



Saudi Arabia, Salafism, and U.S. Foreign Policy

Gabriel Said Reynolds



When the April 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and a group of nations including the United States was concluded, the Obama administration scrambled to assure Saudi Arabia (Iran's rival in the Middle East) of American friendship. Secretary of State John Kerry visited Saudi Arabia three times in 2016. During his third visit, this past December, he declared: "In turbulent times, it's good to have solid friends."

One might have expected the Trump administration to have a different posture towards the Saudis. During his presidential campaign Donald Trump fiercely criticized Saudi Arabia, and in particular the human rights situation there. He repeatedly attacked Hillary Clinton for accepting money from the Saudis. During their final debate he declared, referring to Saudi Arabia: "You talk about women and women's rights. So these are people that push gays off buildings. These are people that kill women and treat women horribly" (it's actually ISIS that pushes gays off buildings).

Nevertheless, there are few signs these days of any disruption in the U.S.-Saudi alliance. Saudi Arabia was noticeably missing from President Trump's executive order on

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immigration. During his visit to Saudi Arabia, President Trump received the highest civilian honor given by the country (the Collar of Abdulaziz al-Saud) and signed a multi-billion-dollar arms deal, the largest in world history. In the May 21 speech he gave there on Islam, President Trump avoided any talk of “radical Islamic terrorism” and any criticism of the Saudis. He did refer to a government that is responsible for giving terrorists “safe harbor, financial backing, and the social standing needed for recruitment.” Yet he wasn’t speaking of Saudi Arabia, but of Iran.

After his visit to Saudi Arabia, Trump applauded the country’s decision to break off diplomatic relations with Qatar, suggesting in a tweet that Qatar is responsible for funding terrorists.

The Trump administration has been looking in the wrong places for the source of terrorism. Iran is a Shi’ite country and Shi’ites have been victims, not perpetrators, of Islamist violence. Qatar is certainly guilty of supporting Islamist groups, but to focus on Qatar instead of Saudi Arabia is to worry about smoke and ignore a blazing fire. The overwhelming majority of Islamist terrorists are associated with a Sunni movement known as Salafism, the ideological home of which is nowhere else but Saudi Arabia. Now there is no reason to think that Saudi Arabia was directly involved in the recent attacks

in London, Manchester, or elsewhere, but for decades Saudi Arabia has been spreading the radical ideology of Salafism. And while most Salafis never turn violent—they simply live pious lives and seek to spread Islam through proselytism—some do.

Trump’s refusal to confront Saudi Arabia puts him in continuity with a long line of presidents of both parties. The roots of the U.S.-Saudi alliance are sometimes traced to a symbolic meeting between Franklin Roosevelt and Saudi King Ibn Saud in 1945. In some ways, the high point of this alliance was the First Gulf War of 1990–1991, when hundreds of thousands of American troops were stationed in the Saudi desert.

During the Obama administration, the alliance with the Saudis was challenged by the rise of the American shale oil industry, the nuclear deal with Iran, and a congressional bill that allowed victims (and their families) of the 9/11 attacks to sue Saudi Arabia.

For their part the Saudis have been eager to remain on good terms with the U.S. Saudi Arabia counts on the U.S. to buy its oil, to provide military supplies, and to turn a blind eye to its current brutal campaign in Yemen. The U.S. also hosts tens of thousands of Saudi college students, who make up the fourth largest group of foreign students in American institutions. “When push comes to shove, this relationship is unshakable,” Adel al-Jubeir, Saudi Arabia’s ambassador to the United States (since named foreign minister), told the *Washington Post* in March 2015.

It is long past time to shake up that relationship. In its campaign against a Shi’ite uprising in Yemen, Saudi Arabia has effectively worked

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hand in hand with al-Qaeda. The second-largest group of foreign fighters in the Islamic State come from Saudi Arabia. Meanwhile Saudi Arabia continues to spread its Salafi ideology abroad. In a 2013 speech, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton acknowledged the problem: "The Saudis have exported more extreme ideology than any other place on earth over the course of the last 30 years," she declared.

