

# **The Influence of Religious Institutions on the Domestic and Foreign Policies of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia**

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## **Abstract**

*A close U.S. ally, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has informal links to terrorism, and many young Saudis have traveled abroad to take part in Islamic militancy across the Middle East. This paper examines how religious institutions, rather than religious beliefs, influence social norms, and therefore both foreign and domestic policy. It analyzes the effects on regional politics and the U.S.-Saudi relationship. The Saudi government under King Abdullah took many positive steps to separate itself from militant groups, but the problem is still clear in the flow of money and militants to Iraq and Syria today. It concludes with recommendations for the United States to continue to engage both diplomatically and culturally with Saudi Arabia in the wake of King Abdullah's passing, to support the country's positive moves and encourage progress through collaboration.*

The foreign and domestic policies of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia are heavily influenced by the country's powerful Wahhabi Islam religious establishment. The United States' close relationship with the Saudis seems incongruent with the Kingdom's social norms and its history of investment in violent Islamist groups. What is the role of Saudi Arabia's religious establishment in defining social norms? How do those same norms impact regional politics and the country's bilateral relationship with the United States? How should the United States proceed?

This paper argues that the enormous influence of Saudi Arabia's religious establishment on social norms has wide-ranging effects on Saudi government policy. This paper begins with a brief introduction to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, its Wahhabi interpretation of Islam, and the influence of its religious establishment on social norms, especially those related to gender segregation. Subsequently, it explores the internal tensions concerning Saudi Arabia's Shi'ite population and the Kingdom's adversarial relationship with Shi'ite Iran. It then analyzes the Kingdom's relationship with the United States. It concludes by evaluating the legacy of King Abdullah and considering the future of U.S.-Saudi relations, with recommendations for U.S. policy-makers.

### **The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Wahhabi Islam**

To understand why the religious establishment in Saudi Arabia wields so much power, one must understand the religio-political history of the Kingdom. The modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was established in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the twilight of the Ottoman Empire, but it is central to centuries of Arab and Muslim history. It is the birthplace of Islam, and home to the two holiest sites in the Muslim religion, the mosques at Mecca and Medina. It is also home to an especially strict interpretation of Islam: Sunni-Wahhabism. A Congressional Research Service report on Saudi terrorist financing described Wahhabism as “an Islamic movement that encourages a return to the pure and orthodox practice of the ‘fundamentals’ of Islam.”<sup>1</sup> A scholar of Muslim thought, Samira Haj, describes the ideas “not as a detached set of abstract doctrinal statements about the nature of God and man's relation to it, but as a set of practices constitutive of the scholarly, political and day-to-day life of the community.”<sup>2</sup> For Saudis adhering to Wahhabism, the laws of the Quran are not merely philosophy, but a seventh-century manual for society that is to be absolutely obeyed.

The country is a theocratic, dynastic monarchy: The mosque and the state are intimately entangled and led by two ruling families. The government is run by the descendants of the Kingdom's namesake, Muhammad Ibn Saud, and the religious establishment by the descendants of the founder of

Wahhabism, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. A pact was formed between these two founders as they established the original Kingdom in the 18<sup>th</sup> century: Today, each family supports the legitimacy and power of the other.



**Figure 1: Map of Saudi Arabia<sup>3</sup>**

The status quo is cemented by the nation's vast oil wealth. Saudi Arabia is the world's largest producer and exporter of oil. It also holds the world's second-largest proven reserves, so it will be able to hold its market position for the foreseeable future.<sup>4</sup> The royal family and the state enjoy a near unlimited flow of income. The result is a generous Saudi Arabian welfare, or rentier, state. "Obviously if you have enough natural resources you can afford to forget about normal economic activity. The whole society can live as rentiers, that is, on unearned income from wealth. That is the situation in Saudi Arabia."<sup>5</sup> For decades, the petrodollars have well provided for the Saudi people, including heavily subsidized energy prices

that keep gas under a dollar per gallon and an imported labor force of millions.<sup>6</sup> Human Rights Watch, an international NGO that performs research and advocacy for human rights, estimated in 2013 that there were “over 9 million foreign workers in Saudi Arabia — more than half the work force.”<sup>7</sup> Only about one in three Saudis participate in the workforce, but just one in five women do.<sup>8</sup> The royal family was largely able to avoid the unrest that swept the region in 2011 by making massive investments in the domestic economy and promising social reforms, some of which have materialized and will be explored later in this paper. This rentier economic structure has allowed most Saudis to live in relative comfort, and has created a state reliant on extraction of its natural resources. There is minimal incentive for citizens to work and contribute to the economy. In this environment, the Saudi royal family and the religious establishment wield a great deal of power.

