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Relationship between state and religion in Saudi Arabia: the role of Wahabism in governance

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This paper tracks the relationship between religion and the state in Saudi Arabia during the past 50 years. This relationship is unique in the sense that the religious power (Wahabi) together with the ruling family (Al Sa'ud) were partners in founding the Kingdom. This cooperative relationship has been degenerating into mutual suspicion. Right now there are three main variants of religious stratification in Saudi Arabia vis-à-vis the state: the traditional Salafists who back the rulers come what may – the government is gradually reducing their prerogatives; and the opposition, which in turn is divided between Sahwa (who are discontented Salafists) and Tanweeris (advocates of enlightenment). The Sahwa current with its elderly leadership believes that the state is straying away from the teachings of religion and it recommends austere adherence to it; the dynamics of their activities are possibly pushing towards taking leadership from outside the Kingdom. The Tanweeris, on the other hand, have young leaders, the popular base is young and broad, and they are strong advocates of democracy. Despite their capacity for effective social mobilization, it seems too early to judge whether this religious stream will eventually push for reform or constrain it, especially given that it has not yet resolved its position on some key issues such as different national constituencies and women.

Keywords: religion; state; Wahabi; Salafist; Sahwa; Tanweeri; reform

Introduction

Religion is a main source of state legitimacy in the Arab countries, including those with secular ruling elites. In these countries a formula was worked out according to which official religious establishment and the elites work in parallel, each using its own discourse and operating within its area of interest, and neither infringing on the domain of the other.

However, Saudi Arabia is a particular case because the state has neither created nor inherited the religious establishment, like in most other countries; on the contrary. The religious elite and the politicians have worked together to establish and safeguard the state for quite a long time, which explains the overlap between the religious and political discourses and the religious clerics' rejection of certain practices deemed 'secular' instate institutions, and the leaders' personal lives and policies.

However, and as Max Weber has said, things always move towards the same end. Once the winds of modernity blow, their impact not only changes existing frameworks, but also reconfigures them in a manner that destroys the old balances of power, and the relationships that depend on them.

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Although all Muslim sects are represented in Saudi society, Mohammad Bin Abdul-Wahab's school, or Salafism as it is known today, is the only one that the state recognizes and draws its religious discourse from. The Saudi religious establishment is based on Wahabism and its leaders are chosen from among the sect's senior clerics; this sect is the subject of this paper.

The paper examines the relationship between the religious and political establishments in the Kingdom over the past 50 years, and highlights the initial partnership between them that turned into an alliance during the foundational stage. This initial stage also witnessed the onset of differences between the allies who soon parted ways, so much so that in recent years their relationship has been plagued by mutual denial and suspicion. The paper aims to pinpoint the fault lines in the relationship between these two parties and their impact on the Kingdom's policies.

In the interest of full disclosure, the paper's author finds it necessary to mention his affiliation with a current that calls for political reforms involving fundamental changes in the relationship between the religious establishment and the state, and that ideas in this paper could be biased towards this particular position, or affected by its tenets.

Background note

Before I begin, I would like to mention a number of the Wahabi Salafist sect's characteristics, such as its dependence on the Hadith as a main source of religious rulings, compared with the other three sources of jurisprudence (Quran, Qiyas and Ijma'), and its acute interest in doctrine in its most basic form – at the level of the individual. Another characteristic is its cultural and historical links to the Kingdom as the sect's home country, which implicitly means that Saudi citizens are more privileged than others because they are citizens of this sect's home country. We understand this to be the case because some influential non-Saudi personalities whose help was crucial at the foundation phase of the religious establishment, have never managed to attain leadership status in the traditional religious current. These include Abdul-Razzaq Al-Afifi, Abu Bakr Al-Jazairi, Mohammad Mahmoud Al-Sawwaf, Nasereddin Al-Albani and Manna' Al-Qattan, though some of them did eventually obtain Saudi citizenship. Moreover, the Arab national element is given precedence over others, since none of the Salafist sect's main leaders or influential authors is non-Arab. Some prominent Salafist *ulema* have written about the particular characteristics of the 'Arabian Peninsula' and its contribution to religion and history (e.g. Abu Zayd 2000).

The significance of the local component lies in the quasi organic links between the Salafist sect and the Saudi state, and in the makeup of the current leadership. The sect's traditional environment gave the religious clerics a key role in social activism unlike other Arab societies such as Egypt, for example, that sees nothing wrong in giving Sayyed Qutob a more prominent status than other *ulema*. The same goes for the Muslim Brotherhood, the largest religious party in Egypt, whose leadership does not include prominent religious clerics.

First: the official religious establishment

There are no specific data on the number of religious clerics in Saudi Arabia; nevertheless, the number indicated below will give the reader a general idea about the size of this sector, most of whose members are organically and existentially linked to the state:

- The Council of Senior Ulema sits at the head of the official religious establishment; it was established by a royal decree in August 1971 and, as its name indicates, its members are supposed to be the most learned in matters of the Sharia. This, however, is not always an objective criterion because it sometimes has to do with determining who is the most learned, sometimes with administrative standards imposed by the need to forge harmonious relationships within the council itself, and sometimes with political standards relevant to the distribution of power and the state's preferences and needs that do not necessarily depend on qualifications.¹
- The Supreme Judicial Council, established in 1975, comes next in rank in the religious leadership hierarchy. Although it was traditionally led by the highest ranking judge, in recent years the government has leaned towards taking into account the requirements of legal and administrative development when appointing its members. The council is the main reference point of the Kingdom's judges, and addresses major issues that ordinary courts are unable to address, or those that should be referred to it by law, such as cases that involve capital punishment.
- In third position come the specialized religious ministries, the most important among which are the Justice, and the Religious Affairs (Awqaf) ministries, followed by various independent religious bodies. These include the Council for Enjoining Good and Forbidding Evil, the Muslim World League, the International Islamic Jurisprudence Forum, and the World Assembly of Muslim Youth.
- There are two religious universities in Saudi Arabia: the Islamic University in Madina and the Imam Mohammad bin Saud Islamic University in Riyadh, both of which depend administratively and financially on the Ministry of Higher Education. Although traditionally senior *ulema* were consulted on the appointment of their administrative and academic leaders, there are signs that this is being discontinued, especially after the king appointed presidents for both universities from outside the usual circles, namely Dr Mohammad bin Ali Al-Uqla at the Islamic University and Dr Sulaiman Abalkhail at the Imam Mohammad University.
- In 2008, the number of religious positions, or those that fall under the supervision of clerics, exceeded one-quarter of a million, or 25% of all government positions. A newspaper report stated that the Religious Affairs Ministry planned to appoint 140,000 muezzins and mosque *imams* as full-time employees (Aljahni 2010).² According to Tawfik Al-Sudairy, Secretary General of the Awqaf Ministry, there are 72,000 mosques in the Kingdom (Al-Sudairy 2010)³ and the Council for Enjoining Good and Forbidding Evil runs 470 offices in different parts of the country, with some 4400 employees.

Many religious clerics perform a variety of cultural and social activities under the aegis of the official religious establishment, and although they are nominally dependent on the state, their work is independent of it. Most prominent among these activities are the Charitable Societies for Holy Quran Memorising that operate, according to data collected by the author, a little over 25,000 memorization circles, comprising 515,000 students, and employing 26,500 teachers and staff members, excluding circles run by clerics outside the above-mentioned societies. Other activities in which religious clerics play a leading role include Al-Birr (charitable) societies, most of which fall

under the jurisdiction of regional emirs, are administered by clerics and operate independently of the state.

The above activities also include the Cooperative Offices for Call and Guidance, and for raising the awareness of foreign communities, which numbered 210 offices in 2010, spread throughout the country. As their name indicates, their main function involves direct proselytization that includes lectures, lessons, the distribution of material, *iftar* banquets, and the like.

Alongside these specialized religious bodies, all the Kingdom's ministries are involved in extracurricular religious activities. The Saudi Armed Forces have a Moral Guidance Administration founded by a well-known cleric called Saud Al-Funaysan, and staffed mostly by graduates of religious colleges. The Ministry for Foreign Affairs appoints a religious attaché in many of its embassies abroad. The Ministry of Education is one of the main employers of religious college graduates, since it hires thousands of them to teach religious education; this accounted for around 31% of the entire academic effort in 2010.⁴ According to the Saudi Press Agency (2010), the ministry also runs 2,077 Quran Memorisation schools; and, according to the newspaper *Al-Bilad* (18 September 2010) 'The Kingdom is witnessing a comprehensive education renaissance, 9 million Rials for the King Abdullah Bin Abdul Aziz Public Education Development Project'.

The Salafist current sees its dependence on the state for employment and daily subsistence as entirely normal, and the issue was never a matter of controversy as far as the clerics' credibility and independence were concerned. Furthermore, many religious clerics, especially from the middle and higher echelons, use their positions and relationships with prominent statesmen to strengthen their social clout and improve their status among the public.