The term Salafism comes from the Arabic expression *al-salaf al-salih*, the "pious ancestors." Salafis hold that after the first three pious generations of Muslims, Islam became corrupted by non-Islamic practices and teachings, and that a program of purification is needed to return Islam to its pristine state.

Salafism in Saudi Arabia is particularly shaped by the legacy of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, whence the related term Wahhabism. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab was a religious leader from the region of Nejd in central Arabia who died in 1792. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab lamented the state of Muslims in his day. He was particularly opposed to devotions at the shrines of saints or prophets, the rituals of Sufi mystics, and various practices of Shi'ite Muslims. And he had a particular loathing for Jews and Christians. In 1744 Ibn Abd al-Wahhab made a pact with a tribal leader from the region of modern-day Riyadh, named Muhammad ibn Saud. When the modern Saudi state

was established in 1932, it was Ibn Saud's descendant, Abdul Aziz, who would be the first king.

Like other Muslims, Salafis believe that Muhammad is the final prophet sent to the world, that the Qur'an is a perfect, matchless scripture, and that Islam is God's will for all of humanity. Many Muslims, and not only Salafis, also believe Islam is about more than spirituality, that the rules of Islam should also influence how a state is run. As a saying popular among conservative Muslims has it: Islam is not simply a "religion"—Islam is "religion and state" (*din wa-dawla*).

In fact many Islamic states actively seek to inculcate Islam among their populations. Children are taught the principles of Islam in public schools and encouraged to follow them. Prayer is encouraged by the funding of religious schools and by allowing mosques to use loudspeakers to broadcast the call to prayer and the Friday sermon. Prisoners who memorize the Qur'an are given reduced sentences. Christians (or others) who convert to Islam are celebrated in the media and may be given money collected from alms.

Saudi Arabia, however, goes further than this. First, while Islamic states still allow for non-Muslims (especially "People of the Book"—generally understood to mean Jews and Christians) to practice their

religion, Saudi Arabia does not. In part inspired by a medieval tradition that has Muhammad declare that no two religions shall co-exist in the Arabian Peninsula, Saudis insist that their country remain “pure” of any non-Islamic religious practice. Thus in Saudi Arabia it is a crime to practice Christianity. Carrying a Bible is forbidden, wearing a cross is forbidden, and preaching the Gospel is forbidden. There are well over a million Christians—mostly foreign workers—in Saudi Arabia but not a single church.

Second, in Saudi Arabia Islamic practice is compelled. In many Muslim countries disobedience is tolerated. Not in Saudi Arabia. In Saudi Arabia shops are closed when it is time to pray and women are compelled to dress according to Islamic standards. In Saudi Arabia one can be condemned to death for “crimes” against God, such as apostasy from Islam, sodomy, adultery, and even witchcraft.

Behind the principle of compelling obedience to religious law is a Qur’anic turn of phrase that calls on believers to “promote virtue and prevent vice.” In Saudi Arabia the government office meant to enforce obedience to the Islamic law takes its name from this turn of phrase. Among other things this office runs a volunteer police force—the Mutaween—which roams the streets and the shopping malls of the kingdom to enforce Islamic morality. There was a time when the Mutaween wielded the power to punish offenders on the spot (some carried sticks and beat offenders publicly). Their status in the country, however, has suffered from a number of high-profile incidents: when a school in Mecca caught fire in 2002, the Mutaween prevented the girls inside from fleeing because they

were not properly covered. Fifteen students died. In response to the backlash from such incidents the Saudi government has restricted the power of the Mutaween: they are now to do their morality work with “kindness and gentleness.”

The repression of religious freedom in Saudi Arabia has particularly affected the large Shi’ite minority in the country, concentrated in the oil-rich province of al-Ahsa. On January 2, 2016, the Shi’ite cleric Nimr al-Nimr was executed by the Saudi government. His crime was officially “inciting sectarian strife,” but the real reason for his arrest and eventual execution was his outspoken criticism of the Saudi system (he had called for free elections) and his campaigns on behalf of Shi’ites, who live in the shadow of a state ideology that sees them as wayward if not heretical Muslims (and possible collaborators with Iran). At an October 4, 2011, protest by Shi’ites, al-Nimr declared dramatically: “The [Saudi] authorities depend on bullets . . . and killing and imprisonment. We must depend on the roar of the word, on the words of justice.” Yet in Saudi Arabia, even words can get you killed.