King Faisal declared the Quran as the country’s constitution in 1967, affirming the holy book’s leading role in Saudi law.<sup>9</sup> Islam and the Quran are central to life in the Kingdom and govern basic relationships between individuals as well as between the individual and society. The police enforce the moral laws of the clerics. This is important because a high social value is placed on obedience to the rules of the Quran. Following these rules can be equated with being both a good Muslim *and* a good Saudi citizen. The religious clerical establishment is as much a government bureaucracy as a theological institution, “a ‘business’ that accounts for more jobs than the all-important oil industry.”<sup>10</sup> Michael Scott Doran laments the difficulty Saudi Arabia would have dissolving its theocratic structure, comparing it to Communism in Soviet Russia: “Wahhabism is the foundation of an entire political system, and everyone with a stake in the status quo can be expected to rally around it when push comes to shove.”<sup>11</sup> The clerics wield significant power, and the royal family both relies on and empowers them. They are the institutional religious voice of Islam in the Kingdom, they are committed to maintaining that position, and “the clerics consider any plan that gives a voice to non-Wahhabis as idolatrous.”<sup>12</sup> One scholarly article on Saudi reform observes “this long-running alliance, foundational to the state and necessary in the past for the monarchy to weather challenges, now

constrains efforts to change Saudi Arabia.”<sup>13</sup> Of course, those who have such power are loath to give it up: Reform in the Kingdom is not impossible, but it will not be easy. “Saudi Arabia also is very much a consensus society, and this means progress is often slow and indirect.”<sup>14</sup> Samira Haj comments on the environment created by strict adherence to the social rules and the way these rules frame internal debate.

This means that an individual who belongs to the collective has to accept the moral and institutional boundaries that define the community. This, however, does not foreclose debate and contention, only that they unfold within limits, and with the acknowledgment of the value of these understandings and practices as embodied and transmitted through historical practice.<sup>15</sup>

Established religious interpretation takes place within a specific framework based on centuries of scholarship. Islamic scholars might say they are standing on the shoulders of giants. This is the academic and theoretical world that Saudi scholars use to take an ancient set of rules and apply them to modern society to mimic, as much as possible, the Islamic Golden Age of the time of the prophet Muhammad.<sup>16</sup>

### **Social Structure and Rules**

This section will explore the reforms and changes taking place in Saudi society and examine further paths forward. First, it is important to understand some characteristics of Saudi Arabian society. Examining this strict, rule-based social structure in its domestic context will help examine why Saudi Arabia promotes violent Islamic groups abroad.

This powerful institutional religious ideology as public policy translates to a strict set of rules on society that govern the individual as part of the larger Muslim community.<sup>17</sup> Alcohol is banned in Saudi Arabia, as are movie theaters, concerts and many other hallmarks of Western leisure.<sup>18</sup> Speech is also curtailed. Not only is it prohibited to speak out against the government, there are also prohibitions on material that supports pluralistic views, or presents the beliefs of others in a positive light. The

Saudi religious establishment maintains an active strategy of intolerance, and this has significant effects on Saudi society and Saudi policy.

These rules have caused Saudi Arabia to be ranked 205<sup>th</sup> on the International Human Rights Rank Indicator, just a few spots ahead of North Korea. The only state in the Middle East below them is Syria, currently engaged in a brutal civil war.<sup>19</sup> This is key to understanding Saudi society. The Western conception of human rights and the role of government in citizens' lives on which this ranking is based is not accepted in Saudi Arabia. The Saudi government that receives this ranking is interacting with its citizens exactly as it sees fit. The freedoms that the West places a high value on are not as valued in Saudi Arabia. Instead, what is valued is obedience to the rules of the Quran and the rules of the official Saudi clerics.

The Saudi religious establishment is hostile to those not of its specific religious persuasion. One manifestation of this hostility is in intolerant and puritanical rhetoric: For example, an Islamic leader outside Saudi Arabia has expressed that "the very concept of human rights is 'a Jewish fabrication' designed to present all religious faiths as of equal value," and that instead, "Muslims should regard all non-Muslim faiths as, at best, deviations from the truth and, at worst, lies spread by the enemies of Allah." This sentiment has found support among far-right imams in Saudi Arabia.<sup>20</sup> Views that stray from the puritanical message of the clerics are a threat to their power and to the cohesion of the system. Clerics wield their influence to sustain these principles, and they permeate many other sectors of domestic and foreign policy, which will be explored below.

Part of this system involves segregation of men and women. Women in Saudi Arabia are governed by a more restrictive set of rules than men.

Women are not allowed to drive; they cannot obtain a passport or travel without the permission of a male relative; they cannot interact with men because extreme gender segregation is observed in all spheres of life; and women must observe a strict dress code, enforced by the "moral police." Overall ... an absolutely male-

dominated society that does not hesitate to use violence against women.<sup>21</sup>

These rules are consistent with the goal of maintaining a hierarchal society dominated by men. The exposition and approval by government clerics and by the royal family provide all the social legitimacy necessary for this practice to continue. However, it seems that this strict internal structure serves as an incubator for the militants and funds that leave Saudi Arabia to support Islamic struggles abroad. The socialization of rules and behavior and the pervasive rhetoric hostile to the ‘other’ raises the social value placed on that support. These struggles are often against traditions that do not follow the same rules and are therefore perceived as enemies: Jews, Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, the secularizing forces of outsiders, especially of the West, and the Shi’ite Muslim community, which is regarded as apostate. When so much domestic social force is spent demonizing these groups, it is an understandable leap from rhetoric to action.

### **Enemies, Foreign and Domestic**

In thinking about the perceptions of Saudi Arabia’s Sunni Muslims of the “other,” much is revealed by their relationship with Shi’ite Muslims in the country. The Shi’ite community in Saudi Arabia makes up 10 to 15 percent of the population, concentrated in the northeast, near Iran, and near Saudi Arabia’s largest oil reserves. Shi’ites have lived in this region for hundreds of years, predating the founding of the Kingdom, and have survived its establishment and rise. However, they are a disenfranchised minority that much of Saudi Arabian society is hostile towards. Saudi Shi’ites are barred from expressing their religion under the threat of arrest and jail, and “the Saudi religious establishment periodically threatens the Shi’ites with genocide.”<sup>22</sup> Understanding the relationship between the Saudi state and its Shi’ite community provides a window into understanding Saudi support for militant groups abroad.

