American Foreign Policy Council

SAUDI ARABIA

QUICK FACTS

Population: 26,939,583

Area: 2,149,690 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Arab 90%, Afro-Asian 10%

Religions: Muslim 100%

Government Type: Monarchy

GDP (official exchange rate): $727.3 billion

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated August 2013)

Since 1744, when the first Saudi emirate was established through a pact between tribal chief Muhammad ibn Saud and puritan preacher Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the ultraconservative Islamic interpretation now known as Wahhabism has been the official and dominant religious discourse in Saudi Arabia. Although Wahhabism was generally confined to the Arabian Peninsula for much of its history, it evolved into a transnational movement in the 1960s as the Saudi government tried to fight the spread of communism and Arab nationalism across the Middle East. To help check these forces, Saudi rulers adopted a policy that allowed the immigration of Muslim Brotherhood members who were suppressed under secular governments like Gamal Abd al-Nasser's in Egypt. In contrast to Wahhabism, which traditionally focused on religious doctrine and ritual observance, the Brotherhood originated as a social reform movement under its founder, Hassan al-Banna, but became more politicized under al-Banna's successor, Sayyid Qutb. Qutb hoped to establish a worldwide Muslim community (ummah), which he believed would be founded through fighting paganism (jahiliyya) with offensive jihad.[1] The Brothers integrated into Saudi society, assuming roles in the

government bureaucracy and becoming influential in the education system; they designed curricula, formed a significant portion of the university faculty, and their writings filled the shelves in local bookstores.[2]

Although the immigration of these Islamists reinforced Saudi Arabia's Islamic society, the Brothers' interpretation of Islam posed a major challenge to the Wahhabi establishment's uncontested religious dominance within the kingdom. In response, as Saudi Arabia continued to import Brotherhood members, Saudi King Faisal initiated an Islam-centric foreign policy that exported Wahhabi doctrine through proselytizing organizations like the Muslim World League, schools, literature, and groups in Africa and Asia who were likewise opposed to liberal forms of Islam and other "blasphemous" religious practices.[3]

1979 proved to be another turning point in the evolution of Wahhabism, as the Saudis promoted an armed struggle (jihad) to defeat the Soviet Union in Afghanistan,[4] and funded a broad network of religious schools that produced new generations of sheikhs, professors, and students to carry on the fight. Just as Saudis were influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood's ideologies inside the kingdom, the Saudis who went to fight abroad were likewise influenced by a combination of other Islamic interpretations.

This is the context out of which the Islamist movements in Saudi Arabia emerged. Indeed, rather than staunchly supporting the government, these movements often opposed the official religious and political stance of the Saudi Monarchy and its loyal clergy. Today, however, the Saudi Islamist scene looks vastly different. The government has successfully co-opted most clerics who once opposed it, turning them into key elements of Saudi power. With the outbreak of the protests across the Middle East, Saudi clerics across the political spectrum have stood behind the regime and reaffirmed its legitimacy. With a mix of religion, money, and security reinforcements, the Saudi Kingdom has so far averted the worst of the Arab Revolts.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Islamism in Saudi Arabia is characterized by competing trends, which—while all conservative and fundamentalist—hold significantly different ideas about the relationship between political Islam and society.

The Rejectionists
One such trend can be termed "rejectionist." Its adherents oppose any role or voice for themselves in the political discourse, and for that matter, in the Saudi state. They instead choose to focus solely on faith and ritual practice, rejecting all schools of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and relying solely on the

unmediated sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (*hadith*). The "rejectionists" confine themselves to their own communities where they educate their children and live a strictly orthodox lifestyle. Like any other Islamist movement, they are not monolithic, and some have formed their own socio-political protest movements in spite of the trend's original doctrine.

