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How Saudi Suburbs Shaped Islamic Activism

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In the repressive frenzy that has whirled around Saudi Arabia since King Salman came to power in 2015, it would be easy to believe that local Islamic movements are over and done with. The Saudi Muslim Brotherhood was outlawed in 2014 under King Abdullah (reign 2005–2015) and relentlessly suppressed under his successor, Salman. Muhammad bin Salman, the King's son and current crown prince, has filled Saudi prisons with Islamic activists of all persuasions, from Salafis to Muslim Brothers and more reformist intellectuals. The country's most prominent Islamic activists, including Salman al-'Audah, 'Awadh al-Garni, Muhammad al-Sharif, and Muhammad al-Hudhayf, were arrested in September 2017, summarily accused of spying, and imprisoned without due process.¹ Many nationalists, liberals, constitutionalists, and feminists were also arrested in recent months.² Being a Saudi activist was never easy; it has rarely been as hard as it is today.

This Brief will show that, despite the climate of fear and pervasive state violence, Islamic movements in Saudi Arabia have not disappeared. They are merely in abeyance and are likely to survive. The key to their capacity to rebound lies less in their ideological appeal than in their effective use of the scant resources available in a bleak political and urban landscape. The geography of Saudi cities and suburbs, in particular, might be Islamic activists' best ally. Since the 1960s, various Islamic movements, including the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafi groups, and armed militants, emerged in

and took advantage of rapidly sprawling suburban spaces. Urbanization in Saudi Arabia is primarily suburbanization—and Islamic movements, more than other political movements, capitalized on the political opportunities offered by sprawling landscapes. They were able to use these new spaces to recruit and mobilize for a range of activities, including street protests, marches, sit-ins, local elections, and direct action. Islamic movements created highly personalized activist networks scattered in massive metropolitan areas, and this adaptation to their environment has helped them survive past crackdowns. It might allow them to survive the current onslaught too.

For a Geography of Activism

Analyses of Saudi Islamic movements tend to insist on belief and religiosity as the main reason why they emerged in past decades. Islamic movements, the argument goes, mobilized already pious Saudis whose upbringing had inclined toward fundamentalist readings of the Islamic tradition. This conjunction of intense popular piety and literalist beliefs is usually presumed to explain not only why Islamic movements predominate in Saudi Arabia, but also why some of them turned to violence. The more fundamentalist (or “Salafi”), the argument continues, the more prone to violence activists are.

The importance of understanding piety and religious doctrines notwithstanding, environmental and geographic factors may be more central to the emergence of powerful Islamic movements. In other words, the geography of piety is at least as worthy of investigation as is the history of ideas and religious doctrines.

For one thing, the kind of intellectual genealogy that analysts regularly invoke to explain why some movements became more prominent (or more violent) than others is often inconclusive. It is hard to know where to stop the search for influences. Shall one go back to the 18th-century reformer Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab? To medieval theologian and philosopher Taqi al-Din ibn Taymiyya? To the Prophet himself? Some do not hesitate to incriminate Islam as a whole, a religion they see as intrinsically violent or prone to confusions between theology and politics, especially in its Saudi iterations.³ Others, while significantly more nuanced, believe that the secret of the Saudi Islamic activists’ “resilience” lies “in the fact that their ideology holds appeal for many fed up” with current Saudi policies.⁴

Many experts also seem to believe that they can explain a still largely unknown political scene by summing it up with a few monikers—“Wahhabi” and “Salafi” being some of the most cited. Yet, how exactly Islamic groups attract followers, adapt to repression, and survive in an extreme consumer society is lost on most observers. How have Saudi Muslim Brothers and Salafis emerged and evolved? What are their politics and their recruitment strategies? Why did they fragment into a host of small, local groups, often with contradictory messages and modes of action? We need another way of understanding Islamic movements: a mapping of beliefs and practices rather than a search for doctrines and ideas—a geography of actions rather than a history of influences. We need to look into the landscapes of Islamic activism more than into theological or ideological genealogies.⁵

In fact, contemporary Saudi Islamic movements did not originate in medieval theology or early modern religious revivalism. They emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in a specific urban landscape: the newly created suburbs of Saudi Arabia’s main cities. Other Saudi political movements, including the labor movement, socialism,

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and nationalism, were crushed between the 1960s and the 1970s. The Islamic movements, by contrast, have found the resources to survive in the harsh, repressive environment of Saudi Arabia. They eschewed direct political activism, espoused the cultural politics of the Saudi state, and availed themselves of all the possibilities offered by ever-expanding Saudi cities, including the numerous schools, mosques, and recreation facilities that were built in the new suburbs. Other political movements did not adapt as well to the suburbanization of power and repression and ultimately vanished.