The Saudi framework of analysis of the Shi’ite population has two factors. The first is the belief that the Shi’ite religion is heretical and a threat to

Wahhabism. In a country politically dominated by its particular strain of Sunni Islam, this frames Shi'ites as a dangerous opposition group. For example, "Saudi clerics such as Nasser al-Omar, who has more than a million Twitter followers ... displays his contempt for the Shia, referring to them as 'the rejectionists' and 'enemies of religion and the nation.'"<sup>23</sup> For clerics such as al-Omar, accepting Shi'ites would be the first step on the road to pluralism that would diminish the clerics' political power. All of King Abdullah's attempts to grant the Shi'ites greater freedom have been adamantly opposed by the religious establishment. Religious leaders worry that one small concession would lead to more, and should democratic reforms ever advance, the Shi'ite voting bloc, along with Saudi progressives, will only further curtail the clerics' power. Michael Scott Doran posited that the "nightmare scenario is that the Americans and the Iraqi Shi'ites will force Riyadh to enact broad reforms and bring the Saudi Shi'ites into the political community. There is no question that many hard-line Saudi clerics share precisely the same fears."<sup>24</sup> That is a frightening prospect for the political future of those who believe, that "Wahhabism is True Islam and that it must have a monopoly over state policy."<sup>25</sup>

The second factor in Saudi analysis of the Shi'ites, built on the above fears, is the threat of Shi'ite Iran. Saudi treatment of its internal Shi'ite population and its foreign policy towards states and conflicts across the Arab and Muslim world, and also with the United States, is dominated by its competition with Shi'ite Iran. Iran and Saudi Arabia are in an ideological cold war characterized by distrust, paranoia, and reactionary rhetoric and policies. Saudi Arabian commentators can find the Iranian threat, real or imagined, in any regional development. All actions and advancement is measured in how it affects the relative power of each. Saudi Arabia is a leader among Islamic Nations, as the Custodian of the Two Mosques, Mecca and Medina, and styles itself the representative of Sunni Muslims. Anthony Cordesman referred to the country as "the most important Islamic nation."<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, the Islamic Republic of Iran is the primary state of the Shi'ite sect. Due to the proximity of the two countries as well as their competition, Saudi Sunnis "fear that the Shia harbour political loyalty to co-religionists in Iran."<sup>27</sup> In this context, Saudi



policy seeks to preempt the emergence of subversive and seditious Shi'ite power in the country.

These fears have been exacerbated by the conflicts of the last decade and show how the seeds of Wahhabi education yielded a harvest of violent Islamic groups in the region, in at least Iraq, Syria, Pakistan and Afghanistan. The war in Iraq overthrew a Sunni minority government, and the sectarian Sunni-Shi'ite violence that followed the fall of Saddam Hussein became a significant draw for young Saudis and other Sunnis steeped in Wahhabi ideology, as well as Iranians and other Shi'ites. The embattled Iraqi Shi'ite government that arose, backed by both Iran and the United States, has had difficulty gaining legitimacy among the Saudis and other Sunnis.<sup>28</sup> The new government neglected its civic responsibilities to serve the Sunni areas of Iraq, and the backlash gave rise to further sectarian violence and militant groups such as ISIS, which some claim began as a Saudi project.<sup>29</sup> The tension between Sunni and Shi'ite powers has sustained the country's instability. Similarly, in Syria, the Saudi regime saw the uprising as an opportunity to weaken an Iranian client state and funneled fighters and millions of dollars of cash and equipment to bring down the Assad regime.<sup>30</sup> Anywhere that Sunnis and Shi'ites clash provides a new front for hardliners in Saudi Arabia to pontificate on the threat from the formation of a "Shi'a crescent," including Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, and Syria that will surround and destroy the Kingdom.<sup>31</sup> This fear dominates the cultural narrative of Saudi Wahhabism.

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Sometimes the fear manifests itself as violence within the Kingdom. In November 2014, radicalized Saudi Sunnis attacked Saudi Shiites leaving a religious building during a major Shi'ite holiday. The Saudi government arrested several perpetrators on terror charges, and linked the violence to

clerics who encourage young Saudis with violent sectarian sentiments.<sup>32</sup> This internal violence spills over from the same rhetoric that spurred thousands of Saudis to join sectarian conflicts raging in Iraq and Syria. These young men who go to fight are encouraged by influential religious leaders who see threats to Islam and the Kingdom in all things Shi'ite.<sup>33</sup> It is easy to argue that if Saudi Sunnis are willing to travel abroad to fight the Shi'ite threat, they should be combatting Shi'ites at home as well. This is the result of a pervasive culture and education that emphasizes the external pressures against the Wahhabi way of life. Daily life in Saudi Arabia is governed by a set of rules that define the behavior of the Sunni Muslim community. A high social value is placed on obedience to these rules. The narrative that the social structure — and way of life — is under threat from enemies of the faith is a strong motivating force for Saudi Muslims and the Saudi government to invest money and lives in its defense.<sup>34</sup>

### **Educated to Fear, Hate ... and Fight**

To understand why Saudis travel across the region and the world to fight, their motivations must be understood. About half of Saudi Arabia's population of 28 million is under the age of 25. Within this segment, there is mass unemployment, with some estimates as high as 40 percent. This is combined with little need to work because of the welfare state and a social history and culture that deem many jobs as below these young men's social status. This has made for a stagnating economy with a great deal of difficulty in finding an engine for growth: Expansion cannot happen with a population that neither needs nor wants to work.<sup>35</sup> One avenue many young Saudi men have taken instead is the path of jihad. Saudis see this as an acceptable, even praiseworthy, thing to do. To understand why, the place to look is Saudi Arabia's other major export besides oil: Wahhabi Islam.

