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Gulf Studies Center

Saudi Arabia: More Room for Wahhabism Lite?

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Gulf Insights Series
№ 23 – April 2020

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Introduction

The Saudi government was surprisingly quick to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic. One of the decisive measures it took was closing the holy sites of Mecca and Medina, something which had not happened since Napoleon invaded Egypt in 1798. Notably, the closure did not evoke any protest from its religious circles. Quite the opposite, the government managed to mobilize the religious establishment, which apparently also had realized the severity of the coronavirus threat.

The pandemic crisis comes at a time of existing economic turmoil on the oil market. The price of one barrel of crude oil plummeted to an unimaginable and dramatic low, which caused the government to announce a strong set of austerity measures, as well as a stimulus package to alleviate some of the immediate burden on its population. It is clear that this will significantly halt progress on the already slow moving Vision 2030 project whilst tapping the debt market will continue to increase. Riyadh also announced a one-sided, fourteen day ceasefire in Yemen in the beginning of April.

Like so many other countries, Saudi Arabia needs to prepare itself for 'the new normal' after the Corona crisis ends. Less money, less expenses. Could it be a 'blessing in disguise' for Mohammed bin Salman who previously argued for a return to moderate Islam? And more importantly: could this be extended to the realm of 'religious diplomacy', the use of Islam as soft power in foreign policy?

More than export of conservatism?

Since the sixties Saudi Arabia spent tens of billions of dollars – some sources argue it is close to a hundred billion dollar –on the dissemination of what the regime considers to be the true form of Islam.[1] Via the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Da'wa, and Guidance, institutions like the Muslim World League (MWL), the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY) and the International Organization for Relief, Welfare and Development (previously called the International Islamic Relief Organization, IIRO) – the list is non-exhaustive – it has funded countless mosques and set up numerous charities and schools. It launched tv stations, distributed Qurans and educated massive amounts of students at Saudi religious universities (mainly the Islamic University of Medina).

Much has been written about the reach and impact of this policy, all too often using hyperboles and applying little nuance. The 'export of Wahhabism' has been too easily equated with the 'export of extremism', paying little attention to the complexity of the matter. However, one thing goes without

[1] Much work on the spread of Wahhabism has been done by authors like David Commins, Reinhard Schulze, Madawi Al-Rasheed, Bernard Haykal, Gilles Kepel, Saeed Shehabi, Stéphane Lacroix, Guido Steinberg, Natana J. DeLong-Bas, Nakil Yannick Ak'abal Bieri, Nabil Mouline, among others. Noticable are two forthcoming publications: Peter Mandaville, *Wahhabism and the World: Understanding Saudi Arabia's Global Influence on Islam*, and Krithika Varagur, *The Call: Inside the Global Saudi Religious Project.*

saying: because of the Saudi influence, global Islam is now more conservative than it would have been without it. But beyond that simple conclusion? Opinions differ widely.

We can roughly distinguish four views. The first can be described as 'scapegoating': Wahhabism (or Salafism) leads, directly or indirectly, to extremism and terrorism. Its simplicity makes this viewpoint widespread and popular. The second outlook refers to the sterility of ideology. Any system of ideas and ideals only becomes relevant if it corresponds to a demand and a need. In other words, do people choose ideas or vice versa? Local circumstances (i.e. the broad scala of possible political, social, economic and/or psychological factors that can cause people to be dissatisfied with themselves and their environment) are usually decisive. The urge to practically resolve these issues typically only follows later. That 'urge' can be to seek refuge in religious piety, of which the components are also supplied by Saudi Arabia, or in its most extreme form to commit a terrorist attack.

A third vision holds that local circumstances are seen as the determining factor. The way Saudi influence manifests itself in receiving countries depends on specific, local conditions. After each attack claimed by an Islamic group, blame is often easily assigned to Saudi Arabia. Yet it is hardly ever possible to find a direct connection between the perpetrators and the 'export of Wahhabism'. Many times it involves a criminal background (some researchers claim up to 80% of cases), superficial knowledge of Islam and not every terrorist frequently visits a mosque. Insofar extremist ideas spread by Saudi imams and others were of clear influence, those ideas 'only form part of the cocktail [of explanations]' as Hind Fraihi puts it.

