



Brandeis University

Crown Center
for Middle East Studies

Mailstop 010
Waltham, Massachusetts
02454-9110

781-736-5320
781-736-5324 Fax
www.brandeis.edu/crown

Middle East Brief

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The Sword and the Book: Implications of the Intertwining of the Saudi Ruling Family and the Religious Establishment

Dr. Ondrej Beranek

Saudi Arabia is usually described as a country dominated by religion. Yet not many studies go beyond this, to analyze the various aspects of the relationship between the Saudi government and the official religious establishment, and to examine how that relationship has evolved and changed over time. Related issues include the effect (if any) of clerics on Saudi policy making; their current position in, and influence on, Saudi society; and the prospects of potential attempts at reform.

This Brief explores the historical relationship between the Saudi ruling family and the religious establishment (*ulama*). Drawing on some examples from history, it demonstrates how their mutual cooperation works and what the resulting implications are for Saudi society. Additionally, it argues that the monopoly that the *ulama* have been granted over public education for many generations, in exchange for their support of the regime, poses a major obstacle in the path of necessary reform.

Because there is no representative democracy—in the secular, Western meaning of the term—in Saudi Arabia, it is religion that is, for the Saudi ruling family, the main and almost exclusive source of its legitimacy. Saudi Arabia is thus an example of a country in which the religious establishment serves to support the regime—in a quid pro quo arrangement from which, as we will see, both sides profit. And because Saudi Arabia is much more a state than a nation, the Al Saud family had to seek a viable source for bringing about a national identity. It found one in the strict observance of Islam, and in its Salafi

interpretation in particular. I will first provide some background on the meaning of Salafiyya, and then discuss the evolution of the *ulama* and of their relationship to the Saudi state.

Saudi Salafiyya

The term “Salafiyya,” which in Western terminology is usually misleadingly referred to as “Wahhabism,” refers, among others, to the religious doctrine derived from Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703–92), who based his approach to reviving Islam on the teaching of earlier Islamic scholars, mainly Ibn Hanbal (780–855) and Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328).¹ Salafiyya invokes the basic concept of Islam: Muslims should follow the example of the prophet Muhammad and of correctly guided ancestors (*al-salaf*). Saudi Arabs, when referring to their interpretation of Islam, almost always speak of themselves as *ahl al-sunna wa 'l-jama'a* (people of Sunna and the community of worshipers), which according to their traditional interpretation is a synonym for Salafi.

Labeling oneself “Salafi” distinguishes one’s doctrine from that of *ahl al-bid'a* (people of innovations). Salafists frequently invoke a hadith (saying of the prophet) according to which the prophet Muhammad said: “My community will split into seventy-three sects, and all of them will go to hell but one—those who follow my way and that of my companions.” The derogatory term “Wahhabism” was first coined by early ideological opponents of Abd al-Wahhab’s teachings. By naming the movement after its founder, Abd al-Wahhab, its opponents emphasized what they considered to be the irreligious nature of a doctrine created by a man. Recently, the term has been overused in the West to describe various unrelated movements and individuals across time and space, whose only common denominators are a tendency to extremism and militancy, suppression of women’s rights, and a strict interpretation of the Quran.

The religious belief (*'aqida*) common to today’s Salafists is one that facilitates their application of religious tenets to contemporary issues. It is based on fervent adherence to the concept of *tawhid* (the belief that God is one and unique), and a strict rejection of human reasoning that is not based on revelation. By following the Quran and the Sunna (the praxis and sayings of the prophet Muhammad), Salafists aim to eliminate the mistakes caused by human bias (which is thought to threaten the clarity of *tawhid*) and accept only the one truth of God’s commandments. From this point of view there is only one legitimate religious interpretation of the Quran, and Islamic pluralism (let alone political pluralism) is inadmissible. Salafists advocate strict adherence to traditional Islamic values, and uphold religious orthopraxy as well as religious orthodoxy.

Salafists are primarily oriented toward internal events in the Islamic world; international relations are not their main interest. This is the major difference between normative Salafists and their radical branch, which in Western media is usually called “Jihadi” or “Salafi Jihadi.” Nevertheless, all branches of Salafiyya accept the same religious directives and cite the same authorities. They disagree only in their analysis of and explanations for the current world situation, and in their different strategies for solving the problems that the world presents.²

To a large degree, there is also a conflict between the older generation of “purists”—mainly those official Saudi *ulama* (*'ulama al-sulta*) who are members of the Council of Senior Ulama (*Majlis hay'at kibar al-'ulama*)—and their younger

Ondrej Beranek is a Postdoctoral fellow at the Crown Center. He holds a PhD from the Institute for Middle Eastern and African Studies at Charles University in Prague.