The majority of Saudi clerics belong to the traditional Salafist current. Not only does the current call for supporting the state as the only guardian of Sheikh Mohammad bin Abdul Wahab's school and the Salafist sect, but also it considers the royal family's rule as legitimate and deserving of obedience, even if its members sometimes act reprehensively, so long as this does not involve plain apostasy. They also advise senior government officials on controversial issues, although they know that the administration does not always follow this advice.⁵

Among the new *fatwas* (religious edicts) issued by the Council of Senior Ulema, in late October 2010, is one that bans women from working as sales personnel and countering the green light they were given by the Ministry of Labour in August of that same year.⁶ As everyone knows, this *fatwa* was not universally welcomed by state officials, though the council did not criticize them for their position and will likely not make an issue of it if the ministry does not abide by this *fatwa*. It is more of a statement of general principles directed at the public rather than the state.

Second: eyeing state authority

In the 1960s, the traditionalist current had one of the strongest leaders in its history, Sheikh Mohammad bin Ibrahim Aal Al-Sheikh (1893–1969), who rose to prominence during the ten years of King Saud's rule (1953–1962). The fact that the governance system that the king had inherited was very simple and limited gave him the chance to rebuild the government administration from scratch.

It is in this context that the official religious institution saw the light and was transformed from a simple entity into an independent institution with special status within

the political system and state administration. This status was embodied in the establishment of the General Presidency of Religious Colleges and Institutes in 1953, the Ifta's Administration in 1954 and the Presidency of the Judiciary in 1959, all of which were under the personal supervision of Bin Ibrahim who was by then Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia. In 1960, the General Presidency of Girls' Education was established and placed under his supervision as well, as were the Muslim World League (1962) and the Islamic University in Madina (1971).

Bin Ibrahim used the Kingdom's transition from the foundational to the organizational stage to turn his own institution into an effective centre of power in the new system. According to Mansour Al-Nuqaidan (Al-Nuqaidan 2012, 108), the Mufti was suspicious of the government's intention to expand general education and hire Arab teachers who might have nationalist or leftist views. He was particularly worried about religious laws being sidelined and expressed his apprehension in this regard in his famous letter entitled '*Tahkim al-Qawanin*' [Enactment of Positive (non-religious) Law] – 1380 *hijri*', which later became a reference point for the Salafist current in matters of 'governance'.⁷ Though the letter did not address the political authority, it argued for maintaining the law in the clerics' hands and keeping the religious domain outside the bureaucratic system.

The experience of Mufti Bin Ibrahim reveals one of the dynamics of the crisis that plagues Saudi Arabia's religious community; by that I mean the ambiguous relationship between the clerics and the state compounded by the latter's erroneous vision of what modern statehood implies, and what the transition from traditionalism to modernity involves. Just like at the beginning of the 20th century, at its end the clerics were under the illusion that their alliance with the royal family meant that the state had become their property. The notion comes from a belief that the current model, i.e. the coercive state or sultanate, is an acceptable model of good governance according to Islamic standards. However, this illusion has blinded them to the natural yearning of the state to establish itself, gain independence and create the mechanisms that would allow it to do so.

Because of this illusion, the religious current failed to develop a comprehensive vision either of modern statehood or of a more advanced state system in tune with the requirements and challenges of the times. Instead, the predominant view among the religious leaders was that safeguarding society's faith is only possible if they have the 'authority' to enjoin and forbid, and implement this authority by closely supervising academic curricula and teachers; in other words, making use of the authority already in place. This view belies the fact that the Saudi government had begun to transform itself from its early image as a traditional quasi-tribal authority into a separate central state, away from the traditions of its foundation stage and all those who were involved in it. This necessarily changes the power structure and composition of the ruling elite and its supporters and, by extension, changes the values and conventions that justify that model.

The Mufti was unaware of the real nature of the changes taking place in the country, and thought that the crux of the problem lay in the 'people' who made the decisions. For example, his insistence on holding onto the Presidency of Girls' Education was based on the traditional view that sees women as enchantresses and, as such, all that concerns them should be in safe hands to prevent corruption. The same applied to the judiciary such that instead of seriously trying to reform it and make it fairer, the clerics' focus was on keeping it under their control.

In 1992, the ‘Advisory Memorandum’ – which was supposed to represent the apogee of the religious current’s maturity – offered the same solutions and did not deviate from the above reasoning, i.e. that the state and society were to blame for the country’s problems because they strayed away from religion, and the remedy therefore lay in strengthening the clerics’ supervision of all walks of life. In other words, like the Mufti in the middle of the last century, those who wrote the memorandum at the end of it saw nothing wrong either with the philosophy of the state or with the administration’s methodology. As far as they were concerned, the blame lay squarely on the shoulders of administration officials who cannot be considered honest unless they are religious clerics or operated under their supervision. Had they been honest they would not have made mistakes. This overly simplistic view leads to a preoccupation with trivial issues and leaves significant ones aside. Many activists will realize later on that they wasted precious time pursuing insignificant matters and – as Salman Al-Odeh has said (Al-Odeh 2002, 49) – had drowned themselves in the parts at the expense of the whole.

In October 1975, King Khaled appointed Sheikh Abdul-Aziz bin Baz as the first president of the religious establishment to come from outside the family of the official sect’s founder, Sheikh Mohammad bin Abdul-Wahab, thus making a break with a tradition that had been in existence since the establishment of the first Saudi state. To some observers this step signalled the undeclared end of a tradition that meant a ‘power-sharing partnership’ between the founding families of the state and the sect.

With the increase in oil revenues in 1971 and their meteoric rise in 1974, changes in the state’s administrative and legal structure accelerated in tandem with an exponential increase in economic activities. This opened up the country more than ever before to international markets, and exposed it to hitherto unfamiliar ideas, ways of life and work ethics.

These changes strengthened the government bureaucracy’s role, and reduced the political authority’s need for religious clerics. The government’s newfound wealth allowed it to bring the religious establishment under its supervision by spending more on it and financing its new projects. Of particular note in this context is King Faisal’s decision, in September 1974, to establish the Imam Mohammad bin Saud Islamic University, which became the jewel in the official religious establishment’s crown. However, although these projects fostered a sense of satisfaction among the religious community that saw itself grow and prosper, it increased at the same time its dependency on the state, which was the financier of these projects.

Third: the religious current emerges out of the state’s shadow

The holy city of Madina has seen the first appearance of the *new* Salafist current. In 1964 a group of youths attacked photography studios and destroyed coffee houses that served *shisha* (or *narghileh*) and plastic mannequins displaying women’s clothing, all of which are considered taboo in the Salafist doctrine. Among these enthusiastic youths were some destined to have a considerable impact on the course of events later on, including Juhaiman Al-‘Otaibi, Abdul Rahman Abdul Khaliq and Omar Al-Ashqar.⁸ The group was motivated by a deep conviction about what they learned at Madina’s Islamic University and, unlike the more patient sheikhs, tried to organize themselves and eliminate evil-doing (Al-Tarifi 2004).

The ‘mannequins destruction incident’, as it came to be known, was an initial largely instinctive reaction against commercialism and the manifestations of

consumer-oriented modernity in the holy city of Madina. However, when analysed scientifically, it reveals a general sense of being under threat, or what is often described as modernity's culture shock. The country's newfound openness to international markets had led – as expected – to a gradual but obvious deterioration in the values and behaviour of a highly traditional society, a phenomenon for which the religious establishment had no answer. The fact that the latter was unable to develop a new discourse to accommodate these sudden challenges explains the reaction of the new generation, most whom were youths barely in their 30s.

Although initially basic and limited in scope, this incident sparked an idea that would have an impact for years to follow. The idea was simply that the official religious establishment was no longer capable of shouldering the responsibility of spreading the call, and that its links to the state had become a major obstacle to the latter's progress. Therefore, the solution lay in trusting the youth to find alternative ways to spread the call, from outside the official framework, an idea encouraged by Arab religious clerics who had come to teach at Saudi universities, most of whom were activists in their own home countries. Most prominent among these were Nasiruddin al-Albani, Muhammed Srouf Zein al-Abdeen (from Syria), Abdul Munim Al Azzi, known as Mohammad Al-Rashed (from Iraq), Mohammad Qutob, Manna' Al-Qattan, Mohammad Mahdi 'Akef, Ma'moun Al-Hudaibi, and Kamal Al-Helbawi (from Egypt). Credible information indicates that the Muslim Brotherhood tried to establish a Saudi chapter in the first half of the 1970s (Al-Otaibi 2010, 37).

The occupation of the Holy Sanctuary (in November 1979) under the leadership of Juhaiman Al Otaibi, which took place a few months after the success of the Iranian Revolution and establishment of an Islamic state under the leadership of religious figures, coupled with the onset of *jihad* against the Soviet forces in Afghanistan, in December of that same year, were key elements for the Salafist current and its relationship with the state.

