

## The domestic sources of Saudi foreign policy: Islamists and the state in the wake of the Arab Uprisings

WORKING PAPER

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**SUMMARY:** Saudi Arabia's fragmented Islamist field has displayed a diversity of responses to the coup in Egypt, the conflict in Syria, and the Saudi-led war in Yemen. While a group of younger Saudi Islamists and intellectuals have embraced elements of democracy, the war in Syria, the authoritarian political system, and domestic sectarian tendencies have rallied support for the ISIS model of violent political change.

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Political Islam in Saudi Arabia has to be analyzed in the context of Saudi Arabia's regional policies. Given Saudi Arabia's crucial position as the country of the two holy places of Islam, Mecca and Medina, as well as their newly proactive foreign policy, the question of what foreign policy the country should have become a source of debate amongst Saudi Islamists. Because debates about domestic politics in Saudi Arabia are restricted, debates about foreign policy become arenas where conflicts between opposing social forces are played out. Saudi Arabia is one of the most important Arab and Islamic countries, strategically located and with huge financial resources at its disposal. Therefore, these debates about foreign policy are of tremendous importance for the Middle East and beyond. I argue that apart from geopolitics, the dynamic relationship between the Saudi state and Saudi Islamists has been crucial in shaping Saudi foreign policy since 2011.

Since 2011 Saudi Islamist actors had to adjust to a rapidly changing regional environment and to power struggles in the Saudi ruling family that culminated in the coronation of King Salman and the appointment of his new administration in 2015. By and large, Islamist actors were appalled by the public Saudi backing of the coup in Egypt. The emergence of the Islamic State (IS), on the other hand, was greeted with some sympathy, because IS could feed into anti-Iranian and anti-Shiite sentiment, which had been stirred up by Saudi and GCC government rhetoric and media for years. In addition, the quick advances of the group contributed to its popularity in Saudi Arabia, as did the fact that thousands of Saudis and GCC nationals joined it as fighters, commanders and ideologues. But the flow of Saudi fighters and financing to Syria was publicly condemned and clamped down upon by the government, especially after the declaration of the caliphate in mid-2014. King Salman, who ascended to the throne in January 2015, could build on his extensive contacts with various Islamist forces in the kingdom, which he had forged as governor of Riyadh since 1963. Indeed, he and his new administration seemed to be closer to Saudi Islamists, including to supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>1</sup>

As a result, and probably again because this fits into the Saudi nationalist narrative of the kingdom as the defender of the "Sunnis" in the region, the war against the Houthis in Yemen that started in March 2015 was endorsed by Saudi Islamist forces from across the ideological spectrum. It was an opportunity for Islamist clerics and public figures to declare their support for the new king and the Saudi leadership, as well as Saudi regional policies, without losing face in front of their supporters.

### **A Fragmented Islamist Field**

The question of what constitutes political Islam and "Islamists" in Saudi Arabia is rather difficult to answer. Unlike in most other Arab countries, Islamic scholars do wield a considerable amount of power in the political system and hold key positions as judges, ministers, and officials in the religious police. In most other Arab states, Islamists largely confront ostensibly secular, often

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Mary Atkins, "Saudi Arabia Has 'no Problem' with Muslim Brotherhood: Foreign Minister," *Middle East Eye*, February 11, 2011, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/saudi-foreign-minister-no-problem-muslim-brotherhood-230201904>.  
Ibrahim Al-Hatvani, "Next Saudi Royal Generation Takes Lead - Al-Monitor: The Pulse of the Middle East," *Al-Monitor*, June 24, 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/06/saudi-arabia-future-challenges-king-salman.html>.

Arab Nationalist, regimes. The Saudi case is more nuanced, however.<sup>2</sup> Saudi Arabia does some things that Islamists want to see implemented in an ideal Islamic state, for example the public enforcement of morality, dress codes, the closure of shops during prayer times, gender separation, the collection of zakat, Daawa at home and abroad, and the role of sharia in jurisprudence. So the "Islamist" field is extremely complex and hybrid, and many key Islamist figures are employed by the state. Others outside the formal state apparatus overlap with government-controlled institutions in many arenas, for example in mosques, charities and mass media.

Broadly speaking, one can classify the Islamist field as follows: Firstly, there is the official Wahhabi tradition. These are the clerics on the Council of the Committee of Senior 'Ulama' and the 'ulama' in the judiciary, the religious police as well as in parts of the education sector.<sup>3</sup> By and large, these clerics endorsed the kingdom's response to challenges at home and its role in the Arab counter-revolution. The Saudi grand mufti Abdulaziz al-Shaykh, who stems from the Al al-Shaykh clerical family that are the descendants of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the founder of the Wahhabi doctrine, for example, said that protests were against Islam, forbidding them in other Arab countries (such as Egypt) as well as in Saudi Arabia. He then endorsed the 2013 coup in Egypt (even though the justifications of the coup in Egypt heavily depended on the mass protests of June 30). The mufti also endorsed the crackdown on dissent and public protest, particularly from the Shiite, inside Saudi Arabia. He also denounced IS as being un-Islamic and supported the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen.<sup>4</sup>

A second group, and an important one, is what one could loosely call the "Sahwa" or post-Sahwis, those people who were involved in the movement termed the Islamic Awakening (al-Sahwa al-Islamiyya) in the early 1990s, which had challenged the political dominance of the ruling family. The Sahwa is an umbrella term for a group that was heavily influenced by Muslim Brotherhood networks in the kingdom and fused Muslim Brotherhood ideology with the local Wahhabi tradition. It is worth remembering, however, that political parties are banned in Saudi Arabia, and all these networks are operating clandestinely. They therefore have a less formal structure than in other countries in the region.