The human rights violations in Saudi Arabia also affect Sunnis who dare to challenge this state ideology. In recent years, Saudi Arabia has seen an increase in the numbers of skeptics, and even atheists (and to a lesser extent, secret converts to Christianity). In response, the Saudis have begun to monitor social media closely, and to punish voices of deviance. The most famous victim of this inquisition is Raif Badawi, creator of the website *Free Saudi Liberals*. Badawi was arrested in 2012 for “insulting Islam through electronic channels” and later sentenced to seven years in prison and 600 lashes, to be administered, “mercifully,” in

rounds of fifty lashes. He has already been subjected to one round of lashing (performed publicly in front of a mosque in Jeddah), and remains in prison. Badawi has also been accused of apostasy for propagating liberal thought, an accusation punishable by death. President Obama, who once spoke out against Saudi abuses as a senator, never publicly criticized the Saudis for the Badawi case.¹

What should particularly worry the U.S. is the way that the Saudi brand of Islam is spreading to other countries. In Arab countries fewer and fewer Muslim women dare not to wear a headscarf. In Pakistan blasphemy laws, which have led to vigilante killings, have enormous popular support. Indonesia recently saw a massive popular movement against the Christian governor of Jakarta, motivated by the principle that Muslims should not have a Christian authority above them. Throughout the entire Islamic world, from Nigeria to the southern Philippines, extremist Sunni Islam is on the rise. This rise in extremism has not occurred spontaneously, and much of it can be traced back to Saudi Arabia.

One way that extremist Islam spreads is through juridical opinions, or fatwas, published by Saudi scholars on the internet. Among the most famous “fatwa” websites is that of the Saudi jurist Mu’ammad al-Munajjid known as “IslamQA” (a website translated into a dozen languages). For example, in response to a question on whether a woman should be permitted to leave the house in order to shop, al-Munajjid declares, “The general principle is that women should stay at home and not go out except for essential reasons or cases of need.” When she must go out, he continues, she should be “wearing complete hijab, and she

should not be wearing make-up, adornments or perfume.”

Another avenue of Saudi influence is the pilgrimage to Mecca. Each year millions of Muslims travel to Saudi Arabia for either the major (*hajj*) or minor (*umra*) pilgrimage.

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For most Muslims the pilgrimage is simply an experience of religious devotion and spiritual solidarity with fellow believers. Some, however, are affected by the experience of witnessing the “purity” of the way Islam is practiced in Mecca and Medina.

Others come to Saudi Arabia to stay longer. The country is home to almost ten million guest workers, the large majority of whom are Muslims. Some Muslims go to Saudi Arabia specifically to study religion, and return home having fully embraced Saudi ideology and eager to see it spread in their own country. For many Muslims Saudi Arabia represents a pure form of Islam, a society where the laws that God has revealed are taken seriously, and a country to be envied.

This perspective is apparent in the comments of the popular Indian preacher and Muslim televangelist Zakir Naik during a 1998 lecture entitled “Why the West is Coming to Islam”:

In Muslim countries, [rape] does take place. . . . [But] what country [has] the least [amount of] rape in the world? It is Saudi Arabia. I am not saying it is nil there,

there are black sheep in every community. But [Saudi Arabia has] the least rate of rape in the world. The least rate of robbery, it is Saudi Arabia.

A popular Islamist slogan relates, “Islam is the solution.” For many Muslims around the world such as Zakir Naik, this might be modified to “Saudi Islam is the solution.”