Al-Sahwa current

Although the entire religious current condemned the Holy Sanctuary's occupation, it nevertheless began to think seriously about its role, position and the nature of its relationship with the state. Shortly before this incident took place, the coming to power of religious clerics in Iran was clearly a challenge to the Saudi religious community, and many wondered, particularly the clerics and youths, whether ideally a religious cleric should be directly involved in the power structure or be simply content to eat at the sultan's table.

From 1980 to 1985, the government followed a dual containment strategy towards the religious current. On the one hand, it harshly suppressed direct political protests and executed or imprisoned all those who supported Juhaiman and his movement.⁹ On the other hand, it increased its support to other religious clerics and gave them free reign at all state levels. The ensuing unprecedented increase in religious activities over-extended the religious institutions, and increased demands for employment in the religious domain. As a result of that, the number of students in academic religious institutions increased five-fold in 1985, from 30,914 (or 7% of the Saudi university students in 1979) to 190,481 (or 22% of Saudi university students) (Department of Statistics 2007).

For a brief period it seemed as if the government had managed to contain the new religious current, since in the five years that followed the Holy Sanctuary's occupation

the country witnessed no events worth mentioning. However, the questions and debates did not cease but simply shifted to the campuses of religious universities that had become natural incubators for the new religious current. All the present prominent leaders of the current, which will become known later on as Al-Sahwa (Awakening), were at the time students at these religious institutions.

The pressure created by these questions and debates found an outlet in the Afghanistan issue that had gradually become the focus of the religious current's attention. In his blog *Thikrayati ma' al-Ikhwan fi-l Sa'udiyya* (My Memories Amongst the Brotherhood in Saudi Arabia, <http://www.som1.net/?p=3340>), on 27 June 2011, Dr Mustafa Al-Hassan, who was active in the Muslim Brotherhood at the time, mentions: 'When the conversation in Saudi Arabia turns to the *jihadi* ideology, many contentious issues are unearthed.' These issues were in fact no more than a series of discussions round the nature of the relationship between religion and the state in the Kingdom, and round the religious current's role and position towards the government's policies. Here, the sensitive question imposes itself again: is it a state for, and based on, a religious call, or is it a partner that managed to capture the religious clerics' share at a time when no one was paying attention? There was no answer to this question; questions based on vacuous assumptions do not have answers. This blocked avenue has led to a new and even more sensitive question: what is our responsibility in this regard, and what can we do as believers to rectify it?

Two strong currents were born in the context of this argument: the Muslim Brotherhood and the Militant Salafism, known locally as the 'Srouriah' after Syrian cleric Mohammad Srour Zain Al-Abdeen. Between the middle and the end of the 1980s, hundreds of Saudi youths had joined the *jihadis* in Peshawar, on the Pakistan–Afghanistan border, and while some bore arms and fought alongside the Afghans against the Soviets, others spent weeks in Mujahideen camps. According to the testimony of a former Saudi *mujahid* who had travelled to Peshawar in 1987, the trip to the Afghan border was every believer's wish:

when I went to buy my ticket, I found many others already there trying to book their flight to Islamabad. On the same flight with me were 20 Saudi young men from different cities, a number which sometimes reaches 75 youths per trip – meaning a total of 225 young men on the three weekly flights.

(Al-Bunyan 2001)

The Brotherhood and Srouriah movements managed to draw the most activist Saudi youths, and succeeded in crystallizing a position opposed to the state's or, at least, that doubted the latter's loyalty to Sharia teachings, which was one of the main differences between the traditional Salafist current and the official religious institution. Ali Al-Omaem believes that this had to do with the impact of the Arab activists who take the main credit for launching Al-Sahwa:

The Islamist movements were neither attracted to the recent Saudi experience nor to its ideological historic base embodied by Muhammad Abdul Wahab's Salafist call. What it was strongly attracted to was the Ottoman State's experience and the Islamic Caliphate concept, of which Sultan Abdul Hamid II (1876–1909) was the last Caliph, and last pious Muslim ruler.

(Al-Omaem 2011, 170)

The above description depicts the movement that rose to the surface of Saudi society until the end of the 1980s. However, another story was unfolding under the

surface, one that perhaps no one had planned for and few had noticed, although its fallout would prove decisive in the following two decades. It is the Salafist sect's separation from its socio-political cocoon, i.e. the region of Najd.

The Salafist sect's separation from its social cocoon

As the income from oil increased, the government launched a series of five-year plans, the first of which was in 1971, aimed at modernizing the economy, administration and public services. Naturally, the new economy created additional opportunities for those who aspire to raise their social status and roles, through education, trade and state bureaucracy. Therefore, the country has seen the rise of numerous influential figures, many of whom came from previously marginalized social backgrounds. The large cities were the locus of economic and social transformation. Thus, it started to receive a large-scale migration of countryside youths who saw in the city life style a unique opportunity to escape poverty (Table 1). However, these young men who came looking for a new life represented fertile ground for the religious current, in its different manifestations and orientations, and found themselves – spontaneously for the most part – the object of the religious activists' attention; they later became – inadvertently perhaps – the tool that caused the sect itself to change.

In the early 1980s, the main element within the Salafist current hailed from Najd, in the Kingdom's central region. However, as public and religious education expanded, elements from other regions came to settle in the region, thus reducing the sect's identification with Najd and affecting the nature of its activism. In the first stage, the adoption of the Salafist call meant loyalty to the political regime and safeguarding its social environment (Najd), while in the second stage, the Salafist current developed as an independent entity from the state and its social milieu. It is in this context that religious leaders and proselytizers emerged from outside the central region, and that the tendency to be independent from the state and the official religious establishment became more pronounced.

Several reasons made the religious current shed its old identification with Najd, of which two in particular warrant mention:

Table 1. State budget and public employment, 1971–1980

| Year | Budget (rials, millions) | Capital for projects (rials, millions) | Number of government jobs based on the budget |
|------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| 1971 | 10 782 | 5036 | 141 320 |
| 1972 | 13 200 | 6718 | 162 439 |
| 1973 | 22 810 | 14 263 | 177 184 |
| 1974 | 98 247 | 26 397 | 192 808 |
| 1975 | 95 847 | 74 380 | 217 704 |
| 1976 | 110 935 | 94 795 | 242 478 |
| 1977 | 146 493 | 97 720 | 244 113 |
| 1978 | 130 000 | 97 606 | 272 584 |
| 1979 | 160 000 | 131 501 | 326 062 |
| 1980 | 261 516 | 174 737 | n.a. |

Note: n.a., Not available.

- In the 1970s and 1980s, non-Saudi religious clerics managed to erode the professional credibility of Najd's religious clerics, particularly the descendants of the sect's founder, Sheikh Mohammad bin Abdul Wahab. I am referring particularly to the influence of Syrian cleric Nasireddin Al-Albani, widely known as one of the world's experts on Hadith. Al-Albani did not hesitate to refer repeatedly to the weakness of reference sources quoted by the sheikhs from Najd, and to the fact that the latter lacked the methodological tools necessary for an accurate assessment of the credibility of an Hadith before using it as a jurisprudential reference; this is especially shameful for a school that relies on the Hadith as the main source of its teachings (Lacroix 2011).¹⁰ Many of Al-Albani's students saw themselves as superior to the graduates of other traditional schools with no expertise in the Hadith. Among these were a considerable number of southerners who studied in Mecca and Madina, to which Al-Albani paid regular visits.¹¹ However, the majority of Najd's religious students preferred to pursue their education in Riyadh and Buraida, the original home of the Salafist doctrine.
- Between 1979 and 1982, the Kingdom witnessed an unprecedented economic boom; the large increase in government spending created thousands of new employment opportunities for all citizens. This economic well-being began to dampen in the following seven years, in tandem with the drop in oil revenues (Table 2). As of 1983, Saudi society began to feel the fallout from unemployment, especially when hundreds of new graduates began looking for work, but failed to find any. The Ministry of Finance had frozen all new positions and halted all construction projects whose budgets had not been allocated years earlier.

