

Islamic Dissent in an Islamic State: the Case of Saudi Arabia

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Islamic Dissent in an Islamic Country: Saudi Arabia

A Summary of the Discussion:

Dr. Bahgat Korany: The subject-matter is intriguing as Saudi Arabia is perceived as the incarnation of Islam. In fact, it has no constitution since the Quran is regarded as its constitution. Moreover, Islam was instrumental in its state building. But Dr. Lacroix is, after his field work, well-placed to discuss the issue. His talk is based on his Ph.D from Paris, his French book and its English edition that is to be published soon by Harvard University Press.

Dr. Stephane Lacroix : Islamism in Saudi Arabia: Why and how it developed in relation to the Saudi state?

Firstly, a brief definition of Islamic activism: The Muslim Brotherhood is an Islamic activist par excellence with two main goals: Fighting Western dominance / influence in the region and establishing an Islamic state.

What makes Saudi Arabia unique is that – contrary to the common view – it had imported present day Islamism rather than exported it. This import happened through two waves of immigration to the kingdom: The first wave happened in the early 20th century. Muslim reformers from Egypt, Syria and Iraq (disciples of Mohamed ‘Abduh, Rashid Rida and scholars of the al-Alusi family) were called to Saudi Arabia to contribute to the formation of the Saudi state. For instance, Hafez Wahba from Egypt was invited to Saudi Arabia and became a key advisor to King Abdul Aziz. These were influential only at the elite level but not in society at large.

The second wave happened in the 1950-60s. The Muslim Brothers came from Egypt, Syria and Iraq which were all under nationalist and socialist regimes. They brought with them a culture of Islamic activism in the modern sense that was not present in Saudi Arabia. To truly understand the influence of the MBs on Saudi Arabia one needs to look at Wahhabism since the 18th century.

Sheikh Mohamed ‘Abd al-Wahhab was a religious reformer in Najd who thought that Muslims of his time went astray and must be brought back to true Islam. For him; *‘aqueeda* (creed) was the main problem as Muslims lost the true meaning of *tawhid* (unity) of God. According to ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s definition, *tawhid* had 3 different parts: belief, names and worship. Hence, it is not enough to believe in only one God but this had to be put into practice in worship. In fact, according to ‘Abd al-Wahhab Sufis and Shi’is were not Muslims since they worshiped saints and Imams respectively. In other words, he had a strict definition of the creed that excluded most of the practitioners of Islam in Arabia. His message was mainly religious not political. But to implement his religious views he needed a political power.

In 1740s, ‘Abd al-Wahhab joined forces with Mohamed Bin Sa’ud the prince of Dar’iya (a small town in Najd) to enforce these ideas. ‘Abd al-Wahhab will give the religious

legitimacy that Sa'ud needed while Sa'ud will implement 'Abd al-Wahhab's ideas. This led to the creation of the first Saudi state. This doctrine came to be known as Wahhabism. While 'Abd al-Wahhab belonged to the Hanbali conservative school of jurisprudence he was not innovative in *Fiqih* (law and jurisprudence). However, what distinguishes Wahhabism is that it was minimal and focused first and foremost on creed.

In 1744, the alliance of 'Abd al-Wahhab and Sa'ud was based on a key principle: power sharing between the '*ulama*' and the *umara*' (princes). This was based on the juridical concept of *siyasa shari'a* (politics) by Ibn Taymiyya in which there can be a separate domain between politics and religion in order to achieve *maslaha* (the common good and interest). In fact, the latter became the prerogative for the princes and not for the '*ulama*'. Put differently, the '*ulama*' believed that "the princes knew better". This clearly explains the perceived contradiction in the absence of any opposition by the '*ulama*' against the alliance between Saudi Arabia and the UK (1910-45) or later the US (1945 onwards). They would always justify these alliances by invoking the notion of "politics is for the princes".

This understanding gave birth to two establishments in Saudi Arabia: the political and religious ones. The descendants of both Mohamed 'Abd al-Wahhab and Sa'ud continued to hold radical Wahhabi views of Muslims; one had to be a Wahhabi to qualify as a Muslim. However, the influence of the Muslim reformists in the 1920s was to moderate Wahhabism. Indeed, they argued that for Saudi Arabia to be accepted regionally as a modern country and part of the international community it was imperative to tone down the Wahhabi exclusive creed.