Saudi Wahhabi education, like oil, is derived from home. As explored above, Islam and the state are intimately connected. One of the central tenets of Islam is the importance of the overarching community of Muslims, the *Ummah*. That is, the idea that Muslim society is more

important than nationalism, “the idea that all Muslims constitute one people or nation” of all Muslims around the world.<sup>36</sup> The government and religious establishment of Saudi Arabia maintain that they, and all Saudis, have a responsibility to defend the *Ummah*. This tenet, combined with a narrative that Islam is under threat from all sides, creates an implicit, and often explicit, call for action.<sup>37</sup> Thus, the wealth and support of the nation stands behind all true Muslims struggling against oppression around the world.<sup>38,39</sup> This is disseminated from schools to mosques, and in the media, from the street corners to state television and radio.<sup>40,41</sup> The Saudi people have embraced this idea, and the vast majority support Islamic organizations around the world as well as Saudi Arabia’s “self-proclaimed image as the defender of the Muslim faithful.”<sup>42</sup> The government cannot easily alter this approach: It cannot stop support for the conflicts considered central to Saudi survival and way of life. Thus, “the decoupling of the Saudi state from religious extremism must be seen as something more than either an administrative or a policing issue.”<sup>43</sup>

While factions of the Saudi royal family have a cozy relationship with the West, the people of Saudi Arabia have very negative views of the United States and Europe. Saudi people see the presence of NATO forces in the Middle East as part of a conspiracy of “Crusaders and Zionists” to destroy Islam.<sup>44</sup> This hatred is deep and pervasive: “polls taken in early 2003 indicated that an astonishing 97 percent of Saudis hold a negative view of the United States.”<sup>45</sup> This is no accident given social and cultural policies established by the Saudi government to maintain power and avoid criticism or calls for reform.<sup>46</sup> For the vast majority of Saudis who never travel outside the country, all they know about the West is what they are told. Anti-Western sentiment is circulated everywhere, including in the basic education system. Daniel Byman finds that “in Saudi textbooks, the portrayal of the world echoes that of many jihadists, extolling martyrdom, criticising the imitation of the West, calling for restrictions on non-Muslims, and contending that Islam is on the defensive and is undermined by modern trends such as globalisation and modern science.”<sup>47</sup> Given the pervasiveness of such rhetoric in Saudi society, it becomes easier to understand the impetus behind militant action.

Amir Taheri observes, “this exaggerated emphasis on the role of religion in society and the use of Islam as a political ideology to legitimize the regime create a vast space within which extremism and ultimately terrorism emerge and develop as natural attributes of Saudi society.”<sup>48</sup> The targeted and explicit hatred that is taught to all Saudi citizens results in a high propensity for a crossover from words and ideas into action. Saudi civilians have not only donated money to support Islamic conflicts, but have been found fighting in all the major struggles involving Muslims around the world.<sup>49</sup> Saudi money and fighters have links in Afghanistan against the Soviets, and in the Balkans supporting Bosnian Muslims against the Serbs and Croats. Today, Saudi fighters can be found in Afghanistan, Iraq, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Syria, just to name a few.

Something else from Saudi Arabia is found in those countries and many others. It is schools, or *madrassas*, and mosques — hundreds of these Wahhabi institutions have emerged around the world over several decades. There are two primary causes of this trend, events that bookended the year 1979. The first is the Islamic Revolution in Iran. With the rise of a Shi’ite theocracy across the Gulf, the modern intra-Muslim cold war began. One observer writes, “the worldwide surge in Wahhabi mosques began in response to Iran’s attempts to export the Shia radicalism of its 1979 revolution.”<sup>50</sup> Saudi Arabia began to provide funding for Wahhabi educational institutions as a counter to Iranian influence in the region and the world. While the two nations will not — cannot — go to war directly given the costs, they do fuel regional sectarian conflicts. Events in Iraq and Syria today indicate the international effects of the regional cold war, especially Iraq, which had a Sunni government overthrown by the war and a Shi’ite regime propped up by the West. A country that was supposed to be a jewel of multi-sectarian unity quickly deteriorated into Sunni-Shi’ite civil war. When at last the country seemed stable enough for American forces to exit, the Shi’ite regime’s abandonment of the Sunni forces it was supposed to command and the neglect of Sunni areas it was supposed to govern created the space for the violent Sunni forces of ISIS to grow and attract recruits. It has been observed that ISIS’s “ultra-violence against religious minorities is also viewed by political analysts and critics as an amplification of Wahhabi hatred for the Shia branch of Islam.”<sup>51</sup> Indeed,

there are suspicions that ISIS was a Saudi project in the fight against Assad, but went out of the control of its handlers.<sup>52</sup> As with opening Pandora's Box, these forces, once released into the world, cannot be withdrawn. Through this lens, it is possible to view the domestic and foreign policies of Saudi Arabia as a social investment, one that builds national security through the military and a worldwide network of zealously devoted religious fighters. Clearly, these investments can have dangerous and unexpected returns.