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Evolution of the Religious Establishment

followers from the entire Middle East, who in many instances are drawn to the concept of jihad. The issue of who is the legitimate representative of Salafiyya continues to dominate religious discourse in Saudi Arabia, and the leading official clerics are fully engaged in a battle for the hearts and minds of the public. It is necessary to note, however, that the distinction between “official” and “unofficial” clerics is quite artificial. Most of the *ulama* are paid from the state budget: They are either employed in departments of different ministries or teach in religious universities. Even those who are not seemingly paid by the state work for organizations funded by the state or for individual members of the ruling family.

The “other” *ulama* are composed mainly of younger clerics who do not share their older mentors’ apologetic attitude toward the ruling family. Instead, they energetically oppose both the regime and the defensive, conservative wing of *ulama*. The members of this younger generation resort to many uncomplimentary names for their mentors on account of both the latter’s apolitical stance and their focus on orthopraxy, which reflects their strenuous effort to maintain control of the social sphere and preserve their importance in a changing world. Among the names most frequently invoked are the “scholars of trivialities” (for their obsession with a whole range of issues, from false eyelashes to athletic centers), “scholars of women’s menses and impurities” (for their obsession with women’s bodies, and their religious rulings concerning the permissibility of sexual intercourse with a menstruating woman), and “blind people living in medieval times.”

Rebellious *ulama* had until now always been suppressed, or lured by money to the side of the regime. That was the case after the first terrorist attacks in the kingdom in 2003, when the Saudi government called on the religious establishment and many independent Islamic thinkers, who had in previous years criticized the government, for support. All of them, unanimously, condemned the attacks.

Individual clerics usually undergo a similar evolution. First, they experience an early phase of defiance. Subsequently, after gaining some popularity, they are imprisoned—or they are co-opted by the regime and become part of the official establishment. This in turn brings fierce criticism from the younger generation of “uncompromising” *ulama*, who believe they have a better understanding of the complexities of the contemporary world. This cycle seems to be fully embedded in Saudi religious culture and is unlikely to change so long as the regime has sufficient financial resources to tame more radical voices who claim that the ruling family is illegitimate.

Even though the interconnection of the *ulama* with the Saudi ruling family dates back to the eighteenth century, their internal composition has undergone significant changes from those times. For one thing, the descendants of Abd al-Wahhab (the Al al-Shaykh family) gradually figured less and less among the clergy. The Al al-Shaykh family did not have an uninterrupted flow of young descendants, and each—unlike the members of the ruling family—usually had only one wife, or at most two wives. One complete branch of the family was also sent into exile in Egypt at the beginning of the nineteenth century, during the military campaign of Ottoman viceroy Muhammad Ali (1769–1849); the descendants of this branch never returned to Saudi Arabia. Another factor was that many members of the Al al-Shaykh family had no desire to become religious scholars.

Detailed genealogical research also reveals that since the 1940s almost no marriages have occurred between the young princes of the Al Saud family and girls from the Al al-Shaykh family. This traditional family of Islamic scholars was thus simultaneously weakened in two respects: Its representation in religious circles was diminished at the same time as its access to the royal family was significantly restricted.³ The deterioration in the political power of the *ulama* meant that they no longer represented the religious sentiment in Saudi society—which in turn led to the flourishing of Islamist movements and to an enhancement in the standing of the “other” *ulama*.

Since 1929, the clergy have been de facto officers in the state bureaucracy, and their independence has come to be questionable. Official *ulama* were formally institutionalized for the first time during the reign of King Faysal, who in 1971 announced the establishment of the Council of Senior Ulama, led by Sheikh Ibn Baz. Its members, who are appointed by the king and have varied in number between fifteen and twenty-five, are the only clergy who can exercise substantive political influence on the ruling family. According to Faysal’s decree, the Council should express its opinions in matters of Sharia; advise the king on political questions; provide religious leadership for Muslims in the areas of belief, prayers, and secular affairs; and confirm the successor to the throne. In essence, an organization was created which would, by means of its edicts on Islamic law (*fatwas*), books, and recordings of sermons, serve kings whenever they needed religious sanction for their policies. Its establishment marked the completion of a centralization process that made religion in Saudi Arabia dependent on the authority of the state.