The second wave of immigrants had another influence on the religious sphere in Saudi Arabia. It was caused by the geopolitical context in the 1950s 1960s. The Arab Cold War in which two blocs of Arab states were at loggerheads with each other; On the one hand there were the so-called progressive countries headed by Egypt while on the other hand there were the so-called conservative states headed by Saudi Arabia. This in itself was a regional version of the Cold War in which the Soviet Union was supporting the progressive states while the United States was supporting the conservative states. The MBs were internal opponents to the progressive states so they became allies of the conservative states. The MBs found shelter in Saudi Arabia to escape the repressive regimes of Nasser, Ba'ath in Syria and Iraq. To be sure, the Arab Cold War was a war of influence and of discourse. Saudi Arabia needed to counter the progressive ideological discourse and only the MBs were able to do so. Hence, they provided the kingdom with a counter propaganda to Nasser. In the early 1960s, they gained prominence in Saudi institutions such as the media and universities where they began spreading their ideology.

The timing of the arrival of the MBs in Saudi Arabia played a crucial role; the Saudi state was developing very quickly and it needed people able to participate in the development of the state. However, few Saudis studied abroad and the '*ulama*' were too conservative and not modern enough to participate in the state building process. The MBs were seen as the ones who could contribute to the development of the state. Hence, King Feisal appointed them in ministries most notably education. It is not an overstatement to say that

the MBs basically built the education system in Saudi Arabia from scratch. In fact, they wrote the school curricula.

The presence of the MBs at a key institution like universities prompted an encounter between those two discourses (MBs vs. Wahhabism). With the exception of the '*aqueeda* (creed) department which belonged to the Wahhabis, most university departments were headed by MBs (e.g., Islamic culture, engineering, medicine ...etc).

Sahwa Islamiya (Islamic awakening) is thereby a hybrid of Wahhabi creed but with a MBs' discourse in terms of culture and politics. It was the brainchild of none other than Mohamed Qutb the brother of Sayed Qutb. The former was appointed as a professor at the University of Um El-Qura in Mecca where he taught for 30 years. The intellectual production of Qutb was to accommodate Sayed Qutb's ideology with Wahhabism.

The Sahwa ideology emerged and spread from within the education system hence producing the Sahwa generation in the 1980s.

Hence, the two main features of the Saudi Islamism:

- 1- Imported Islamism.
- 2- State-Islamism. (i.e. it developed in Saudi Arabia from within the state institutions as opposed to those that had developed outside or against the state).

The year 1979 was a turning point in Saudi Islamism. Islamic dissidents stormed the mosque in Mecca and proclaimed one of them as the Mahdi. These were not Sahwa. Instead, they were indigenous Wahhabis who opposed the MBs. As a result the government became afraid of these fringe groups coming from society rather than from its institutions and thus enforced the Sahwa which got even more powerful and expanded its influence (e.g. a rise in Sahwa summer camps).

Until the 1980s, the MB political discourse would denounce the rulers of Egypt, Syria Iraq in Qutbi terms language because they do not implement Islam. However, this was not applied to the Saudi Arabian ruler as it was seen as the one true Islamic state. Yet in the 1980s a shift takes place from state Islamism to an Islamism against the state. Why? Socio-economic changes were behind this shift linked to the low price of oil. The large generation of the Sahwa comes to the scene. They also happen to be the children of *al-tafra* (The oil boom). However, as the oil boom turned to bust, the Saudi state was unable to provide them with resources and opportunities. As a result, instead of having a conflict of generations they had an ideological reading of the economic crisis (true Muslims vs. untrue Muslims). Put differently, before the 1980s they were rebels without a cause whereas after the 1980s they had a cause. Hence, a wave of social dissent was fermenting in the kingdom.

The invasion of Kuwait was another turning point in Saudi Islamism. King Fahd was convinced that Saddam Hussein will invade his kingdom next and asked the US for military protection on August 7th 1990. The dissent which was already growing shifted from social to political; the opposition to the king's decision turned into a full scale

opposition movement. They begin asking for radical political reforms in line with what the Sahwa regards as true Islam. By contrast, the Wahhabi 'ulama' issue a *fatwa* (a decree) that the decision to host Western troops is legitimate by invoking the notion of *al-umara' adra bilmaslaha* (the princes know better the interest of the state). However, the 'ulama' of the Sahwa disagreed and countered that by virtue of their modern education they are now the ones who know better; why leave deciding what constitutes the *maslaha* to the princes? They argued against leaving the issuing of *fatwa* to the traditional Wahhabi 'ulama' of the religious establishment. This illustrates how the Sahwa radically disagrees with this sense of power sharing that is the basis of Wahhabism.

In 1994-95 the Sahwa movement died out as it is repressed and most of its members are sent to jail. However that is not the cause of the weakening of the movement. Rather, it is the realization that at the end they lose more by confronting the state. Arguably, it is a failed insurrection because "it has one foot in the state while the other in society".