These people, who were broadly speaking associated with the Muslim Brotherhood trend, supported the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, as well as in Syria and Yemen, and welcomed the Muslim Brotherhood coming to power in Egypt. They and their supporters visited Egypt, helped their "brothers" there, established media outlets, and invested in the country. These

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<sup>2</sup> Of course these Arab Nationalist states also cooperated with Islamists and had a much more nuanced approach than is generally assumed. For an account of the Syrian case see Thomas Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> For background on the relationship between religion and politics in Saudi Arabia see David Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006); Natana J. DeLong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007); Nabil Mouline, *Les clercs de l'Islam: autorité religieuse et pouvoir politique en Arabie Saoudite, XVIIIe-XXIe siècle* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2011); Guido Steinberg, *Religion und Staat in Saudi-Arabien: Die wahhabitischen Gelehrten 1902-1953* (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> "Saudi Grand Mufti Slams Popular Protests as Anti-Islamic," *Now*, November 28, 2012, [https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/latestnews/saudi\\_grand\\_mufti\\_slams\\_popular\\_protests\\_as\\_anti-islamic](https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/latestnews/saudi_grand_mufti_slams_popular_protests_as_anti-islamic); "ISIS Is Enemy No. 1 of Islam," Says Saudi Grand Mufti," *Al Arabiya News*, August 19, 2014, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/08/19/Saudi-mufti-ISIS-is-enemy-No-1-of-Islam-.html>.

people have connections to individual Saudi princes and may be employed by the state bureaucracy. But by and large they were rather critical of the Saudi handling of the Arab uprisings. Some of them, such as the popular cleric Salman al-Awda, signed a petition calling for political reforms in early 2011.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, in 2011 and 2012 there was some interaction between Sahwa Islamists, liberals and political reformers of various persuasions. Together they unsuccessfully tried to push for democratic reforms in the country. One of the key groups behind this alliance was the the Saudi Association for Civil and Political Rights (ACPRA), known in Arabic as HASM (Jamiyyat al-Huquq al-Siyasiyya wa al-Madaniyya), most of whose leaders have since been imprisoned for their activism.<sup>6</sup>

Salman al-Awda also published a book in which he praised public protests and the Arab uprisings in general.<sup>7</sup> He reaffirmed his position in an open letter to the government on March 15, 2013. In the letter he warned of a socio-political explosion if political prisoners were not released and reforms were not enacted immediately.<sup>8</sup>

So for most of the period from 2011 to 2014, Sahwa clerics and their supporters were more or less in disagreement with the Saudi government over the handling of regional challenges (with the partial exception of Syria, where both supported the opposition, even though there were disagreements about which groups to support, as well as Bahrain, where both supported the crackdown on the opposition).<sup>9</sup> But the emergence of IS and then the Houthi takeover of Yemen's capital Sanaa in September 2014 posed severe challenges to Saudi Arabia, and caused a temporal realignment between these Sahwis and the Saudi regime, in particular since Salman took to the throne in early 2015.

The jihadis are another distinct strand of political Islam in Saudi Arabia even though they have emerged out of the above mentioned Islamist traditions.<sup>10</sup> They were mainly active in Iraq and Syria, where the foreign policies of the Saudi state, and its support for the armed opposition, in many ways overlapped with the short-term aims of the jihadis. But the successes of IS, the declaration of the caliphate, and IS's increasingly anti-Saudi rhetoric undermined this.

While a number of terrorist attacks occurred in Saudi Arabia since 2014, it is remarkable that throughout the period of 2011 to early 2014 there were no jihadi attacks in Saudi Arabia, even though Saudi Arabia took such a forceful stance to support the ancien régime and undermine the democratic prospects of Islamists in Egypt and elsewhere. But jihadi attacks increased since the summer of 2014, in particular attacks by IS cells. The so far deadliest attacks have targeted

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<sup>5</sup> For an analysis of how they reacted to the regional events in early 2011 see Stéphane Lacroix, "Is Saudi Arabia Immune?" *Journal of Democracy* 22, no. 4 (October 2011): 48–59.

<sup>6</sup> Nora Abdulkarim, "Trial of Saudi Civil Rights Activists Mohammad al-Qahtani and Abdullah al-Hamid," *Jadaliyya*, September 3, 2012, <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/7174/trial-of-saudi-civil-rights-activists-mohammad-al->

<sup>7</sup> For more on al-Awda see Madawi Al-Rasheed, "Salman Al-Awdah: In the Shadow of Revolutions." *Jadaliyya*, April 27, 2013, [http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/11412/salman-al-awdah\\_in-the-shadow-of-revolutions](http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/11412/salman-al-awdah_in-the-shadow-of-revolutions).

<sup>8</sup> Toby Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab Spring That Wasn't* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 85f.