The most well-known of these movements is the *al-Jama'a al-Salafiyya al-Muhtasiba (JSM)*, which formed in the 1970s and was inspired by the Syrian religious scholar Nasr al-Din al-Albani.[5] In 1979, JSM directly challenged the Saudi regime when hundreds of its members, led by Juhayman al-Utaybi and his brother-in-law Muhammad ibn Abdullah al-Qahtani, staged an armed takeover of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, taking thousands of hostages while announcing that the messiah, or *mehdi*, had arrived in the form of al-Qahtani.[6] Because the mosque is one of Islam's holiest sites, the Saudis were reluctant to use force to end the takeover. However, after days of failed attempts to coax the zealots out of the mosque, the Saudis violently ended the siege with the help of French intelligence; al-Qahtani was killed during the raid,[7] while al-Utaybi and 62 other JSM members were later publicly beheaded.[8]

After the Grand Mosque incident, the remaining JSM fled to Kuwait, Yemen, and the northern Saudi desert, returning to a state of relative isolation. Despite the JSM's futile end after the mosque takeover, Juhayman's ideas have continued to influence others in subsequent years. According to Thomas Hegghammer and Stephane Lacroix, Juhayman's ideas made an early impact on the prominent Jordanian Salafi-jihadi leader Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, who first met JSM members in Kuwait and then moved to Saudi Arabia in the early 1980s "to study religion."[9] Furthermore, the JSM's views allegedly influenced three men who were involved in the 1995 bombing in Riyadh, as well as "senior militants" who were part of al-Qaeda's violent campaign in 2003.[10]

But the JSM also influenced the Saudi government itself. The year of the Grand Mosque takeover was tumultuous for the Monarchy, one that also witnessed the Islamic Revolution in Iran (which brought Shi'a fundamentalists to power), Shi'a protests in Saudi Arabia's oil-rich Eastern Province, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The Saudi leadership perceived all of these developments as serious threats to its security, and quickly took drastic measures to assert its leadership of the Islamic world and appease rising domestic extremism. They accomplished both objectives by exporting a politicized and violent form of Wahhabism, directed as a foreign policy tool against the Soviets and competing strands of Islam alike.[11]

The Sahwa

Another trend is the *Sahwa* ("Awakened") movement. *Sahwa* clerics trace their roots back to the 1960s and the Muslim Brotherhood's rise to global prominence. As a natural result of their interaction with Muslim Brotherhood members, the *Sahwa* clerics' ideology has become a synthesis of Salafi-Wahhabi theological teachings and the Brotherhood's political activism.[12] Far from being homogenous, the *Sahwa* are an extremely diverse faction that includes religious scholars, scientists, doctors, and academics. They are commonly divided into at least two main camps: those who follow Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Brotherhood, and those who follow his more extreme ideological successor, Sayyid Qutb. Their ability to address issues—like politics—that were outside the purview of the official Saudi religious establishment originally garnered them broad public appeal.[13]

The *Sahwa* became widely recognized in 1990 for their virulent opposition to Saudi King Fahd's reliance on a non-Muslim military coalition, led by the United States, to defend the Arabian Peninsula after Saddam Hussein's Iraqi army invaded Kuwait in 1990. That royal decision, legitimized with a *fatwa* (religious edict) by Grand Mufti Sheikh Abd al-Aziz ibn Abdallah ibn Baz, stoked the ire of two famous clerics associated with the *Sahwa*, Salman al-Odah and Saffar al-Hawali. Al-Odah and al-Hawali issued sermons denouncing the Saudi Monarchy and the religious establishment for its decision.[14] They, along with other prominent *Sahwa* clerics, believed that the legitimacy of the Al Saud leadership and the official Saudi religious establishment had been permanently destroyed by this collaboration with the West.[15] Thereafter, the *Sahwa* called for greater Islamization of Saudi society and demanded a more prominent role in social and foreign affairs.[16] Between 1991 and 1992, they joined with other religious scholars in directing two major public critiques at the king. The first, signed by 400 scholars, was the "Letter of Demands," which called for stricter rules in the public sphere. The second, signed by 107 scholars and entitled "Memorandum of Advice," was extraordinarily blunt and wide-ranging. It called upon the king to outlaw the teaching of Western law, create a half-million man army to fight the Jews and aid Muslims, and end foreign aid to atheistic regimes.[17]

