

SAUDI ARABIA AND SAUDI NATIONALISM: RELIGION, POLITICS AND NATIONALITY

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This article addresses the central question: how have historical factors and cultural influences shaped Saudi nationalism and its contemporary implications? By tracing the establishment of Saudi Arabia as a sovereign nation, led by Abdulaziz and the conquest of Hejaz, the article explores the historical origins of Saudi nationalism. It delves into the influence of Wahhabism on the Najdi people and its impact on their cultural and religious identity. The article also examines power struggles within the Wahhabi movement, the prevalence of warfare and violence in the nation's history, and the resulting mistrust between different factions. It further explores the socio-political effects of oil wealth, highlighting the disparities between the urban minority and the nomadic population. Additionally, the article discusses King Faisal's transformative efforts in establishing new institutions and the international significance of conflicts like the 1967 and 1973 events. In conclusion, the article provides a comprehensive understanding of the complex factors that have shaped Saudi nationalism, as it explores historical developments and cultural influences. It sheds light on the ongoing evolution of this nationalistic ideology and its impact on Saudi governance and policies.

Keywords: *Saudi Arabia, nationalism, religion, politics, nationality*

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Introduction

This report aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the current state of affairs in Saudi Arabia, shedding light on the intricate formation of Saudi nationalism and its diverse developments. Present-day Saudi Arabia exhibits significant differences and distinct characteristics compared to its state a decade ago and even five years ago. The recent interview with Princess Reema bint Bandar, the Saudi Ambassador to Washington, during her appearance on CNN, highlighted the aforementioned distinctions, underscoring their accuracy and relevance.

It is crucial to recognize that this transformation process is ongoing and has far-reaching implications. In recent years, Saudi Arabia's domestic policy has been to marginalize and sometimes eliminate competitors and opponents with different ideas. This new approach has been consolidated in several dimensions.

Regrettably, the significance of this reality often receives inadequate attention. However, gaining a comprehensive understanding of the current situation necessitates a deep appreciation of the intricacies surrounding Saudi nationalism and a contemplation of how and why it has reached its present state. It is essential to acknowledge that the administration of Saudi Arabia is presently guided by this prevailing nationalistic ideology, which shapes its governance and policies.

Establishment of Saudi Arabia

The establishment of Saudi Arabia as a sovereign nation can be traced back to the transformative developments that unfolded in the late 1920s and early 1930s of the twentieth century¹. Prior to this pivotal era, the dominant and widely recognized power in the Arabian Peninsula was vested in Sharif Hussein, the ruler of Hejaz, whose lineage had been entrusted with the guardianship of the Two Holy Shrines for centuries². It is noteworthy that Hejaz is a part of present-day Saudi Arabia, alongside the other regions of Najd, Aseer, Ha'il, and the Eastern Region.

1 The establishment of Saudi Arabia was significantly influenced by British regional policy, perhaps more than any other single factor. From the early 19th century, Britain rose as the dominant power in the Persian Gulf, pushing out European rivals. By the end of the century, their influence became so strong that the region was sometimes referred to as a "British lake". The emergence of some of the existing sheikhdoms can also be attributed, in large part, to British designs (Masjed Jamei 2016b: 283–285).

2 The Ottomans appointed the sharifs to positions of leadership and exercised some level of supervision over them (Al-Rasheed 2002: 14).

Abdulaziz, the father of the current Saudi royal family, held rulership over the Najd region. With the assistance of the British, who had grown increasingly disillusioned with Sharif Hussein, he launched a military campaign to assert his authority over Hejaz (Shibaru 1970: 320–326). The conquest of Hejaz, particularly the acquisition of sovereignty over Mecca and Medina, solidified Abdulaziz's ascendancy. Subsequently, the subjugation of the remaining three regions marked the formation of Saudi Arabia within its present borders (Abd al-Fattah Hasan n. d.: 37).

This seminal historical moment served as the foundation for the nation as we know it today, establishing Saudi Arabia as a distinct sovereign entity with its territorial boundaries encompassing Hejaz, Najd, Aseer, Ha'il, and the Eastern Region.

The troops under Abdulaziz's command were exclusively comprised of Najdis, inhabitants of a land distinguished by its unique characteristics. The Najdi people possess distinct psychological, ethical, and cultural traits that set them apart from other populations within the Arabian Peninsula¹. It was within this specific cultural milieu that Wahhabism, a radical movement, originated and found resonance primarily among the Najdis. Wahhabism's compatibility with the Najdis' psychology, ethics, and culture facilitated their wholehearted embrace of this religious ideology, a phenomenon that was not replicated to the same extent in the other four regions (Masjed Jamei 2016c: 280–283; al-Rashid 2009: 67–72).

Moreover, the Najdis' experience with Wahhabism has held significant influence over their actions and radical reactions within their immediate surroundings, both within the Peninsula and in adjacent areas. This religious movement, spearheaded by Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, has profoundly shaped the behavior and attitudes of the Najdis over the course of nearly three centuries. Unlike other Islamic schools of thought, Wahhabism has distinctively recruited and reformed the Najdis in accordance with its own specificities, forging a distinct identity that sets them apart from adherents of other religious ideologies².

