

The Islamic Community and the Wahabi fire

By **Xhavit Shala**

Recent developments within the Albanian Islamic Community¹ have been followed with great attention by the public opinion in Albania.² The meeting of the General Council of the Muslim Community during 14 and 15 of May³, that passed the changes to the statute and respective by-laws, clearly manifested the will of the Albanian Muslims to follow the practices of the Hanefi legal school that have been a traditional practice in Albania.

The decision of the General Council of the Community would be naturally met with harsh reaction from the Wahabi movement. The recent developments made public by the media demonstrate that the “wahabi” fire today presents a serious a threat for the traditional practice of Islam in Albania.⁴

“My dear Vizier, I was informed of your concern. We will look at what measures we need to take.” This is what the sultan, Selim III, tells to the Vali, who was requesting the intervention of the Supreme Porte to stop the wahabies that were threatening the holy places.⁵ The initial spread of the movement was not properly dealt with by the ottoman authorities and the intervention came too late. The fires could no longer be put out and were burning the Ottoman Empire.

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² This article was first published as an editorial in the daily “Korrieri”, of June 15, 2005

³ Press statement of the Albanian Muslim Community, May 15, 2005.

⁴ On June 15, the day the article was published, R.O. (for security reasons we are publishing only the initials of the person), wrote to the author saying: «I have personally been a selafi from more than ten years and have come to know this sect very well. I returned to the Hanefi truth after studying the Hanefi books and coming in contact with a true Hanefi scholar of Indian origin in Birmingham. And now I know very well that selafis was made up by people in the 18th century and is not based on the Koran or the hadith. I also want to add something that you should know. 95% of Muslim youth (the ones who go to mosque) in Albania are selafis, ihvanes or wahabies, as you refer to them. And the problem is what will happen later. I think that after 15 years the Muslim community will be in hands of the selafis. And why do I say that? The Muslim Community does not have a single Hanefi theologian who has graduated in a Hanefi school. Without a single Hanefi theologian, how can the community remain Hanefi? It can not but become selafi. And this is a big danger. Unless we have Hanefi scholars in Albania, the selafi will continue to penetrate. The Selafis are becoming a problem across Europe and I truly call them family terrorist. Today’s imams in Albania have graduated in Arab countries and 95% of them are selafis. They will also very soon, within ten years, convert the xhemat into selafi also. The Muslim community can do nothing against this. It can just vacate their seats”.

⁵ Tarihte Vehabi.

The wahabies⁶ at that time, drove their opposition to any other religion and the movement to teaching drawing the teaching of Islam straight from the book and the prophetic tradition to a real war. According to them victory could be achieved only by merging the sword with the religion. The people who did not “obey” the commandments of God need not be taught, they must be fought, they say.

In the context of the Ottoman Empire the Albanians of that time played a considerable role in the fight against the intolerant currents in Islam. The wars waged by Mehmet Ali Pasha against the intolerant wahabies and the Saudi tribe are a sufficient example to this.

With minor alteration due to the times we live in, the wahabies of our days share the same position with those of the earlier times.

Albania, though part of the Ottoman Empire, stayed outside the influence of the wahabies due to its geographical position and continued to preserve the traditional Islamic practices that were first brought by the ottomans and when compared with the Wahabi practices were very tolerant. After 1990, nearly 260 years later, the ambitions of the Wahabi movement reached the European Muslims who according to them had long departed from the prophetic tradition.

The wahabies as a religious movement is not a phenomenon affecting only Albania. By making use of these NGOs from the Arabic peninsula, this movement began spreading among the Muslims of Bulgaria, Bosnia, Albania⁷, and Macedonia⁸ and after 1999 in Kosovo⁹. The goal of this movement was the arabisation of Islam in the Balkans.¹⁰

⁶ The Wahabi movement was founded by Mohammed ibn Abdulvehhab born near Riyadh in 1703 and died in 1792. The Wahabi movement should be seen as a political one because it continues to maintain to this day strong political ties with the Saudi family. In our times it tries to politically influence other countries also. With the help of the British also, the movement was transformed from a religious sect into a powerful national liberation movement against ottoman domination. The Wahabi movement also has a religious dimension and the movement first introduced the term selafi into use.

According to scholars, the teachings of Mohammed Ibn Abdulvehhab is very rigid, puritanical and violent, with a retrograde and conservative character ... After being driven out of several Arab towns, and with the purpose of spreading his teachings, he entered into an agreement with the king of Saudi house Mohammed ibn Saudi. Following his agreement with the royal family and after being welcomed by the majority of the believers in that country, the royal family used him to spiritually subdue the tribes of the kingdom. As recompense, the prince would use his power to help spread the teachings of the sheik and this cooperation continued even after his death. In 1792, the descendants of both parties agreed to continue the agreement reached by their parents. This cooperation in the form of an association between the Saudi dynasty and Wahabi fundamentalism continues to dominate to our days. ... It is interesting to note that in the agreement religious and political power is joined together, an occurrence that has rarely happened in the Muslim world. The Russian researcher D. B. Malisheva, in a metaphorical manner describes the following: “Joined together, one with his preaching, and the other with his sward, they contributed to the spread of this new teaching ... (Abdu’l-Wehhabi and wahabism in the light of evidence - Nexhat S. Ibrahim).