The second event began Christmas Eve, 1979: the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In response, the Carter administration and then the newly elected Reagan administration began a decade-long campaign to fund and arm Afghan rebels. Saudi Arabia was a significant provider of funds, arms, and fighters going to Afghanistan through Pakistan. The conflict provided a major conduit for the spread of violent Wahhabi beliefs:

Thus, the Cold War-motivated jihad against the Soviets spread Islamic militant fundamentalism at a fever pitch, especially at the Pakistan-Afghan border region, where ubiquitous madrassas training young boys and men in jihad and the Quran served as mujahidin "factories." Moreover, the Reagan administration explicitly sought out the most militant and fundamentalist mujahidin factions to support, with the supposed logic that their religious fervor would be the most effective for recruiting fighters and maintaining their morale and steadfastness in fighting against the Soviets.<sup>53</sup>

The religious aspect of their training was heralded as an important factor. It provided structure for their education and righteousness for their cause. This was also at a period of resurgent religious evangelism in the United States, exemplified by the election of President Ronald Reagan. This may have given the Reagan administration an illusion of understanding and legitimacy with the religious warriors fighting the "Godless Soviets."<sup>54</sup> Of course, once the Soviets withdrew, the Islamic-warrior victors did not simply disappear. Some went back to their home countries to found their own Islamic movements.<sup>55</sup> Others stayed and "morphed into the Taliban,

which eventually took over Afghanistan and provided al-Qaeda with a geographic base to build an infrastructure to support terrorist operations around the world.” Saudi foreign policy was keen to support a government that shared its social structure and preached its strain of Islam and narrative of struggle.<sup>56</sup> Saudi Arabia was one of the few nations to formally recognize the Taliban government after it consolidated power in Afghanistan.<sup>57</sup> The Kingdom was also the Taliban government’s primary financial backer, and today, Pakistan is still a significant pathway for Saudi money to Taliban forces and other violent Sunni groups.<sup>58</sup>

Since that time, Saudi money has continued to fund Wahhabi schools and education around the world, for an estimated total of \$70 billion.<sup>59</sup> King Fahd (r.1982-2005) sponsored construction of hundreds of mosques, schools, and Islamic centers, and under King Abdullah, “anecdotal

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evidence says Saudi mosque-building is powering ahead wherever believers are found, especially in South, Central and Southeast Asia, home to about 1bn of the world’s 1.6bn Muslims.”<sup>60</sup>

These institutions teach a puritanical interpretation of the Quran, intolerance, and the missions and goals of jihad. “Wahhabi ideology has inspired Islamic extremism and militancy worldwide, including the

likes of Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden.”<sup>61</sup> Its effect can be seen in the last decade and more of conflict that has brought recruits from all the over the world to fight Western and Shi’ite forces in the Middle East.

For all the institutions and recruits abroad, the effects of this system are most evident at its source. Saudi citizens themselves have taken part in the sectarian violence and terror of the last fifteen years, led by the infamous, now dead, Osama bin Laden. 15 of the 19 hijackers on September 11, 2001, were Saudis. In the first years of the U.S.-led war in Iraq, begun in 2003, Ned Parker of the *Los Angeles Times* reported that nearly half of foreign fighters in the country were Saudi, and that “fighters from Saudi Arabia are thought to have carried out more suicide bombings than those

of any other nationality. ... [a senior U.S. officer] said 50 percent of all Saudi fighters in Iraq come here as suicide bombers.”<sup>62</sup> The last point bears special importance: Only the most radicalized fighters would leave the comfort of their place in Saudi Arabian society to detonate themselves in markets and mosques on foreign soil.

Saudi clerics wield a great deal of influence in their society, and some are activists and advocates for foreign action. A December 2006 statement by more than 30 Saudi clerics urged all Sunnis to back the insurgency in Iraq against Shi’ite and Western forces, who they claimed were working together to crush Sunni Muslims.<sup>63</sup> Statements like these by prominent community clerics can radicalize young men to cross borders and join the struggle. Similar calls to action have focused on the conflict in Syria. Again, “clerics in Saudi Arabia have been encouraging youths to wage jihad in Syria, and constant promotion of the plight of Syrian Sunni Muslims on social media has further fueled an exodus of young men to fight.”<sup>64</sup> When faced with the suffering of their co-religionists at the hands of the enemy they fear and hate, many angry, wealthy, and unemployed young Saudis feel compelled to pick up arms and go to battle. For them, this is not someone else’s problem or fight, it is one front of a global war between them and the “other.” That is why U.S. involvement in the region can be so precarious: for all the country’s best intentions, the United States’ misunderstanding of the conflicts it gets involved in, and how its involvement is interpreted, has negative unintended consequences.