<sup>9</sup> Stéphane Lacroix, *Saudi Islamists and the Arab Spring*, Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States (2014), [http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/56725/1/Lacroix\\_Saudi-Islamists-and-theArab-Spring\\_2014.pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/56725/1/Lacroix_Saudi-Islamists-and-theArab-Spring_2014.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Stéphane Lacroix "Osama bin Laden and the Saudi Muslim Brotherhood," *Foreign Policy*, October 3, 2012, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/10/03/osama-bin-laden-and-the-saudi-muslim-brotherhood/>.

the Shiite minority.<sup>11</sup>

A last group are the Shiite Islamists, concentrated in the Eastern Province. Profound changes have occurred amongst the Shiite since the beginning of the Arab uprisings. A protest movement emerged in 2011 and lasted with interruptions until late 2013. The movement was youth-driven, but clerics and Islamist leaders constituted the leadership of the movement.

### **Saudi Support for the Egyptian Coup**

Saudi Arabia has long given a safe haven to Muslim Brotherhood supporters, who were fleeing Nasser's or Hafez al-Assad's crackdown on them in the second half of the 20th century. They helped build many of the educational and religious institutions that were set up in Saudi Arabia during the oil boom of the 1970s when Saudi Arabia embraced political Islam as a counter-ideology against Arab nationalism and leftist ideologies.<sup>12</sup> In the early 1990s, the Sahwa started to criticize the ruling family over its alliance with the United States and the deployment of American troops on Saudi soil to organize the "liberation" of Kuwait in 1991. The Sahwa included many leaders and sympathisers of the local branch of the Muslim Brotherhood that came into being as a result of the migration of Muslim Brotherhood members to the kingdom. The Sahwa was a mix of Muslim Brotherhood ideology and organizational principles and the local Wahhabi clerical tradition. It is widely believed that this episode was a turning point in the relationship between the Al Saud and the Muslim Brotherhood, and it largely explains the fears of the Al Saud and their reaction to the empowerment of Muslim Brotherhood branches across the region since 2011.<sup>13</sup> This issue has been crucial in shaping Saudi foreign policy since 2011, as well as the attitudes of Saudi and regional Islamists towards the Al Saud and the Saudi regime at large.

The Gulf states with a distinct anti-Muslim Brotherhood policy, above all Saudi Arabia and the UAE, did play an important role in the Egyptian coup of 2013.<sup>14</sup> Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the Saudi intelligence chief at the time, met with Egyptian military figures and urged Western countries to support a military takeover. The Egyptian Salafi Nur Party, which is said to have close ties to Saudi Arabia, endorsed the coup.<sup>15</sup> Some Salafis on the other hand, particularly

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<sup>11</sup> Toby Matthiesen, "Sectarianisms after the Saudi mosque bombings," *Washington Post*, May 29, 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/05/29/sectarianism-after-the-saudi-mosque-bombings>.

<sup>12</sup> The best account of this is Stéphane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia pledged funds to Egypt immediately after the coup that brought Abdul Fattah al-Sisi to power. They again pledged \$4 billion each at the start of the Egypt Economic Development Conference held in March 2015 in Sharm El-Sheikh. "Gulf states again prove to be Egypt's bulwark", *Gulf News*, March 21, 2015, <http://gulfnews.com/business/economy/gulf-states-again-prove-to-be-egypt-s-bulwark-1.1475506>. See also David D. Kirkpatrick, "Recordings Suggest Emirates and Egyptian Military Pushed Ousting of Morsi," *New York Times*, March 1, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/02/world/middleeast/recordings-suggest-emirates-and-egyptian-military-pushed-ousting-of-morsi.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/02/world/middleeast/recordings-suggest-emirates-and-egyptian-military-pushed-ousting-of-morsi.html?_r=0) and David D. Kirkpatrick, Peter Baker, and Michael R. Gordon, "How American Hopes for a Deal in Egypt Were Undercut," *New York Times*, August 17, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/18/world/middleeast/pressure-by-us-failed-to-sway-egypts-leaders.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Khaled Abou El-Fadl, "Failure of a Revolution" in: Larbi Sadiki (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of the Arab Spring: Rethinking Democratization* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 265f. Other Egyptian Salafi groups and parties, however, did not endorse the coup and in fact denounced it. For more on the Salafis in Egypt see Stéphane Lacroix, "Sheikhs and Politicians: Inside the New Egyptian Salafism", *Brookings Policy Brief*, June 11, 2012, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2012/06/07-egyptian-salafism-lacroix>

from the Sururi group in Saudi Arabia, criticized the government.<sup>16</sup>

Supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood also voiced their frustration with the coup publicly and criticized the Nur Party for legitimising the new regime.<sup>17</sup> On social media the four finger symbol came to epitomise the massacre of Muslim Brotherhood supporters on "Rabaa al-Adwiya" square in Cairo in August 2013. It was very widely used by Saudis on Twitter. This became a public way of showing dissatisfaction with the Saudi government, albeit on a foreign policy issue. Most Sahwa clerics and other Islamist leaders in Saudi Arabia denounced the coup in Egypt, and implicitly or explicitly, Saudi Arabia's role in it.<sup>18</sup>

But Saudi Arabia in turn clamped down on these public forms of dissent, and particularly on any show of solidarity with the Muslim Brotherhood, which was even designated a terrorist organization in March 2014.<sup>19</sup> Using the four-finger symbol on Twitter became a crime. The government also clamped down on a prominent publisher, who had become a rallying point for Islamic critics of Saudi government policies, and had also published studies critical of the Wahhabi tradition. It had become a vehicle for the Sahwa and Islamic reformists to spread their ideas about the Arab uprisings. As a result, the government accused the publishers of links to the Muslim Brotherhood, raided the publisher's booth and banned it from participating at Riyadh book fair in the future.<sup>20</sup>