The fourth view point analyses the phenomenon in terms of the sorcerer's apprentice effect. This vision indicates that the exported Salafist ideology – extremely conservative, intolerant and xenophobic – was (and is) generally politically quietist.[2] Islam 'dictates that we should obey and hear the ruler', confirms MWL's secretary-general Mohammed bin Abdul-Karim al-Issa. The success of jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s, thanks in part to generous injections of Saudi oil dollars, added a revolutionary political component to international Salafism, at least for some of its supporters. This meant that Saudi Arabia started to lose control of the global Salafi-Wahhabi movement from the 1980s onwards. In fact, since the 1990s, this revolutionary Salafism also put the House of Saud on its hit list, which resulted in terrorist acts by Al-Qaeda from 2003 to 2008 on Saudi soil. In recent years, Islamic State also committed several terrorist attacks in the Kingdom. Both organizations can therefore be considered as sorcerer apprentices of the 'original' Wahhabism.[3]

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[2] E.g., see Aurélie Biard, '"We pray for our president": Saudi-inspired loyalist Salafism and the business sector in Kazakhstan', Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & world Affairs, Working Paper, January 2019.

[3] An excellent analysis of the factors mentioned above can be found in the work of Peter Mandaville and Shadi Hamid, 'Islam as Statecraft: How Governments Use Religion in Foreign Policy' (Foreign Policy at Brookings, November 2018), https://www.brookings.edu/research/islam-as-statecraft-how-governments-use-religion-in-foreign-policy/

Wahhabism lite?

With the above analysis in mind and taking into account recent developments in Saudia Arabia under the reign of the Salmans, we then wonder whether there has been an inclination towards 'de-Wahhabization'.[4] If this is indeed the case, how seriously should we take it and what is the relationship between the royal family, the religious establishment and the independent clergy?

In numerous interviews, the crown prince has expressed his eagerness to leave the 'years of extremist Islam' behind. Since 1979 Islam has been hijacked, he argues, and needs to be 'restored'. That year did not just witness a revolution in Iran, it also marked the beginning of the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan and Wahhabi zealots occupied the Grand Mosque in Mecca. Regardless of whether the earlier Islam was really that moderate (and whether the importance of the Iranian revolution is overestimated or not), Wahhabism developed an even stricter interpretation after 1979, with a lot of room for religious hardliners. The events of '9/11' changed this somewhat. For example, then Crown Prince Abdullah warned against offering the extremist clergy too much space. In later years, during the reign of Abdullah, a cautious start was made with a revision of the educational curriculum (which was loaded with hate speech). All in all however, these changes were minimal and the wave of terrorist violence on home soil (2003-2008) did not change that.

The real test came when Islamic State arrived on the scene. In June 2014, IS declared a caliphate which aimed to be a copy of the first 'real' Wahhabi state (1744-1818). King Abdullah consequently demanded that the religious authorities would declare their disapproval, but this happened only sparsely. Many clerics simply sympathized with Syrian jihad against the Iranian-backed Bashar al-Assad regime. As far as there was any debate within the clergy, it was triggered by Hatem al-Awni, a dissident loner who advocated a more than cosmetic reform of Wahhabism. It is unknown how much space for criticism the current crown prince leaves al-Awni, but it is a well-known fact that numerous other religious activists face severe repression.

In recent years, there have been noticeable domestic changes which extended far beyond just the economic realm. The limitation of the powers of the *mutawwa* (the religious police), followed by, among other things, a relaxation of the previously strict conservative rules around male-female relations, speak volumes. Although its importance is certainly not insignificant, these increased socio-cultural freedoms must be contrasted with the greatly increased political repression. Clearly, reform and repression go hand in hand.