1 See *Jazīrat al-'Arab fi Qarn al-'Ishrīn* (Wahbah 1996). This work's Egyptian author served as an advisor to Abdulaziz during the formative years of Saudi Arabia's establishment. He also held the position of Saudi ambassador to Britain during World War II. His two books on Saudi Arabia, exploring its biological, social, cultural, and political characteristics over this period, are considered among the best resources in the field. Researchers frequently reference them to gain a deeper understanding of Saudi Arabia.

2 There exists a strong link between the natural environment, historical development, and human geography of Najd that has contributed significantly to the persistence of Wahhabism. The harsh geographical conditions of Najd fostered a sense of insecurity, violence, and scarcity, leading people to rely heavily on tribal affiliations for survival. These very tribes were frequently engaged in conflict. Wahhabism emerged as a potent religious and social movement that sanctioned these conflicts, allowing the Najdis to view them as a religious duty and undertake them with fervent conviction (Masjed Jamei 2016b: 229).

Abdulaziz assumed leadership over an army distinguished by its adherence to Wahhabism, a defining characteristic of their identity. This army governed a vast expanse of land. However, following the establishment of their rule, divergent interpretations of Wahhabism emerged, causing a division within the ranks. Abdulaziz had embarked on a mission to adapt Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's Wahhabism to align with the ideological framework of his kingdom. This endeavor faced opposition from Wahhabi fundamentalists, notably led by Bin Bajad and Faisal al-Duwaysh.

The fundamentalist faction pursued three key objectives: the propagation of their ideology to the neighboring nations of Iraq, Kuwait, and Jordan; the severing of ties with Britain; and the prohibition of modern equipment and technology. Abdulaziz, with the support of his pro-Wahhabi scholars adhering to the Hanbali school of jurisprudence, countered this opposition. These scholars regarded obedience to the sultan as a religious obligation. Through strategic maneuvering, Abdulaziz succeeded in defeating the fundamentalist faction, ultimately dispersing their rival army and leading to both of the fundamentalist leaders being killed. It is worth noting that remnants of their religious ideology endured within the lower strata of Najdi society, perpetuating their ideological legacy (Said 1987; Kishk 1984: 549–693).

The emergence of *Saudi Arabia* as a nation, known by that name, was accompanied by a tumultuous period marked by warfare, threats, intimidation, and violence. The echoes of these negative experiences continue to resonate in regions such as Ha'il, Aseer, and the Eastern Region¹. As a result, the rulership remained in the hands of the Najdis, with Abdulaziz positioned at the pinnacle of authority. He was intensely suspicious of the non-Najdis, particularly because he had killed a large number of them.

In accordance with Arab customs of vendetta and the "law of blood", the defeated parties harbored a profound desire for vengeance, a prospect that seemed inconceivable at the time. Consequently, mutual trust between the different factions was severely lacking². In an attempt to bridge this divide, Abdulaziz sought to forge alliances through marriage with women from diverse tribes and regions. However, despite these efforts, power dynamics, political control, security, and economic resources remained predominantly concentrated in the hands of the Najdis (Al-Said, internet: 68).

1 See *Tārīkh Āl Sa'ūd* (Al-Said, internet). The author of this work, a Shia Muslim from Saudi Arabia, recounts in detail the actions of the House of Saud during their three periods of power in Saudi Arabia. Particularly see 127–134: *Madhābih al-Ihtilāl al-Sa'ūdī fī al-Hijāz Yarawhā Abd al-Azīz Āl Sa'ūd*. In this chapter, Abdulaziz recounts the actions of his army, Ikhwān al-Tawhīd (Monotheism's Brotherhood), in the conquest of Hejaz.

2 Life in the harsh desert environment has fostered a sense of suspicion among the Bedouin people (Masjed Jamei 1990: 58–59). This characteristic suspicion is one way Saudi opponents differ from some other Arab world opponents (Al-Rashid 2009: 183).

Thus, the Najdis maintained a stronghold over the reins of power, perpetuating existing disparities and hindering the establishment of trust and unity among the diverse populations of Saudi Arabia.

The historical period under Abdulaziz's rule was characterized not by "Saudi nationalism", but rather by "Najdi regionalism". This regionalistic orientation persisted until Abdulaziz's death in 1953. His successor, Saud bin Abdulaziz, had received a traditional Arabian upbringing and carried on his father's political legacy and even intensified it to some extent, albeit without possessing the same level of aptitude. Concurrently, the influx of substantial oil wealth played a pivotal role in shaping the course of events.

Following World War II, and particularly from the late 1940s onward, petrodollars began to pour into Saudi Arabia. The nation, which had previously relied on meager sums of financial assistance from the British due to a sharp decline in pilgrimage revenues during the early years of the war, suddenly witnessed an influx of tens of millions of dollars, which swiftly escalated into hundreds of millions. The prevailing notion at the time was that this wealth belonged to the "king" and the "royal family". This sentiment was shared not only by the royal household and their associates but also by an urban minority who had access to such news. However, the vast majority of the populace resided in the desert, leading a nomadic existence and lacking awareness of the macroeconomic implications of the burgeoning oil revenues or the transformations unfolding in urban centers.

Nevertheless, the acquisition of immense wealth precipitated a seemingly legendary lifestyle reminiscent of the intricate tales woven in the *One Thousand and One Nights*. Meanwhile, the king himself indulged in promiscuity and womanizing. These excesses ultimately resulted in the removal of Saud bin Abdulaziz from power (ibid.: 477–483).

