

Prof. David Commins (Dickinson College)

Bio and abstracts, ZMO 5-21 January, 2006

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's publications include journal and encyclopaedia 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*, is due for release in December 2005 (IB Tauris).

Kolloquium: Thursday 12 January, 2006 (18.00, ZMO)

The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia

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 neighboring 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.

Arbeitsgespräch, Wednesday 11 January, 2006 (10.00, ZMO)

Revising the Wahhabi Reputation in the Arab East

If you traced the long term trend in relations between Wahhabism and the outside world, you would find a tendency toward accommodation. The first Saudi amirate's expansionist project meshed with the Wahhabi view of other Muslims as idolaters who must be conquered and converted. A more robust set of imperial neighbors in the nineteenth century compelled the second Saudi amirate to quell expansionist impulses and to settle for coexistence with 'idolatrous' neighbors. When it came to relations between Wahhabi and Ottoman ulama, however, no such corresponding *modus vivendi* evolved to mute doctrinal enmity until the 1880s. While the Wahhabis maintained their customary view of Ottoman Muslims as idolaters, there emerged a tendency among a handful of religious scholars in the Arab East (Egypt and the Fertile Crescent) that

initiated a reappraisal of the Najdi movement. This new religious tendency blended revivalism with an impulse to demonstrate Islam's compatibility with modern life. After the First World War, revivalists in the Arab East welcomed the Saudi rebirth, apparently dismissing the Ikhwan as ignorant bedouins and as an aberration, not the essence of Wahhabism. These revivalists tried to rehabilitate the Wahhabis' reputation in the Muslim world.