The power of today's official *ulama* is weakened by their duty to obey the ruler; *ulama* themselves often point out this obligation when discussing political problems. Yet according to the *ulama's* interpretation, even a ruler who seized power by force is legitimate, because the institution of government is indispensable. One of the most quoted sayings in this context, based on Ibn Taymiyya, goes: "Sixty years of an unjust ruler [*imam ja'ir*] is better than a single night without a ruler [*sultan*]."⁴ The only justification for disobedience is when the sovereign rules at variance with Sharia—which is precisely what today's generation of radical Salafists believes with respect to the Saudi ruling family. Nevertheless, the *fatwas* from the official *ulama*, whether issued on their own or on orders from the ruler, have led to an unprecedented expansion of the range of Islamic jurisdiction in the country, mainly in the social sphere. The dominance of Sharia law has also led to unpredictable decisions on the part of individual clerics and unclear doctrine in some areas.

The Most Prominent Ulama

Today we can find among the official Salafi *ulama* both moderates—Abdallah al-Hamid, Abdallah al-Subayh, Abd al-Aziz al-Qasim, and Abd al-Aziz al-Khudr, among others—and hard-liners—Sheikh al-Jibrin, Nasir al-Umar, and Sheikh al-Hudhayfi, to name just a few—who are known for their intransigence with respect to other schools of thinking. (In 1991, for example, al-Jibrin issued a *fatwa* branding Shiites as unbelievers and demanding their death.) These hard-liners are usually more favored by the younger generation, who are prone to commit violence in pursuing their goals.

In the last decades, two prominent sheikhs—Sheikh Ibn Baz, the former highest mufti of Saudi Arabia, and Sheikh Muhammad ibn Salih al-Uthaymin—became embodiments of institutionalized *ulama*. Sheikh Abd al-Aziz ibn Baz (1912–99) came to be regarded as a leading religious scholar. A characteristic sign of Ibn Baz's doctrine was open animosity toward Christians and Jews, whom he considered to be polytheists. Ibn Baz also promoted a new type of jihad: economic jihad (*jihad bi'l-mal*). This idea was notably implemented in the eighties and nineties, when Saudi "philanthropists" funded the propagation of Salafiyya throughout the world. At the same time, Ibn Baz demonstrated how the *ulama* were prepared to give in to the king when it came to an important political question—as when he issued a *fatwa* to authorize the presence of foreign armies on Saudi soil in 1990, and when he endorsed the Oslo peace accords between Israel and the PLO three years later. His influence on the Salafi

movements was immense, and many of the prominent *ulama* of the kingdom today are former students of his.

Muhammad ibn Salih al-Uthaymin (1925–2001) contributed many *fatwas* in the area of religious orthopraxy, mainly through the prism of the "prohibited and permissible." Both Ibn Baz and al-Uthaymin gained widespread popularity owing to their religious erudition and as a result were able to successfully support the policies of the ruling family. Since their death there has been a vacuum in the country, which the new highest mufti, Abd al-Aziz Al al-Shaykh, has not yet succeeded in filling.

Among the most quoted official authorities—who from time to time may differ from one another regarding subsidiary juridical matters (*furu'*), while concurring with respect to the fundamentals of law (*usul*)—are Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani (1914–99), a well-known hadith scholar and a fiery opponent of political activism (*harakiyya*) and violence; Sheikh Salih ibn Fawzan al-Fawzan (1933–), noteworthy mostly on account of his regard for Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab; and Sheikh Rabi' ibn Hadi al-Madkhali (1931–). The last has been active in battling both extremism and the blatant overuse of *takfir* (branding others as unbelievers). He has also been conspicuous in labeling more radical clerics with the term *Qutbiyya*, derived from the name of Sayyid Qutb (1906–66), an important ideologue of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood who was executed for attempting to overthrow the regime. Al-Madkhali applied this term in particular to Safar al-Hawali and Salman al-Awda, two prominent *ulama* from the younger generation who gained popularity at the beginning of the nineties by criticizing the Saudi government for allowing deployment of the United States army in the country. Al-Madkhali accused them of being influenced in their methodology (*manhaj*) by people like Sayyid Qutb and his brother Muhammad Qutb—who, after his release from prison in 1972, took refuge with other Muslim Brothers in Saudi Arabia and also became a teacher of al-Hawali. Al-Hawali's and al-Awda's main error, in the eyes of al-Madkhali, lay in their incitement of youth and their encouraging the general population to indulge in *takfir* with respect to others and to rebel against the authorities—behavior that was naturally opposed by the official establishment.⁵

