

## Saudi dissent more than just Jihadis



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It is often taken for granted in the West that dissent and Islamic radicalism in Saudi Arabia are inextricably linked. The rise of the Jihadis and the terrorist campaign in recent years is often cited as proof of this contention. But whilst the conflation of dissent and radical Islamism may serve Western interests in the short-term – insofar as it connects the post-9/11 counter-terrorism discourse to the survival of the House of Saud – it does little to advance understanding of Saudi politics.

Despite there being connections between Islamism and dissent in the Kingdom, not all dissenters are radical Islamists – and vice versa. Explaining why this is so requires clarification of the relationship between Islamism and dissent, and a clear understanding of where the two converge and diverge.

### **War and awakening**

The history of modern dissent in the Kingdom can be traced back to the Gulf War of 1991 and the stationing of American troops in the country. Whilst there were dissenters before this landmark event, they are best described as “rejectionists”, in that they were not presenting a positive alternative and a comprehensive programme for change. The Ikhwan revolt of the 1920s and 1930s, and the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979 by Juhayman al-Utaibi and his companions, fall neatly into this category. By contrast, the types of dissent that emerged during and after the Kuwait crisis involved comprehensive plans for reform. It is this factor that has contributed to their persistence and significant social base, despite relentless efforts by the al-Saud to destroy them.

The stationing of large numbers of American troops in the Kingdom – ostensibly to protect the country against the ambitions of Saddam Hussein – seriously undermined the legitimacy of the al-Saud, and destroyed its prestige in the eyes of many Islamists. Nearly all of these critics came from within the “Sahwa al-Islamiyyah” (Islamic awakening) – the religious revivalist movement that gripped Saudi universities and other elite institutions from the late 1960s onwards. The Sahwa gave rise to a generation of Saudi Islamists that, broadly speaking, combined the official Wahhabi outlook on social and cultural issues, with Muslim Brotherhood-style political activism.

### **Figureheads of the underground**

The embryonic opposition was spurred into action by the weakness of the regime that had been exposed by the Gulf War. Meanwhile, the al-Saud’s perceived subservience to the United States acted as a catalyst, bringing a wide range of people under one umbrella. In addition, the opposition was alienated by economic incompetence and the profligate behavior of some members of the royal family.



This opposition was initially led by prominent Sahwa preachers: Salman al-Auda, Safar al-Hawali, Ayidh al-Gharni and Nasir al-Omar. These individuals did not represent power centres in their own right; they were the figureheads for underground networks comprising academic and professional elites. Whilst these networks were not directly interested in radical change in Saudi Arabia, their piety, sincerity, discipline and professional competence inevitably set them on a collision course with the House of Saud.

The Sahwa preachers were quickly joined by a new wave of dissenters, comprising religious intellectuals and the professional classes. In March 1991 the leading dissidents drafted the “Letter of Demands” which was signed by more than 400 personalities. The Letter was a concise summary of the main demands of the embryonic opposition. As such it constituted a landmark document in the history of modern Saudi Arabia. It was followed in September 1992 by the “Memorandum of Advice”, which was prepared by 107 religious scholars.

### **Loyal opposition**

These documents set out an oppositional discourse that sought radical changes (in particular to the country’s foreign policy and the close relationship with the United States) within the context of the existing Saudi state. In other words these early dissidents were anxious to convey an impression of “loyal” opposition and dispel any fears they wanted to overthrow of the House of Saud. The regime responded by using the official clerical establishment to issue statements against the signatories of the Letter of Demands and the Memorandum of Advice. This split Saudi society, pitting pro-regime elements against those calling for their rights. It was a bad move on the part of the regime, as it alienated the opposition further and, in due course, produced deeper and more serious

forms of dissent.

### **Crackdown**

The creation of the “Committee for the Defense of Legitimate Rights” in 1993 represented another landmark event in the history of modern Saudi Arabia. The primary function of CDLR was to air grievances through official channels. Therefore, strictly speaking, it did not constitute an opposition group. However, given the Saudi government’s sensitivity to any independent organization, it was only a matter of time before it cracked down on the organization.



The first crackdown targeted people at the heart of the organization. These included Saad al-Faqih and Mohammad al-Massari, who were imprisoned, and upon release fled to London. A second crackdown was launched in 1994 and involved extensive use of security forces. The arrests of Auda and Hawali were particularly contentious and led to a small riot in Auda’s hometown of Burayda.

The crushing of the so-called “Burayda Intifada”, and similar crackdowns by Saudi security forces, created deep divisions between the regime and Islamists. It created the conditions for the emergence of “disloyal dissent” and was also the single most important factor behind the emergence of terrorism in the Kingdom. Of course, Osama Bin Laden and the veterans of the Afghan jihad were a major factor in the emergence of Sunni Islamist terrorism in the Kingdom, but the primary catalyst was the response of the regime to these early voices of dissent.

