

# A Reexamination of the Theological Thought of Muhammad 'Umar Sarbazi in Critique of Wahhabi Beliefs

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## ABSTRACT

The Wahhābī movement, through literalist and takfīr (excommunicating) interpretations, has consistently generated doubts (shubuhāt) and doctrinal disputes within the Muslim world. This study examines the theological foundations of Muḥammad 'Umar Sarbāzī—a prominent Iranian Deobandī scholar representing mainstream Sunnī tradition—in response to these doubts. Employing a descriptive-analytical method and drawing on Sarbāzī's writings alongside primary Deobandī and Wahhābī sources, this research demonstrates that Sarbāzī, grounded in the Māturīdī school, Ḥanafī jurisprudence (fiqh), and Naqshbandī Sufism, critiques Wahhābism across eight principal axes: (1) Takfīr (Excommunication): Invoking the principle of "non-excommunication of the people of the qibla" ('adam takfīr ahl al-qibla), he strongly opposes Wahhābī takfīr tendencies; (2) Attributive (Khabarī) Divine Attributes: To avoid anthropomorphism (tashbīh) and corporealism (tajsīm), he deems hermeneutical interpretation (ta'wīl) necessary, contrasting the Wahhābī "without asking how" (bi-lā kayf) approach; (3) Intermediate Life (Ḥayāt-i Barzakhi): Affirming that prophets and saints live in their graves and hear the living, he reinforces the foundations of intercession (tawassul), visitation (ziyāra), and seeking aid (istighātha); (4) Intercession (Tawassul) and Seeking Aid (Istighātha): He permits intercession through the Prophet (PBUH) and saints—in life and after death—provided one rejects their independent agency; (5) Intercession (Shafā'a): He regards the Prophet's (PBUH) intercession for his community after death as an established Sunnī doctrine; (6) Visitation of Graves (Ziyārat al-Qubūr): He permits travel (shadd al-riḥāl) to visit the Prophet's (PBUH) grave, viewing it as veneration; (7) Seeking Blessings (Tabaruk): He regards seeking blessings through relics of prophets and the righteous as legitimate, with precedent among the Salaf; (8) The Faith of the Prophet's Ancestors: Opposing Wahhābī views and the Sunnī majority, he considers the Prophet's (PBUH) ancestors innate monotheists (muwahhīd-i fitrī), rejecting any attribution of polytheism (shirk) to them. Thus, Sarbāzī's theological foundations—rooted in the classical theological-mystical tradition of Sunnī Islam—provide a well-documented, systematic response to Wahhābī doubts and represent Deobandī traditionalist opposition to takfīrī Salafism.

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## 1. Introduction

The Wahhābī movement, since its emergence in the Arabian Peninsula in the eighteenth century, has constituted one of the most significant and influential currents in the theological disputes of the Muslim world. Relying upon a literalist (*zāhirgarāyāna*) reading of religious texts and emphasizing a return to the understanding of the Salaf (pious forebears), this movement has subjected many commonly held beliefs and practices of Muslims to critique, and in certain instances, has deemed them to constitute polytheism (*shirk*), innovation (*bidʿa*), or deviation from authentic Islamic teachings. The consequence of this approach has been the formation of extensive doctrinal disputes between Wahhābism and other Islamic schools, both Shīʿī and Sunnī. In response to this movement, numerous Muslim scholars have sought to defend traditional doctrinal foundations by drawing upon authoritative Islamic sources, while exposing the deficiencies and epistemological challenges of the Wahhābī perspective.