In 1994, al-Odah, al-Hawali, and nearly 1,300 *Sahwa* affiliates were arrested for their vehement opposition to the Saudi regime.[18] To the leadership's dismay, their five years in prison only cemented the clerics' standing in the eyes of their followers and granted them even greater popular legitimacy than the official *ulema*. When the men were released in 1999, the Saudi government confronted them with the choice of either withdrawing from the public eye or acquiescing to the authority of the state. They chose the latter, and the *Sahwa* splintered as a result. Some of its members have since joined other

Saudi Islamist movements, including the *jihadist* trend, while others abandoned Islamism entirely. The tone of *Sahwa* members that remained has also changed dramatically: they now rarely criticize the Saudi government or religious establishment. In fact, they have come to defend the regime and condemn opponents who try to undermine stability in the kingdom.[19]

The jihadists

A distinct *jihadist* trend is also manifest in Saudi society, encapsulated most clearly (and notoriously) by the rise of Osama Bin Laden's al-Qaeda network. Many analysts believe that al-Qaeda was forged in Peshawar, Pakistan by Bin Laden and Palestinian *jihadist* theoretician Abdullah Azzam toward the end of the Soviet-Afghan war (1979-1989). The movement was an outgrowth of the duo's services bureau (*maktabat al-khadamat*), which supported the Afghan *jihad* logistically and materially.

Following the Soviet defeat, many *mujahideen* returned home as war heroes in the eyes of their Muslim brethren, and 1990 proved to be a pivotal year in al-Qaeda's evolution. A sense of invincibility pervaded the "Afghan Arabs," and after Saddam Hussein's Iraqi army invaded Kuwait, Bin Laden petitioned Saudi King Fahd to allow his men from the war in Afghanistan to defend the Arabian Peninsula, the birthplace of Islam. Unwilling to entrust the safety of the Peninsula to the *mujahideen*, the King declined Bin Laden's offer and soon welcomed a U.S.-led Western coalition of nearly 500,000 troops for the mission instead. As Bin Laden later said, Saudi Arabia "betrayed the *Ummah* [worldwide Muslim community] and joined the *Kufr* [infidels], assisting and helping them against Muslims."[20]

From 1999 through 2001, conflicts in the Muslim world (Chechnya, Kosovo, and the Palestinian Territories) and a powerful recruiting network in Saudi Arabia enabled Bin Laden to attract a wave of Saudis to al-Qaeda's training camps in Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda's operations are known to be well-funded by Saudi individuals and organizations. In 2004, the 9/11 Commission reported that Bin Laden created an informal financial network of charities, including the Al Haramain Islamic Foundation and other non-governmental organizations, which allowed Saudi and Gulf financiers to send funds to Arabs fighting in Afghanistan and then later to al-Qaeda.[21]

In early 2002, between 300 and 1,000 Saudi al-Qaeda members returned to Saudi Arabia after the Taliban's fall compromised the network's base of operations in Afghanistan. Two independent cells subsequently formed, and the organization's operatives began preparing for operations by stockpiling weapons, renting safe houses, setting up training camps, and recruiting other "Afghan Arabs."[22] Members were almost entirely male, with the exception

of a small number of females who were involved in logistics or the group's media campaign. Al-Qaeda militants were typically older than members of other Islamist groups, with an average age of 27, and most of them had only been educated to the high school level or lower.[23] The cells consisted principally of Saudis, but maintained a small percentage of foreign nationals. It is interesting to note that the majority of al-Qaeda members were not from regions typically considered to be the most religiously conservative or impoverished rural areas. Instead, the overwhelming majority of the organization was formed of urbanites from Riyadh, most of whom shared previous combat experience in Afghanistan—first against the Soviets and later against the United States.[24]

The strength of Saudi counterterrorism efforts eventually forced al-Qaeda's local branch to relocate across the border in Yemen. In January 2009, the Saudi and Yemeni branches of al-Qaeda merged to become al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), with a number of Saudis assuming leadership positions in the new franchise.[25] AQAP became a dangerous threat in just its first year of operations; in August 2009, the organization nearly succeeded in assassinating then Saudi Deputy Interior Minister Prince Muhammad bin Nayef during a gathering at his home in Jeddah.[26] Then, only months later, AQAP coordinated the attempted Christmas Day bombing—carried out by a Nigerian man with explosives in his underwear—of a Northwest Airlines flight traveling from Yemen to Detroit.[27]