Role of King Faisal in the Formation of Saudi Nationalism

Following the reign of Saud, his brother Faisal ascended to power in 1964 and is widely regarded as the architect of modern Arabia. Faisal embarked on a transformative journey, endeavoring to establish new institutions and ministries, a pioneering effort among the Saudi monarchs (Al-Rashid 2005: 106–114). This undertaking necessitated the recruitment of qualified personnel. For the first time, the stage seemed set for the inclusion of Hejazis in influential positions, yet the critical military, security, and political roles remained firmly in the hands of the Najdis¹.

1 For centuries, Hejaz was governed by the Nobles (Al-Shurafā) who served as Ottoman vice-regents in the Two Holy Shrines after the Ottoman takeover. This aristocratic rule,

The initial decades of Saudi Arabia's stability were primarily attributed to the unity of the recently empowered Najdis. This cohesion prevented the nation from succumbing to internal collapse. However, it was during this period that the seed of Saudi nationalism took root and rapidly flourished. The two significant conflicts of 1967 and 1973 played a pivotal role in strengthening this growing sentiment. The 1967 war witnessed a resounding defeat for the Arab nations, particularly Egypt. Previously engaged in open rivalry and hostility with Saudi Arabia, Egypt sought reconciliation with the Saudis. In return, Saudi Arabia pledged to compensate a substantial portion of Egypt's losses (Masjed Jamei 1990: 82–87). This process served to elevate the Saudi position, contributing to the emergence of a proud Saudi identity.

The 1973 war, which took place during Sadat's tenure, significantly elevated Saudi Arabia's standing. Sadat's political strategy of de-Nasserization, drawing closer to the United States and Saudi Arabia while distancing from the Soviet Union, played a central role in shaping regional dynamics¹. The partial victory achieved in the 1973 Arab-Israeli War seemed to validate the authenticity of Sadat's policies, resulting in an increased regional and Arab prominence for Saudi Arabia.

Of utmost significance was the sharp surge in oil prices and the subsequent oil embargo. This unexpected turn of events thrust Saudi Arabia into the forefront of global news, captivating public opinion and becoming a key political priority for industrialized nations. Zaki Yamani, the Saudi oil minister, emerged as one of the most influential figures in international news coverage. The oil embargo rattled the general public and various segments of Western societies, leaving an indelible impact on everyone. In a bid to secure Saudi oil exports, numerous officials from industrialized countries hastened to engage in separate negotiations with the Saudis, seeking to distance themselves from the ranks of embargoed nations. France notably took the lead in pursuing such independent contracts.

The substantial escalation in oil prices yielded further consequences. From the perspective of advanced economies, there arose a desire to expand

combined with the influx of pilgrims from various countries, contributed to Hejaz's significant development compared to other regions. This advancement encompassed both civil and urban infrastructure as well as social structures and governance. In fact, the Hejazization of social and administrative institutions is considered a key factor driving the initial wave of development in Saudi Arabia (Masjed Jamei 2016b: 288; Takabayashi 1986).

1 During this period, a shared concern for both Saudi Arabia and Egypt was the spread of Communism and the potential for Soviet influence to grow in the region. This made Mohammad-Reza Shah of Iran a valuable ally in their eyes. The Shah actively opposed Communism and the Soviet Union, and he consistently urged others to do the same. He also stood against Arab nationalist extremism, particularly the brand of pan-Arabism associated with Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser (Heikal 1981: 194).

the sale of consumer goods and undertake ambitious infrastructure projects, which coincided with Saudi Arabia's pressing needs. Consequently, Saudi Arabia emerged as a lucrative market for the exportation of goods, as well as the provision of technical services, engineering expertise, and a wide range of other services, spanning from education to healthcare.

Moreover, the surge in oil prices presented a predicament of considerable magnitude for economically disadvantaged developing nations. Recognizing this predicament, Saudi Arabia, as one of the most significant oil producers, stood ready to extend various forms of financial assistance to such nations. Notably, priority was given to impoverished Arab and Islamic countries, as part of a broader commitment to support fellow members of the regional and religious community.

The nationalism that emerged as a result of Faisal's initiatives experienced remarkable growth within a span of less than a decade. Given Saudi Arabia's absence of a historical precedent as an independent nation, the foundation of its nationalism could not rely on a preexisting framework. Instead, political and social leaders, and even religious figures of Saudi Arabia, had to actively cultivate the grounds for nationalism. It was during Faisal's reign that Saudi nationalism began to take shape, and a series of unforeseen events further contributed to its deepening¹.

The success of this nascent nationalism hinged on elevating the status and prestige of Saudi Arabia to a point where its citizens could take pride in their affiliation with the nation. Both regional and international circumstances offered favorable conditions for achieving this objective. However, within the country itself, Saudi nationalism encompassed diverse facets and dimensions, each with its own distinctive characteristic. It was a composite of religious and Arabic elements, while also incorporating a nascent sense of belonging to Saudi Arabian society and identity. These three factors exerted profound influence on the development of Saudi nationalism, with the religious aspect assuming particular prominence at the time.