Still, the domestic policies of the government remain ambiguous. All things considered, it predominantly

[4] In an interview with *The Atlantic* (April 2, 2018) Mohammed bin Salman rebuffed to even acknowledge the existence of this creed, let alone its role as one of the Kingdom's foreign policy drivers in past decades. He questioned the existence of Wahhabism itself: 'No one can define Wahhabism. There is no Wahhabism. We don't believe we have Wahhabism.' https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/04/mohammed-bin-salman-iran-israel/557036/

comes down to condemning critics from the Sahwa movement, like Salman al-Awda, Ali al-Omari and Awadh al-Qarni. Anyone suspected of sympathizing with the Muslim Brotherhood (which is considered a terrorist organization since 2014) is deemed a state risk. And its main religious institution, the Council of Senior Scholars, despite harboring a number of questionable hardliners, maintains excellent relations with the king and crown prince.

If we zoom in on the foreign dimension, the picture does not necessarily become clearer. Mandaville and Hamid rightly point out there is no surplus of studies available on this topic, but Jonathan Benthall's study on Saudi overseas humanitarian charities may provide some insight. He reviewed the International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO or IIROSA) and concluded that among other things, humanitarian initiatives have been 'rationalized' and 'centralized' since 2017. In other words, the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center (KSRelief) has a monopoly on all foreign aid programs, with the exception of some programs run by the MWL. Benthall gathers that "(...) the kingdom's new policy of centralization, and its disengagement from the 'comprehensive call to Islam', resulted in a remodelling of IIROSA's role in support of the kingdom's diplomatic interest but marginalized and stripped of religious content." In itself, that is not necessarily bad news, except that according to Benthall's own assessment it resulted in a 'humanitarian deficit'. Qatar, Turkey and the UAE are more important donors than Saudi Arabia.

Another notable development can be observed within the MWL since Mohammed al-Issa took office as secretary-general in 2016. He is recognized as 'a leader and champion of interfaith dialogue', known for his use of reconciling language. However, as Sara Feuer points out, it remains to be seen whether there is more than just a 'discursive shift' taking place. Feuer's study of MWL's relations with the Grand Mosque in Brussels raises sufficient doubts about actual changes 'on the ground' in areas where the League was active. "Here the picture is less clear and less encouraging, at least thus far," the author concludes. As long as the MWL remains a junior player within the broad palette of Saudi authorities and significant changes in places such as the Ministries of Islamic Affairs and Foreign Affairs (as well as several universities) fail to materialize, expectations of serious reforms need to be tempered.[5]

A final lead that can shed a light on a possible departure in the direction of 'Wahhabism lite' is a recent study on 2016-19 textbooks. Strikingly enough, the new batch of textbooks contains subtle, but substantial changes in 'language, tone, narrative and outlook'. The study concludes that clear attempts have been made to treat 'the Other' as less hostile, although there are still plenty of problematic passages to be observed. The building blocks for a new kind of national identity are present, with room for the pre-Islamic past. However, in daily practice this often boils down to a form of 'hyper-nationalism', which

[5] It should be soberly noted that whatever reforms are being undertaken, the horses have long left the barn and even if Saudi Salafists are not anymore – or much less – the drivers of the argument, the impact of Wahhabism's export has had a globally long-lasting impact (taking all the nuances sketched above into account).

presents its own problem, especially in regard to relations with Iran (but also Qatar).

Breaking the umbilical cord?

Forecasting the Kingdom's future is little more than a guessing game. However, a preliminary conclusion is that a denunciation of the historical pact between the Al Saud and the Wahhabi religious establishment is not imminent (though it must be pointed out that mutual relations have regularly been altered – mostly to the detriment of the clergy).

Interestingly, many of the measures taken by Mohammed bin Salman prove to the radical opposition that he is an 'American agent'. His 'moderate Islam' is therefore an 'American Islam'. Should the economic reforms launched by the crown prince fail – and this is certainly not out of the question now that the economy is being hit hard by the coronavirus and the collapsed oil market – organizations like Al-Qaeda can benefit. However, speculations about a possible revolt by dissenting clerics seem overblown. The umbilical cord is still too resilient. To break it, Nabil Mouline argued two years ago, “it is necessary to have an alternative social project, the unfailing support of the elites and the population, a sound economic base and a very favourable context”. Today, this is more unlikely than ever.

About the author

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