Apart from the fact that Sisi and the military undermined the Muslim Brotherhood, and hence prevented Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated groups from being empowered in Saudi Arabia, the alliance with Sisi's Egypt also has a strong military dimension. Just days after Saudi-led forces had started airstrikes on Houthi targets in Yemen, a plan for a joint Arab military force was unveiled on 26 March 2015. The campaign highlighted the extent of the GCC's ambition to shape regional affairs, and underscored the military support that Egypt is supposed to make to the security of the Gulf states in return for financial and political backing.<sup>21</sup> As will be shown later, many Saudis think that this alliance is useful, even though the costs of propping up Egypt's finances indefinitely might be less popular. But most Saudi Islamists, in particular

<sup>16</sup> The Saudi cleric Nasir al-Umar, seen as the leader of the Sururis, was particularly vocal. Jon B. Alterman, William McCants, "Saudi Arabia: Islamists Rising and Falling", in: Jon B. Alterman (ed.), *Religious Radicalism after the Arab Uprisings* (Washington, DC.: Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2015), 144-175, 166f., <http://csis.org/publication/saudi-arabia-islamists-rising-and-falling>.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, "Saudi religious scholars accuse Egyptian Salafist Al-Nour party of obstructing sharia," *Middle East Monitor*, January 13, 2014, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/news/africa/9200-saudi-religious-scholars-accuse-egyptian-salafist-al-nour-party-of-obstructing-sharia>.

<sup>18</sup> Marc Lynch, "Gulf Islamist Dissent over Egypt", *Foreign Policy*, 18 August 2013; Lacroix, *Saudi Islamists and the Arab Spring*, 25-27.

<sup>19</sup> "Saudi Arabia declares Muslim Brotherhood 'terrorist group,'" *BBC News*, March 7, 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-26487092>; Stéphane Lacroix, "Saudi Arabia's Muslim Brotherhood predicament," *Project on Middle East Political Science*, March 20, 2014, <http://pomeps.org/2014/03/20/saudi-arabias-muslim-brotherhood-predicament>.

<sup>20</sup> For more on the *Arab Network for Research and Publishing* see Madawi al-Rasheed, "Saudi officials shut down display at book fair," *Al-monitor*, March 13, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/03/saudi-book-display-shut-down.html>. The same publisher also translated my book *Sectarian Gulf* into Arabic. It was launched at Riyadh book fair a day before the booth was raided and was subsequently banned, along with other publications by the publisher. See Toby Matthiesen, *al-Khalij al-ta'ifi, wa-l-rabi' al-'arabi al-ladhi lam yahduth* (Beirut: Arab Network for Research and Publishing, 2014).

<sup>21</sup> For the statements made at the summit see <http://www.lasportal.org/ar/summits/Pages/default.aspx?Stype=1&imgLib=ArabicSummit&year=2015#tab6>; "Arab League unveils joint military force amid Yemen crisis", AP, *March 29, 2015*.

Sahwis, the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi-jihadis, see the Egyptian regime of Sisi as illegitimate.

### **The Challenge of the Islamic State**

On the Syrian issue, there was a convergence of interests between the Saudi state and the Islamists, but both sides were aware that they supported the Syrian revolution for different reasons. The aforementioned Salman al-Awda, a former leader of the Sahwa, argued that the Saudi government used the Syrian issue to position itself as a champion of revolutionary forces after having become the main actor of the Arab counter-revolution. He stated that Saudi Arabia was pursuing its strategic interests in the region, and this was the reason why it supported the Syrian revolution.<sup>22</sup> But when jihadist groups increasingly started to harbor more regional ambitions, rather than being solely confined to Syria (and Iraq), something that was symbolized by the emergence of the Islamic State, this alliance between the Saudi regime and the Islamists over the Syrian file started to fracture.

By early April 2015, the UN was estimating that 25,000 foreign fighters had gone to Syria to join Islamist militias. Many of those fighters later ended up with IS.<sup>23</sup> Several thousand of those are believed to be Saudi nationals. It is difficult to discern the true extent of links between IS and Saudi Arabia, both at governmental and popular levels. What is clear is that the Syrian revolution initially had huge support amongst the Saudi population, and was seen as a just uprising against a dictatorial regime. The support for the Syrian revolution did also have a sectarian component, because it was framed as a "Sunni" uprising against a "Shiite", "Alawite" and "sectarian" regime.

From relatively early on in the Syrian revolution, funds and fighters flowed from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, notably Qatar and Kuwait, to Syria. Many of the Sahwa clerics became very strong supporters of the Syrian revolution, and encouraged Saudis to send money to the rebels, and in some cases even encouraged Saudis to go and fight in Syria.<sup>24</sup>

The declaration of the caliphate by what was then still called the 'Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham' at the end of June 2014 had a strong impact on Saudi Arabia.<sup>25</sup> It forced the Saudi government to reassess its support for the opposition in Syria (as well as in Iraq), because IS rather quickly denounced the Saudi monarchy and vowed to expand to the kingdom. This was logical, given the large amount of Saudis in the organization, and given that, once the caliphate was declared, conquering Mecca and Medina was bound to become one of the major aims of the organization.<sup>26</sup> IS also became increasingly active in Saudi Arabia and carried out several attacks in Saudi Arabia, including on foreigners, Saudi security forces, Shiite Muslims and Saudi

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<sup>22</sup> "Islamische Kritik an der saudischen Regierung: Gespräch mit dem Kleriker Salman al-Audah," *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, April 17, 2012, <http://www.nzz.ch/aktuell/international/islamische-kritik-an-der-saudischen-regierung-1.16481903>.