Among the Sunnī scholars of Iran, Mawlawī Muḥammad ʿUmar Sarbāzī occupies a position of particular distinction. He is regarded as one of the most prominent contemporary Deobandī scholars, and his numerous works in the fields of exegesis (*tafsīr*), hadith, jurisprudence (*fiqh*), Sufism (*taṣawwuf*), and theology (*kalām*) have enjoyed extensive reception among the Sunnī community in Iran. His theological thought, by virtue of its grounding in Māturīdī theology, Ḥanafī jurisprudence, and the Naqshbandī Sufi order, represents a characteristic example of the traditional Sunnī approach in confronting emergent Salafī and Wahhābī currents. Despite the significance of his scholarly and social standing, no independent research has systematically examined his theological foundations in critiquing Wahhābī beliefs. Therefore, the central problem of this research is the elucidation and analysis of the most important theological foundations of Muḥammad ʿUmar Sarbāzī in confronting Wahhābī views, and the assessment of the capacity of these foundations to respond to contemporary doctrinal doubts.

## 2. Methodology

The present research has been conducted employing a descriptive-analytical method. In the first stage, the written works of Muḥammad ʿUmar Sarbāzī—including his exegeses, collected fatwās, theological writings, and recorded statements—were gathered and examined. Subsequently, his views concerning the most significant disputed issues between traditional Sunnīs and Wahhābīs were extracted. In the next stage, to analyze and evaluate these views, the primary sources of Wahhābism and Salafism—particularly the works of Ibn Taymiyya, Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb, and various contemporary Wahhābī jurisconsults (*muftīs*)—were studied. Additionally, Māturīdī, Ashʿarī, Ḥanafī, and Deobandī sources were consulted to contextualize Sarbāzī's views within the Sunnī tradition.

The analytical framework of this research was organized around the theological issues disputed between Wāḥḥābism and other Muslims. Accordingly, topics such as takfīr (excommunication), attributive (khabarī) divine attributes, intermediate life (ḥayāt barzakhī), intercession (tawassul), seeking aid (istighātha), prophetic intercession (shafā'a), visitation of graves (ziyārat al-qubūr), seeking blessings (tabarruk), and the faith of the Prophet's ancestors were selected as the principal axes of inquiry. The collected data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, and efforts were made to extract and elucidate the theoretical foundations, arguments, and intellectual implications of each of Sarbāzī's views.

### 3. Literature Review and Research Background

The critique of Wāḥḥābī thought has long been one of the important concerns of scholars of the Deobandī school, and numerous works have been produced in this field. Among the most significant of these works are the critical discussions of Mawlānā Muḥammad Anwar Shāh Kashmīrī in *Fayḍ al-Bārī* 'alā Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, in which he critiques certain Wāḥḥābī doctrinal foundations within the context of his commentary on hadith. Likewise, Khalīl Aḥmad Sahāranpūrī, in his work *Al-Muḥannad* 'alā al-Mufannad, elucidates the beliefs of Deobandī scholars and responds to the accusations and criticisms raised by Salafī and Wāḥḥābī currents.

In continuation of this tradition, Mawlawī Sayyid Ḥusayn Aḥmad Madanī, in his work *Al-Shihāb al-Thāqib* 'alā al-Mustariq al-Kādhīb, devoted attention to critiquing Wāḥḥābī views and defending the doctrinal foundations of the Ahl al-Sunna. Similarly, Mawlawī 'Abd al-Raḥmān Chābahārī, in his book *Pāsukh-i 'Ulamā-yi Dīyūband biḥ Pursishhā-yi 'Ulamā-yi Ḥaramayn* (The Response of Deobandī Scholars to the Questions of the Scholars of the Two Holy Sanctuaries), sought to elucidate and defend the doctrinal positions of the Deobandīs against the criticisms raised by the scholars of Mecca and Medina. In recent years, Muḥammad Yūsuf Ḥusayn'pūr, in his work *Taḍād-i 'Aqā'id-i Ḥanafīyyat bā Wāḥḥābiyyat* (The Contradiction of Ḥanafī Beliefs with Wāḥḥābism), has undertaken a comparative examination of the doctrinal and intellectual differences between the Ḥanafī school and the Wāḥḥābī current.