Notwithstanding Saudi Arabia's early counterterrorism successes, AQAP cells still operate in the Kingdom. In 2011 and 2012, Saudi authorities reportedly arrested more than 5,000 people suspected of links to al-Qaeda, including some who were charged with forming local cells in order to coordinate attacks against U.S. troops in Kuwait and Qatar.[28] Then, in August 2013, Saudi security forces arrested two expatriates from Yemen and Chad who were allegedly planning to carry out suicide attacks. Furthermore, the Kingdom reported that the men were connected to a larger al-Qaeda plot that forced the U.S. State Department to close 19 diplomatic missions in the region.[29]

Other Saudi citizens remain wanted for their suspected AQAP links. Notably, the Saudi Interior Ministry maintains separate lists of 47 and 85 different "most wanted" individuals. As of August 2013, 42 of the 47 men and 75 of the 85 men remained at large.[30]

The Shi'a
Saudi Arabia's final Islamist trend is rooted in the country's Shi'a minority. Having been branded as unbelievers (*kuffar*) since the time of Muhammad

ibn Abd al-Wahhab, Saudi Shi'a are still severely marginalized in the modern state.[31] And while Shi'a Islamists have never been as organized as the *Sahwa*, or even the *jihadists* in Saudi Arabia, instances of Shi'a Islamist activity nonetheless merit discussion. One frequently documented incident of Shi'a opposition took place in early 1980, in the wake of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Radio Tehran's Arabic channel had been broadcasting propaganda against the Saudi regime to the Shi'a population. The propaganda sparked a riot in Qatif, during which citizens attacked the town's central market.[32] Since that time, the Saudi government has been extremely wary of renewed violence, as well as Iran's influence in Saudi domestic affairs.

The Arab Spring appears to have rekindled violence among the restless Saudi Shi'a opposition. Shortly after the outbreak of protests in Tunisia in December 2011, Shi'a Islamists in Saudi Arabia began to organize themselves through social media tools like Facebook and Twitter, issuing petitions for political and social reforms such as the transition to a constitutional monarchy and an end to sectarian discrimination (a cause of great anger for the minority community). Violent protests erupted in July 2012 in the Eastern Province—home to most of the country's Shi'a population and its oil—after security forces shot and arrested prominent Shi'ite cleric Nimr al-Nimr for instigating "sedition."[33] Shi'a anger continued to bubble in the weeks after Nimr's arrest, but Saudi authorities poured further fuel on the fire when they fatally shot two men during the demonstrations.[34] The protests in the Eastern Province escalated even further in October 2012, when tens of thousands of angry mourners carried the bodies of three young Shi'a men, slain by Saudi security forces, through the streets of Awwamiya while chanting "Death to al-Saud."[35]

As of mid-2013, tensions between the state and the Shi'a community have not abated. Almost ten months after Saudi authorities arrested popular Shi'a cleric Nimr al-Nimr, they put him on trial in March 2013 for "sowing discord" and "undermining national unity."[36] Meanwhile, clashes between Shi'a youth and security forces in the Eastern Province have continued to stoke popular anger toward the monarchy. According to some reports, at least 19 Shi'a have been killed by the Saudi military and police since 2011.[37]

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Islamist movements in Saudi Arabia have failed to garner enough societal support to mount a sustained or serious challenge to the ruling House of Saud, owing partly to the government's use of oil wealth to appease citizens and co-opt opponents, and the Wahhabi mandate of allegiance to the ruler

(*wali al-amr*). Nonetheless, Saudi Islamists do enjoy a telling amount of popular support.

