Politics and Religion in Saudi Arabia

Does the State Control Religion or Does Religion Control the State?

A critical analysis of the interaction between the Al Saud regime and the religious establishment of Saudi Arabia.

The study of international relations has, predominantly, been dominated by the assumption that countries would inevitably become more secular as they modernized. An examination of the interaction of religion and politics in Saudi Arabia, however, seems to contradict this supposition. The oil boom of the 1970s and subsequent development of Saudi Arabia’s infrastructure, economy, and even social sphere have not changed its theocratic nature. The relationship between the Al Saud monarchy and the religious establishment (ulema, or body of religious scholars), however, is complex and prompts the question of whether the state controls religion, or religion controls the state. A critical analysis of the interaction between the Al Saud regime and the religious establishment shows how the control they exercise on each other has changed since the kingdom’s foundation. Additionally, while religion is seemingly more influential in the domestic policy realm, the state, along with secular security goals, appears to shape most foreign policy decisions.

Religion and politics have been inseparable in Saudi Arabia since its establishment as a nation-state in 1932. The origins of this link, however, date back to 1744, when a relationship was forged between a religious scholar, Muhammad ibn Abd-al Wahhab and the ruler of Nejd (an area in central Arabia), Muhammad ibn Saud, a bond “which remains crucial to the nature of the Saudi state” (Niblock, 1982: 11). The Arabian Peninsula was mostly governed by nomadic tribal societies who, according to al-Wahhab, had strayed from the teachings of the Prophet Muhammed and the Islamic
principle of *tawhid* (the concept of monotheism) by worshiping tombs, sacred trees, and other earthly symbols (Hopwood, 1982: 25). Failing to spread the ideas of *tawhid* without any political support, al-Wahhab came to conclusion that religion and politics could not be separated, believing that “without the coercive power of the state, religion is in danger, and without the discipline of revealed law, the state becomes a tyrannical organisation” (Hopwood, 1982: 33). Recognizing the ambition of the House of Saud to control the Arabian Peninsula, al-Wahhab promised Muhhamad ibn Saud power and religious legitimacy if he aided in the spread of *tawhid* (Library of Congress, 2012).

Thus, in 1744, al-Wahhab’s religious convictions, now known as Wahhabism, became inextricably linked to Al Saud’s territorial conquests.

The control of the House of Saud over the peninsula increased and fell until, in 1902, Abd al-Aziz bin Abd al-Rahman al Saud (Ibn Saud) began a conquest led by the Wahhabi armed tribal group, the *Ikwhan* (Berkley Center, 2012). Ibn Saud’s authority over the area was finally fully realized in 1932, and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was created. Tim Niblock argues that the “alliance of the religious and temporal” ensured the success of Ibn Saud (Niblock, 1982: 11). Religion legitimized the Al Saud’s territorial expansions, justifying military conquests “by the religious belief that it was the duty of all true Wahhabis to carry the message of Islam to all peoples who were non-Muslim ‘infidels’” (Helms, 1981: 70). When the modern-day boundaries of Saudi Arabia were forged, however, this religious goal was trumped by secular security goals. Recognizing the strength of British imperialism in the Middle East, Ibn Saud forcefully stopped the *Ikwhan* from continuing the military expansion into Iraq,
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Kuwait and Transjordan in 1929 during the Battle of Sabilla (Lacey, 2009: 14-16). This battle marks the first significant conflict between the royal family and conservative Wahhabi groups. The difficult task of balancing the kingdom’s need to protect its territory and the Wahhabi wish to expand and convert non-believers is a problem that continues to affect contemporary Saudi Arabia.

The intertwining of state and religion since Saudi Arabia’s foundation created a mutual dependency, where “the muwahhidun (followers of the tawhid doctrine) have always looked on the House of Saud as their temporal protectors, and the character of the Saudi-ruled states has, in turn, been critically affected by the role played within them by the muwahhidun” (Niblock, 1982: 11). The Wahhabi movement relied on the Al Saud’s to fund the propagation of the tawhid doctrine, but, similarly, Saudi Arabia’s creation as a nation-state depended on religion to transcend the tribal and local structures that previously ruled the peninsula (Nevo, 1998: 37-38). Thus, the House of Saud relied on the ulema to legitimize the regime, fostering “a common ideology among the population, giving religious-legal sanction to the authority of Al Saud” (Helms, 1981: 70). In Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Islam, religion became a unifying instrument and a crucial component of the country’s national identity.