Notwithstanding the value and significance of these works, an examination reveals that the majority of the aforementioned research has focused on the general critique of Wāḥḥābī foundations or the exposition of the general views of the Deobandī school. To date, no independent and methodical research has undertaken a reexamination and analysis of the theological foundations of Mawlawī Muḥammad 'Umar Sarbāzī in critiquing Wāḥḥābī beliefs. Consequently, the present research, by focusing on the works and views of Muḥammad 'Umar Sarbāzī, seeks to fill the lacuna in studies concerning the theological thought of contemporary Deobandī scholars and to elucidate his position in critiquing the Wāḥḥābī movement.

#### 4. Findings

The findings of this research demonstrate that the theological thought of Muḥammad ʿUmar Sarbāzī rests upon three main pillars: Māturīdī theology, Ḥanafī jurisprudence, and Naqshbandī Sufism. These three components, in conjunction with one another, provide a coherent theoretical framework for the critique of Wahhābī foundations.

On the Issue of Takfīr (Excommunication): Sarbāzī, invoking the principle of "non-excommunication of the people of the qibla" (ʿadam takfīr ahl al-qibla), critiques the Wahhābī approach. He maintains that many Muslims whom the Wahhābīs accuse of polytheism are in fact monotheists (*muwaḥḥidūn*), and that merely performing acts such as intercession (*tawassul*) or visitation of graves (*ziyāra*) does not constitute grounds for their excommunication from Islam. He regards the wholesale excommunication of Muslims as contrary to the prophetic conduct (*sīra*) and a factor in the fragmentation of the Islamic community.

On the Issue of Attributive (Khabarī) Divine Attributes: Sarbāzī defends the Māturīdī position. He maintains that the literal acceptance of certain divine attributes without hermeneutical interpretation (*taʿwīl*) paves the way for anthropomorphism (*tashbīḥ*) and corporealism (*tajāsīm*). Therefore, in interpreting verses such as the "establishment" (*istiwāʾ*) upon the Throne, he emphasizes the necessity of hermeneutical interpretation and the purification (*tanzīḥ*) of the Divine Essence, and regards the Wahhābī interpretation of these verses as approximating the view of the corporealists (*mujassima*).

On the Issue of Intermediate Life (*Ḥayāt Barzakhī*) and the Hearing of the Dead (*Samāʾ al-Mawtā*): The findings indicate that Sarbāzī believes in the life of prophets and saints after death, and regards this belief as an established doctrine of the Ahl al-Sunna. He maintains that the Prophet (PBUH), after his passing, remains aware of the state of his community, receives the greetings of visitors, and seeks forgiveness for them. This foundation provides the theoretical underpinning for many other beliefs, such as intercession, prophetic intercession, and the visitation of graves.

On the Issue of Intercession (*Tawassul*): Sarbāzī accepts the legitimacy of seeking intercession through the Prophet (PBUH) and the saints of God, both during their lifetimes and after their death. He explicitly states that intercession is incompatible with monotheism (*tawḥīd*) only if one attributes independent agency to the saints; however, if they are understood as conduits of divine grace, intercession is not only permissible but affirmed by the Islamic tradition.

#### 5. Conclusion

This research demonstrates that Muḥammad ʿUmar Sarbāzī, one of the prominent Deobandī scholars of Iran, relying upon Māturīdī foundations, Ḥanafī jurisprudence, and Naqshbandī Sufism, has presented a coherent and well-documented critique of Wahhābī thought. On issues such as takfīr, attributive divine attributes, intermediate life, intercession, seeking aid,

prophetic intercession, visitation of graves, and seeking blessings, he has deemed Wahhābī views incompatible with the authentic tradition of the Ahl al-Sunna, and by emphasizing the principle of "non-excommunication of the people of the qibla," the hermeneutical interpretation of attributive attributes, and the affirmation of the intermediate life of prophets and saints, he has defended the legitimacy of beliefs such as intercession and visitation. Sarbāzī also characterizes Wahhābism as a "belated" (khalfī) movement that, through its takfīrī approach, threatens Islamic unity. In sum, his theological thought demonstrates the capacity of the traditional Sunnī schools to respond to contemporary doctrinal challenges.

### Declarations

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