The *Sahwa* clerics became very influential when they challenged the Islamic credentials of the ruling family and religious establishment between 1990 and 1994. Their subsequent imprisonment only increased their status and notoriety. And while the *Sahwa* clerics have since muted their criticism of the regime, they remain very influential. In recent years, even struggling Arab dictators have sought out stamps of approval from *Sahwa* leaders. For example, the Saudi-owned newspaper *al-Arabiya* reported on February 27, 2011 that Libyan leader Muammar al-Qadhafi's sons, Seif al-Islam and Al-Saidi, pleaded with al-Odah and Aidh al-Qarnee to issue *fatwas* prohibiting demonstrations in Libya. Both clerics rejected the request, but the incident highlighted the enduring status of these clerics across the Arab and Muslim worlds.

Moreover, a number of *Sahwa* clerics are gaining increasing prominence as they take to the internet to propagate their messages. In 2011, *Forbes Middle East* ranked Salman al-Odah fourth on its list of top 100 "Twitterati." As of August 2013, he boasted more than 3.4 million Twitter followers and nearly 1.5 million more on Facebook.[38] Yet fellow Saudi clerics Muhammad al-Arefe and Aidh al-Qarnee are outflanking Al-Odah on social media. As of the same date, Al-Arefe had more Twitter followers (6.3 million) than the total population of the Kingdom of Jordan.[39] Likewise, al-Qarnee is a rising social media star who boasted more Twitter followers (4.1 million) than the White House.[40]

But the *Sahwa*'s growing popularity could be cause for concern, as some clerics have used their clout in the past to advocate violence. A clear manifestation was their ability to mobilize Saudis to fight in Iraq against Coalition forces in 2004. On the eve of the American siege of Fallujah, twenty-six prominent clerics signed an "Open Sermon to the Militant Iraqi People" that legitimized joining the Iraqi insurgency as part of a "defense *jihad*" against the "aggressor" Coalition.[41] Shortly thereafter, the number of Saudis who went to Iraq to fight against Western forces peaked.[42] More recently, a number of prominent clerics tried to organize a fundraising campaign in June 2012 for Syrian rebels fighting against President Bashar al-Assad's regime. However, one of the organizations facilitating the transfer of donations was the Revival of Islamic Heritage Society of Kuwait, a charity previously designated as a terrorist entity by the United States and UN for arming and financing al-Qaeda.[43]

Despite strong support from clerics and Saudi nationals for *jihad* in various, Saudis do not support al-Qaeda's attacks inside the kingdom. Generally, Saudi al-Qaeda members who returned home from foreign battlefields have been significantly more radicalized than Saudi society as a whole.[44] As a result, their local attacks were denounced by the leading *Sahwa* clerics, who had become staunch government-backers by 2003. Furthermore, the Iraq insurgency gained popular support and diverted attention and resources away from al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia. For many Saudis who would have been ideologically inclined to fight, the Iraqi cause was considered more legitimate as a defensive *jihad* against Western aggression.[45]

Since September 11, 2001, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries have been criticized for financing terrorism abroad. In 2007, former Undersecretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Stuart Levey said that, "If I could somehow snap my fingers and cut off funding from one country, it would be Saudi Arabia."[46] Exact amounts of money implicating Saudis in terrorism are extremely difficult to pinpoint, though Islamic charities are commonly singled out as the primary source of illicit funds. Since giving charitably (*zakat*) is one of the five pillars of Islam, such organizations receive significant donations anonymously and from all sectors of society.

This pattern of funding allegedly stretches back for the past 30 years. In particular, the 9/11 Commission noted the "Golden Chain," a network of Saudi and other Gulf financiers used by Osama Bin Laden to collect and channel funds for the anti-Soviet *jihad* during the 1980s in Afghanistan. The financiers used charities and other NGOs as conduits for their donations to the *jihad*, and this network later became influential in the establishment of al-Qaeda's base in Afghanistan in the late 1990s.[47]