The Saudi government also mobilized some of its formerly militant clerics in a campaign aimed at stemming the continuing appeal of al-Qaeda's ideology in the kingdom and reeducating hard-liners. An example of a now moderate official cleric would be Sheikh Abd al-Muhsin al-Ubaykan, who, together with the highest mufti of Saudi Arabia, Abd al-Aziz Al al-Shaykh, called for calm

after some more radical *ulama* issued a *fatwa* urging jihad in Iraq. From his position as a member of the Saudi advisory assembly, al-Ubaykan also defends the right of women to issue religious rulings and take part in elections, and he condemns suicide bombings. Other Islamic counselors appointed by the government have succeeded in infiltrating a number of extremist websites and establishing dialogue with some al-Qaeda sympathizers.

To keep pace with modern times, most of the official *ulama* maintain their own web pages while still being seen fulfilling their ceremonial role. Scholars with characteristic untrimmed beards and headgear untied by the traditional rope circlet (*'iqal*) have become fixtures both on satellite television and in the print media. The most important princes also have to be seen greeting these scholars during important state events. The official clerics have shown considerable flexibility—which was the only possibility, given contemporary conditions and the changing needs of the state administration—but the younger generation of *ulama*, more skilled in handling the media, constitute the most serious threat to their position and authority.

The Role of the Ulama

Although they have been flexible in responding to some of the challenges facing them, the *ulama* have nonetheless been the major obstacle with respect to reforming the social and educational climate in Saudi Arabia—as some of the reforms implemented by the ruling family have met with opposition from the *ulama* rather than with their immediate blessing. The first such difficulties were already apparent in the 1930s, when the king tried to introduce radio into the country; in the end, it was allowed under the condition that it would be used only for broadcasting news and reading the Quran. The same problems were encountered in the sixties in the case of television. Faysal, the crown prince at the time, issued an edict in 1963 allowing the establishment of television stations. But the Saudi *ulama* were not consulted with regard to this edict, and they set out to protest in the streets of Riyadh for the first time. Similar difficulties accompanied the introduction of female education at the end of the 1950s, and of the internet at the end of the 1990s.

In all of these cases, however, when part of the official *ulama* rebelled, it was the Al Saud family who had the last, and decisive, word, not the *ulama*. In the history of the country, such conflicts have never been lost by the ruling family; yet these victories have not come without a price. The ruling family has always had to somehow mollify the *ulama*, either by bestowing more money on the religious establishment, granting the *ulama* more influence over the

social sphere, or making concessions to their religious sensibilities. (TV is dominated by religious programs; the internet is heavily censored.) The usual procedure is for the ruling family to make a decision and announce it to the clerics, who then issue the respective *fatwa*, legitimating the new policy—after which one of the princes or the king appears, to officially communicate the decision to the public. The religious establishment has no option other than to subordinate itself to the ruling family and provide them with legitimacy. Questioning the ruling family would automatically strip the *ulama* of their power.

On the other hand, the power of the *ulama* traditionally increases at times of crisis for the Saudi ruling family. Sometimes this comes down to a matter of political bargaining. The *ulama* use their power to influence and mobilize, and the regime rewards them with various concessions. This happened, for example, after the dramatic events of 1979, when the *ulama* played a crucial role during the siege of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, allowing the regime to take an unheard-of step: using the armed forces to remove the rebels from the holy site. In exchange for the *ulama*'s support, strict norms were reimposed with respect to public morality, and social life became very difficult, especially for women. A similar scenario occurred during the Gulf War. The *ulama* helped the regime by calling Saddam Hussein an infidel and condoning the presence of foreign troops in Saudi Arabia. In exchange, King Fahd postponed many reforms that had been promised for a long time.

An examination of some recent situations (the Arab oil embargo in 1973, the Saudi endorsement of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, and many others) supports the belief that American and Western intelligence analysts often underestimate and do not fully understand the nature of the Saudi religious establishment and its influence on the political culture of the country. Every decision taken by the government of Saudi Arabia, especially when it pertains to the social sphere or might “threaten” public morals, has to accord, somehow, with the will of the *ulama*.