### **The Saudi-U.S. Relationship**

Given the complexities of Saudi Arabian political and social policies, it is important to consider the U.S.-Saudi relationship as it exists today after the death of King Abdullah, and how the United States should manage the relationship with the royal family going forward. The U.S.-Saudi relationship began to tighten after FDR and King Ibn Saud met in 1945. The two agreed, among other things, that the United States would maintain a military presence in the Kingdom. Despite some rocky moments, the last few decades have seen growing economic and military cooperation between the two, including tens of billions of dollars in arms

deals and construction in the Kingdom. These deployments, initially made to protect U.S. oil interests and contain the Soviets, proved useful during the first Gulf War against Saddam Hussein's Iraqi forces. When U.S. forces deployed for Operation Desert Shield, "having U.S.-trained Saudi forces, along with military installations built to U.S. specifications, allowed the American armed forces to deploy in a comfortable and familiar battle environment."<sup>65</sup> The U.S. has maintained a small force there since, which was one of the main stated reasons for Osama bin Laden's targeting of the U.S. mainland.<sup>66</sup> The relationship became strained in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, when the nationalities of the perpetrators came to light, and the United States closely scrutinized and revealed Saudi Arabia's connections with terrorism. However, none of this was enough to dismantle the relationship.<sup>67</sup>

The Middle East is a volatile area, but Saudi Arabia has been a stable and reliable ally for the United States for decades, as well as a major trading partner.<sup>68</sup> As mentioned above, the deployment of U.S. troops to Saudi soil and in Saudi military installations was important in the first Gulf War in the early 1990s. It is important to note that, while the religious establishment in Saudi Arabia and nearly every other Arab and Muslim country strongly oppose any peace with Israel — Egypt and Jordan being the exceptions — Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah, at the time the Crown Prince, crafted the Arab Peace Initiative in 2002, a proposal for peace with Israel, and advocated its adoption by the entire Arab League.<sup>69</sup> In a country that regularly demonizes the state of Israel, the initiative was an important precedent for changing the culture towards peace. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, "Saudi Arabia quietly donated over \$100 million to help the victims of Hurricane Katrina. The supplies are bought in the United States and distributed directly to those who need them. In some cases, this aid arrived before federal or state aid arrived."<sup>70</sup> The move served to strengthen the ties between Saudi Arabia and the United States.

While the Saudi government did not support the 2003 invasion of Iraq, it did again allow the United States to use Saudi territory as a staging ground for the invasion: "Saudi Arabia opened up its airspace, made available its



airbases, and housed Special Forces when Turkey reneged on basing U.S. forces at the last moment. Unlike Turkey, which was offered a \$30 billion aid package for its support, the kingdom did not ask for any compensation.”<sup>71</sup> Saudi Arabia has proven itself a real ally to the United States in its aims and interests in the region. It does this despite the resulting blowback from religious extremists at home, which carries real consequences.

The relationship with the United States comes at a cost for the Saudi government. In 2003, Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda opened a front in the Kingdom, beginning with two separate bombings in the capital city of Riyadh. Evidently, some felt that the Saudi royal family was not adhering to the rules it teaches are so important for the rest of its citizens.<sup>72</sup> Further, their relationship with the United States, and their permission of U.S. troops in the Kingdom was an affront to Wahhabi ideology.<sup>73</sup> Al-Qaeda’s campaign prompted a significant recapitalization of Saudi security forces to fight domestic terrorism; they successfully killed and captured a significant number of militants and effectively ended the threat in 2006.<sup>74</sup> Along with upgrades in the security establishment to face this threat, financial reforms targeting charities that fund militant groups at home and abroad, significant cultural reforms have been undertaken to peel Saudi citizens away from militant ideologies.<sup>75</sup> These steps, while limited and slow, are the best avenue toward a society that does not actively stimulate fear, hatred, and religious militancy.

### **Reform: Challenges and Opportunities**

Saudi Arabia’s difficulty with reform stems from complicated internal social and political dynamics. Michael Scott Doran has an excellent 2004 review of the tension between the Islamic principles of *Tawhid* on the conservative side and *Taqarub* on the liberal side. *Tawhid* is intolerance of all who do not follow the strict rules of Wahhabi Sunni Islam:

The doctrine of Tawhid ensures a unique political status for the clerics in Saudi Arabia. After all, they alone have the necessary training to detect and root out idolatry so as to safeguard the purity of the realm. Tawhid is thus not just an intolerant religious doctrine

but also a political principle that legitimizes the repressiveness of the Saudi state.<sup>76</sup>

It feeds the call to global jihad. This is the dominant institutional doctrine of Saudi Arabia, but it is not without opposition. On the opposite side, *Taqarub* seeks peace with other religious communities, extending them political involvement and freedoms domestically. Citing again from Doran's review, "in foreign policy, *Taqarub* downplays the importance of jihad, allowing Saudis to live in peace with Christian Americans, Jewish Israelis, and even Shi'ite Iranians. In short, *Taqarub* stands in opposition to the siege mentality fostered by *Tawhid*."<sup>77</sup>

At the time Doran was writing, in 2004, King Fahd sat on the Saudi throne, mostly incapacitated by a stroke. Beneath him, his younger half-brothers, the two most powerful princes, represented the two sides. Prince Nayef, also the Minister of the Interior, was the champion of *Tawhid*. Crown Prince Abdullah, who was effectively the regent following Fahd's 1995 stroke as well as commander of the Saudi National Guard, represented the champion of *Taqarub*.<sup>78</sup> "The two camps divide over a single question: whether the state should reduce the power of the religious establishment."<sup>79</sup> Ultimately, Abdullah reigned as king from 2005 until his death in 2015, and Nayef, his crown prince, passed away in 2012 without ever ruling. In January 2015, their half-brother Salman ascended to the throne. His successor was named by King Abdullah, and Salman has named the next in line after that, a significant transition to the next generation. There are important question surrounding how Saudi policy will proceed in the coming months and years. U.S. policy-makers need to understand King Abdullah's moves in the context of Saudi politics. If U.S. policy-makers want reforms to continue in the direction of the West, they will need to build a plan to consistently and appropriately engage with the Saudi monarchy.