⁷ Dictionnaire Mondial de l’Islamisme – The chapter on Albania - «The Islamic associations work to achieve one goal which they never tried to hide and that is the re-islamization of Albania».

⁸ On June 15, 2005, the day of the publishing of this piece in the daily Korrieri, Avni Halimi, an intellectual and journalist from Skopje writes to the author: «I am also one of the people who like you has publicly expressed the concern about the wahabi spread. Here among us in Macedonia, the Wahabi current has been able to enter in the highest state agencies, (understandably, only those involved in espionage and

The Albanian wahabies have grown confident due to the support from certain countries in the gulf. Representatives of this movement since seven years now ¹¹ are making efforts to take control of the Albanian Muslim Community structures or to create parallel structures¹² within the community¹³. In Albania they are represented by the selafis and the ihvanes who have recently grown in numbers particularly in Tirana. Both the Albanian Islamic Community and the law enforcement structures know who these people are. The Albanian authorities must take action to put out the Wahabi “fire,” unless they want to follow the example of Sultan Selim III.

Without underestimating the threat that wahabism presents to our country, it is of interest to note the news of that was conveyed to the media by certain interested persons saying that the “Selafi jihad” had threatened with life the chairman and the general secretary of the Muslim Community¹⁴, while the latter have categorically denied having received any threats. The name “selafi jihad” brings to my attention the name of a cell, a branch of Al Qaeda, which was uncovered by the Italian police and Secret Service in Italy, two to three years ago. The tendency to present the “selafi jihad,” once an illegal cell in Italy, as a legitimate movement that seeks to promote the role of Muslims in Albania appears to be directed and aims to destroy the Euro-Atlantic dream of Albanians.

The electoral campaign may have also directly or indirectly affected the increase in temperature within the Islamic Community.¹⁵ The accusations and counter-accusations [from within the community] about political alliances may seriously undermine the

counterespionage). Only God knows what their true mission is. Their targets are the institutions because the Wahabi world has recently put it as a condition that it will provide funding only to movements that grow to the level of an institution. Since 9/11 the manner of financing has also changed. I am troubled because these marionettes have a goal of achieving an arabisation of the Albanian society”.

⁹ On June 16, 2005, the author receives an email from Kosova coming from a sender called «bardhi46@hotmail.com», who says: “I can say that Kosova has the same problems and honestly speaking I am deeply concerned. The wahabies operate illegally in Kosovo and with great support. There are cases when even professors and their children propagate the spread of radical Islam. All should rise against this phenomenon”.

¹⁰ The authors of «Dictionnaire Mondial de l’Islamisme» on this have the following: «On December 2, 1992 Albania enters the Organization of the Islamic Countries. This hap brought as a consequence a new orientation of Albanian Islam toward the countries of the Gulf.

¹¹ During the 1997 unrest, a group of selafis attempted to take by force the leadership of the Muslim Community in Elbasan first taking control by force of the Mufti’s offices.- Report by the Muslim Council of Elbasan, in response to the petition of March 3, 1997.

¹² In September 1998, in an effort to increase the pressure on the Albanian Muslim Community, the selafis, with the support of Arab NGO’s initiated the creation of the «Association of the Jemat of the Mosques» as a parallel structure to the Muslim Community. The Court did not approve the creation of this association.

¹³ On June 14th and 15th, 2005 the daily Gazeta Shqiptare and some other dailies published articles that said that the creation of the Albanian Muslim Forum present an attempt to set up a rival body to the Albanian Islamic Community. Article 2, paragraph 7 of the Forum’s Statute says that “the Forum will serve as a center of coordination for all organizations, institutions and agencies that operate in the Republic of Albania on behalf of the Islamic religion”.

¹⁴ «Gazeta Shqiptare», June 14, 2005, page 2-3, “Shekulli”, June 14, 2005, “Dita Informacion” etc.

¹⁵ “Shekulli”, June 16, 2005.

authority of the Muslim Community and politically divide it. There can not be one Islamic Community that supports the majority and another that supports the opposition. Such a development would light up another dangerous fire in the country. The religious communities must clearly state and uphold political neutrality. Tendencies by certain political parties to politically use religious communities are very worrying. At the same token, the state structures which monitor developments within these communities must themselves be apolitical and maintain a distance from the electoral campaign.

In closing, we would say that the Albanian Islamic Community is faced with a challenge that will determine its future physiognomy. Dealing with it properly, however, is a matter that concerns the entire Albanian society. The seriousness of the matter requires efficient action not only by the Albanian Islamic Community but by the society and law enforcement structures in the country. In keeping with the Constitution, the International Conventions and in defense of the national security, all these actors should work together to deal with the problems that have arisen within the Islamic Community and to put out the fire before it burns.

Tirana, 15 June, 2005