<sup>23</sup> "UN says '25,000 foreign fighters' joined Islamist militants," *BBC*, April 2, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-32156541>.

<sup>24</sup> Lacroix, *Saudi Islamists and the Arab Spring*, 4f.

<sup>25</sup> Matthew Weaver, "Isis declares caliphate in Iraq and Syria," *Guardian*, June, 30, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/middle-east-live/2014/jun/30/isis-declares-caliphate-in-iraq-and-syria-live-updates>.

<sup>26</sup> Control over Mecca and Medina was crucial for the legitimacy of caliphs throughout much of Islamic history.



border posts. On November 3, 2014, one day before Ashura, one of the holiest days in the Shiite calendar, militants opened fire on a crowd leaving a Shiite mourning house (hussainiyya) in the Eastern oasis of al-Ahsa, killing several. All official organs of the state, including the official clergy, were quick to denounce the attack, and within a few days the security forces had hunted down the perpetrators and killed several while suffering casualties themselves.<sup>27</sup> But the attack, which was largely carried out by Saudis and for which IS claimed responsibility, raised large questions about the extent of IS support inside the kingdom, the reach of the security forces, and the state's willingness to protect its Shiite minority. These issues became even more pressing when in May 2015 suicide bombers targeted Shiite mosques in Qudaih outside Qatif and in Dammam. Both operations were claimed by IS - Najd Province, which vowed to rid the Arabian Peninsula of the 'rejectionists'.<sup>28</sup>

The sectarianism that Saudi Arabia uses to contain its own as well as Bahrain's Shiite populations, and rally support for its geopolitical ambitions, especially its rivalry with Iran, has fuelled the problem.<sup>29</sup> Saudi recruits for al-Qaida and the Islamic State are often motivated by a desire to contain Shiism and stem Iranian influence in the region – strategic objectives that Saudi media perpetuates ad infinitum.

Saudi Arabia did carry out air strikes against IS targets in 2014 until the start of the Yemen campaign in March 2015, when the Saudi air force stopped flying sorties against IS. Just two months into his reign, in a sharp reversal of established Saudi petro-dollar diplomacy, King Salman launched one of the biggest foreign policy adventures in Saudi Arabia's modern history: a military intervention in Yemen. While the intervention was intended to crush the Houthi movement and reinstall the government of interim president Abd Rabbu Mansur Hadi, it also led to an empowerment of al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which profited from a power vacuum and anti-Houthi sentiments in South Yemen.

The Saudi branch of al-Qaida had carried out a series of attacks in Saudi Arabia from 2003 to 2006. After its networks in the kingdom were dismantled, the remaining militants merged with the Yemeni branch to form AQAP in 2009 and used Yemen as their main base. They expanded their area of operations gradually.<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, unlike most other Saudi foreign policy initiatives since 2011, the Yemen campaign was strongly supported by the kingdom's Islamists. This may in part be because of affinities and links to Yemen's branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, al-Islah, which had suffered from the Houthi advance and was rehabilitated as a tactical ally of Saudi Arabia since the start of the Yemen intervention.

### **A Deadly Storm over Yemen**

In the wake of the Saudi-led campaign against the Houthis, a remarkable discursive shift has

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<sup>27</sup> Toby Matthiesen, "Sectarianism comes back to bite Saudi Arabia", *Washington Post*, November 18, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/11/18/sectarianism-comes-back-to-bite-saudi-arabia>

<sup>28</sup> Toby Matthiesen, "Sectarianism after the Saudi mosque bombings," *Washington Post*, May 29, 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/05/29/sectarianism-after-the-saudi-mosque-bombings>.

<sup>29</sup> For this argument, see Toby Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab Spring That Wasn't* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).

<sup>30</sup> Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism Since 1979* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

occurred amongst Islamists in Saudi Arabia and the region with respect to their position towards the Saudi monarchy. The regional policies of Saudi Arabia post-2011, in particular Saudi Arabia's support for the coup in Egypt, its attacks on IS, and its declaration of the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization, had been perceived as very bad policies by most Saudi Islamists. This even alienated figures dependent on the Saudi state. Not so much criticism was voiced in public, although some key clerics and public figures did openly condemn the coup in Egypt. Draconian new cyber security laws undermined the relatively open social media discussions seen in the kingdom in the wake of the Arab uprisings and ensured that the outcry was less vocal than it might otherwise have been.<sup>31</sup>

The airstrikes against the Houthis, on the other hand, were almost unanimously supported, even from people that had previously been very critical of the ruling family and its handling of the Arab uprisings. Sectarianism is a key explanatory factor in this regard, particularly when contrasted with the Saudi Islamists' position on Egypt. A striking example of this is the aforementioned Salman al-Awda, who through his Twitter account (@salman\_alodah), where he has 7 million followers, and through public interviews, strongly supported the intervention in Yemen and even gave a religious justification for the killing of the Houthis. In a long interview on al-Jazeera Arabic TV, he reiterated the government narrative that Iran was taking over Arab lands and needed to be punished, which made the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen legitimate. He also reiterated a rather simplistic sectarian reading of the situation in Yemen and of Zaidism, the branch of Islam that the Houthis subscribe to.<sup>32</sup> His website, Islam Online, also dedicated a special site to the military intervention, which it strongly supported.<sup>33</sup>