Religion and Saudi Nationalism

The religious factor exhibits two distinct dimensions, the foremost being the Islamic dimension, a paramount element owing to the presence of the Two Holy Shrines. This dimension holds profound significance for both Muslim and non-Muslim entities. Its pertinence to Muslims is self-evident, given the

¹ Put differently and more correctly, from King Faisal's era onwards, Saudi Arabia gradually solidified its national identity, and a stronger sense of being Saudi grew among its citizens (Masjed Jamei 2016c: 290).

sanctity of these shrines. However, for non-Muslims, its importance lies in the pivotal role played by the Islamic dimension in shaping Saudi geopolitics. Indeed, the historical eminence of Saudi Arabia can be predominantly attributed to the presence of the Two Holy Shrines within its borders, a phenomenon echoing the significance of Hejaz in the prelude to the establishment of the Saudi state. This pertinence was acknowledged not only by the Ottomans and other Muslim regimes but also by the British, Americans, and other influential Western powers.

A parallel facet to consider is the “Wahhabism” dimension intrinsic to the Saudi regime. Since its inception post-Second World War, particularly with the surge in oil revenues, this nation has garnered recognition as a Wahhabi regime, a characterization embraced by both Muslim and non-Muslim observers. Consequently, the ascendancy of Wahhabism and its dissemination significantly contributed to the elevation of Saudi Arabia’s global standing¹. The kingdom, in turn, strategically aligned itself with this ideology for multifaceted reasons, thereby augmenting its influence more profoundly than any other contributing factor².

Arabism and Saudi Nationalism

Regarding the Arabic factor, post-war Arab nationalism underwent profound influences marked by socialist, anti-imperialist, and anti-reactionary tendencies – conflicting forces with Saudi identity and politics. Consequently, the relationship between Nasser and Saudi Arabia reached its nadir. Saudi Arabia consistently opposed Nasser’s initiatives (Al-Nafisi 2011: 44), exemplified by the Saudi opposition to his alliance with Syria and support for Yemen’s Republicans, leading to direct confrontations in the case of Yemen³.

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- 1 The rise of Saudi nationalism is deeply intertwined with religious diplomacy. Consequently, Islam and the religious sector play a much more significant role in shaping Saudi national identity compared to many other countries (Masjed Jamei 2016b: 292).
 - 2 This marked the first instance of Wahhabism being employed in foreign policy. Prior to Faisal’s era, the Saudi regime rarely used its religious ideology in international affairs. However, following his rise to power, and particularly after the defeat of Gamal Abdel Nasser and Nasserism, this use became more widespread and institutionalized. This coincided with the decline of religious, educational, and missionary centers across the Muslim and Arab worlds. Conversely, Saudi Arabia witnessed a resurgence and expansion of its own religious institutions. Faisal’s policy of attracting scholars from various countries further invigorated these institutions, solidifying their influence (Posner 2005: 35–37).
 - 3 Despite valuing the historical and cultural aspects of Arab identity, Saudi Arabia and the sheikhdoms strongly opposed the political and economic demands of Nasserite Arabism. They feared that its influence could lead to three undesirable outcomes: first, uncontrollable riots; second, the departure of the British presence, which they viewed as essential for

Saudi Arabia's discord extended beyond Nasser to encompass Arab progressives more broadly. As a result, the kingdom actively distanced itself from Arab nationalism. A prominent example of this stance is found in the writings of the Saudi distinguished scholar, Abd al-Aziz bin Baz, who, later assuming the role of mufti in his country, critically examined Arab nationalism in his treatise titled *Naqd al-Qawmīyah al-Arabīyah 'alā Ḍaw' al-Islām wa al-Wāqi'* (*Criticism of Arab Nationalism in Light of Islam and Current Realities*) (Al-Shamrani 1988: 333–334).

The geopolitical landscape underwent a seismic shift with the wars of 1967 and 1973, relocating the Arab world's center of gravity from Egypt to the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf sheikhdoms. The significance of this transformation lies not only in the change of geographical focus but more crucially in the fact that Arab progressives, in the aftermath of these wars, largely abandoned the previously mentioned ideological tendencies. Arab nationalism underwent a practical abandonment of its revolutionary ideals and political commitments, experiencing a process of depoliticization. This shift aligned with the preferred notion of Arabism embraced by Saudi Arabia and the sheikhdoms, leading them to adopting and advocating for this depoliticized version of Arab nationalism¹.

Nationality and Saudi Nationalism

The sense of belonging to Saudi Arabian identity was relatively weak in its influence on the developments of the 1960s and 1970s. There were several factors contributing to this situation. Firstly, the prevailing conditions during that time were not conducive to the active and decisive presence of Saudi Arabian identity. The ruling regime and the elites primarily understood Saudiness within the framework of Islam, Wahhabism, and Arabness. The transformative events that would eventually shape them into nationalists had not yet occurred, creating a historical gap.

Secondly, Islamic, Wahhabi, and Arab characteristics had already coalesced into an acceptable and esteemed form of nationalism. These elements did not require further reinforcement. The emphasis on Islam, particularly Wahhabism, played a significant role in increasing the geopolitical importance of Saudi Arabia, particularly in the eyes of Western countries and Eastern bloc nations. In Western countries, Saudi Arabia presented

maintaining security and peace; and third, disruptions to the operations of oil companies (Masjed Jamei 1990: 80–83).

1 The two wars fostered a trend in Arab public opinion favoring a brand of Arabism that incorporated stronger religious undercurrents (Salim 1975: 6–7).

itself as a modernized and reformed version of Islam, akin to a Protestantized and Reformed interpretation¹. In Islamic countries, it tried to position itself as a champion of pure and fundamental Islam, rooted in the teachings and practices of the Pious Predecessors (Al-Salaf al-Ṣāliḥ), the Companions (Al-Ṣahābah) and the Followers (Al-Tābi‘ūn)².