From Urban to Suburban Revolution

Urban growth in Saudi Arabia, as elsewhere, was the outcome of massive rural and international migrations, of the dismantling of agrarian economies, and of the concentration of capital and power. This urbanization was actually suburbanization. Saudi cities did not grow harmoniously along traditional lines, but exploded in all directions, projecting their fragments into peripheries, suburbs, satellite towns, and infrastructure.⁶ Suburbanization turned Saudi cities inside out. It abolished the dichotomy between city center and periphery and replaced it with a plurality of nodes and networks. It marked the end of Saudi cities as organic, self-contained totalities built on a human scale, with narrow streets leading to such landmarks as the palace, the mosque, and the market. Saudi suburbia is the outcome of real estate speculation and municipal corruption and revolves around the needs of the automobile. It is crisscrossed with highways and dotted with post-industrial monuments: power stations, pylons, shopping malls, and single-family homes.

Suburbanization not only altered urban spaces; it also transformed the relationship between people's politics and institutional politics. It removed the centers of power from the reach of crowds by scattering people in far-flung peripheries, while at the same time increasingly criminalizing mass protest and street politics. Yet it would be simplistic to conclude that suburbanization was a top-down, authoritarian policy designed to crack down on protest. Suburbanization is a market-driven phenomenon that made possible new forms of protest, including Islamic activism.

The centers of power moved outside the old urban cores of Riyadh, Jeddah, and Hofuf in the 1930s. Standard Oil of California signed an oil concession with Saudi Arabia in 1933 and established its headquarters in Dhahran on the eastern coast of Arabia, at a distance from the old cities of Qatif and Hofuf. The company built a residential suburb

for its U.S. employees, whose air-conditioned houses, lawns, and swimming pools were off-limits to non-whites; Saudis were housed in palm huts and tents in a burgeoning slum down the hill, with no running water or electricity. King Abd al-Aziz soon followed the example set by the oil company. He built a palatial complex north of Riyadh and laid out paved roads. Suburban palaces later served as models for the expansion of Saudi cities.

This early suburbanization did trigger labor protests. The first Saudi strike, by construction workers, occurred in Riyadh in 1942. Between 1945 and 1956, oil workers staged demonstrations, strikes, and bus boycotts in the Eastern Province to protest ill treatment, low wages, poor housing, and racial segregation and to demand political rights. The protests were violently repressed, but they compelled the government and the oil company to react. Inquiry commissions were created, and new housing plans laid out.⁷

In 1947, the governor of the Eastern Province asked Aramco (the new name of the local Standard Oil) to draw up plans for the coastal towns of Khobar and Dammam. Shantytowns were pulled down and workers were rehoused. In the Central Province, the Saudi state planned Riyadh's first suburb, New Manfuha, for Saudi labor migrants who poured into the city from nearby steppes and oases. New Manfuha's grid of streets made policing easy, and its remote location kept migrant workers away from the general population.⁸ Aramco launched a Home Ownership Program for its Saudi employees in 1951. Employees received construction loans and free lands in new planned developments, and they were required to build single-family houses, one story high, set back from the street. The goal was to pull the rug from under labor activists' feet and to discipline employees through loans and red tape.

Suburbanization reinforced racial segregation and was hardly a success, however. Many workers were reluctant to move to the suburbs, where they would be placed under the direct control of the company. Women were particularly vocal. They refused to be cut off from their social networks, isolated in a car-based landscape, and condemned to purely domestic roles.⁹

In the late 1960s, the Saudi state commissioned Greek and British urban planners to rein in urban growth. Massive rural migration had made Riyadh and Jeddah swell out of proportion. King Faisal commissioned Constantinos Doxiadis to plan Riyadh and Central Arabia and RMJM (Robert Matthew Johnson Marshall) to plan Jeddah, Mecca, Medina, and the Hejaz. European planners engaged in regional planning to curb rural

migration. In Riyadh and Jeddah, they designed car-based suburbs along grids of avenues. Doxiadis also planned a necklace of rural towns around Riyadh in the hope of limiting migration to the capital. Saudi suburbia was born, with its endless, flat vistas, its concrete villas, its straight highways, and its ubiquitous cars.