Muhammad al-Arifi, another very prominent Saudi cleric with millions of followers on Twitter, also endorsed the campaign. He sent a message to the Yemenis fighting with the Houthis that they should abandon them in order not to be used by the "Safawid" state. He called on the Yemenis to remember their Arab roots and not kill each other.<sup>34</sup>

A'yid al-Qarni, another prominent preacher, praised Salman for his bravery, and called the war a long awaited chance for the "junud Allah/soldiers of God" to show the enemies of the kingdom their strength. He wrote a poem in support of the king and the war with the title "Labayk ya Salman". His lyrics were turned into a song accompanied by a rather martial video, that presented the war as a war against the "majus" (Zoroastrians) that would eventually also lead to the death of Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah "Khamenei".<sup>35</sup>

Awad al-Qarni, one of the key clerics of the Sahwa movement, also generally supported the intervention, although not as vocally as others.<sup>36</sup> Some Salafis and Salafi-jihadists also supported the intervention, using words such as "rawafid" (rejectionists) and "safawi" to

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<sup>31</sup> "Saudi Arabia amending laws to monitor social media," *Saudi Gazette*, June 2, 2014, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/media/digital/2014/06/02/Saudi-Arabia-amending-laws-to-monitor-social-media.html>.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Salman al-Awda on al-Jazeera Arabic, March 30, 2015, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1R5K4eNV\\_wv#t=38](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1R5K4eNV_wv#t=38)

<sup>33</sup> <http://www.islamtoday.net/files/DecisiveStorm> (Arabic)

<sup>34</sup> "al-Safawiyyin wa-'asifat al-hazm" (The Safawids and Operation Decisive Storm) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RHCgeukHkss&feature=youtu.be>

<sup>35</sup> <http://sabq.org/yE2gde#VRrtxNrzbwU.twitter> (Arabic)

<sup>36</sup> Awad al-Qarni, <https://twitter.com/awadalqarni>

describe the Zaydis, whose threat needed to be dealt with by waging this war.<sup>37</sup> Al-Rafida is commonly used as a term by Saudi Islamists to describe the Shiite and signifies their rejection of the caliphs Abu Bakr, Umar and Uthman as rightful successors of Muhammad. Accusing the Shiite, or the Arab Zaydis, of being Safawids, in reference to the Persian Safawid Empire, is another way of denouncing alleged links of the Shiite with Iran and of de-Arabizing Arab Shiite.

Interestingly, even regional Islamist movements, including militants in Iraq and Syria, praised King Salman and the Saudi monarchy for the intervention.<sup>38</sup>

Indeed, there were hardly any dissenting voices over the war from within Saudi Arabia.<sup>39</sup> While the war effort certainly has a lot of support, a lack of dissenting voices also has to do with draconian cyber security laws. People speaking out against the war on Twitter in other GCC countries, such as Bahrain and Kuwait, were arrested immediately.<sup>40</sup> So almost the only Saudi voices critical of the war were those of dissidents abroad. Saad al-Faqih, a long-time dissident and Islamist activist based in London, broadly supported the war, saying he supported the defense of the Saudi borders and 'national security'. However, he was critical of the suffering that the Yemeni people had to undergo as a result, and also criticized the way the army ran the war. He in particular criticized that Saudi Arabia did not reach out earlier to the Islah party, the Yemeni branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, which in his view could have profoundly changed the situation.<sup>41</sup> The Shiite Islamist opposition abroad also denounced the Yemen war.<sup>42</sup> The war then symbolizes a new realignment of the King Salman and his administration with Sunni Islamists.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, quotes from Nasser al-Omar and Saad al-Burayk: Angus McDowall, "Yemen strikes boost Saudi nationalism and sectarianism," *Reuters*, April, 10, 2014, <http://in.mobile.reuters.com/article/idINL6N0WX4U720150410?irpc=932>.

<sup>38</sup> These include a branch of the army of the Naqshbandi order as well as the Islamic Army in Iraq: Aymenn J Al-Tamimi, Twitter Post, March 31, 2015, 5:06 AM, <https://twitter.com/ajaltamimi/status/582876677161635840> and Aymenn J Al-Tamimi, Twitter Post, March 31, 2015, 5:00 AM, <https://twitter.com/ajaltamimi/status/582875179182780416>.

<sup>39</sup> There was a controversy on Twitter when one Saudi Shiite writer, Tawfiq al-Sayf, expressed his regret for the victims of a suicide bombing on a Houthi gathering in March 2015. Al-Sayf was attacked on Twitter for saying this, which some Saudis saw as an endorsement by a Saudi Shiite for the Houthis for sectarian reasons. <http://www.alkhabarnow.net/news/182783/2015/03/22>. As soon as the war started, however, al-Sayf sided with the Saudi government, saying on Twitter that he would support any effort to protect the nation that would bring Saudis together. Tawfiq al-Sayf, Twitter Post, March 25, 2015, 10:27 PM, [https://twitter.com/t\\_saif/status/580964238153273344](https://twitter.com/t_saif/status/580964238153273344). He also called the Sharm al-Shaykh summit a success. He argued that some wars could lead to more wars, but that he thought the idea of an Arab military force as a stabilising factor was a good idea and could lead to a resolving of the region's issues. "War gives birth to a solution," *Aawsat*, April 1, 2015, <http://aawsat.com/home/article/326156/%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%81%D9%8A%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D9%81/%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%AA%D9%84%D8%AF-%D8%AD%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%8B>. Al-Sayf's views are important, because he was in the early 1990s the secretary general of the Reformist Movement, as the main Saudi Shiite Islamist organization, the Shirazi movement, was known at the time. He has since served as an interlocutor between the Shiite and the government.