Opportunities decrease in times of scarcity; this fuels competition over what little is available, and people beg and plead to get hold of these few opportunities. Under such circumstance, the law is the only means of guaranteeing a minimum level of fair distribution of opportunities, and preventing the powerful from monopolizing them. However, the rule of law is not familiar to the Kingdom's administration. People in high places control the allocation of material and non-material benefits as they

Table 2. Budget expenditures and government jobs, 1981–1989

| Year | Projected budget revenues (rials, millions) | Credit for projects in the budget (rials, millions) | Number of government jobs in the budget |
|------|------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| 1981 | 340 000 | 205 925 | 371 816 |
| 1982 | 313 400 | 202 814 | 192 120 |
| 1983 | 225 000 | 128 504 | 305 151 |
| 1984 | 214 100 | 130 097 | 328 046 |
| 1985 | 200 000 | 82 091 | 341 234 |
| 1986 | 200 000 | 82 091 | 341 234 |
| 1987 | 117 280 | 57 084 | 341 234 |
| 1988 | 105 300 | 32 299 | 342 928 |
| 1989 | n.a. | 37 088 | 344 020 |

Note: In 1986 no new budget was announced, but the previous year's budget was extended instead.

n.a., Not available.

please. Between 1983 and 1990, the Kingdom witnessed a period during which various ministries and departments were 'allocated' to specific persons or groups. If you were, for example, a minister, deputy minister or general secretary, the members of your tribe would expect to find employment in your department; this means that in the absence of a legitimate civil society, those who aspired to become leaders in their natural habitat, i. e. their tribe or region, used this system to increase their social capital, a practice considered normal in previous years. However, the wide availability of jobs had lowered the competition level and confined it to the higher positions, though what there is now is competition even over small jobs; Table 3, which was prepared by Al-Wardi (2006, 92), the former administrator of Al-Jawf Principedom, shows a side of that impact.

The competition spread to the religious sector like it did to all other government sectors, and what made the situation worse was the re-emergence of patronage traditions that have somewhat abated recently. In earlier years, the government used to grant senior clerics – especially from Najd – a share of the jobs available, which they in turn passed on to their relatives and friends. This system was meant to strengthen the social belt surrounding the royal family, in which religion, family, tribe and region came together to form a strong reliable security belt. Some families are known for never having to look for a job, since theirs are reserved well in advance. However, with the retreat in opportunities, these religious clerics were no longer content with their usual share, but tried to help their village and tribe members to nab some of these opportunities. In other words, the official religious establishment's clerics and senior employees were involved in discrimination, a practice that necessarily alienates all those outside the immediate circle of the person concerned, especially in times of economic hardship.

This was a highly emotional issue for the youths who had recently joined the religious current. The sheikhs preached salvation in the afterlife when people wanted salvation in this life as well, and expected the sheikh to focus on the afterlife and leave earthly matters to them. What they found, however, was the exact opposite; those who hailed from the Kingdom's southern and northern regions saw their colleagues getting comfortable positions in various ministries, in the judicial branch and in different religious organizations, without much effort, while they spent days looking for a decent job in vain. They begged the sheikh who helped educate them or whose recordings and pamphlets they once distributed to help them, but all they received in return were polite excuses. Some even lowered their expectations and were content to be taken on as a *muezzin* or an *imam*, two secondary-level positions, only to find that their colleagues from Najd had also beaten them there.

Table 3. Distribution of high officials by region based on a selected sample of government departments, 1994

| Region | Population (millions) | Percentage of the total population | Number of senior employees | Percentage of the total |
|----------|-----------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|
| Western | 3.62 | 0.294 | 172 | 0.203 |
| Middle | 3.22 | 0.262 | 511 | 0.602 |
| Southern | 2.41 | 0.196 | 84 | 0.099 |
| Eastern | 1.90 | 0.154 | 36 | 0.042 |
| Northern | 1.15 | 0.093 | 46 | 0.054 |
| Total | 12.30 | | 849 | |

Although I am not entirely sure that this was what raised the ire of the religious current's youth against Najd and its clerics, what is certain is that the second half of the 1980s witnessed the emergence of young clerics from the southern and northern regions (those who failed to reserve a place in the upper echelons of the official religious establishment). Among the latter's main traits are their open and candid political views, a hitherto unfamiliar trait among religious clerics. These young clerics had transcended all the talk about Afghanistan and its *mujahideen* and were now talking about a Western plot to Westernize Muslim societies, and thus defeat Islam on its own turf, with the inadvertent or coerced participation of countries that claim to be Muslim. As usual in such cases, they were referring to Saudi Arabia. Among these clerics were Sheikh Safar Al-Hawali, 'Awad Al-Qarni and 'Ayed Al-Qarni, all three of whom hail from the country's southern region.

Fallout from the Gulf War

The Iraqi occupation of Kuwait in August 1990 unleashed a number of social crises, the first repercussion of which was the emergence of a current calling for political reform. In December 1990, a number of prominent personalities drafted a petition with a list of demands calling on the government to introduce essential reforms to the official administration, and the relationship between society and the state. The signatories included well-known intellectuals, former officials and socially influential personalities, but no religious clerics.¹²

The crises rocked the entire religious current and left it tense, hesitant and incapable of seizing the initiative. The Council of Senior Ulema's decision to endorse the government's call for the help of American forces came as a considerable shock to the Salafist current that had been in a prolonged dream and, when it woke up, found that it had to deal with a plethora of unprecedented challenges and apprehensions.¹³ For years the religious discourse had insisted on the principle of '*al-walawa al-bara*' ('loyalty and disavowal') as an essential element of faith, one of whose main tenets is to forbid the reliance on non-believers and expelling them from the Arabian Peninsula, yet here was their army with an official invitation endorsed by the senior *ulema*.

The new generation of the religious current's leaders believed that the presence of a foreign military force would reorient the country towards secularism. Their fears were vindicated when, in November 1990, 47 Saudi women organized a demonstration in the streets of Riyadh calling for their right to drive a car.¹⁴ However, though the small demonstration was quickly put down by the Council for Enjoining Good and Forbidding Evil and the local police, who arrested all the participants, the incident elicited a fierce debate and the issue became the main subject of Friday sermons during the following three months. Dr Mohsen Al-'Awajy remembers a meeting in Dar Al-Fatwa called to discuss the issue, attended by the Mufti, Sheikh Abdul Aziz bin Baz, the Emir of Riyadh Salman bin Abdul Aziz – later the crown prince – and a number of *ulema* and prominent personalities. Al-'Awji writes in this regard:

Huge crowds of people had gathered outside the building brought together by the interest in the subject, the paucity of remedies and murky official position. It was the first time that a crowd of this size had gathered in that manner.¹⁵

Over the following years, the right of women to drive would become the symbol of Saudi women's struggle for liberation and equality. The religious current's position in

this debate and the ensuing events reveals three fundamental problems in its discourse and activities:

- The absence of any calm and collected debate on major issues of the logic of negotiations to arrive at the best solutions and the predominance of the mobilization rhetoric over the current's discussions and pronouncements. By virtue of its very nature, the mobilization rhetoric is populist, simplistic, hard-line and imprecise.
- The fact that the religious elite, and by extension its supporters, overlooks – or maybe denies the existence of – the social change taking place in the country, particularly the rise of new forces and questions on the need to develop the country's political system in a manner that allows it to accommodate the unprecedented challenges. Overlooking these changes results from misunderstanding the relationship between the state and religion and its clerics, as indicated above. The fact that this continues despite all the deep socio-political changes helped entrench the exclusivist aspect of the religious discourse. Later on this exclusivist behaviour turned inward on itself and became the norm inside the current, when once it targeted only those on the outside.
- Believing in conspiracy theories and assuming that those opposed to the current are part of a global plot, instead of dealing with them simply as people who have different opinions with whom one could agree or disagree at different times. The total belief in conspiracy theories without diligent examination is the outcome of what could be seen as a sudden politicization that prompted some to explain major issues in light of small insignificant ones. This way of understanding politics departs from the tactical to understand the strategic, rather than the other way round, as it is supposed to be.

Neither during that particular period nor in the years that followed did any Salafist activist address the conditions and rights of Saudi women; their discourse centred entirely on two different issues:

- Intermixing between the sexes and the enchantment and corruption that ensues from it.
- When women gain their rights it means victory for the Westernized liberal current over its religious counterpart (e.g. Al-Ahmad 2011; Al-Omar 2011).

Some preachers noticed that the government did not react strongly enough to what they saw as a Westernization onslaught, but did exactly the contrary. King Fahd ordered the dismissal of the Chairman of the Council for Enjoining Good and Forbidding Evil, a move seen as a sign of the government's determination to restrict the activities of religious institutions that act without direct official orders.¹⁶ Moreover, in an official statement, the Awqaf Ministry ordered mosque preachers not to mention the women's demonstration incident in their Friday sermons, and threatened to punish the *imams* who do not abide by the order. The President of Riyadh University, where some of the demonstrating women were teachers, did the same. Some Salafist activists wondered about the secret behind the state not dealing strongly enough with the women who staged the demonstration in Riyadh:

Did the liberal current use the crisis to embarrass the state and conservative society, i.e., to pit the two historical allies against one other, starting with a pro-forma issue like women

driving cars, or, perhaps – as the conspiracy theory goes – America’s fingers are all over it?¹⁷

The immediate impact of the crises was the collapse of trust and respect between the senior *ulema* and the activist religious current, and the latter’s emergence from under the senior *ulema*’s mantle. The activists declared their opposition to both the government’s request for American military assistance and the senior *ulema*’s endorsement of the move, and considered it evidence of the sheikhs’ alienation from reality and their lack of knowledge in what they called ‘the jurisprudence of reality’, i.e. of politics and its reversals. Sheikh Safar Al-Hawali delivered several sermons condemning the decision and warning against its repercussions.¹⁸ Sheikh Salman Al-Odeh did the same in a sermon entitled ‘Causes of the State’s Collapse’ in which he said that the worst transgression is placing one’s trust in non-Muslims and seeking victory through their help (Al-Khudor 2011, 180–200). This was the first time that the Kingdom’s mosques turned into arenas of political debate and mobilization against the government and the official religious authority. The split drew many youths to the activist religious current (Alshamsi 2010, 86).