The crackdown on CDLR was only partially successful however, as some of its organization and operations moved to London. The two personalities at the centre of CDLR operations in London were Saad al-Faqih – a professor of surgery at King Saud University until he was imprisoned then fled the country – and Mohammad al-Massari. A fiercely intelligent man, Saad al-Faqih was deeply influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood. Al-Massari was equally intelligent, though volatile and lacking Faqih’s sharp political judgement. Al-Massari was also a life-long member of the pan-Islamic organization Hizb al-Tahrir, a factor that would later complicate his relations with al-Faqih, who (like al-Auda and al-Hawali) is a nationalist.



### **Softening the voices**

Having learned lessons from the early 1990s – when its response created new forms of dissent – the Saudi government subsequently pursued a successful two-pronged strategy against the explosion of dissent in the Kingdom. On the one hand, through old-fashioned repression it destroyed the CDLR and other smaller platforms and drove the most persistent dissenters into exile. But on the other, it tempered this repression by co-option, whereby less determined dissidents were gradually won over by the regime and its security apparatus.

The regime scored a major coup with the tentative co-option of al-Hawali and al-Auda following their release from prison in 1999. Both have now tempered their criticism of the Saudi regime, and in the case of the latter have gone as far as attacking the exiled opposition in London and brokering deals between the regime and its jihadi enemies.

The regime has also been successful in transforming the debate over political reform into one of socio-cultural discussion, where the level and intensity of the debate is conducted on official terms alone. This has not only served to dampen external criticisms of the regime (after all it suits American interests when Wahhabism, divorced from the regime, comes under sharp scrutiny), but has also given its security apparatus the opportunity to closely monitor and manipulate a new generation of mild dissenters – the so-called liberal Islamists.



### **Spectrums of dissent**

The relationship between dissent and Saudi Islamism can be best understood by outlining the two spectrums within which the two phenomena exist. Neither spectrum – as outlined below – is exhaustive, though they map out, in general terms, every notable group and movement in each category. While there are points of convergence between the two, there are also important points of divergence.

These spectrums deliberately ignore the Shia and secular liberals. There are good reasons for not including them: the latter are virtually extinct, and the former – aside from having localised grievances – have now reached accommodation with the al-Saud. Hardcore ideological liberals are very hard to find in contemporary Saudi Arabia, while only a minority of Shia continue to oppose the al-Saud in a meaningful way; but even this fringe no longer expresses dissent in the radical, Khomeinist language of the 1980s.

### **Islamists right and left**

In the Islamist continuum, jihadis occupy the extreme right wing of the spectrum. Aside from the principal actors – the mujahideen – this group is ideologically and spiritually sustained by what have come to be known as the Jihadi clerics. Despite being few in numbers, they have had a disproportionate effect on the motivation and stamina of the jihadis and have helped sustain the terrorist campaign over the past three years. Nasser al-Fahd is arguably the most sophisticated Jihadi scholar. Other notable Jihadi clerics include Ali al-Khudayr, Ali Faris al-Zahrani and the slain Abdullah al-Rushood. Beyond the jihadis is Said bin Zoair who – despite being a Salafi-jihadi – does not call for jihad inside the Kingdom.

Beyond Zoair are the old Sahwa clerics and their disciples. But the Sahwa no longer project cohesion, having splintered into divergent politico-ideological and socio-cultural groupings. The liberal edge of the Sahwa is occupied by the most interesting and

influential personalities. These include Salman al-Auda, Abd al-Aziz al-Qassim and Abd al-Aziz al-Wuhaibi. Abd al-Aziz al-Qassim is particularly interesting insofar as he was an influential player in the CDLR and a powerful critic of the regime, having spent nearly three years in prison for his opposition activities.

To the left of the old Sahwa are the so-called liberal Islamists. Interestingly, some of the personalities in this group are former extremists who have undergone a dramatic transformation. The best example is Mansur al-Nuqaydan who was so extreme in his youth that he was considered a Kharejite; in other words on the right side of the jihadis. Today Nuqaydan, alongside Abdullah bin Bijad, Hassan al-Maliki, Ibrahim al-Bulaihi and Ali al-Omair focus most of their energy on de-legitimizing the Wahhabi world view. Hassan al-Maliki has gone even further by vociferously critiquing the theological structure of Sunnism.

The regime tolerates – and some would argue encourages – these individuals on account that only a fraction of their criticism is levelled at the al-Saud. In any case they are – at best – on the extreme left-wing fringe of the Islamic movement in Saudi Arabia.



