

Saudi Arabia and the export of religious ideologies

By Laurent Bonnefoy

■ Executive summary

Saudi Arabia's history since the mid-18th century has to a large extent been shaped by the relationship between the royal family (the Al Sa'ud) and religious clerics, in particular those from the Al al-Shaykh clan. This relationship has been structural and has played a central role in maintaining conservative religious policies inside the country. It has also been instrumental in legitimising the monarchy both at the national level and abroad. The fact that the two holiest sites of Islam (Mecca and Medina) are on Saudi soil has further strengthened the relationship that exists between the state and religious actors, the role that Islam plays in defining Saudi foreign policy, and the image of the country at the international level.

This policy brief discusses the impact of this connection between state institutions and religion. It will first stress the diversity of the various ideologies and relationships that structure the politics-religion nexus in Saudi Arabia. In doing so it will stress the importance of not limiting one's understanding of this nexus to Wahhabism. It will then present the various instruments and mechanisms that contribute to the dissemination or export of religious ideologies beyond Saudi Arabia's borders. Finally, it will conclude by showing the extent to which Islam is one among many determinants of Saudi foreign policy.

The religious field beyond Wahhabism

Wahhabism, described as a particularly conservative branch of Sunni Islam, has often been depicted as the driving force of the Saudi state's policies. It emerged during the 18th century and allegedly builds on the teachings and writings of Muhammad bin 'Abd al-Wahhab, who came from the Najd region in the centre of the Arabian Peninsula and allied himself with Prince Muhammad ibn Sa'ud to establish the first Saudi state (1744-1818) and fight the Ottomans occupying their homeland. Bin 'Abd al-Wahhab's teachings focused on reasserting the oneness (*tawhid*) of God in the face of pagan practices that existed among both local Najdi populations and representatives of the Ottoman Empire. As such, Bin 'Abd al-Wahhab's legacy was both religious and nationalist. In his publications (most notably *Kitab al-Tawhid – The Book on the Oneness of God*) he called for the revival of the religion of the origins of Islam and blamed human-made innovations for polluting and cor-

rupting Islam. The legacy of Bin 'Abd al-Wahhab (who died in 1792) lived on through his numerous descendants, who took the family name of Al al-Shaykh (i.e. House of the Shaykh, in reference to Bin 'Abd al-Wahhab). The family became the second most prestigious in the country after the Al Sa'ud and consistently dominated the state religious institutions of the second Saudi state (1818-1891) and the third one (established in 1902). To date, the Council of Higher Ulama – an assembly appointed by the king that supposedly comprises the most important religious clerics, who play a major role in defining Saudi laws and jurisprudence – remains dominated by the Al al-Shaykh. As such, the doctrine established by Muhammad bin 'Abd al-Wahhab still appears as a reference to many and plays a fundamental role in contemporary Saudi Arabia.

However, the use of the label Wahhabism to define Saudi Islam as a whole is problematic. Firstly, the label is

contested by most of the actors depicted as such and consequently cannot be seen as neutral. Secondly, the use of the Wahhabi label overlooks the variety of the influences and references, some dating back to before Bin 'Abd al-Wahhab and some after, that are mobilised by the Saudi religious establishment to define its position on contemporary matters. Thirdly, it automatically links an intellectual movement and a religious project, despite the fact it is shared beyond Saudi Arabia, to a geographical and historical context, that of 18th-century Najd. Fourthly, it overlooks the fact that Saudi Islam is diverse and that while the religious authorities – in particular, the Council of Higher Ulama and Dar al-Ifta (the committee responsible for issuing religious advice) – may still be dominated by individuals who claim to perpetuate the teachings of Bin 'Abd al-Wahhab, society itself reflects other models and references. As such, Wahhabism cannot be considered as the only religious product that Saudi Arabia, both as a state and as a lively and dynamic society, is seeking to export through the mechanisms of proselytism. In more or less centralised ways and benefitting from more or less direct state support, various shades of Salafi Islam (the generic term used to describe the reformist project that seeks to reinstate authentic Islam, of which Wahhabism is only one component), Sufism, the Muslim Brotherhood or even Shia Islam are being disseminated through Saudi-based proselytising enterprises.

Mechanisms of dissemination

The influence of Saudi-based Islamic actors has long been perceived as a tool of Saudi “soft power”. The combination of Saudi oil revenues and the exceptional position of Saudi territory as the “cradle of Islam” has favoured the emergence of a number of mechanisms of proselytism.