Furthermore, the shifted center of gravity in the Arab world played a role in how Saudi Arabia was perceived. It was increasingly recognized as an Arab country committed to defending Arab interests. This recognition was acknowledged by both Arab and Western governments. Consequently, this perception furthermore solidified Saudi Arabia's geopolitical importance while simultaneously elevating its status and prestige.

Overall, during the 1960s and 1970s, Saudi Arabian identity had limited prominence compared to the dominant religious, Wahhabi, and Arab dimensions of nationalism.

Saudi nationalism experienced stagnation in its national dimension during the late 1970s. A significant factor contributing to this tepidity was the emergence of young individuals who adhered to the Wahhabi tendencies of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and identified themselves as Al-Jamā‘ah al-Salafīyah al-Muhtasibah. This trend ultimately culminated in the uprising led by Juhayman al-Utaybi on the first day of Muharram in 1400 AH (November 21, 1979), which shocked both the government and Saudi society as a whole³. To address this threatening wave, the regime had to focus primarily on religious and Wahhabi politics, thus undermining the grounds for the growth and prosperity of nationalism.

The Soviet Union's occupation of Afghanistan presented a significant opportunity for Saudi Arabia. Firstly, it allowed them to channel their dissatisfied religious forces out of the country, and secondly, it provided a platform for them to extend full support, both practically and through media propaganda, to the jihadist volunteers fighting against the so-called infidels. Thus, Saudi

1 Their Western institutions aimed to cultivate friendship and respect from Westerners. This objective shaped the presentation of Islam, from religious and cultural outreach programs to Friday sermons and weekly gatherings (Masjed Jamei 2016a: 179).

2 The Wahhabism promoted to other Islamic countries was a more conservative version that had already been superseded within Saudi Arabia itself. Saudi Arabia's own Wahhabism had undergone a process of reconstruction and modernization in response to changing circumstances. However, this modernized version held little appeal in traditional societies like Pakistan, where a more cautious and conservative form of Wahhabism took root. Over time, this Pakistani version became even more conservative and closed in its interpretation of Islam. This is the type of Wahhabism that gave rise to the Pakistani Taliban and similar groups (Masjed Jamei 2016c: 290–295).

3 For a more detailed discussion of this group's tendencies, Juhayman's uprising, and his subsequent imprisonment, see Edward Mortimer (1981: 82).

Arabia positioned itself as a defender of the faith in the face of external threats¹.

During this period, power resided in the hands of Fahd bin Abdulaziz, who was relatively more open-minded within the Saudi royal family, embracing the requirements of the modern era. In a country like Saudi Arabia, nationalism, particularly in its national dimension, was deemed a necessity for modernity. However, despite Fahd's openness, the regime was compelled to adopt a conservative and restrictive policy to safeguard its stability and self-preservation².

Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait

This process continued until the end of the 1990s. The conclusion of the Iraq-Iran War provided Saudi Arabia and the neighboring sheikhdoms with a breathing space, allowing them to distance themselves from their previous closed policies. However, unexpectedly, Iraq occupied Kuwait, causing a profound shock in the region³. This event marked the second major upheaval following Juhayman's uprising. The issue at hand was not solely political; it held significant religious implications as well. The Saudi regime came to the realization that in order to defend itself and liberate Kuwait, it needed assistance from the United States and the Western powers. However, this idea was met with opposition from Muslim public opinion and Islamic groups outside Saudi Arabia, including the Muslim Brotherhood, Hizb al-Tahrir, and supporters of Osama bin Laden⁴. The religious propaganda in the country during the 1980s had brought public opinion closer to Salafism and Wahhabi thought. Consequently, the majority of Saudis shared the sentiment of their fellow Muslims abroad who opposed seeking help from the West. It was unacceptable to them to seek assistance from non-Muslims to repel a transgressive and unjust ruler like Saddam, who was perceived as a fellow Muslim. Furthermore, the presence of non-Muslim troops in the Arabian

1 Saudi religious leaders, Abd al-Aziz bin Baz and Muhammad ibn al-Uthaymin, portrayed Osama bin Laden and Abdullah Azzam as devout Muslims engaged in jihad against Communist forces in Afghanistan. Bin Baz issued a fatwa declaring jihad in Afghanistan obligatory for all Muslims, while advocating for a more selective application of jihad elsewhere, requiring a sufficient number of Muslims to participate (Al-Rashid 2009: 162).

2 The rise of religious sentiment in the 1980s created a situation where the Saudi regime felt compelled to adopt stricter policies. This coincided with a period of crisis for Wahhabism, which made the regime's approach particularly appealing. Subsequently, volunteers from other Arab countries also came forward, and with Saudi Arabia's direct and indirect support, these fighters were deployed to conflict zones (Masjed Jamei 2016c: 298–299).

3 For a detailed account of the occupation of Kuwait, see al-Jawhari (2002).

4 Bin Laden had declared his willingness to combat the invaders with his forces and drive them out (Rashid 2010: 133).

Peninsula was also intolerable, as the entire Peninsula was considered a holy sanctuary (Al-Rashid 2002: 164–167).