The official place of religion in Saudi Arabia’s public life is enshrined in its 1992 Basic Law. Out of the Basic Law’s 83 articles, 23 refer to religion, declaring that the country’s constitution is the Qur’an, Islam is the official state
religion, *sharia* (Islamic Law) is the official criminal law in the country, and that the government “derives power from the Holy Koran and the Prophet’s tradition” (Fox, 2008: 227). The banning of political parties makes the monarchy the central political institution in Saudi Arabia, and the legal right of the sons of Ibn Saud to rule is explicitly outlined in the Basic Law (Mohseni and Wilcow, 2010: 222). Although the king is an absolute ruler, his “powers are in theory limited within the confines of… *sharia*… law and other Saudi traditions” (Haynes, 2007: 348). His official title reflects the extent to which religion and politics are intertwined in Saudi Arabia, as King Fahd (ruler from 1982-2005) insisted on replacing the title ‘His Majesty’ with ‘the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques’ (The Arda, 2012). Joseph Nevo argues that “in the absence of political participation in the secular Western sense, religion has provided a major and almost exclusive source of legitimacy for the rule of the Saudi royal family” (Nevo, 1998: 34). This dependence, however, has led to various attempts by the ruling elite to manipulate religion to justify their actions.

The discovery of Saudi oil fields led to an exponential increase in the nation’s monetary reserves. This income allowed the regime to start modernizing Saudi Arabia, introducing new technologies to the Bedouin societies, building communication lines, transportation routes, and developing Saudi infrastructure (Milton-Edwards, 2005: 42-43). Along with physical changes, King Faisal (ruler from 1964-1975) outlawed some of the more “anachronistic Wahhabi strictures” such as slavery, introduced education for women and created Saudi television (Trofimov, 2007: 22). The 1960s and most notably...
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the 1970s were “years of explosive development, liberal experimentation, and openness to the West” (Library of Congress, 2012). These technologies and social developments, however, were bid’a (innovations opposed by the Qur’an and thus forbidden by Islam) according to the Wahhabi creed. Despite this religious consideration, these technologies and measures were essential in the ability of the House of Saud to control the peninsula (for example, the large territory was difficult to govern without an effective transportation system and communication lines) (Nevo, 1998: 38). To justify his actions, King Faisal called upon leading religious scholars to legitimize their introduction.

The ulema, who mostly preached against these innovations in their mosques, now justified “secular reforms and changes” and functioned “as state agents… to check manifestations of religious radicalism” (Nevo, 1998: 38). The sanctioning of these reforms by the religious establishment depicts a contradiction that is continuously present in Saudi Arabia. The scholars separated theory from practice as

“their rejection of modern ways never crossed the line into open opposition to the royal family. It was fine to criticize proposed reforms, but not the established government… The Saudi royals were still seen by these ulema as the only bulwark of Islam in an increasingly secular world” (Trofimov, 2007: 30).

Prominent religious scholars provided legitimacy to a regime that was introducing measures that were bid’a as they felt that the alternative (the potential overthrow of the House of Saud) would have far greater negative consequences. The royal family continued to foster its relationship with the
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ulema, but “the clerical elite did not have the power to exercise political influence in matters of state, governance, defence, economy or foreign affairs” (Milton-Edwards, 2005: 42-43). The regime gradually increased its control over religion and used it as a tool of governance to justify the modernization that Wahhabi ideology so strictly opposed.

The 1979 seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca halted Saudi Arabia’s progression towards secularism. Viewing the changes across the country as violations of the teachings of the Prophet, a group of Wahhabi fundamentalists, led by the rebel Juhayman, occupied Islam’s holiest shrine. Although large portions of the Islamic population were horrified by the rebels’ aggressive actions, “their call for less ostentation on the part of the Saudi rulers and for a halt of the cultural inundation of the kingdom by the West struck a deep chord of sympathy across the kingdom” (Library of Congress, 2012). Juhayman’s concerns were in accordance to “Wahhabi puritanical ethos”, which was “at odds with the consumerism, indulgence and ‘materialism’ that resulted from the incorporation of the Saudi Arabian ‘rentier’ economy into the world system of capitalist relations of exchange” (Ayubi, 1991: 100-101). The fusion of religion and temporal power (or politics) had been so effective that many citizens of Saudi Arabia derived their identity from this combination. Modernization, therefore, increased the attraction of conservatism due to the “impending loss of identity caused by overwhelming Westernization” (Library of Congress, 2012). The events in Mecca challenged the legitimacy of the regime as the protector of Islam by openly displaying the schism that had erupted between the government and the religious
establishment who supported it, and Muslim fundamentalists (Nevo, 1998: 39).

