



EINLADUNG / AUSHANG

The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia by Prof. David Commins, Dickinson College (USA)

Chair: Dr. Guido Steinberg, SWP

Zentrum Moderner Orient
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Kirchweg 33, 14129 Berlin

The history of Wahhabism falls into three phases. In the first phase (1740s to 1880s), most Muslims considered Wahhabism a heretical innovation while Wahhabis viewed other Muslims as idolaters. Hostile polemics and conflict characterized relations between Wahhabis and neighbouring Muslims until the second phase (1880s to 1940s), when the modern Islamic reform movement paved the way for a revision of the Arabian movement's reputation in the Muslim world. In the third phase (1940s to present), Saudi Arabia supported Wahhabi proselytizers as instruments of foreign policy and opened the kingdom to Muslim Brothers fleeing Arab nationalist regimes. The mingling of Wahhabism and Islamic revivalism inside Saudi Arabia has diminished the standing of the kingdom's religious authorities. In the eyes of many Saudis, the Wahhabi establishment is tainted by association with the rulers, and Islamic revivalism offers an alternative vision of the union of religion and politics. How long this phase will last, and what might follow it, are open questions.

David Commins is Professor of History and Executive Director of the Clarke Center for the Interdisciplinary Study of Contemporary Issues at Dickinson College. He earned his B.A. at the University of California, Berkeley in 1976 and his PhD in history from the University of Michigan in 1985. He has held Fulbright grants to fund Arabic study at Damascus University (1981-82), to research Islamic modernism in Ottoman Syria (1982-1983), and to study Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia (2001-2002). A specialist in modern Islamic thought, Commins' publications include journal and encyclopedia articles on the subject as well as *Islamic Reform: Politics and Social Change in Late Ottoman Syria* and *Historical Dictionary of Syria*. His latest book, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia*, was published in December 2005. **Guido Steinberg** is a research associate at the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik in Berlin, specializing in the Arabian Peninsula, Iraq and the Persian Gulf.

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