To address the issue domestically, the Fatwa Council and religious scholars were consulted, and once again, emphasis was placed on religious policies¹. Following the liberation of Kuwait, the outcomes of these measures, including seeking assistance from the West and adopting religious policies, led Saudi Arabia to face a new internal challenge known as the Sahwah (Awakening). Key figures in this new movement were prominent religious scholars such as Salman al-Awdah and Safar al-Hawali, whose speeches and ideas held sway until the end of the 1990s and attracted many Salafist scholars. When ISIS emerged, the followers of this new tendency provided them with significant support, which has a lengthy history².

During this time, al-Qaidah also emerged, gaining popularity among young individuals with Salafist and anti-Western inclinations due to its militant operations. This trend, in turn, necessitated the adoption of strict religious policies. Religious figures once again assumed a prominent position, while those advocating for Saudi Arabia to be founded on purely nationalist factors were marginalized. Although there were a significant number of nationalists in the 1990s, who even took measures with the assistance of the regime, the circumstances were not conducive for them to sustain their activities, leading to gradual disillusionment.

September 11 Attacks

The September 11 attacks were a significant shock to both the Saudi government and society. The government faced accusations of having provided financial support to the perpetrators of the attacks. Saudi society, on the other hand, was deeply affected as the international community largely held Arabs responsible for the attacks, with the majority of the attackers being Saudis. This led to extensive propaganda targeting Saudis and Saudi society as a whole (Al-Rashid 2009: 25).

Following the attacks, studies on the motivations behind the attacks were initiated by Americans, Europeans, and various United Nations organizations. These studies focused on Arab societies, examining their social, political,

1 For a discussion of the fatwa issued by Bin Baz and other Saudi scholars, see Al-Rashid (2009: 58).

2 For a deeper understanding of the Sahwah movement, see Al-Rashid (2014). Sahwah members generally admire the first Saudi government but harbor significant reservations about the current leadership. In fact, some members faced imprisonment during the 1990s. Government officials view the Sahwah as responsible for radicalizing young people and contributing to the rise of jihadist and violent movements.

cultural, and religious systems, as well as their educational and academic systems, with a particular emphasis on religious textbooks. The results of such investigations were used to humiliate and insult Arabs, and to some extent, Muslims in general, and especially Saudis. The studies concluded that the problem lay within their societies, cultures, textbooks, and education systems, which were criticized for being based on rote memorization. This led to a wave of slander and a shocking level of contempt and humiliation directed at Arab societies, particularly from Western media. While Westerners may have historically held negative views of Arabs due to cultural and historical reasons, the magnitude of the humiliating remarks was unprecedented (Masjed Jamei 1990).

The aftermath of the attacks sparked various reactions, including the emergence of a sense of Saudi identity and pride among the Saudi people. This feeling of national identity was greatly strengthened during this period. The slogan “Raise your head, because you are a Saudi!” began to appear on city walls, reflecting a newfound sense of pride and resilience among the Saudi population¹.

After the September 11 attacks, the United States and its allies conducted two military operations that resulted in the overthrow of the Taliban in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Of particular significance to the Arab region was the fall of Saddam Hussein. The American neo-conservatives who initiated the war explicitly stated that their objective was to create a desirable model for regime change and shape a new Middle East. They envisioned a new Iraq that would serve as a model for other Arab nations (“Peace in the Middle East”, internet; Stewart 2005: 400–424).

This idea instilled fear in Arab regimes, particularly those neighboring Iraq. Saudi Arabia, in particular, was deeply concerned. Their response was to impede the progress of the new Iraqi government, and they made significant efforts to achieve this. Once again, they sought assistance from religious elements, overshadowing the nationalist sentiments that had emerged.

One of the key strategies employed to undermine the new Iraqi government was the intensification of sectarian tensions between Shias and Sunnis. This issue eroded the unity and social cohesion of Iraq and sparked a sectarian war. Subsequently, Salafist extremists, both from within Saudi Arabia and other regions, flocked to Iraq and targeted Shias under the pretext of confronting the Western occupiers. Additionally, some young Muslims living in Western countries joined their ranks. This trend created problems within Saudi Arabia itself, as *takfiri* Salafist ideas gained prominence and caused internal disturbances.

1 The aftermath of 9/11 ushered in a period of significant hardship for the Arab world, particularly for the sheikhdoms. For further details, see Masjed Jamei (2016c: 171–178).

Furthermore, Saudi Arabia, with a significant Shia minority, faced challenges that concerned the government.

Arab Revolutions

In the early 2010s, a wave of Arab revolutions, commonly referred to as the Arab Spring, began with Tunisia as the initial spark. While Tunisia may not have held significant geopolitical importance, the unrest in the country influenced the political landscape in Egypt, which was a major concern for Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia made efforts to support President Husni Mubarak and later his successor, Umar Sulayman, in order to maintain stability, but these attempts ultimately failed. The Egyptian revolution had a ripple effect on other Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia, as well as neighboring sheikhdoms and countries like Syria, Bahrain, Yemen, and Iraq, further complicating the regional situation. Once again, religious leverage was employed to address these challenges. Apart from Saudi Arabia, other Islamic countries, groups, and individuals indirectly or directly contributed to the emergence of ISIS and other takfiri groups. The Saudi government, some Saudi citizens, wealthy Salafists, and Wahhabi scholars played a significant role in the rise of ISIS (“Fatwā Sa‘ūdīyah bi-Takfīr al-Shī‘ah”, internet; Almisri, internet).