While the Sahwa movement backed down, two groups split up from it to continue political activism:

On the one hand, the Jihadists (most prominently among them Osama Bin Laden) who were socialized in Afghanistan and introduced the concept of political violence in the kingdom. They were behind the first major bombing in 1995. They left for Afghanistan under the Taliban regime. After September 11th 2001 jihadists move back to Saudi Arabia and establish "Al-Qaeda organization in the Arab peninsula". Despite media claims, it was never a major movement (only a few hundreds). Most of the attacks took place in 2003-04 but after 2005 there were no major ones. It did not develop into a full scale insurgency as some have predicted.

On the other hand, the so-called liberal Islamist reformers who read the literature of sheikh el-Qaradawi, *wasatiya* thinkers, were interested in the AKP in Turkey and wanted to reform Islamism with a more conciliatory tone. Through petitions they call for *shura* not democracy, and the re-formation of Saudi Arabia as a constitutional monarchy. A case in point is 'Abdallah al-Hamed who was a prominent Sahwa dissident but turned into a Liberal Islamist. They align themselves with people from Liberal, nationalist or even communist backgrounds, and with Shi'i activists running on a Sunni-Shi'i platform of common political activism. Some 11 members of them formed the Association of Civil and Political Rights. Nonetheless this is not a major social movement in Saudi Arabia (only a few hundreds).

While the Sahwa had backed down, it is very influential in state institutions. It is the major actor in the Saudi religious sphere. Attempts to curb down the power of the Sahwa are evident in the willingness of the state to reform the education system. This can be best illustrated by the establishment of the King Abdullah University. Indeed, it is the outcome of creating another parallel model to influence what exists already. However, it is also an acknowledgement of the failure to reform the existing system. In addition, there was a recent decision to limit the issuing of *fatwa* to the official council of 'ulama'. From now on Sahwa sheikhs cannot issue *fatwa*.

Dr. Bahgat Korany: Our discussant Dr. Soraya Al-Torki is not only from Saudi Arabia but is an anthropologist who has done extensive field work in Saudi Arabia. We thus have an interdisciplinary panel.

Dr. Soraya Al-Torki: Between the book and the articles, this is probably one of the most documented studies of dissent in Arabia. For that I thank you.

With respect to the title “Could there be an Islamist protest against a regime that bases itself on Islamic legitimacy?”. By now it is not a question: Throughout history since el-Kharijites up until Iran in June 2009 the answer is yes; it is possible. The real question: How did they protest? How did the Sahwa formulate their arguments? How did they mobilize both symbolic and material resources to challenge the ruling regime? For opposition to succeed tactical and strategic skills are needed to enable people to construct and maintain coalitions. How close did the Sahwis or other groups come to that? Was their failure because of their dependence on the state? Could their failure be attributed to their organizational skills?

Questions regarding the conceptual scheme:

The categories are not so clear as to who is a Sahwi? Who is a Salafi? And who is a Wahabi? The lines separating those two categories seem to shift and perhaps are related to personality in these categories in an ad hoc way rather than a theoretic systematic matter. The use of rigidity of the system to explain the segmentation of the society as an effective means of social control by the authoritarian state: How is it possible that these sectoral divisions are used as a form of social control? Is it specific to authoritarian regimes? When do the divisions and walls between say the ulama and intellectuals collapse? The use of Liberalism to describe the non-violent Islamist activists is very problematic since Liberalism acquires a different meaning in the UK than in the US let alone in Saudi Arabia.

Lacroix : Liberals call themselves as such while they do not know what exactly they believe in; they are everything else but not the Sahwa. They felt threatened by it and gathered around this label of Liberals; some were social liberals, others were political liberals or social conservatives. The term secular in Saudi Arabia is frowned upon whereas Liberal is a much more accepted term.

As for the difference between Wahhabis and Sahwa; Wahhabis are the old generation. There are more Sahwa now than Wahhabis because of the education system. This corresponds to a change in the political culture.

In terms of the field divide, Saudi society is divided socially, horizontally and spatially. For instance the *'ulama'* have their universities, their neighborhoods. They socialize among themselves and distinguish themselves by dressing differently than the rest of the Saudis. The politicians distinguish themselves as well as they are the princes and

circulate only in their own society. The intellectuals are another group and represent the voice of modernity in the kingdom. Interestingly, the state is using both groups: the '*ulama*' and the intellectuals. On the one hand the state wanting the religious legitimacy and on the other hand the modernizing legitimacy. An illustration of that would be Sheikh El-Baz saying Saudi Arabia is an Islamic state while Ghazy El-Qusaiby saying Saudi Arabia cares about modernity and development.

Saudi Arabia is very stable. Al-Qadea insurgency is not supported at all by the population. In sum, the Sahwa is a powerful lobby that clashes with King Abdullah when he tries to modernize socially but not politically.

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