<sup>40</sup> Habib Toumi, "Kuwaitis held over Yemen war tweets," *Gulf News*, April, 2, 2015, <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/kuwait/kuwaitis-held-over-yemen-war-tweets-1.1484281>.

<sup>41</sup> He also called on people in the south of Saudi Arabia to be on high alert and defend themselves against any Houthi attack without relying on the government. See for example, his speech delivered on 9 April, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D3fkTD57D0A>

<sup>42</sup> See for example the tweets by Hamza al-Hasan and Fouad Ibrahim.

<sup>43</sup> Yaroslav Trofimov, "New Saudi King Brings Major Change at Home and Abroad", *Wall Street Journal*, April 29, 2015.

## The Shiite Islamists

The kingdom's Shiite population makes up about 10-15% of the citizen population, and is mainly located in the country's Eastern Province, particularly around Qatif and al-Ahsa. Since the 1970s, Islamist movements have become the most powerful political force amongst the Shiite, replacing leftist and Arab nationalist movements that had been popular in the Eastern Province since the 1950s.<sup>44</sup> They led an uprising in 1979, which was repressed. Many of their leaders spent long years in exile and tensions with the state remained high during the 1980s and early 1990s. An amnesty agreement in 1993 brought most exiles back, and led to an alliance of the state with the Shirazi movement, the most prominent of the Shiite Islamist movements. The Shirazi movement has by and large maintained its pro-government stance, and did not openly call for protests as part of the Arab uprisings in 2011. But most Saudi Shiites supported the uprising in neighbouring Bahrain and saw the Arab uprisings as an opportunity for change.

And so a splinter group of the Shirazi movement led by the cleric Nimr al-Nimr from Awwamiyya did call for protests, and an uprising started in February 2011. It mainly involved peaceful protests but also occasionally armed clashes with security forces. A small militant faction remains active, particularly in the village of Awwamiyya. Nevertheless, the uprising was by and large crushed by the end of 2013 with hundreds of people imprisoned and more than twenty killed. Nimr al-Nimr was arrested and sentenced to death. A decentralized coalition of youth and opposition groups, the Coalition for Freedom and Justice, still exists, and occasionally calls for protests, although turnout is generally small. The coalition is broadly Islamist in outlook and advocates revolutionary change. Another trend of Shiite Islamists is the pro-Iranian Islamist movement that is locally known as Khat al-Imam, referring to followers of the line of Imam Khomeini. Supporters of this strand had in the late 1980s and the 1990s formed a militant group, Hizbullah al-Hijaz. Khat al-Imam broadly supported the protests since 2011 and demanded the release of Shiites imprisoned for their alleged role in the 1996 Khobar Towers bombings and membership in Hizbullah al-Hijaz.<sup>45</sup> But Khat al-Imam did not take as confrontational a stance towards the government as the group around Nimr al-Nimr did. The Khat al-Imam leader in Qatif, the cleric Abdulkarim al-Hubayl, eventually told the youth to stop the protests and urged them to refrain from using weapons against the security forces.<sup>46</sup>

Crucially, none of the key Sunni Islamist leaders spoke out in support of the protests in the Eastern Province, despite repeated efforts by the Shiite protesters to adopt inclusive and national slogans, for example by calling for the release of Sunni political prisoners. In fact, the crackdown on the Shiite protesters was another point of convergence between the government

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<sup>44</sup> Toby Matthiesen, "Migration, Minorities and Radical Networks: Labour Movements and Opposition Groups in Saudi Arabia, 1950-1975" in: *International Review of Social History* 59, no. 3 (Autumn 2014), 473-504.

<sup>45</sup> For background on this political trend see Toby Matthiesen, "Hizbullah al-Hijaz: A History of the most Radical Saudi Shi'a Opposition Group," *The Middle East Journal* 64, no. 2 (Spring 2010), 179-97.

<sup>46</sup> For more on the protest movement in the Eastern Province see: Toby Matthiesen, "A "Saudi Spring?" The Shi'a Protest Movement in the Eastern Province 2011-2012" in: *The Middle East Journal* 66, no. 4 (Autumn 2012), 628-659; Toby Matthiesen, "The Local and the Transnational in the Arab Uprisings: The Protests in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province" in: May Seikaly and Khawla Matar (eds.), *The Silent Revolution: The Arab Spring and the Gulf States* (Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2014), 105-143. For background on political movements amongst the Saudi Shiites, including the Shirazi movement, see Toby Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis: Shiism, Dissent and Sectarianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

and Sunni Islamists, and was in part justified with sectarian arguments.

In the context of the Yemen war, the Coalition for Freedom and Justice called for a protest on Friday April 3, 2015 to denounce the Saudi-led airstrikes on Yemen. The protest call was couched in anti-government language and denounced the Saudi-led airstrikes as an 'aggression on Yemen', adopting the discourse of pro-Houthi and pro-Iranian media. Given the pro-war rhetoric in the country, and the strong efforts by the government to suppress dissenting voices in the wake of the war, this was a clear provocation. Eventually, the protest was called off amidst pressure by the government.<sup>47</sup> However, just a few days after the planned protest, security forces raided a house in Awwamiyya, looking for wanted men. This raised tensions, and intense gunfights erupted as the security forces came under fire by militants in the village. One security officer was killed, and several locals wounded and arrested.