King Abdullah took significant steps towards reform in Saudi Arabia, and the difficulty of this task should not be underestimated. The Saudi king has to work within the complex and rigid Saudi religious and political establishment. Many of Abdullah's reforms sought to open up basic

human rights to more Saudis and create relationships outside of the Muslim world. He expanded female participation in the workplace, universities, sports, and local elections and, “imposed greater controls on the religious police, curbing its violent abuses of citizens and restricting its patrols.”<sup>80</sup> In January 2013, Abdullah appointed 30 women to the top advisory body in the Kingdom, the Shura Council. This was the first time any women were allowed on the Council as formal members, and it made women one-fifth of the council’s membership.

This move and others, despite their relatively small impact, were met with rare public protests by a small group of “ultraconservative, anti-Western sheikhs who regard any societal change as a Western-inspired threat to Saudi Arabia's Islamic identity.” The stated grievances of the protesters, which can be summarized under the theme “sponsoring ideological chaos and cultural looseness,” provides a useful snapshot of the reforms and the clerics’ views.<sup>81</sup> Carlyle Murphy, reporting on the makeshift demonstration, commented that the clerics were not coming from official religious institutions, which is not acceptable in Saudi society, but that their sentiments “are amply represented among state-employed clerics, who are simply more judicious about voicing their opinions.”<sup>82</sup> That view could be widespread, but the changes may be contributing to cultural shifts. Less than two years later, the Shura council called for loosening the ban on Saudi women driving. The plan is still very restrictive, but almost 25 years after the first major protests to the ban, this could be a sign of further changes to come. One significant part of the plan, “the Shura Council said a ‘female traffic department’ would have to be created to deal with female drivers when their cars break down or if they encounter other problems...[and] also suggested stiff restrictions on interactions between female drivers and male traffic officers or other male drivers, and stiff penalties for those breaking them.”<sup>83</sup> The creation of such a department would mean more female employment, and put female Saudis in a position of authority in their communities, paving the way for further female empowerment.

The King had also pushed major educational reforms that have pulled away from strict Wahhabism and sought to counter hate-fueled and violent attitudes with international and interfaith outreach. Soon after becoming

king, Abdullah hosted a conference of Islamic scholars from all over the world to discuss issues of terrorism, extremism, other faiths and Muslims as minority communities in non-Muslim countries.<sup>84</sup> Subsequently, “In 2007, he became the first Saudi monarch to visit the Vatican, where he met Pope Benedict XVI. The king also hosted an international interfaith summit in Spain and funded construction of an interfaith center in Austria.” These efforts were met with rebuke by the most conservative Saudi clerics, “because they explicitly repudiated the Wahhabi dictum that non-Muslims are “infidels” to be shunned lest they weaken a true Muslim's faith.<sup>85</sup> He encouraged changes in textbooks and curriculum that remove the most vitriolic hate speech.<sup>86</sup> He has also pushed hard on religious scholars to denounce ISIS, and moved to stem the flow of militants out of the country, arresting and punishing those caught trying to cross borders to join their cause.<sup>87</sup>

An important institution of cultural evolution established by King Abdullah is the King Abdullah Scholarship Program, which between 2005 and 2014 sent hundreds of thousands of Saudi students, including tens of thousands of women, to study abroad, about half of whom went to the United States.<sup>88</sup> While the Saudi government has sponsored study-abroad programs for decades, this program is the largest of its kind in the country.<sup>89</sup> This program has the potential

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to foster generational change for young Saudis, who will return with a new understanding of other cultures and peoples. Many of these more culturally aware students will end up leading the public sector as well as the rapidly expanding private sector. Programs like these should be lauded, encouraged, and

expanded by Western nations, as they offer an unmatched opportunity to shift the culture of Saudi Arabia by broadening the perspective of its top students. Abdullah demonstrated that incremental changes in favor of minority and gender rights are possible. The United States needs to quietly encourage King Salman and the royal family to continue, and indeed accelerate, down this path.

## Looking Forward

King Salman, who ascended to the throne in 2015, is, at this point, an unknown commodity. He governed the city of Riyadh for nearly 50 years, and profiles have linked him with jihadi movements in the past.<sup>90</sup> However, as a prominent leader in the House of Saud, it would be difficult to avoid such relationships, which are an integral part of Saudi politics. Wearing the crown, however, is a different story. Salman faces enormous domestic and international problems. Now that he is the head of the country, his own legacy is at stake. Reform could continue, or the religious establishment could see a resurgence.

The royal family of Saudi Arabia must encourage greater participation of all Saudis in civic society, and in a diversifying economy, emphasize that a strong relationship with the international community is a better social investment for the nation and the Muslim community than strict Wahhabi education and jihad. Furthermore, the continued advancement towards minority and gender equality are crucial to social change. Continuing to lift restrictions on women and Shi'ites, as well as expanding their political rights, will diversify the voices being heard, allow new coalitions of advocacy to form, and improve the Saudi economy through increased participation. Establishing institutional community roles for women and Shi'ites to fill, such as a female traffic authority, will be empowering and make their presence and participation in society normal, thereby influencing a younger generation. Further promotion of women and minority groups to high-level positions will increase the general participation of their communities and further the process of their political integration. These changes are not immediate, but generational, and they must be evaluated as such. Western observers cannot expect a dramatic shift towards Western-style democracy, human rights, and Western-style economy. These changes — if they occur at all — will take time.