### **Wilderness and exile**

Within the dissenters spectrum the right wing is again occupied by the jihadis. But there is some debate over whether al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is seriously interested in overthrowing the regime. Some have argued that it merely wants to weaken the regime and force its Western backers to flee - by attacking the oil industry and Western targets.

Beyond the jihadis are the exiled opposition, most of whom are based in London. The “Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia” headed by Saad al-Faqih has emerged as a serious nuisance to the Saudis, who have repeatedly called on the British government to stop the group’s activities and expel al-Faqih. MIRA was formed in 1996 after a dispute between al-Faqih and al-Massari, the latter continuing to oppose the Saudis under various banners, the most recent being the Party of Islamic Renewal. However pan-Islamism and extremism blunt his effectiveness. Nevertheless both Faqih and Massari are widely considered the most radical of Saudi dissidents since they consider the regime in its entirety to be illegitimate. In this respect they may even be considered more radical than the jihadis of al-Qaeda, whose commitment to the overthrow of the al-Saud is not beyond dispute.

In terms of his position in the Islamist spectrum al-Faqih is immediately to the right of the liberal Sahwa. But al-Faqih does not have a religious stance and his critique of the official clerical establishment is only on account of their pro-regime political position.

Beyond the London-based opposition are Said bin Zoair and Abdullah al-Hamid, who are based inside the Kingdom and – despite repeated attempts to pressure them – continue to oppose the regime, though they stop short of calling for its overthrow. To the left of these two personalities are Safar al-Hawali, Salman al-Auda and Nasser al-Omar. Despite having reached some accommodation with the regime, they are too independent and popular to be fully co-opted. Moreover, they continue to be secretly critical of the regime.

Next is a group of individuals sharing many characteristics as al-Hawali, al-Auda and al-Omar, but lacking their political weight. The most important is Abd al-Aziz al-Qassim, a figure described as an original intellectual who has reached the conclusion that the regime is too powerful to overthrow. While he remains critical of the regime, he is regarded as too embroiled in socio-cultural debates to focus on political reforms.

Then there are the so-called liberal-Islamists (or even ex-Islamists) who mostly focus on de-legitimizing Wahhabism rather than the Saudi regime. They include Nuqaydan, Maliki, Bulaihi and Omaim. Mohammad al-Sheikh (a prolific writer on the internet) can also be added to this category. Omaim (who writes for Sharq al-Awsat) and al-Sheikh are former Sahwa activists who turned against the movement and use their inside knowledge to publicly embarrass their former companions. Beyond the liberal-Islamists are the bulk of the old Sahwa who have been co-opted by the regime. Whilst they do not promote the regime openly they move within its circles and often use their status to purchase credibility for the al-Saud.



There is another group that – unlike the old Sahwa – openly promotes the regime. This group comprises a mixture of people, including former dissidents, who have clearly been co-opted by the security establishment and have no qualms about brazenly defending the regime.

### **Back in the fold**

By comparing and contrasting the different types in each spectrum – though excluding the jihadis, on account of the uniqueness of their activism – one thing is clear: the regime has managed to co-opt the bulk of the Islamic radicals. This type is mainly found in the Sahwa category, which – broadly speaking – has reached an accommodation with the al-Saud.

It is on the basis of this revealing truth that one can argue convincingly that there is a deep flaw in the argument: the more radical the Islamist the more likely he is to be in opposition. It is evidently not the case. It suits the Saudi regime to conflate the two as this promotes its agenda of a controlled debate on religious and socio-cultural issues. What the regime fears most is disciplined and positive political opposition (irrespective of its type and level of religiosity) because this resonates across wide swathes of Saudi society

and is much more difficult to co-opt. Moreover, the most serious non-violent form of opposition to the al-Saud – namely the London-based MIRA – is among the least radical of the Islamists, excluding controversial personalities like Nuqaydan and Maliki, who many would anyway argue fall outside the Islamist discourse altogether. Despite being an Islamist, Saad al-Faqih is more interested in promoting competent governance, accountability and transparency, than Sharia.

It is precisely Faqih's exclusive focus on politics that irritates the regime. It undermines its plans to submerge calls for political change in a directionless and restricted debate on religious and socio-cultural reforms. The regime's response to highly committed political reformers is to accuse them of jihadi connections—a charge that is not taken seriously by informed observers.

In the final analysis, the regime's success in co-opting many of the Islamic radicals is tied to its ability to resist American calls for radical changes to the education system and other socio-cultural institutions. Any significant softening of its position would alienate potential dissenters. In fact any sign of weakness on the part of the regime would most likely drive many of the dissenters to the right of the spectrum. This will force the regime to make fundamental choices: either to crack down hard against emboldened dissenters or to accept the need for political reform. It will most likely opt for the former, a move that may trigger serious instability in Saudi Arabia.

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