But Saudi charities have allegedly financed terrorist groups elsewhere as well. In 2004, families of terror attack victims in Israel filed two civil lawsuits with the U.S. District Court of New York against Arab Bank PLC of Jordan. The families sought $2 billion in damages, accusing the "Saudi Committee for the Support of the Al Quds Intifada," a government-sanctioned charity, of funneling money through Arab Bank branches in the Palestinian Territories to provide "insurance benefits" to the families of suicide bombers and others who were casualties of conflict with Israel.[48] While Arab Bank denied that it had prior knowledge of payments to the families of suicide bombers through its branches, the Saudi Committee's executive manager stated: "We support the families of Palestinian martyrs, without differentiating between whether the Palestinian was a bomber or was killed by Israeli troops."[49]

In another instance of illicit financing, the Pakistani newspaper *Dawn* reported on a leaked 2008 cable from the U.S. Consulate in Lahore to the State Department. The cable alleged that financiers in Saudi Arabia and the UAE were sending nearly $100 million annually to Deobandi and Ahl-i-Hadith clerics in southern Punjab. In turn, those clerics were targeting families with multiple children and severe financial difficulties for recruitment, initially under the pretense of charity. Next, a Deobandi or Ahl-i-Hadith *maulana* would offer to educate the children in his school and "find them employment in the service of Islam." During the education phase, the clerics would indoctrinate the children and assess their inclination "to engage in violence and acceptance of *jihadi* culture." Parents then received cash payments of $6,500

for each son chosen for "martyrdom" operations.[50]

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

The ruling al-Saud family has a long history of suppressing Islamist challenges to maintain their hold on power. During the mid-1910s, the al-Saud faced their first major Islamist uprising from a group known as the *Ikhwan*. Several decades prior to that conflict, the *Ikhwan* were desert nomads whom the Wahhabi *ulema* converted as part of Saudi expansion. The Wahhabis gathered the *Ikhwan* into small communities called *hujara*, which were literally "places of migration" where the conversion process took place. This was an effective tool for the Saudis to depopulate areas of Arabia that they considered idolatrous while simultaneously training the tribesmen and clan leaders in Wahhabi doctrine.[51]

Gradually, they became zealous adherents to the Salafi-Wahhabi notion of *al-wala' wal bara'* (association with Muslims and dissociation from infidels), a central principle of modern *jihadi* ideology. By 1914, they developed a reputation as uncompromising religious soldiers who enforced monotheism, and harshly punished those who refused to follow the "true path."[52] But Ibn Saud earned enemies as the *Ikhwan* conquered towns and ruthlessly killed nomads, including women and children, who refused to convert. That put them in direct conflict with Ibn Saud, who conquered Arabia with military support from the British.[53]

Ibn Saud and Wahhabi leaders tried moderating the *Ikhwan*, and in early 1927, they convened a conference in Riyadh to reach an understanding. The *Ikhwan* demanded stricter laws to govern the Shi'a, a provision which Ibn Saud accepted, but he also demanded that they recognize him as the only legitimate authority on foreign policy and *jihad*. Furthermore, he forbade them from raiding British territory in Iraq and Transjordan.[54]

However, the *Ikhwan* remained disgruntled that Ibn Saud wanted them to temper their role as raiders and religious enforcers, yet would not appoint them as local governors and chiefs in his newly conquered territories.[55] Finally, their feud came to a head in December 1928, when the *Ikhwan* raided a caravan of merchants in the Wahhabi stronghold of Burayda. Ibn Saud considered this an attack on his people, and in response, between March 1929 and January 1930, Ibn Saud's troops battled the *Ikhwan*, eventually forcing them to surrender. Rather than punishing the *Ikhwan* harshly, however, Ibn Saud mixed punishment with religious rehabilitation in order to pacify them.[56] That dual approach later became a staple of the Saudi's battle against *jihadis*.