About half a year after the crises, the new generation of Salafist leaders succeeded in reorganizing their ranks, and believed that the crises had weakened both the government and the religious current. They believed, therefore, that the time had come to formulate a new relationship between the parties, one that would strengthen the religious currents’ role in the country’s decision-making circles and administration, especially its new representatives. The new idea appeared in the form of a petition drafted by a group of activists and presented to the Kingdom’s Grand Mufti, Sheikh Abdul Aziz bin Baz, who in turn endorsed it in a letter to King Fahd. The fact that Sheikh Mohammad bin Uthaimen endorsed the idea as well meant that it had the support of two of the most prominent Ulema in the Kingdom at the time. The letter, signed by 52 sheikhs and prominent Salafist personalities, was presented to the Chief of the Royal Court in May 1991.¹⁹

The Ulema’s letter or memorandum comprised 12 demands, some of which were related to political reforms, while others underlined the need to promote the *ulema* and the institutional role of religion, in both the state and society. However, although the government did not respond to these demands, the fact that the Mufti saw the letter’s sensitive political contents compelled him to reconsider his relationship with the same young proselytizers whose public activism and enthusiasm for the call had made him so optimistic earlier on. In June 1991, the Council of Senior Ulema issued under the Mufti’s leadership a declaration distancing itself from the petition, although the criticism focused on having spread the petition in the media instead of treating it as confidential advice, as is customary when advising those in charge.

In March 1992, King Fahd issued three Royal Decrees in response to public demands prior and during the Gulf War. These were relevant to the Basic Governance System, which in fact meant a constitution; the Consultative Council Law; and the Regional Law which was supposed to lay the legal foundations for a decentralized administration system. However, reception of the decrees by various social groups and the religious current was tepid, and deemed far less than what the society had expected over the previous two years.

This circumvention by the government of the religious current’s demands and the Mufti’s refusal to continue applying pressure on it seems to have been a watershed moment for the young Salafists. Those who had struggled to ensure a key role for

the Mufti and portrayed him as the father and guide of the religious current could no longer convince their colleagues who wanted to seize this historic opportunity to assume leadership of society.

The impact of this transformation became evident in June 1992 when 107 Salafist advocates and activists, from the second and third rank, signed a statement in which they called the 'Advisory Memorandum' a document they hoped would clarify the *ulema's* petition. This memorandum, written in the form of a political party platform, was the first widespread organized political appearance by the independent Salafist current opposed to the government. Unlike its first letter whose tone was soft and pleading, the memorandum openly connected the government's religious legitimacy to its commitment to their demands. Sheikh Al-Obaikan, one of the period's activists, believes that while the first letter was a sincere reflection of the local Salafist current and its vision of reforms, the Advisory Memorandum was a reflection of a politicized activist current.²⁰

In light of the above, the Salafist current emerged as an entity independent of its traditional political cocoon, i.e. the state, and of its legitimate leadership, i.e. the Council of Senior Ulema and the official religious establishment, and of course independent of its original environment, i.e. the central region of Najd. And although, like their counterparts in the traditional Salafist current, the religious leaders who hailed from the central region, in particular Al-Qaseem, kept their first rank status in Al-Sahwa, they were no longer the only leaders, nor was derivation from Najd a criterion for choosing leaders.

The Grand Mufti was angry because he did not have the chance to express his opinion on the memorandum before it was published. He gathered the Senior Ulema in September 1992 and issued a statement distancing himself from the memorandum and condemning its contents, even expressing doubts on the real intentions of those who signed it.²¹

Based on the council's position, most of the Advisory Memorandum's signatories were dismissed from their government positions, and some were prevented from leaving the country. This marked the beginning of the largest secession in the Salafist current's history, and the appearance of what become known later as the Al-Sahwa current as a distinct entity from the general Salafist current that had stayed out of the political struggle.

Crises give rise to a variety of ideas based on which new political parties are formed, and new leaders created. The Al-Sahwa current, which was born out of the Gulf War, was based on the idea of separation from the traditional Salafist current and the government, a politically motivated and self-interested idea that produced a new generation of young leaders. At the time of the crises, the average age of the Ulema Council's members was 71 years, while Sheikh 'Ayed Al-Qarni was 31, Salman Al-Odeh was 34, and Naser Al-Omar and Abdul Mohsen Al-Obaikan were both 38 years old.

The new sheikhs' discourse was embarrassing to the senior sheikhs. On the doctrinal level, it cast doubt on their insistence on obeying the ruler no matter how much he deviates from the prescribed path, which is one of the established tenets of traditional Hanbali jurisprudence. On the political level, their influence on the street was elbowing out the popularity that the senior sheikhs had diligently built over the years (Al-Omaem 2011, 164). Moreover, despite the Mufti's advice and attempts to calm down the proselytizers and convince them to avoid provoking the state, the young supporters were pushing for more radical positions, and the new leaders were enjoying their success in mobilizing the masses.

In September 1994, the government had had enough and arrested the main symbols of the new Salafist current, starting with Safar Al-Hawali, whose followers call him the 'Ibn Taimiah of his age' and one of the current's most prominent political theoreticians, along with Salman Al-'Odeh, 'Ayed Al-Qarni, Nasser Al-Omar and others (Alshamsi 2010, 126).

The end of the struggle: a new generation that transcends Al-Sahwa

When the Sheikhs came out of prison in 1999, they found an entirely different scene than before they went in; it was clear that the government had managed to absorb the shock. In 1995, when a small group from the religious current became involved in terrorist activities with Al-Qaeda, the activist religious current became suspect and its main concern was to defend itself against a fierce attack that held it responsible for furnishing Al-Qaeda with ideas, money and men.

Al-Qaeda's attack on New York City and Washington, DC, in September 2001 was another watershed moment for the religious current. The government became convinced that the impact of the 'rough curriculum' of Salafist education would not stay limited to Saudi society, and that its old wager on its ability to contain the current again had reached its limit. Many of the current's activists and leaders, especially the young generation, became convinced that the cost of the fight with the government was steeper than they could handle, and that the large masses that they had attracted to the mosques were not necessarily prepared to fight for their discourse.

This reconsideration led to serious fragmentation within the new religious current. Some of its youths developed a discourse more in tune with liberal principles and most of its clerics tried to bridge the gap with the government. In the meantime, the government took a hardline position aimed at quelling sources of extremism and terrorism, thus depriving the religious current of its political power sources.

Fourth: the siege

While in the first half of the 1990s, official and media pressure came down hard on the second generation of Salafists, or the so-called 'Al-Sahwa Sheikhs', in the second half, the traditional wing joined the list of targets. It seems that after years of placating and being courteous to traditional Salafism, the government had decided to limit its circles of influence after succeeding in cutting Al-Sahwa down to size. According to Sheikh Abdul-Mohsen Al-Abbad, former President of the Islamic University, this change indicates that the forces behind the Westernization strategy did not only comprise local liberal groups or groups opposed to the religious current. The events that followed 2001 confirm that the government was also involved in the plan, and that prominent ministers and royal family members were helping to implement it, including the king's daughter and her husband (*Al-Alouka* 2001). In the past, Al-Abbad used personally to deliver his messages to the king and major princes, but had started to publish them on the Internet when he discovered – or so it seems – that none of these officials was listening to him. His messages mainly revolved around allowing women to work outside the home and warning against their removing the veil and mixing with men (Al-Badr 6/7/1434 *Hejira*). He also severely criticized Islamic University for opening non-religious colleges and admitting women to them (Al-Abbad 2010).

In March 2002, a fire broke out at a girls' school in Mecca killing 14 pupils; the government used the incident to take girls' education away from the religious

establishment and place it under the Ministry of Education. Girls' education had been under the sheikhs' control since its establishment in 1960, and was considered the fortified bastion and symbol of the traditional religious current's power. All those who presided over that sector were senior clerics and most of its employees were loyal to the religious current. Many saw it as entitlement or prerogative of the Kingdom's senior clerics, no different in that from the ministries of Awqaf and Justice, or specialized religious institutions. The Presidency of Girls' Education used to run 10,674 schools with a total of 178,276 female teachers, or 25% of the state's civil employees, in 2002 (Saudi Arabia Department of Statistics 2002).