In 2010 the United States struck a major new arms deal with the Kingdom, with more than \$60 billion in new sales, including fighter jets and helicopters.<sup>91</sup> Military deals continue to be the major focus of government-to-government relations. Although the narrow focus on military procurement is not ideal, this is a positive development because the

relationship remains strong, and the best avenues for reforms that move away from the strict Wahhabi culture in Saudi Arabia are through economic and cultural engagement with the West. Disengagement would eliminate that avenue and remove one of the few external sources of incentives and pressure for pursuing reform. The reforms that took place under the rule of King Abdullah were a step in the right direction, and could be expanded upon in numerous ways, including the invitation of foreigners into the country under the protection of the royal family. This could be for academic study-abroad programs, research in any variety of fields, cultural events, or even subsidized tourism for non-Muslims. Increasing the cultural diversity flowing in and out of the country will be beneficial. This will serve to disseminate diverse perspectives within a society that has traditionally closed itself off and held itself aloof from outsiders, and give Saudis an opportunity to share their culture. Foreign outreach and engagement will encourage foreign direct investment, help to diversify the Saudi economy, and influence the creation of infrastructure and educational institutions to meet new needs. Perhaps most importantly, improving labor force participation rates may reduce the perceived desirability of radicalism.

The United States government should encourage the changes originating from within the country and provide support where possible without seeming to impose its will. In a country where the United States is not popular, obvious and public U.S. support can hinder and damage the reformers' efforts.<sup>92</sup> The United States needs to make the case that a strong relationship is better for Saudi Arabia than a poor one. U.S. policy should encourage further engagement in order to facilitate high-level and mid-level talks on a variety of economic and technological issues that expose Saudi leaders and opinion-makers to the opportunities they can provide for their country. If the appetite exists for some of the attractions of Western civilization, they will find a way to adapt it and craft an appropriate narrative. As the Kingdom seeks to expand the economy and the private sector, engagement on development and technological advancement will serve all parties involved. Saudi Arabia's leadership in the Muslim world can continue by fostering connections between that world with the international community and further integrating into the

world economy. It will also serve to highlight Iran's continued intransigence, raise Saudi economic prospects in relation to their rival, and consequently improve Saudi security.

It should be a priority for Saudi leadership to connect more Saudi citizens with the values of pluralism and equality within their own society. The royal family should continue to move to expand voting rights, education, and diverse participation in the private and public sectors. Gradual as it may be, the cultural effects will cascade in the decades to come. Security forces need to provide security to all, including Shi'ite citizens and foreign laborers working in the country. The Saudi royal family, including the king, needs to be seen publically engaging with leaders in these communities within the country to make their presence acceptable and eventually desirable, while making attacks on them unacceptable. The king also needs to do what he can to curtail intolerant rhetoric from the clerical leadership. If possible, he should seek to promote more tolerant clerics to positions of power. The United States should support these efforts through its own engagement with Saudi leaders, but not through direct engagement with other communities, as pictures of U.S. leaders with leaders of communities that are not yet accepted will provide opponents material to attack initiatives as being conspiratorial.

U.S. policy-makers should seek to provide more resources for students to study abroad in Saudi Arabia and for Saudi students to come to the United States. Congress and the White House should also encourage private-sector engagement with Saudi Arabia to support the country's burgeoning economy and increase employment. They could do so with tax incentives, trade deals, and public-private partnerships to promote greater economic cooperation. Selling military equipment is not enough. These deals need to include equipment and materials that will be seen as beneficial to their country and people, not just their military. With the growing numbers of U.S.-educated Saudis, this would provide an avenue to maintain their connection to the United States through employment and normalize a commercial U.S. presence in the country. It will also encourage U.S. citizens to travel, live, and work in the Kingdom. The private actors that do engage need to be able to portray their involvement as a benefit for

Saudi society, rather than simply a means for profit. Our representatives should be a diverse group that models our vision of a pluralistic society. Innovators in the fields of science, medicine, and the arts have the potential to engage Saudi citizens and improve their lives, with the result that their suspicions about the United States might be alleviated. These engagements might, at first, be met with resistance by hard-liners, but successes will breed further successes and soften Saudi views.

It is important to note that there are risks for companies and students involved, especially that they may be inadvertently touching money that supports terror. U.S. agencies should provide investigative support for companies doing business with Saudi Arabian industries to make sure their counterparts are compatible with the laws and values of the United States. In addition, they also risk of being singled out for attacks by religious extremists. This kind of engagement and cultural mixing is exactly what the conservative establishment does not want, and they will protest these new relationships loudly. Engagement would need to be gradual to be safe and have the desired effect, and the United States government would need to partner with Saudi Arabian government to ensure security and protection.

Finally, the United States needs to gain a deeper understanding of the politics of the country to carve a path for its public diplomacy. This means a light footprint, and working in partnership with Saudis to shape their messages for the long-term empowerment and encouragement of reformers. The United States needs to push reform quietly and allow Saudis to take the initiative and the credit for doing so without the appearance of U.S. pressure. It should give reformers space to claim victories, and sometimes that may even mean victories that appear to push back at the United States. Reform needs not only to look like, but actually be, Saudi leaders looking out for the best interests of Saudi Arabia. It is Saudis themselves who need to advocate for these policy changes and be the champions of their own causes. If they appear to be pawns of the United States, they will fail. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is poised to move forward, but it needs to do so on its own terms.



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