Throughout the 20th century, the Saudi government and its official Wahhabi religious establishment used the tools of *hijra*, *takfir*, and *jihad* to strengthen Saudi political rule. *Hijra* (migration) required individuals to physically migrate to the land of the pious state (Saudi Arabia), which proved useful in settling and indoctrinating the nomads. Later, they used *takfir* (excommunication) to provide the religious blessing for wars against secular Arab leaders like Gamal Abd al-Nasser and Saddam Hussein, and *jihad* (struggle) to embolden young men towards armed conflict against Islam's enemies in Afghanistan and elsewhere.[57]

Exporting Wahhabism
Under King Faisal, the Saudis developed a policy of supporting Islamic institutions abroad in an effort to combat the spread of secularism and communism. In 1962 they created the Muslim World League (MWL) to facilitate the spread of Wahhabi ideology, and the MWL supported sects and organizations throughout the world that challenged "heretical" Muslim sects, and eliminated popular religious practices that are forbidden in the Wahhabi interpretation. At once, the MWL supported the Deobandis, Ahl-i Hadith, and Jamaat-e-Islami in South Asia, while it distributed religious literature and funded schools in West African countries like Nigeria, Mali, Ghana, the Ivory Coast, and Guinea.[58]

The Saudis created more proselytizing organizations after the MWL, including the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY) in 1972, Al Haramain Foundation, and the International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO), among others. From 1973-2002, the Saudi government spent more than $80 billion on Islamic institutions and other activities in the non-Muslim world alone, contributing to some 1,500 mosques, 150 Islamic centers, 202 Muslim colleges, and 2,000 Islamic schools.[59] Thanks to Saudi financing in Asia, there are more than 10,000 Deobandi-run *madrassas* in India, Pakistan, and

Bangladesh.[60] And in Afghanistan, the Saudi government is currently financing a $100 million mosque and Islamic education center in Kabul that will be one of the country's largest when it opens in 2016.[61]

With their unprecedented outreach campaign, the Saudis now sponsor nearly 80 percent of all Islamic institutions in the U.S. and Canada. But after 9/11, Islamic institutions in the U.S. came under heavy scrutiny; of nearly 50 that have been raided, shut down, or had their assets frozen because of suspected links to terrorism, most have been controlled or funded by Saudis. Among those institutions were the Muslim World League, World Assembly of Muslim Youth, Al Haramain Foundation, SAAR Foundation, the International Institute of Islamic Thought, and the School of Islamic and Social Sciences.[62]

Combating the jihadist threat at home

The Saudi approach to combat the *jihadist* threat posed by al-Qaeda has been more extensive, with a focus on "men, money, and mindset." In a major initiative between 2003 and 2008, Saudi security forces broke up al-Qaeda's cells in the Kingdom, arresting and killing thousands of militants and collaborators suspected of planning attacks. Officials from the Ministry of Islamic Affairs continue to monitor tens of thousands of the country's nearly 70,000 mosques for individuals who the government claims hold "deviant" ideologies.[63]

The Saudi government runs two religious rehabilitation programs: a governmental Counseling Program and the independent, but government-supported program called *Al-Sakina* (Tranquility).[64] Both programs rely on clerics, some of them also former radicals, who engage the "deviants" in theological discussions in an attempt to prove their faulty understanding of Islam. Prisoners who have not committed terrorist acts on Saudi soil, and can prove that they have renounced their extreme views, are released and assisted with jobs, government stipends for marriage, education, cars, and housing. Although the Saudis used to claim a 100 percent success rate for their rehabilitation programs, recent estimates of recidivism rates—the rate at which "rehabilitated" extremists return to militancy—have been estimated at between 20 and 40 percent.[65] However, those numbers do not tell the entire story. The only individuals released from the program are those who have not actually committed terrorist acts inside Saudi Arabia.

The Saudi government also tries to utilize what it calls the Public Awareness Campaign, which aims to "reinforce the true values of the Islamic faith and to educate Saudi citizens about the dangers of extremism and terrorism."[66] According to the Saudi Embassy in Washington, DC, the campaign cen-

ters around public service announcements that are broadcasted on Arabic satellite networks and Saudi television.[67] The Saudi government also leverages interviews with former militants, who have allegedly repented for their wrongdoing and are eager to deplore their past lives for impressionable Saudis. Among the first former radicals to renounce their views on television were several high profile clerics who were arrested in 2003 following al-Qaeda's attacks in Riyadh.[68] More recently, former members of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) have publicly relinquished support for terrorism. One of those men was Jabir al-Fayfi, who reportedly tipped off Saudi authorities about a plot, originating from Yemen in October 2010, to send hidden explosives aboard cargo planes bound for the U.S.[69] Another notable figure was Muhammad al-Awfi, a former field commander of AQAP and ex-inmate at Guantanamo Bay. After al-Awfi surrendered to Yemeni authorities in February 2009, he appeared on television in November 2010 to discuss his experience and describe how the organization exploits Saudi youth to advance its own agenda.[70]