After the 1973 oil boom, fast money triggered unchecked development again. Cities expanded in all directions as speculators, investors, and developers created new residential areas. Fueled by public wages, state loans, and skyrocketing land speculation, suburbs kept swelling.¹⁰ The ruling family turned land into a commodity, creating business opportunities for a few investors and developers and trying to turn the general population into docile suburban denizens. Some started jokingly referring to the Al Saud princes as *Al Shubuk* (Lords of the Fences) because they erected barriers everywhere around cities to reserve lands for themselves or their clients.

Since the 1990s, sprawl has proceeded at a galloping pace, fueled by private-public partnerships, satellite towns, new business districts, and new suburban college campuses. Developers broke free from the rigid modernist vocabulary of Doxiadis and RMJM. Instead of straight, perpendicular avenues, they started laying out curvy roads, with cul-de-sacs and lawns. Suburbanization had come full circle to its leafy beginnings on top of Jebel Dhahran.¹¹

Awakening Suburbia

It is not easy to organize and protest in low-density areas. Long distances mean that getting together is often challenging and spaces to occupy or block are harder to find. One needs a car to get around and free time to meet others. Low-density planning dismantled the city of the 19th and early 20th centuries, whose busy nodes, packed streets, squares, and public monuments were relatively easy to politicize. People were already there, and the centers of power were close at hand. It was easier to convene vast crowds and to make them visible, audible, and obnoxious enough to prompt change. By contrast, suburbs are simply not dense enough for any crowd of people to assemble easily and, once brought together, create much disturbance.

Saudi state elites used suburbanization and regional planning to respond to the protest movements of the 1950s and 1960s. From the 1960s onward, workers, soldiers, and students were scattered amid vast landscapes. Traditional modes of political action—pyramid-like organizations with a clear ideology and a

hierarchy of leaders—proved unable to withstand police repression, which intensified during the reign of King Faisal and increasingly relied on forced disappearances and torture. Nationalist, unionist, socialist, and communist movements were crushed. Meanwhile, the car-based landscapes of the new Saudi suburbs, with their wide roads and empty spaces, made it particularly easy to crack down on marches and demonstrations.

Repression and suburbia had together blighted the political landscape. Yet in the 1960s and 1970s, religious spaces still evaded the ire of the police. Their independence was respected, and they were protected by powerful religious figures, including senior clerics Muhammad bin Ibrahim Al al-Shaykh and Abd al-Aziz ibn Baz. In an era of suburbanization, religious spaces were multiplying. Islamic universities and religious institutes opened in several provinces in the 1950s to 1970s. Many new mosques were built in the suburbs. In the early 1980s, urban planners working in Riyadh's new areas were asked to ensure that each single-family house would be no more than 800 feet away from the nearest mosque.¹² From the 1960s onward, these religious sites, relatively untouched by repression and scattered in sprawl, became the backbone of new political movements, characterized by their decentralization, their abhorrence of organizational leadership, and their ideological elasticity. Together these movements were described as “the Islamic Awakening,” or *al-Sahwa al-Islamiyya*.

Inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood and various Salafi groups, the Islamic Awakening succeeded in politicizing the suburbs. In the 1980s, Awakening activists waged a campaign against intellectuals they thought were too Westernized and too close to the state. In the early 1990s, they supported a protest against the Gulf War and the U.S.-Saudi alliance and joined a nationwide call for political and economic reform. In the 2000s, they organized marches and sit-ins to protest increased police repression after 9/11.

The nimble networks created by Islamic activists put people in the streets demanding institutional reforms. Protesters had a hard time getting together, were lost in sprawling spaces, and were eventually overpowered by the police, as in Riyadh and other cities in the early 1990s and early 2000s. Yet suburban protests were not entirely counter-productive. They increased public awareness of burning political issues, including corruption and repression, and of ways to address them. They prompted the state to create an appointed consultative assembly, to publish constitutional documents (in the 1990s), and to form human rights commissions (in the 2000s). The

Islamic Awakening did not revolutionize the system or decrease repression, but it compelled state elites to be more transparent about their actions.

How have the main Islamic Awakening movements benefited from suburbanization since the 1960s? What differences are there between the Salafi movements and the movements linked to the Muslim Brotherhood? How have armed movements fared in suburban settings?