This series of initiatives and actions took a toll on society, elites, and even segments within the royal family. Additionally, the society was deeply influenced by the impact of cyberspace. Urban renewal, economic changes, improved living standards, increased connectivity with the outside world, the growth of the middle class and a weakening of religious beliefs and traditions all contributed to new conditions, particularly as the population became younger at a rapid pace. These developments necessitated new policies. However, the excessive use of religious tools by the regime for political purposes acted as a hindrance to meaningful reform.

King Salman and a Modern Government

The rise of Salman bin Adulaziz to power marked a turning point in Saudi Arabia. Since the end of King Abdullah’s era, a new class has emerged within the country, advocating for a modern government. This modernity, as perceived by this class, largely aligned with the aspirations of the younger generation who were less inclined to adhere strictly to social and traditional customs¹. The ideology of this new government can be described as Saudi

¹ Saudi Arabia has a youthful population, with a significant portion comprised of young people. The expansion of the internet and social media has created a vast gulf between this

nationalism. This concept differs significantly from the notions prevalent in the 1970s and subsequent decades, where Wahhabi and Arab nationalist elements held greater prominence. The influence of Wahhabism has diminished as it conflicts with the desired modern state, while the Arab nationalist element is only valued to the extent that it serves the interests of the modern state. Importantly, due to profound internal changes, there is limited resistance from religious institutions and figures. Furthermore, the Hanbali school of jurisprudence, more than other schools of thought, emphasizes obedience to the ruler and considers it a religious obligation (Masjed Jamei 2006: 262).

It is indeed true that Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf sheikhdoms have undergone significant historical developments. The first stage can be traced back to their Bedouin existence prior to the discovery of oil when their way of life was primarily centered around tribal and nomadic practices. The second stage emerged after the discovery of oil, during which their focus shifted towards enjoying the wealth generated from oil reserves and ensuring the preservation of their peaceful and prosperous lifestyle, even if it meant paying considerable prices. The primary policy during this period was non-confrontation and avoiding potential threats.

In the third stage, which has emerged more recently, there is a desire among these nations to actively engage in global and regional arenas and participate in various competitions. They are willing to bear the associated costs and consequences. These ambitions to enter the global stage and engage in regional dynamics have shaped the policies of the ruling regimes. These changes at the top level naturally have implications for the societal context.

The direction and pace of change within these countries, including Saudi Arabia, are influenced by their unique historical, cultural, and geopolitical circumstances. While in many third-world countries, change often originates from grassroots movements and societal demands, prompting transformations from the bottom up, in Saudi Arabia and the sheikhdoms, top-down changes are much more prominent (Masjed Jamei, internet/a).

Indeed, the process of transformation and expansion into various spheres began in Qatar in the second half of the 1990s under the leadership of Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa. Leveraging its significant oil wealth, Qatar aimed to develop its small society and position itself as an active mediator and a major hub for political, economic, sports, and media events. Initiatives such as the establishment of the Al Jazeera network, rapid growth of Qatar Airways, and the construction of modern infrastructure including airports, stadiums, hotels, and conference halls were part of this strategic policy, serving Qatar's political aspirations.

generation and their predecessors, who lived in a far more closed society (Masjed Jamei 2016b: 349–351).

In the early 2000s, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and to a certain extent Saudi Arabia also embarked on similar endeavors. However, Saudi Arabia faced certain constraints due to its geographical size, population, and other internal factors that required careful consideration. Nonetheless, this process initiated during King Abdullah's reign and gained further momentum under the leadership of King Salman. These decisions align with internal developments, particularly the impact of cyberspace on the younger generation. This series of measures has led Saudi Arabia to adopt a more nationalistic policy approach.

The perception and treatment of historical heritage and relics in Saudi Arabia have indeed undergone changes over time. In the past, due to the influence of Wahhabism, there was limited attention given to historical monuments, and in some cases, there was even a tendency to destroy them as they were seen as manifestations of polytheism. However, the current approach has shifted, and there is a desire to discover and revive heritage sites. This shift is driven by the recognition of historical wealth as a foundation of national identity and nationalism, as well as the aim to attract tourists. Tourism has become a priority for Saudi Arabia.

There is speculation that Saudi Arabia may even consider rebuilding the Al Baqi Cemetery and the holy graves of Shia Imams, both as showcases of their history, culture, and civilization, and as tourist attractions to generate income. The lack of action in this regard at the moment may be influenced by factors other than religious or Wahhabi reasons, with concerns over Iran's influence being a significant consideration (Masjed Jamei, internet/b).

Considering these points and the nationalistic ideology of the ruling system, it can be said that their perception of Shias, particularly Iran, has undergone changes. However, this does not mean that the current policy is fundamentally different from the past. The context and factors shaping the current policy are distinct from those in the past. It is important to note that significant differences exist in Saudi Arabia's policy toward both Saudi and non-Saudi Shias. The complexities of regional dynamics, religious differences, and geopolitical considerations contribute to the nuances in their approach.

Indeed, the series of changes and developments in Saudi Arabia can be traced back to the end of King Abdullah's era. King Abdullah's characteristics and personal background may have hindered a deeper understanding of the underlying sentiments within society, particularly among the younger generation. However, the roots of the significant transformations that occurred during Salman's era can be traced back to earlier times.