The seizure of the mosque caused religious scholars around the globe to openly question the Al Saud’s right and ability to protect Islam’s holiest shrines (Trofimov, 2007: 120-121). In order to protect its legitimacy, the ruling family had to re-capture the mosque quickly and in accordance to Islamic principles. Islam forbids any form of violence within the Grand Mosque, let alone the military assault that was necessary to capture the rebels (Lacey, 2009: 27). Thus, King Khaled (ruler from 1975-1982) needed to obtain a fatwa (religious ruling issued by scholars of Islam) to have the authority to forcefully restore control over the holy shrine. The ulema agreed to sign the fatwa, but only on the condition that the regime would truly “live up to their Islamic obligations… The social liberalization that had begun under King Faisal should be halted and, where possible, rolled back” (Trofimov, 2007: 100). This event marks a turning point in the relationship between the ulema and the royal family. Once Mecca was re-captured and the rebels arrested, the monarchy began enforcing the ban on alcohol, heavily censured the media, banned women from TV and imposed other restrictions in accordance with Wahhabism (Trofimov, 2007: 100). A rapid increase in the involvement of religion in state affairs became present, in stark contrast to its declining influence in the 1970s. An analysis of Saudi Arabia’s domestic interaction between religion and politics thus seemingly supports Jonathon Fox’s argument that “religion arguably controls the state as much or more than the state controls the religion” (Fox, 2008: 227).
One of the consequences of the renewed influence of religion on politics was the redirection of Saudi state funds to the propagation of Wahhabism abroad. Its theocratic nature, control over Islam’s holiest shrines, Mecca and Medina, as well as being the unquestionable birthplace of Islam has allowed Saudi Arabia to assert a global leadership role in forging an Islamic identity (Trofimov, 2007: 21). One way in which such an identity was formed was through the funding of “organisations, projects groups and facilities” that “promoted the flourishing of Islam in poorer areas of the Muslim world” (Milton-Edwards, 2005: 67-68). Sources estimate that in total, between $70 billion and $90 billion has originated from Saudi Arabia since the 1970s for this purpose (Clarke, 2010: 392; Pew Forum, 2012).

Yaroslav Trofimov argues that the government agreed to propagate Wahhabism in return for domestic support from the *ulema* during and after the Mecca events (Trofimov, 2007: 100). Jeffrey Haynes, drawing upon Joseph Nye’s work on soft power, however, disagrees with the idea that the government was coerced into spreading Islam for purely religious reasons. Saudi funding is intended to further its foreign policy goals by spreading its soft power (Haynes, 2007: 350). Recognizing that the country could not compete with global military powers like the United States, Saudi Arabia attempts to “co-opt people rather than coerce them” and thus “obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries – admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness – want to follow it” (Nye, 2004: 5). The Saudi regime, while undoubtedly
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satisfying the *ulema* by furthering their religious goal of uniting the Muslim *umma* (global community), has utilized religion to increase their political influence in other countries. Its encouragement of the revival of Islamism “represents a political response to a historical context of European expansions” (Mura and Teti, 2010: 98).

Thus, contrary to Fox’s analysis of the control religion exercises over politics, Jean-Jacques Platteau concludes that “even when political and religious functions appear to be merged, religion is the handmaiden rather than the master of politics” (Platteau, 2008: 330). Similar to its previous employment of religion as a tool of governance in the 1960s and 1970s, the Saudi regime manipulates religion to enhance its position internationally and to counter the ‘hard power’ of countries like the US.

The contrasting conclusions Fox and Platteau draw from their study of Saudi Arabia can be partially explained by the differing nature of the kingdom’s domestic and foreign policy realms. As the regime relies heavily on religion to legitimize its actions, it fosters religious education, censures the media and has even established the *mutaween* (religious police) that ensures Saudi citizens follow Islamic social conventions (Library of Congress, 2012). For decades, its domestic religious environment even shaped its foreign policy, as shown by the kingdom’s opposition to the Soviet Union due its atheistic nature and its hostility towards Jewish Israel (Haynes, 2007: 52; Smart, 1998: 486).