Salafi Suburbia

Analysts often assume Salafi movements are driven by ideological purism. These self-proclaimed heirs of the pious predecessors (*al-salaf al-salih*) are expected to emulate the ways of the first generations of Muslims, to stay away from politics, and to engage with the sources of Islamic doctrine, in particular the Sunna—the collections of the Prophet’s deeds and sayings.

Yet Salafis are not always apolitical, and their tendency to isolate themselves is less a doctrinal choice than a common suburban phenomenon. Salafi movements have created suburban counter-societies that strove to be purely Islamic and removed from the mainstream. They tried to turn Saudi suburbia into a religious utopia. Like 18th-century English Evangelicals, they promoted a “new ideal of conduct that emphasized the role of the family” and tried to separate “the women’s sacred world of family and children from the profane metropolis.”¹³

This commitment expressed itself in several ways. In some cases, suburban Salafi counter-societies have avoided contact with mainstream society and used the suburbs as a refuge. In others, they have tried to confront mainstream society and attempted to change it, sometimes by violence.

Suburban retreat is common among Salafis. Riyadh’s southern suburb of al-Suwaydi, for instance, has been a Salafi stronghold since its creation in the 1970s. A dense network of mosque study circles, religious groups in schools, and Islamic bookstores away from the city center has supported a Salafi atmosphere that expressed itself through greater religious rigor in public spaces, including a neighborhood-wide ban on tobacco sales. The most extreme version of this isolationist trend can be found among the Burayda Brethren, a Salafi group that left mainstream society behind and re-created pre-modern living conditions in a suburb of Burayda, a city 250 miles northwest of Riyadh.¹⁴

Other Salafi groups have used suburban strongholds to prepare for confrontation with the state. Juhayman al-‘Utaybi’s Salafi Group That Commands Virtue and Forbids Vice, for instance, emerged in the 1960s among rural migrants who had flocked to the informal suburbs of Mecca, Medina, and Riyadh. This transnational movement, comprising activists from Saudi Arabia, Yemen, India, Pakistan, Egypt, Palestine, and the United States, self-built entire suburban communities, with segregated streets (main streets for men, back lanes for women) and a family-friendly atmosphere.¹⁵ The group was repressed in the mid-1970s and prepared for confrontation. In November 1979, it occupied the Mecca Grand Mosque for two weeks and was crushed with the help of the Jordanian and French special forces.

Muslim Brothers in Suburbia

Muslim Brothers have had a more ambiguous relationship to suburbs than Salafis. Born in Egyptian cities as a teachers’ movement, the Brotherhood has been wary of the freedoms suburbs afforded younger generations. The Saudi Muslim Brothers, a group of educators and reformists who emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, repeatedly warned against the perils of suburbia. They denounced the atomization and individualization of society; they decried the emergence of leisure, free time, and what they called “deviances,” including drug addiction, homosexual practices, and joyriding, which they linked to Westernization, suburbanization, and the dissolving of extended families into nuclear families.

Yet at the same time, the Muslim Brothers were well equipped to tackle the challenges of organizing in suburbs. They created loose activist networks in each region of the country, most notably the Hejaz, Najd, and the Eastern Province. They recruited in suburban schools and mosques; they kept a low profile to dodge repression. They used suburban resources to organize against what they thought were suburban threats. To fight idleness, they politicized leisure and free time.

Their modes of organization reflect their suburban orientation. Whereas the smallest unit of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood was the family, Saudi Muslim Brothers created a smaller unit: the car. Comprising four activists and a leader-driver, “car” units assembled during commuting and reimagined cars as venues for politicization. Activists designed specific car activities (debates, readings, competitions) to reclaim their commuting time. They looked at the car as crucial to the making of strong activist networks. The Muslim Brothers scaled down their activities to adapt to suburban low

density and adopted the lowest possible political profile they could without losing coherence or control.

Summer camps were another prime site of politicization for the Brotherhood. Organized since the 1970s in schools and colleges, summer camps were meant to combat the emptiness of suburban summers and to fight “vice” and criminality. (After they were banned for two years in the mid-1990s, the Ministry of Interior reportedly noticed an increase in juvenile offenses.) Summer camps proved to be effective advertisements for Islamic networks. Muslim Brothers employed sports, leisure, and outdoors activities to recruit activists outside of traditional religious circles and thus demonstrate their social usefulness.