Anti-Shiism had become publicly acceptable again after it had been less prominent during a period of 'National Dialogue' under King Abdullah. This public anti-Shiism could be felt at least since the sectarian clashes in Medina in 2009 and the first anti-Houthi war of 2009/10.<sup>48</sup> But the anti-Houthi war of 2015, and the partially sectarian justification of the war, has led to yet another worsening of sectarian relations in Saudi Arabia, symbolized most strikingly by the IS attacks on Shiite mosques in Saudi Arabia.<sup>49</sup> A worsening of relations between the Shiite and the Saudi ruling family then seems to be one of the outcomes of the rapprochement between King Salman and the Sunni Islamists.

## Conclusion

The period from 2011 to 2015 has seen profound political changes in the Middle East that have gone hand in hand with changes in Saudi foreign policy. Islamist actors in Saudi Arabia had to position themselves vis-à-vis these fast-developing, unpredictable and sometimes contradictory developments. The key events that defined the Islamists' stance since 2013 were the Syrian revolution, the military coup in Egypt, the emergence of IS and its declaration of a caliphate, and the Saudi-led war against the Houthis in Yemen. Generally, Saudi Islamists did not agree with the government's policies in Egypt and Tunisia, but they largely supported the crackdown on the Shiite-led protests in the Eastern Province and Bahrain, and the war against the Houthis. The latter acts of repression were supported because they were seen as being in the geostrategic interests of Saudi Arabia. In addition, the Saudi government and the Islamists are equally hostile to Iran, which they see as being behind all these problems. Anti-Shiite actions were therefore a point of convergence between the government and the Islamists, as much as anti-MB policies and support for secular strongmen in North Africa were a point of contention.

So the essentially fragmented nature of the Islamist field in Saudi Arabia led to profoundly different responses by Saudi Islamists towards the regional turmoil since 2011. One of the few

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<sup>47</sup> Rori Donaghy, "Police officer killed in security raids on Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province," *Middle East Eye*, April, 5, 2015, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/security-forces-raid-saudi-arabias-eastern-province-stop-anti-yemen-war-protests-451186533>.

<sup>48</sup> Toby Matthiesen, "The Shi'a of Saudi Arabia at a Crossroads," *Middle East Report Online* (May 6, 2009).

<sup>49</sup> Brian Murphy, "Saudi Shiites worry about backlash from Yemen war," *Washington Post*, April, 8, 2015, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/saudi-shiites-worry-about-backlash-from-yemen-war/2015/04/07/10b01be2-dc7e-11e4-b6d7-b9bc8acf16f7\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/saudi-shiites-worry-about-backlash-from-yemen-war/2015/04/07/10b01be2-dc7e-11e4-b6d7-b9bc8acf16f7_story.html).

issues that all Islamist actors in the kingdom agree upon, and an issue they continue to advocate via social media and the occasional protest, is the question of political prisoners. Over the past decades, and in particular since 9/11 and the start of the jihadist insurgency in Saudi Arabia in 2003, thousands of Saudis have been imprisoned and in some cases held for years without a public trial. Estimates of the numbers of prisoners vary, some even speak of tens of thousands. Small, flash-mob like protests calling for the release of political prisoners have erupted in many places across the country, including in Riyadh and Qasim.<sup>50</sup>

In addition, there is huge diversity of views amongst Saudi Islamists regarding such issues as the Arab uprisings, the emergence of new Islamist actors, democracy, the implementation of sharia, and the use of violence. One group of younger Islamists and new Islamist intellectuals embraced democracy and elections and even argued that sharia should not be implemented immediately after a revolutionary situation but rather only once the people chose to do so through democratic means. This was a reflection of the Tunisian and Egyptian experiences. They include people such as Salman al-Awda, Muhammad al-Ahmari and Muhammad al-Abd al-Karim. These people re-invigorated the discourse of the Sahwa and incorporated theories of democracy after 2011, also building on the political discourse of organizations such as ACPRA.

While Islamists remain one of the key political forces in Saudi Arabia, there is also a tendency amongst the younger generation to be equally dissatisfied with the politics of the Islamist movements as with the old political order. Some of them have again become more interested in the legacy of leftist and Arab nationalist movements in the region. They are, for example, inspired by people such as Azmi Bishara, who from his base in Qatar has also become a figurehead for the aspirations of some young Saudis.

On the other hand, the number of people espousing violence as a revolutionary tool grew as well, partly as a result of the failure of the Egyptian democratic experiment. The rise of IS has given new impetus to people that accept violence as a political tool, both abroad and at home. Islamists in Saudi Arabia have thus embraced the various causes of the Arab uprisings abroad and because of their central role in the wider Islamic world and the financial means at their disposal have become central actors in a whole range of conflicts. At home they have thus far, however, only called for political reform and have not challenged the ruling family directly. Indeed, the new King Salman has reached out to Islamists in an effort to unite Sunnis across the region and to strengthen Saudi Arabia's geopolitical influence. It is not the first time that the Saudi state and Saudi Islamists are joining forces to support "just wars" abroad. And the consequences may well be as monumental, and unpredictable, as on previous occasions.

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<sup>50</sup> Lacroix, *Saudi Islamists and the Arab Spring*, 15-18. See also the main Twitter account of the movement for the release of political prisoners, <https://twitter.com/e3tegal>.