly launched attacks on the Gilgit Shia during the presidency of Pervez Musharraf, between 2001-2008. It is claimed that “all these massacres are being legitimated and orchestrated by a Wahhabi group known as Sepah-e-Sahabe which emerged in 1985 allegedly with Saudi funding.” Various Pakistani scholars have emphasized how an intensive “Arabization” of society, characterised by a stricter interpretation of Islam, has pervaded Pakistani society making religion in certain localities intolerant and austere. As Gilles Kepel put it: “grain by grain the desert sands of Saudi Arabia are replacing the rich soil that had nurtured a magnificent Muslim culture in India for a thousand years [with] a stern, unyielding version of Islam [Wahhabism] replacing the kinder, gentler Islam of the Sufis and saints who had walked on this land for hundreds of years”. One recent Pakistani feminist similarly laments how “Ibn Taymiyyah’s influence became profoundly evident in South Asian Muslim societies after the 1970s because of the expansion of the power and religious ideology of the oil-enriched Saudi kingdom over the Muslim world”. In particular she notes the occurrence of “many significant changes in the relationship between the gendered or non-Muslim individual, and the community and the state, as a result of the pervasiveness of Wahhabi-influenced morality and religiosity in the society”.

Conclusions

Although vehemently denied by the Saudi government, it is claimed that KSA actively campaigns in Pakistan calling for the replacement of all forms of Islam with its own; attempts to “Arabize” Islam, as seen in the enforcement of a strict dress code and the use of Arabic terms only, and exports radical, political Islam under the innocuous labels, “education” and “charity”. In carrying out such activities it has been asserted, sometimes in dramatic terms, that Wahhabism is “killing the soul of Islam”, in presenting an extremist, intolerant interpretation of Shariah which, the majority of Muslims would argue, distorts and misrepresents their faith. With these points in mind, especially the use by Wahhabi factions to propagate their views by use of the madrassah system, there is an obvious need for the

50 ibid.
56 Jamal, Jamaat-e-Islami Women in Pakistan: Vanguard of a New Modernity, op.cit.
57 “Attacks on Sufi Islam in Pakistan”, Hot Kashmir, 12 November 2010, op.cit.
provision of better state funded education in Pakistan; the careful oversight and monitoring of curricula and the supervised training of teachers, thus plugging the inlet of Wahhabist ideology in that country. Pakistan, unlike Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Jordan, Iran and other Muslim states, has no state controls over religious learning so as to prevent sectarian disharmony in society. In the past twelve months, in a further attempt to eradicate militancy, the Pakistani government has commenced closing and demolishing unregistered madrassahs, and $70 million has been allocated to modernise curricula taught in such schools.

As well as educational reform there is also the need for political accountability and integrity. Many Muslims have argued that the “Pakistani rulers have failed miserably in stopping” this infiltration of Wahhabist, and militant elements, into the country. It is claimed that “government institutions are paying more attention to the so-called war on terror but are unaware of the state of affairs in their own backyard where another Afghanistan is in the making”. It is a point of considerable irony that western countries, particularly the US, accuse Pakistan and the Pakistani military's spy agency, the ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence), of supporting the Taliban, but (due to their reliance on Saudi oil and the use of KSA as a mediator in the Middle East) say nothing against Saudi Arabia, and Saudi covert support of radical Islam. As one analyst remarked recently, “if the Pakistani establishment is really intent on stopping the spread of extremism in the country, they should cut off the invisible hands which buttress these extremist groups within the civilian government, military, intelligence services and the judiciary system”. KSA is custodian of the two holiest sites in Islam, namely Mecca and Medina, and as such for many Pakistani Muslims, criticizing Saudi Arabia is synonymous with criticizing Islam itself. Although such reticence is to a degree understandable, there should be no shirking by the Pakistan government, and the western powers to name-and-shame KSA, as one of the main financial supporters of militant activity in Pakistan.

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60 “Attacks on Sufi Islam in Pakistan”, ibid.