Unlike the Salafis, the Muslim Brothers did not regard suburbs as a utopia. They were content to actively turn suburbs into a resource that enabled them to intervene in the public sphere. Suburban Islamic networks came together during the 1990 Gulf War to support a nationwide movement that both proposed political reforms and protested the U.S.-Saudi alliance. They helped distribute petitions, organize marches and sit-ins, and mobilize against repression. During the 2005 municipal elections, these networks organized voters and were instrumental in the victory of Muslim Brother candidates in most cities.

Embedded in such suburban institutions as schools, mosques, and summer camps, Muslim Brother networks are hard to repress. They owe their survival ability to their bottom-up, decentralized, and scaled-down activities. As a Muslim Brother organizer told me, “The nature of the Brothers’ thought does not require any organizational link between the various groups and the mother ship. It is a thought that allows you to mobilize even when you are alone.”¹⁶

Suburban Insurrection

The most radical Saudi activists have targeted Western suburban enclaves and U.S. military bases since the 1950s. In 1967, thousands of oil workers stormed the Dhahran military airfield to protest police and security cooperation between Washington and Riyadh. After hundreds of peaceful Islamic activists were thrown in jail in 1993-1994 for criticizing the U.S.-Saudi alliance, armed militants targeted the symbols of Western presence in Saudi Arabia—in particular, military training facilities and suburban communities. Returnees from the 1980s Afghan war, religious activists, and others were tempted by armed militancy and joined al-Qaeda in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In the 2000s, al-Qaeda militants bombed

several gated communities or “compounds,” killing Westerners and Saudis alike. This anti-suburban streak reflected a continuity between earlier forms of anti-Western activism and al-Qaeda’s armed belligerence; it was also meant to turn Saudis against the secure enclaves of privilege that most Westerners live in.

Al-Qaeda and its successor, ISIS, target suburban spaces, too, while being suburban organizations themselves. In the 2000s and 2010, armed militants used suburbs as both outposts and places of refuge. Their culture, marked by cars, weapons, and the cult of bodily fitness and autonomy, is markedly suburban in its refusal of top-down organization and its belief in individual agency and DIY activism. Entire areas became popularly associated with militancy. The southern suburb of al-Suwaydi, in Riyadh, became jokingly known in the 2000s as “the Fallujah of Riyadh” or “the Sunni triangle” on account of its concentration of Salafi activists and because some al-Qaeda leaders chose to hide there. (This is not to say that Salafism is a mere gateway to armed militancy, but al-Qaeda militants sometimes do feel safer in those suburbs that have been shaped by Salafis’ everyday activism.)

In the 2010s, ISIS militants also used the fragmented landscape of Saudi suburbia to hide from security services and try to dodge repression. Armed militants had turned suburban communities into battlefields.

Closing Remarks

Saudi Islamic movements cannot be understood outside of the suburban context of their emergence. Salafi movements have taken to the suburbs since the 1960s and have strived to create religious utopias away from mainstream society. Muslim Brothers, although more critical of suburban cultures, have also invested in the suburbs and have exploited whatever spaces could be organized and mobilized. They created strong, decentralized networks in mosques, schools, and colleges. During political crises, these networks provided the resources for petitioning, resisting repression, mobilizing voters, and organizing marches and sit-ins. Armed militants also confronted the culture of the suburbs. They took the legacy of oil workers occupying U.S. suburbs to an extreme, bombing suburban enclaves and gated communities and turning Saudi suburbia into a battlefield.

Saudi political institutions reorganized the political landscape of the country in radical ways. State elites imitated the U.S. oil company Aramco and hoped that regional and suburban planning would keep Saudis apart.

Yet rather than depoliticizing Saudis, suburbanization made possible the creation of political networks that could challenge the status quo. Suburbs became sites of non-violent protest and of violent encounters between police and militants.

Saudi suburbia was born out of the globalization of both urban expertise and capital accumulation. It was a fragment of a much larger, transnational metropolis, which Constantinos Doxiadis had once named *oekumenopolis*—the global city—and whose monotonous landscape was now replicated from Riyadh to Kuala Lumpur to Los Angeles and Sao Paulo. No wonder protest movements originating in Saudi suburbia, this globalized landscape, eventually reached distant shores and became, in turn, global.

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Endnotes

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- 11 See the 2020 Riyadh Master Plan, in *al-Taqrir al-Shamil: Al-Mukhattat al-Istratiji al-Shamil li-Madinat al-Riyadh* [Full report: The full strategic plan for Riyadh] (Al-Riyadh Development Authority, 2003), pp. 47ff. and fig. 4-1, pp. 50–51.



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