As an example of the blow's severity, the Salafists tried to organize a sit-in in protest against the move but some senior sheikhs convinced them to postpone it, with the hope that their discussions with the crown prince would change his mind, but it seems that no one at the royal court was listening to them. It was already November by the time the activists realized that the sheikhs' efforts would likely not succeed, and a few hundred of them organized a sit-in in front of the Grand Mufti's office in the capital Riyadh, but this reaction came in what amounts to 'injury time'. The religious current no longer had its old thrust and power, and the government was no longer interested in placating it.

The Council for Enjoining Good and Forbidding Evil was the government's next target; the council was another of the religious current's fortresses and a symbol of its struggle against other currents, and until 2002 had enjoyed immunity from public criticism and various kinds of litigation. The well-known Saudi novelist Abdo Khal recounts an incident he personally had with the Council, which shows the clout it once had in the political system (Khal 2010). He says,

I was severely beaten by the security forces accompanying the Council for Enjoining Good and Forbidding Evil that stopped me when I was driving around looking for parking outside a mall, while my wife was doing her shopping. They dragged me out of the car [...] I went with my wife to the Nazla police station to make a complaint, but the major told me 'you are crazy, who complains against the Council for Enjoining Good and Forbidding Evil [...]?' Eight years have passed since that incident and I am still waiting for the police to get in touch with me. [...] I tried to write about the incident at the time but was unable to because the Council had been granted total immunity against complaints or exposure of its members' mistakes.

This real story is a good example of the manner in which the council deals with the public, and there are several similar incidents of which very few have been recorded, most having been transmitted by word of mouth (Al-Nuqaidan 2012). In April 2004, a judge agreed to prosecute a case raised by a Saudi woman against the council's employees, whom she accused of kidnapping and terrorizing her and her daughter. The fact that the case was accepted at all was unprecedented. In the past, the courts refused all cases against the council even when the accusation was supported by ample evidence or the judge was convinced of the claimants' honesty, preferring to opt for an amicable solution between the parties to avoid bringing the council before the law.

In the same context, the past ten years have witnessed thousands of yearly dismissals of teachers and *imams* from their positions, especially those who harbour non-traditional views, and the Civil Service Commission gave the Minister of Education permission to transfer teachers to positions outside the education sector, if he receives directives to that effect from the Interior Ministry. In 2010, for example, 2,000 teachers

were transferred to other jobs (Al-Awwad 2010), as were 3000 others the following year; the Minister of Awqaf said that 6000 mosque *imams* were dismissed between 2008 and 2011 because they had been ‘derelict in their duties as *imams* and preachers’ (Al-Naqmi 2012), meaning that they failed to abide by professional or political rules. Candidates to higher education branches having to do with the rehabilitation of judges and professors of religious colleges received the same treatment. In theory, these measures are aimed at sidelining those issuing accusations of apostasy and those suspected of sympathies with Al-Qaeda or of adhering to their beliefs, though in fact they also target activists, even reformist Salafists whose loyalty to the state or support for its policies is in doubt (e.g. Al-Thabit 2010).

Fifth: *Al-Tanweer* (enlightenment) current

Just like the attacks on New York City and Washington, DC, marked a turning point in the relationship between the state and the religious current, it became the cornerstone of the religious current’s path; the Al-Sahwa current that dominated all social activities in the Kingdom for over two decades had begun to unravel. Scores of activists who had found in Al-Qaeda global discourse a model of power and pride soon discovered that the price to pay for supporting it was dearer than the hopes pinned on it. The sheikhs who for a short time dreamt about becoming national leaders discovered that the religious current was still operating within narrow confines, and that their discourse had failed to convince anyone beyond these confines. Scores of Arab activists who in the 1980s and 1990s had become the engine of the religious movement discovered that they were ultimately classified as foreigners and, as such, could be deported at any moment for security reasons, which is what actually happened. In 2002 the Interior Minister, Prince Nayef, said that many of Saudi Arabia’s problems came from the Muslim Brotherhood (Nayef 2002).

When he came out of gaol in 1999, alongside other prominent symbols of Al-Sahwa, Sheikh Salman Al-Odeh found a changed world; he felt a gap between the society he knew in 1994 and the one he was then seeing. He said, in this context:

Television has become part of the house’s furniture when once local society rejected the whole idea for both the ordinary people and the sheikhs [...] his [my] student, Abdul Rahman gives him a laptop, and shows him how to connect to the Internet and access a website [...] it is the magic of information and fear of the unknown. He rediscovers things and reacts with astonishment; his memory is in an unusual celebratory condition; it recuperates its old files, recalls the spirit through which he used to look at things [...] and links them to today’s feeling and emotions.

(Al-Odeh 2011, 540–541)

Sheikh Odeh put his finger on the key change that had taken place at the time: the information revolution; unlike other Arab countries, the Kingdom had been closed to new ideas and currents (Article 19, 1991). The emergence of satellite television and the Internet broke the walls of isolation and brought down the borders; the extreme censorship of books and media was no longer an issue. In mid-2010, a Salafist cleric noticed that the post-Al-Sahwa generation dealt with religious ideas and symbols differently. The new generation was becoming increasingly individualistic due to its growing ability to access information directly and express itself via modern communication tools that allowed it to bypass its relationship with the clerics. The youths’ knowledge of religious matters and their exposure to different ideas gave them the self-confidence

and courage to dispute the *ulema*'s opinions that were once considered infallible and sacrosanct, including the option of consulting non-religious sources in their arguments with the *ulema* (Al-Buloushi 2010).

After five years of isolation from the world, Al-Sahwa's sheikhs had to choose between confining themselves to their current's old culture and politics and gaining access the wide world beyond. Each of these choices has a price, one to be earned and one to be paid. The years they spent in gaol gave them the opportunity to reconsider their positions, their relationships and the old ways they used to do things, and this reconsideration impacted on their activities during the next stage. The first impact was to break with Al-Qaeda and those who advocate violence. Although this decision would cost them a significant part of their reputation as independent leaders, it was necessary to avoid more deterioration. According to Sheikh Odeh:

We used to despise the American discourse which said 'he who is not with me is against me', yet here we are today plagued with a discourse that says 'he who is not with me is against God'.

(Al-Odeh 2003)

The decade between 1995 and 2005 was the most difficult in the religious current's history. It had to apologize to the government on a daily basis to prove again and again that it was still loyal to the regime, and turn a blind eye to the restrictions and measures aimed at liquidating its sources of power, including the arrest of many of its figures and activists. In 2011, the Interior Ministry said that 5000 individuals belonging to the current had been arrested, but political activists claim that the real number exceeds 20,000.²²

In 2003, there were widespread calls for political reform in the country; a number of activists issued a declaration entitled 'Vision of the Kingdom's Present and Future', a statement that marked a turning point in the history of calls for reform in the Kingdom.²³ Among the signatories were six well-known activists from the religious current, although the majority stayed on the sidelines, and neither got involved in the initiative nor launched one of their own. It was clear that the religious current was no longer unified, was unable to launch initiatives similar to the one it issued in previous years, and that its leaders were no longer willing to pay the price of a confrontation with the government, which outcome was far from guaranteed.

The social influence of most religious leaders had started to retreat and terms like 'the sultan's *ulema*' began to circulate among the religious community, terms that were heard briefly during the Gulf crisis before disappearing. In fact, quite a significant number of Al-Sahwa's leaders had decided to return politically to the state's embrace and work alongside its officials without, however, regaining their former positions. Within the context of their new relationship with the state, some founded their own cultural and media institutions, while others became lawyers or advisors to different statesmen.

This elitist type behaviour was very different from the populist activism of the old Al-Sahwa. Today, the current's youths are the main absentees from the scene. Some of those who had separated themselves from their leaders developed their own intellectual and practical abilities, and now had a new vision of religion, politics and society. The latter would in time form a new elite – at least some of them – and lead a new religious current with a discourse different from Al-Sahwa's and, by extension, from traditional Salafist ideology (Al-Qudaimy 2011).

The new current was looking for a special occasion to make its presence known, and it seems that it found it in the American elections that witnessed Barak Obama's rise as the first 'African American presidential candidate of Muslim origin'.

The new current's activists seized the occasion to announce their adoption of democracy as the only option for the Kingdom's future. Dr Mohammad Al-Ahmari attacked the clerics and Al-Sahwa's followers who had previously described democracy as the product of apostates saying:

Democracy is the highest form of governance, and all other systems are not even worth mentioning in the news, any news, except for news about the coerced and defeated among the marginal, failed or backwards groups.

(Al-Ahmari 2008)

Salman Al-Odeh commented saying, 'Laawe Kana Obama Fi Balad Arabi ...' (If Obama were in an Arab country you would have found him in one of the deportation centres)²⁴ in reference to the treatment of foreigners in the Kingdom. Al-Ahmari and Al-Odeh were implicitly announcing the creation of a new current whose discourse is different from Al-Sahwa's, adopts democracy and public freedoms, and bets on good relations with other currents and trends in Saudi society.

The announcement was met by a strong attack by Al-Odeh's former colleagues; it was clear, however, that the latter was actually wagering on a new trend whose size and influence in Saudi society was likely to grow, a trend that believed in democratic transition and public participation as a way for Saudi society to exit its accumulated crises.