That is not to say that the Public Awareness Campaign has succeeded in de-radicalizing Saudis or persuading them against joining militant organizations. Indeed, while Saudi clerics are part of the Kingdom's de-radicalization efforts, they offer contradicting messages when they incite sectarian tensions and support fighting *jihad* in foreign countries. During the ongoing civil war in Syria, for example, clerics like Mohamad al-Arefe have been cheering for Syrian rebels to slaughter Bashar al-Assad's supporters, which include Iran, Hezbollah, and Syrian Alawites.[71] Even the Kingdom's Grand Mufti Abdulaziz Al al-Sheikh jumped in to bash Hezbollah, saying, "We urge all politicians and clerics to take substantial measures against this repulsive sectarian group (Hezbollah) and all those [who] back it so as to deter this aggression."[72]

After the Arab revolts

Since massive protests overthrew longtime Saudi allies in Egypt and Tunisia and heralded the rise of Islamists to power, the Saudi government has been moving to stave off similar demands for national reforms. During 2011, King Abdullah issued subsidy packages worth an estimated $130 billion to buy off his Saudi citizens. The king's measures included 60,000 jobs at the Ministry of the Interior, 500,000 new houses, and a minimum wage for the public sector of 3,000 Saudi Riyals ($800) per month—in contrast, the average private sector wage is only 1,000 SR per month.[73] The state also infused $10.7 billion into its development fund, which offers Saudis interest-free loans to build homes, marry, and start small businesses. An additional $4 billion was designated for the healthcare sector.[74]

But the Saudi government also relied on help from the state's sanctioned and unsanctioned clergy, who criticized activists online over Facebook and Twitter and issued *fatwas* in support of the regime. On March 6, 2011, the country's highest religious body, the Council of Senior *Ulema*, called on "everybody to exert every effort to increase solidarity, promote unity and warn against all causes giving rise to the opposite," and further warned Saudis about "deviant intellectual and partisan [Shi'a] tendencies" that could threaten Saudi stability.[75] Other clerics threatened potential protesters with violence. Saad al-Buraik, a member of the government's Counseling Program for re-educating extremists, called for "smashing the skulls of those who organize demonstrations or take part in them."[76]

In the end, the state's mix of subsidies and clerical advocacy—not to mention robust security deployments—helped it temporarily stave off demonstrations that could have brought down the monarchy. But all is not well. Demonstrations have been mounting from Riyadh to the Eastern Province over the government's policy of indefinitely detaining "security" prisoners, with both Shi'a and Sunni Saudis becoming more united and emboldened in their demands for justice.[77] Meanwhile the unsanctioned clerics have also carved out a substantial platform on social media that may prove difficult for the government to control. Until now, because those clerics have generally played within the state's red lines, they have been largely unhindered in the messaging.[78]

It is important to remember that the Saudi regime faced several major confrontations with Islamists during the 20th century—the *Ikhwan*, the JSM, the *Sahwa*, and *Jihadists*. In each case, the state was ultimately able to crush public dissent with a mix of heavy-handed measures and co-optation. But the current political scene in Saudi Arabia and the Arab world is changing rapidly. Newly empowered Arab publics have forced seismic shifts through the power of the street, and the Saudi government is by no means immune from similar challenges. Though the Kingdom's domestic strategy has been able to contain political frustrations thus far, it is not sustainable. King Abdullah—or whoever succeeds him—will need to implement serious reforms to address Saudi citizens' concerns. The kings of Saudi Arabia will not be able to buy off and stifle dissent forever.

ENDNOTES

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