The 1991 Persian Gulf War, however, forced the Saudi government to redevelop its foreign policy to further its “security goals unconnected to religious objectives” (Haynes, 2007: 53). Saddam Hussein’s occupation of
Kuwait and his deployment of troops to the Saudi border caused the Saudi regime to doubt its ability to prevent an Iraqi invasion. As a result, the government agreed to join the anti-Iraq alliance led by the United States and granted permission for the deployment of US military personnel on the kingdom’s soil (CIA, 2012). This alliance shocked religious conservatives who wanted to separate the kingdom from non-believers, according to the hadith (statement by the Prophet Muhammed): “Let there not be two religions in Arabia” (Lacey, 2009: 130). The ruling family, however, managed to obtain a fatwa that accepted the presence of the largely non-Muslim US military.

This religious support once again depicted that although the House of Saud depend on the ulema to uphold their legitimacy, the Wahhabi clerics equally depend on the ruling family to protect Saudi Arabia’s territorial domain (Lacey, 2009: 131). A strict adherence to Wahhabi Islam alone did not prevent Iraq from invading Kuwait and it would, arguably, not have prevented Saddam Hussein from marching to Riyadh, Saudi’s capital. The war “demonstrated to the Saudis that it was implausible to try to base the country’s foreign policy alone in their vision of Islam. Instead, the king and his advisers became convinced that the kingdom’s security interests necessitated a balancing of both secular concerns and religions considerations” (Haynes, 2007: 351).

Saudi Arabia’s alliance with the US led to the implementation of foreign policies based on more secular ideologies to avoid clashing with its ally (Haynes, 2007: 351). Such policies, however, often clash with the opinions of the conservatives within the nation, and even within strands of the
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government. Prince Nayef (currently the Crown Prince), for example, has frequently been at odds with King Abdullah’s (current King since 2005) conduction of foreign affairs. As such, his accession to the throne could potentially undermine the kingdom’s relationship with the US and strengthen the role of religion in foreign politics (Laipson, 2011). Currently, however, it seems that “although religious actors, including Prince Nayef, seek to influence foreign policy, albeit in competition with others such as their King, their influence is not guaranteed to be the most significant” (Haynes, 2007: 53). The Wahhabi ideology has limited influence on Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy as it is trumped by the belief that the kingdom’s security is best protected by an alliance with the West (Al-Dhakil, 2007). Thus, in foreign policy, it seems that the state controls, manipulates and even minimizes religion to achieve its goals.

The use of religion to achieve secular goals has intensified the rift between the religious conservatives and the kingdom’s ruling elite, and continues to be a significant concern for the monarchy. Ironically, the embracement of Wahhabi doctrines within the kingdom after 1979 created “a new generation of radical Islamists who claim that the ruling elite has abandoned the strictures of faith for the security of alliance with kufr (non-Muslim) elements from the West” (Milton-Edwards, 2005: 96). Saudi Arabia’s soft power of “Islamic radicalism has flowed in the direction of Osama bin Laden and his goal of overthrowing the Saudi government, not in the direction of making the Saudi government more secure” (Nye, 2004: 96). Thus, in an attempt to legitimize their authority over the birthplace of Islam, the House of Saud has
unintentionally encouraged the population to question whether the rulers abide by the strict Wahhabi principles preached in Saudi public schools (Nevo, 1998: 48). The state’s ability to control the influence of religion, therefore, seems to be declining domestically as it implements more secular foreign policies that do not abide by Wahhabi doctrines.

An examination of the relationship between the *ulema* and the regime prompts the question of whether the state controls religion, or religion controls the state. Their relative influence has changed since the state’s foundation, but the royal family continues to derive its legitimacy to rule the birthplace of Islam from the support of the *ulema*. The Al Saud has succeeded in manipulating religion to justify foreign policy actions and uses religion as a tool to counter the hard power of nations like the US. Although this soft power has helped create a global Islamic revivalism, it has produced a generation of citizens that challenge Al Saud’s authority. The schism between conservatives on one hand, and the regime along with institutionalized religion (who view the royal family as a bulwark against secularism) on the other has consistently been present in Saudi Arabia. The loss of control over religion poses a major threat to Al Saud’s rule and even causes disputes within the royal family. King Abdullah has attempted to slowly reform the nation and separates religion from foreign policy, but Prince Nayef is a religious conservative. His accession to the throne could potentially lead to an intensified relationship between religion and the state, allowing Wahhabi doctrines to govern and control the kingdom.

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