The Saudi state is also actively engaged in spreading its own version of Islam. Saudi Arabia sponsors the building of mosques and Islamic schools not only in the Muslim world but in places where Islam is a minority, such as sub-Saharan Africa, East Asia, Europe, and the United States. In some countries, such as Kosovo, Saudi-backed mosques give stipends to poor families if they agree to veil their daughters and attend services.² In September 2015, after Germany announced plans to accept upwards of one million refugees, King Salman of Saudi Arabia refused to accept any refugees. He did, however, offer to build 200 mosques in Germany.³

Saudi Arabia has also proven to be deeply committed to Islamic evangelism, or *da'wa*. In 2015 Saudi Arabia awarded the King Faisal International Prize for Service to Islam, with its \$200,000 cash prize, to the aforementioned televangelist Zakir Naik (who has since been given Saudi citizenship as well).

Yet Saudi Arabia is not only interested in proselytism; the country has also been behind the violent spread of Islam through its support of jihadist movements around the world. Not all of this support is visible, and not all of it comes directly from the Saudi state. According to Islamic law the charitable donations (*zakat*) that Muslims are obliged to offer

annually may be given to the poor, to new converts to Islam, or to Muslim groups fighting for the sake of Islam (this latter stipulation comes from the reading of a clause in Qur'an 9:60, which says that charities may be given “in the cause of God,” generally understood to be a euphemism for jihad).

The 9/11 Commission Report identified *zakat* giving from private individuals in Saudi Arabia to Saudi-based “charities” (and other “charities” based in the Gulf) as a major source of support for al-Qaeda. In recent years “alms” have been used to fund jihadi rebels in Syria and Iraq.

The Saudi state itself has also been accused of directly supporting jihadi rebels in Syria, including ISIS. In a private October 2013 speech by Hillary Clinton, excerpts of which were published by WikiLeaks, the former secretary of state declared, “The Saudis and others are shipping large amounts of weapons—and pretty indiscriminately—not at all targeted toward the people that we think would be the more moderate.” In a second email, dated August 17, 2014, and also published by WikiLeaks, Clinton calls for “pressure on the governments of Qatar and Saudi Arabia, which are providing clandestine financial and logistic support” to ISIS.

Officially ISIS and Saudi Arabia are enemies. ISIS is responsible for at least one attack in Saudi Arabia, and in a February interview with a German news outlet, Saudi Foreign Minister al-Jubeir suggested that Saudi Arabia is ready to send special forces troops to fight ISIS. Nevertheless Saudi Arabia has continued to support the Sunni rebellion against the Alawi Shi'ite regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria and some of this support inevitably

finds its way to ISIS and other radical groups.

Meanwhile, by its very embrace of Salafism, Saudi Arabia provides ideological justification for the existence of extremist groups such as ISIS.

If Saudi Arabia is sincere in its stated commitment to fight extremism (Saudi Arabia is part of a group of nations that call themselves the Islamic Coalition against Terrorism and Extremism), then it must initiate substantial reforms. In his speech on Islam in Saudi Arabia, President Trump declared, “We are not here to lecture—we are not here to tell other people how to live, what to do, who to be, or how to worship.” This sounds fine, until one remembers that Saudi Arabia is a country that forbids women from driving, stones women to death for adultery, flogs activists, bans Bibles and churches, and discriminates against its Shia minority. The U.S.

does not need to lecture Saudi Arabia, but it should rethink whether this sort of country should be its “solid friend.”

Reforms in Saudi Arabia are the key to addressing the problem of radicalism elsewhere. Even if Saudi Arabia were to halt all state-sponsored or clandestine support for groups such as ISIS, the Saudi problem would remain. Of course, we should not expect Saudi Arabia suddenly to embrace secularism or western liberal values. Instead the Saudis can look to the rich diversity of Islamic tradition and find resources for reform. Salafism, after all, is not the only Islamic ideology. A country can still be Islamic and respect its minorities, offer liberty to women, and permit freedom of speech and religious practice.

It is good that Saudi Arabia is publicly declaring its willingness to join the campaign against ISIS. There is, however, an equally important campaign that needs to take place: one for ideological reform *within* Saudi Arabia. **P**

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ENDNOTES

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