The Saudi state has in particular based part of its diplomacy on non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international Islamic organisations, the most important being the World Muslim League, established in 1962. While the organisation can be labelled as conservative and influenced by the Salafi project, it would be wrong to see it as strictly Wahhabi or to imply that such an organisation (minimally centralised as it is and without the staff to actually control in the field how funded projects are managed and whether the founding principles of Wahhabism are enforced) has the capacity to efficiently disseminate one specific form of Islam. The 60 member states, who fund various projects (mosques and schools) aimed at propagating the Islamic faith, represent the diversity of the religion. The World Assembly of Muslim Youth, established in 1972, also plays a role in funding activities at the international level and, much like the World Muslim League, sees Saudi actors play a prominent role. This organisation is nonetheless considered with some suspicion by hard-core advocates of the doctrine of Muhammad bin 'Abd al-Wahhab, who tend to highlight the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood on its activities.

Education is also an important factor in proselytism. Saudi universities, in particular Umm al-Qura' in Mecca, al-Imam Muhammad bin Sa'ud University in Riyadh and the Islamic University in Medina, all have important numbers of foreign students who benefit from Saudi state-funded scholarships. These students, who may also receive private funding from NGOs or rich individuals, are usually trained in Saudi Arabia before returning to their home countries, where they often propagate a Salafi interpretation of Islam. Hundreds of foreigners also stay each year in private religious institutes (which may or may not be Salafi) and can benefit from private scholarships and the patronage of prominent clerics or princes. Religious institutes abroad may also be on the payroll of clerics. 'Abd al-'Aziz bin Baz (d. 1999), mufti of the Kingdom and among the most influential religious scholars of the second half of the 20th century, funded many religious activities in Europe, North America and elsewhere in the Islamic world.

Migration and tourism are important channels of influence, but often play an ambiguous role. The narrative that states that Muslim migrants staying in Saudi Arabia as guest workers (either Arab, South Asian or African) are automatic exporters of “Saudi-style Islam” when they return to their countries is flawed. It overlooks the mixed feelings most migrants have regarding their experience abroad, the difficulties of their daily lives in Saudi Arabia and the discrimination they experience. Recent crackdowns on illegal migration (paving the way, for instance, for the expulsion of tens of thousands of Yemenis) is likely to reinforce such feelings. Such an interpretation of the role of migration also neglects the extent to which interaction between Saudi society and migrant workers (including because these workers do not always speak Arabic) is limited; as such, the possibilities for influencing religious practice are not self-evident.

Pilgrims who come for the yearly Hajj to Mecca and Medina are an obvious lever of religious “soft power”. The Saudi government and religious institutions invest money and energy in organising their accommodation and in channeling them and their religious practice and interpretations. Gifts granted to pilgrims such as copies of the Qur'an and distributed pamphlets play a role in placing Saudi Arabia at the heart of the Muslim world. However, even during their brief stay in the country it is likely that the pilgrims will be confronted with a variety of Muslim voices, because the religious field is highly competitive.

The diversity of Saudi Islam is highly visible in the media. While tens of privately owned and internationally accessible satellite channels focusing on religion and funded by Saudi capital have developed over the last decade or so (the most prominent being Iqra, al-Nass and al-Majd), they all leave room for a certain diversity and can by no means be linked exclusively to Wahhabism or even to Salafism. Such dynamism in the media sphere, as well as through the Internet, has favoured the emergence of popular scholars who are not linked to the traditional religious establish-

ment. Among them, Salman al-ʿAwda plays a prominent role. With over 1.3 million followers of his Facebook page and numerous activities in the media, this former opposition member, who is strongly criticised by certain Salafi circles, has developed as an alternative figure to the traditional ulama. Receiving support from certain segments of the royal family and from ʿAbd Allah, the current king, al-ʿAwda embodies both the internal nature of Saudi Arabia and the new external image of Saudi Islam, and, in its own form, offers a new religious product to “export”.

This diversity of the forms of Saudi-based religious proselytism outside the country can be explained by the fact that what is often described as foreign policy and depicted as the product of a centralised decision-making process is

in fact the consequence of complex dynamics. Consequently, narratives accusing Saudi Arabia of exporting Wahhabism have only a limited relevance. Thus the export of religious ideologies is by no means a univocal process, since multiple actors are involved: institutions, migrants, NGOs, the media, etc. As such, the outcomes of this process are various. Furthermore, while Saudi Arabia is often depicted as a religious state (including by its rulers), the determinants of the country’s interactions with the outside world are in fact much more diverse. Such matters as migration, security and trade are not guided by the desire to export Wahhabism. They are nevertheless structural constituents of the Saudi state’s policies and explain the counter-intuitive (and much-criticised) special relationship with the U.S. ■

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