Conclusion: The Limits of Reform

In Saudi Arabia, stability depends to a large degree on cooperation between the ruling family and the *ulama*. During the second half of the twentieth century and under the generation of *ulama* represented especially by Ibn Baz and al-Uthaymin, the expression of traditional Abd al-Wahhab's doctrine changed from the revivalist Salafi movement to apologetic institutionalized religion, which has supported two very controversial, yet very frequent political habits in the history of Islam: hereditary political

power and absolute submission to the ruling authority. The official *ulama* argue that subordination to the “legitimate ruler” is better than anarchy and chaos. They are aware of the fact that the ascendancy of their interpretation of Islam is inseparably connected to the existence of the ruling family—on whose support, they believe, the proper conduct of the society depends.

The official *ulama* continue to exert immense influence on Saudi society, but matters of state politics remain out of the reach of their *fatwas*. Saudi Arabia operates in some respects as a religious society, but its political sphere is permeated by secularism and governed by thinking grounded in national security concerns, economic interests, and foreign policy issues generally. It is this contradiction between rhetoric and reality at the level of both the individual and society that is responsible for the violence in Saudi Arabia, and the voices of dissent.⁶

Especially after 9/11, there has been a lot of pressure on Saudi Arabia to proceed toward reforms and democratization. But many such calls reflect the lack of a deep understanding of Saudi realities. The very survival of the current Saudi regime is built on the intertwining of the Sword and the Book. The ruling regime provides the clerics with money and the means to spread their message. The official *ulama*, in return, provide the regime with legitimacy, and for the most part do not interfere in the realm of politics. When they do so, it is usually with only one purpose: to support the regime’s decisions and eliminate any potential voices of dissent. The government has the exclusive say in the areas of national security, defense, the economy, and foreign relations; the clerics control the public sphere, education, religious indoctrination, and, to some degree, the dissemination of their teachings abroad—although in the last case their authority has in many instances been overtaken by more radical elements.

In such a setting, it is hard to push for more religious and political freedom, or for swift reforms. It would be very difficult to forcibly reform a society that for many generations has been “educated” by a religious establishment telling it that the West and its values constitute one of the main threats to its way of life and its beliefs. Consequently, reforms cannot be achieved without changing education in the kingdom and opening the public sphere to alternative religious interpretations. But the question is whether the ruling family could afford such reforms—which would, ipso facto, deprive it of its *raison d’être*. If the regime separated religion and state, it would automatically lose its main source of legitimacy and appear un-Islamic in the eyes of its radical opponents.

Salafiyya today functions as both a moral code and unifying factor in Saudi society—and as an ideological instrument of the regime’s legitimization. But the *ulama*’s sway over the shaping of values and attitudes in Saudi society presents a subtle and silent threat to the regime’s authority. As Saudi Arabia enters a period of change—characterized by population growth and the radicalization of some elements of the society, amidst a complicated regional situation—the *ulama* will likely raise a louder voice for adjusting the power-sharing relationship between them and the ruling family and demand a more influential role in Saudi politics.

Endnotes

1 There are many debates over the teaching and terminology of “Wahhabism.” See mainly Pascal Ménoret, *The Saudi Enigma: A History* (New York: Zed Books, 2005); Madawi Al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State: Islamic Voices from a New Generation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); David Dean Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia* (New York: I.B.Tauris, 2006); and Natana J. DeLong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). Today the term is contested not only by the Saudis themselves, but also by Western scholars. Some of them incline to “Salafiyya”; others keep using “Wahhabism” with the intention of preserving all of its negative connotations. And others adhere to this old name simply because “a known error is better than an unknown correctness” (Madawi Al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State*, p. 2).

2 For an excellent overview of this subject, see Quintan Wiktorowicz, “Anatomy of the Salafi Movement,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29 (2006): pp. 207–39.

3 For a more detailed account of the status of the *ulama* in the twentieth century and the changes in their ranks, see Alexander Bligh, “The Saudi Religious Elite (Ulama) as Participant in the Political System of the Kingdom,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 17 (1985): pp. 37–50.

4 Ibn Taymiyya, *Al-Siyasa al-shar‘iyya fi islah al-ra‘i wa al-ra‘iyya* (Beirut: Dar al-afaq al-jadida, 1983): p. 139.

5 For the treatises of official *ulama*, see, primarily, www.salafipublications.com, along with their respective web pages (all in Arabic): www.binbaz.org.sa, www.bin-baz.org.sa, www.ibnothaimen.com, www.alalbany.net, www.alfawzan.ws, and www.rabee.net.

6 Madawi Al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State*, p. 58. For an explanation of the *ulama*’s insistence on total submission to political power, see mainly the first chapter of this book.

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