Although the new current's youths have neither media nor social institutions similar to the sheikh's, they are enthusiastic, have a good knowledge of the world and harbour new ideas that have allowed them to use what Manuel Castells calls the 'Power of Flows'. This happens when ordinary people have access to information on the Internet, for example, then reproduce it and spread it around the world. Not only does this release the power pent up within them, but also it disperses the power that was once monopolized by certain groups (flow of power), and allows marginalized communities to find their own sources of power or form influential pressure groups (Castells 2001, 217). These youths would soon impose themselves and their discourse on the scene using new media outlets, and would become a considerable force that has so far managed to offer a national democratic discourse as a more attractive alternative that responds to the new generation's needs.

The current, called 'Al-Tanweery [Enlightenment] Current' since 2009, issued its first petition in the middle of 2011, delineates the separation between it and the state, on the one hand, and the traditional Salafism and Al-Sahwa, on the other. Around 10,000 citizens signed the petition, entitled 'Towards a State of Rights and Institutions', which began with a reference to the transformation taking place in the Arab world:

The revolution that the youths have launched and the entire population participated in, in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and elsewhere, suggests that the kingdom, like other countries, is facing a serious challenge and that the situation will head towards revolution if the state does not quickly introduce reforms, development, freedom and dignity, reverses injustice and combats corruption.

The first 50 names on the list of signatories are of particular importance; the names show a wide cross-section of support that transcends the religious current's social milieu, since among them is a number of liberal, leftist and Shia activists, both men

and women, which confirms the interest of the petition's drafters in offering a discourse that represents all sectors of Saudi society. The religious discourse once described itself as the sole shaper of events and public opinion, and addressed the Saudis as an adviser and arbiter. This petition, however, presents itself as a partner in the same discourse that calls for joint objectives and offers collective solutions.

The petition pinpointed eight avenues of reform, starting with an elected parliament with full prerogatives, separating the prime minister and monarch's positions, reforming the judiciary and ensuring its independence, combating administrative corruption and abuse of power, encouraging the establishment of unions and civil society institutions, allowing freedom of expression and guaranteeing it in the law and, finally, releasing all prisoners of conscience and ensuring that the security forces abide by the rule of law in matters of state security.²⁵

These days, there are three distinct warring factions within the religious current:

- Traditional Salafism, most of whose members and positions are linked to the state.
- Remnants of the Al-Sahwa current whose activities focus on combating Westernization and issues related to mixing between the genders and women's work. The latter's political position wavers between opposition to what it calls Westernization policies implemented by the state and supporting policies that strengthen religious activism and its institutions.
- The Tanweer current that calls, alongside those who advocate political reform, for transitioning towards a constitutional monarchy that ensures the rule of law, public freedoms and people's participation in political decision-making. This automatically places it among the political opposition, although it is not involved in day-to-day opposition activities.

Conclusion

This paper has addressed the relationship between the religious current and the state in Saudi Arabia, based on the dialectic of: alliance–intimidating domination–discordance. It has clarified the special status of religion within the state compared with other Arab countries, due to the fact that the religious establishment is a founding partner in the political system, which endows it with a political and social status unlike any other in the Arab world. Despite that fact, the state's openness to international markets and its adoption of the modernization option – at least in the economic sphere – resulted in a series of change dynamics within the state, society and the religious current itself, which eventually led to slow but deep changes.

Relationship between the religious current and the state

The paper delineated five different stages in the relationship between the religious current and the state, each of which begins at a particular turning point:

- The first stage began in 1961 and witnessed a change in the religious leadership that saw it develop from its old image into a strong and organized institution; it succeeded thanks to the mufti's ability to dominate all official religious activities, the judiciary and girls' education.

- The second stage began in 1979, witnessed the rise of a new generation of followers and leaders, and saw politics become a daily occupation thanks to the Iranian revolution, the occupation of the Holy Sanctuary, the *jihad* in Afghanistan and the impact of Arab activists. The religious institution doubled in size and more people enrolled in religious education. The debate expanded round the state's legitimacy, its relationship with religion and its qualifications as a model of good governance. However, the most important change at the time was the Salafist current's growth beyond its original social milieu (central Najd) when thousands of migrants from rural areas joined its ranks. As a result, Salafism lost its historic trait as a Najd-based sect and its function as an organic security belt for the royal family.
- The third stage coincided with the occupation of Kuwait in 1990, and saw the above questions change into accusations, against the Saudi state and elite, of involvement in a Western plot to control Muslim societies. The crises shed light on the new generation of clerics as the shapers of public opinion and political pundits. The stage also witnessed the rise of the Al-Sahwa current; however, before most of its leaders were arrested, in 1994, they managed to reorient the current role from guardian of the state to detractor of its legitimacy, by contradicting the old vision of the Saudi state as a model of good governance in line with religious teachings.
- The fourth stage began with the attack on New York City and Washington, DC, in September 2011; its main event was the state's decision to dismantle the sources of the religious current's power, especially those that allowed it to mobilize and play a political role. Different strands of the current were affected by the decision including the official religious establishment and traditionalist trend affiliated to the state. Also during that period, girls' education was appended to the Ministry of Education, and the Council of Senior Ulema and Higher Judicial Council had their membership changed. The immunity that religious institutions once enjoyed was lifted, including that of the Council for Enjoining Good and Forbidding Evil. Several domestic religious institutions were either cut down in size or closed, and thousands of activists were arrested, dismissed from their posts or denied promotion.
- The features of the fifth stage became clear with the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011. One of its most salient manifestations is the rise of the Tanweer current that openly opposes traditional Salafism and turns its back on Al-Sahwa's discourse. The current adopts democracy as a model of good governance and calls for transitioning towards a constitutional monarchy. These principles were laid out in a petition entitled 'Towards a State of Rights and Institutions' that was a turning point in the history of calls for reform in Saudi Arabia.

The religious current as a political player: does it help or impede the reform movement?

In theory, the religious current could be for or against the state; likewise, it could play a defining role in shaping public attitudes towards the government. Realistically, it is difficult to determine which way it will go, at least in light of the situation on the ground. Most people do not distinguish between a religious cleric loyal to the state and another who is not, and most clerics do not have a firm position towards the state and its policies.

This is mainly due to predominance of a fragmented view of public affairs. While a cleric supports the government because it holds prayers, spends on mosques, manages the *haj* (pilgrimage to Mecca), and respects religious occasions and rituals, he ignores economic, foreign policy and legal matters. Intellectually, the Saudi cleric tends – for the most part – to delve in generalities like day-to-day matters and people’s behaviour, and has no interest in politics; he is no different in that from the vast majority of ordinary people. The lack of either a political life or a modern organized civil society in the Kingdom is a major contributor to the poverty of political culture, and impacts religious clerics and ordinary people alike.

It was stated above that all religious clerics – save for a few – are linked to the state, both professionally and for existential reasons, via the official religious establishment. However, apart from the existential aspect, many religious clerics, especially those from the middle and upper echelons, obtain their power from the positions they occupy or connections they have to various statesmen, and use it to increase their social capital. In other words, the cleric has no choice – for existential reasons or to maintain his social status – but live in the shadow of the state. In times of crisis, the state works feverishly to win the latter’s support and punishes those who hesitate, which is what happened to thousands among them and among the activists over the past decade.

For those two reasons, i.e. the poverty of political culture and existential and social links to the state, the religious current was an active supporter of the state or, at least, helped thwart any serious moves by the opposition, as happened during the so-called Hanin Revolution in March 2011. A change in this position is contingent upon other factors, chief among which is the development of alternative ‘circles of interest’, which could happen as an outcome of changes taking place in the region. A good example is the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafists’ rise in Egypt and Syria, or change in local public opinion as a reaction to the government’s policies or regional changes.

Division within the religious current and its impact on short-term policies

Al-Sahwa’s leaders saw the deaths of Sheikhs Abdul Aziz bin Baz (in 1999) and Mohammad bin Othaimen (in 2001) as the end of the great Salafist fathers’ era, and the end of the dream to unite different trends within the current (Al-Awajy 2002). This factor, coupled with changes in government policies and the escalating international pressure on the government to curb religious extremism – particularly by the Americans – quickly unravelled the old patriarchal-like system within the religious current and opened the door to new ideas and leaders who forge their way forward by openly stating their opposition to those in power. This change played a double role: it opened the door to radical political trends and provided an opportunity to those seeking to acquire the social power enjoyed by senior clerics by identifying with the state and forging alliances with its officials. An example of the first case is Sheikh Youssef Al-Ahmad who shifted his interest from issues like Westernization, mixing among the genders and women’s work to the cause of political prisoners, organizing sit-ins in front of the Interior Ministry and calling for their release, which led to his arrest in July 2011.²⁶

Positions like these force the current’s followers and activists to negotiate their political positions – with or against the state. Whichever decision is made, it has to be grounded in a socio-religious justification. It was noticed, for example, that a significant number of activists who supported the state, in March 2011, and gave religious and

political justifications for their choice, tended after Sheikh Al-Ahmad's arrest to voice their despair that reforms would take place in the foreseeable future, a move that placed them on the side of the opposition. On the other hand, and contrary to that, a number of clerics and activists formerly identified as reformers decided to keep quiet and focus on their professional matters when an official decision was issued preventing judges from making public statements or engaging with the media.²⁷

I believe that the tendency for position-demarkation will be stronger among activists who remained loyal to Al-Sahwa, because the trend proved unable to regenerate its discourse. Its leaders are growing older and lead conservative elitist lives, with no new leaders ready to replace them; it is akin to a popular movement without popular leaders. In my opinion, a large segment of this current will give up politics in the short-term and involve itself in cultural activities aimed, first and foremost, at developing new visions capable of confronting the challenges brought about by the Arab Spring.

On the other hand, the current was highly affected by the rise of political Salafism outside the Kingdom, especially in Egypt and Yemen. What strengthened the hand of those advocating that democracy be accepted as a good governance system was the particular involvement of Egypt's Salafists in politics by democratic means. Until recently, the latter saw democracy as a Christian model and an entryway for Western culture into the minds of Muslims. In May 2012, a major faction of the current held a meeting in Doha, under the leadership of Sheikh Nasser Al-Omar and the participation of prominent activists from the Kingdom and elsewhere, in which democracy was the main topic of discussion. Such discussions will, on the one hand, lead to a wider cross-section of people believing in democracy and, on the other hand, help centralize the Arab Salafist movements at the expense of its Saudi counterparts. Both options will in the short-term widen the gap between Al-Sahwa and the government.

The Tanweer current and the limits of its impact

Although Al-Tanweer's general position places it among the ranks of the opposition, it is still too early to say that it has a major impact on political conditions in the country. The current still has major unresolved issues including its position towards other national groups, and towards women's and minority rights, although those who know the current's members believe that these issues have already been resolved. It is also clear that they avoid openly declaring their position on these issues to avoid jeopardizing their relations with the remnants of Al-Sahwa, or lose a public that is still halfway between Al-Sahwa's old discourse and Al-Tanweer's new one. The current is still a youthful social movement that expresses itself mainly through cultural activities, wages a cultural war against the traditionalists and Al-Sahwa's followers, and has not yet reached the level of a concrete and organized movement. Sheikh Salman Al-Odeh's adherence to the current is a source of strength for it since he is one of the most credible clerics today, though it is unlikely to cut corners. Many restrictions pull him back to his history and traditional sources of power, which I do not believe he is ready to forgo, unless social and political conditions in the country undergo a major change.

Given all the above reservations, the current's fast expansion tells us that it has succeeded in achieving a major breakthrough, and is becoming increasingly convincing to the new generation; this encourages the belief that it is likely to play an influential role in any future local movement.

Notes

1. For more information on the council, see Al-Dhayan (2011).
2. It is worth mentioning that the Minister of Awqaf had previously denied that the ministry was planning such a move (Aal-El-Shaikh 2006). Based on Ministry of Awqaf statistics, the actual number of mosque employees in 2008 was 78,347; for more information, see the Awqaf Ministry's website at: <http://www.moia.gov.sa/Menu/Pages/%D9%8DStatistics2.aspx/>. Accessed July 3, 2013.
3. Based on the Ministry of Awqaf's statistics, the number of mosques under its supervision is 55,266, in addition to 3604 prayer sites for special occasions. This number does not include mosques under the supervision of other government institutions or private individuals.
4. For more information on the percentage of those involved in religious education in the general academic curricula, see Al-Issa (2009, 23).
5. The general tendency among senior *ulema* in the Kingdom is to admit that the state has made mistakes and committed legal violations, while at the same time forbidding anyone from defaming it. The only solution in their opinion is to pursue the system of giving confidential advice to the ruler. For a collection of opinions on the subject, see the Subul Al-Salam website (<http://sobolalsalam.net/>).
6. The *fatwa* was issued by the Permanent Committee for Scientific Research and Iftaa' (Islamic rulings), no. 24937, on 31 October 2010. It states that: 'Muslim women are not allowed to work in a place where there exists mixing with men. They should stay away from areas where men congregate and find employment in permitted domains where they would neither seduce nor get seduced.' What was mentioned in the question (to which the *fatwa* is responding) means that it exposes women to both seduction and to seducing others and is therefore forbidden by *Shar'* (Islamic jurisdiction). 'Any company that hires her for such a position is abetting her in doing the forbidden and is therefore itself forbidden.'
7. For the text of the letter, see Aal al-Sheikh (2011).
8. For Sheikh Omar Al-Ashqar's account, see Shehadeh (2011).
9. For more details on the occupation of the Holy Sanctuary and those who took part in it, see Al-Huzaimi (2011).
10. Personal conversation with the author on this specific issue.
11. For more on Al-Albani's methodology and impact, see Shehadeh (2010, 45).
12. For more details on this petition, see Ahmad (2010).
13. See the interview of the editor-in-chief of Al-Bilad newspaper, Abdul Aziz Mohammad Qassem, with Mohsin Hussein Al-'Awajy: 'Mukashafat al-doctor Mohsin Al-'Awajy – Al-Juso' al-Awal' (Dr Mohsin Al-'Awajy's Disclosures – Part I). This interview was published in Al-Bilad on 20 Shawal 1422h, and on the interviewee website in January 2002 (<http://www.mohsenalawajy.com/ar/index.php/2009-12-05-13-19-49/93-1>, accessed 3 August 2013).
14. For the story about the incident, as told by Dr Aziza Al-Mane', one of those who took part in the incident, see Qassem (2007, 80).
15. See note 13.
16. The new Chairman of the Council, Dr Abdul Aziz Al-Saeed, who was appointed by King Fahd on 16 December 1999, was the first president from outside the family of Sheikh Mohammad bin Abdul Wahab, which had monopolized the post since 1903 (Al-Nuqaidan 2012, 65).
17. See note 15.
18. The most important of Al-Hawali's sermons were: '*Fasathkuroun ma Aqoolu Lakom*' (You shall remember what I am telling you), in Jeddah, and '*Farfrou ila-Allah*' (Escape to God), in Riyadh, both of which were delivered in early September 1990. He also wrote articles and a memorandum to the Council of Senior Ulema, all of which focused on what Al-Hawali said was an international plot to liquidate the religious current and control the Middle East. For the text of the first sermon, see the website of Sheikh Dr Safar Al-Hawali (www.alhawali.com/index.cfm?method=home).
19. For the text and additional reasons for its publication, see Lacroix (2011).
20. On this, see Sheikh Abdul Mohsin Al-Obaikan's interview to *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* newspaper (Al-Thayidi 2005).
21. See the Council for Senior Ulema's statement distancing itself from the Advisory Memorandum in *Wasiyah, wa Nasiha Hatta la Takuna Fitnah* [Recommendation and Advice to

- Avoid Strife] on the *Al-Sakina* website, dated 25 February 2011 (<http://www.assakina.com/taseel/6722.html>, accessed 3 August 2013).
22. In April 2011, the Interior Ministry spokesman said that there were 5056 prisoners: 'Waddaha Wa Fassala Bayan Hay'at-l-Tahkeek ...' (He Clarified the Statement of the Bureau of Investigation and Public Prosecution ...); 'Ministry of the Interior: 90% of the Detainees for Terrorist Offenses are being Currently Tried ... and Only 616 are Under Investigation'. *Al-Iqtisadiya*, April 2, 2011. Commenting on the statement, the opposing *Harakat al-Islah* said that the real number of prisoners exceeded 27,000; 'Bayan Harakat Al-Islah Hawla Adad-l-Sujana ...' (Statement by the Islah Movement Regarding the Number of Political Prisoners in the Kingdom). *Al-Saha* website, April 3, 2011 (<http://www.saudiwave.com/ar/2010-11-09-15-55-47/615-2011-04-03-09-43-40.html>, accessed 4 August 2013).
 23. 'Hal Yatumm Taf'iluha? Nass Wathiqat al-Isolah-l-Watani (Will it be Activated? Text of the National Reform Document). *Shu'oon Saudia*. Accessed July 3, 2013. <http://www.saudiaffairs.net>.
 24. See the Alweeam website. September 29, 2008. <http://alweeam.com>; the interview was aired during the MBC's Hajar al-Zawiya programme on 27 September 2008.
 25. For details of the petition, see Alsaif (2012).
 26. It has been said that Sheikh Youssef Al-Ahmad was released from prison in November 2012 as part of a general amnesty.
 27. Regarding this decision, see *Al-Weeam* May 6, 2010: <http://alweeam.com/archives/126161/>. The website was undergoing maintenance when accessed on 3 July 2013.

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