Even before King Abdullah's death, Saudi society experienced various forms of unrest and protests against stringent social and traditional customs. One notable example is the protests by Saudi women against the ban on

driving cars, which began in the early 1990s. In the mid-2010s, there were further protests by teenagers, exemplified by cases such as Rahaf Muhammed, a teenage girl who sought help from human rights institutions in Thailand and eventually found refuge in Canada. It is important to note that Rahaf's case gained significant attention, but there have been numerous other cases of individuals fleeing due to limitations within their family environment, such as the case of Latifah, the daughter of Dubai's ruler, who escaped a few years prior to Rahaf (Chulov, internet). These incidents highlight the challenges faced by individuals in closed family environments and their desire for greater freedom and autonomy.

The developments that unfolded under the leadership of Salman, particularly through the initiatives of his son, Crown Prince Muhammed bin Salman, have been aligned with the desires and characteristics of the younger generation. This process is expected to continue and progress further, reflecting the aspirations and demands of the evolving Saudi society.

The changes in Saudi Arabia also had implications for its foreign policy, particularly in relation to Iran. During Obama's presidency, especially in his second term, Saudi Arabia felt a sense of unease and perceived that the United States was not adequately addressing their concerns about Iran and its allies. This perception of being left alone against Iran contributed to Saudi Arabia's sensitivity during that period (Black & Smith, internet).

When Donald Trump was elected as the President of the United States, his personal views on the Arab world were influenced by the support he received from Evangelical Christians and certain segments of white supremacists. Although Trump himself was not an Evangelical Christian, he adopted a perspective that aligned with the opinions of these groups. His language was often bold and occasionally carried racist undertones. He made statements likening Saudi Arabia and the sheikhdoms to "milking cows" that would be discarded once they were no longer useful.

Saudi Arabia understood Trump's personal sensitivities and engaged in frequent communication with him between his election and assumption of the presidency. It is evident that they sought to establish a rapport with him. Trump's first foreign trip as president was to Saudi Arabia, followed by a visit to Israel, which held symbolic significance. His visit helped to alleviate some of Saudi Arabia's concerns, and they announced their 2020 and 2030 plans, which had been previously discussed and prepared in a nationalistic framework focused on modern governance. While these plans had been announced before, their emphasis on them reflected Saudi Arabia's confidence in Trump's support.

The arrival of President Joe Biden and his statements regarding the murder of Jamal Khashuqji did raise concerns in Saudi Arabia. However, the global

landscape has undergone significant changes that have affected the dynamics of international relations. The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the unexpected growth of China, and Russia's dissatisfaction with NATO policies have created a new situation that has diminished the perceived importance of the United States. These factors have contributed to the growth of Saudi nationalism and the exploration of potential new partners and allies.

As a result of these developments, there has been a certain cooling of the bilateral relationship between Saudi Arabia and the United States. This shift in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy approach is noteworthy.

The Ukraine war, which occurred unexpectedly, is distinct from the wars that have taken place since World War II. It represents a different kind of conflict, with the West and its close allies, such as Japan and South Korea, on one side, and Russia on the other. However, some view this as a broader civilizational war, a struggle for the future, and a competition between the United States and the West versus China.

China is attempting to distance itself from direct involvement in the conflict, but the United States rightly perceives China as its future rival rather than Russia. According to this perspective, the defeat of Russia would create a favorable basis for countering China, and vice versa.

The Ukraine war had significant economic implications, similar to the 1973 oil embargo. Russian gas exports decreased and eventually stopped, leading to a crisis in the wheat and oilseed markets, as Russia and Ukraine were major producers of these commodities. Europe faced the greatest pressure in this chaotic market, and in such a situation, oil-producing countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf sheikhdoms, found themselves in a privileged position. They became highly economically desirable, experiencing a level of desirability they had not seen in recent decades.

An illustrative example is the death of Khalifa bin Zayed, the Sheikh of the UAE. Although he was a relatively isolated figure, when it was time to extend condolences to the Emiratis, European leaders, the Vice President of the United States, and even Erdogan rushed to the country, as if they were competing on the matter. During a conference of leaders of major industrialized countries, President Macron called the Sheikh of the UAE to inquire about the possibility of increasing oil exports and relayed the conversation to President Biden. This incident highlights the high level of attention and engagement with the UAE's leadership during that period.

Furthermore, the same Amir of the UAE had recently visited Russia, where President Putin welcomed him with great warmth and even personally accompanied him during his departure. This level of treatment and dignity bestowed upon the Amir was unexpected, including the gesture of Putin lending him his personal overcoat due to the cold weather. These interactions were

influenced by the crisis in Ukraine and had implications not only for the UAE but also for Saudi Arabia.

Presently, Saudi Arabia feels empowered to disagree with anything that seems not to be in its interest and can confidently say no. This was evident in a recent case involving a reduction in oil production, where the United States threatened not to sell weapons to Saudi Arabia. Despite attempts by individuals like Turki bin Faisal and the Saudi ambassador to Washington to appease the Americans, the Saudis stood their ground (Elhamy & Abd-Alaziz, internet).

The new Saudi Arabia is characterized by a sense of nationalism driven by a combination of internal and external factors. The goal of this nationalism, as interpreted by Saudi thinkers like Turki al-Hamad, is to establish a modern state that prioritizes the rule of law and seeks to regulate societal relations. In this vision, religion and religious rules do not hold a determining status in shaping the modern society. The government's role is seen as creating the necessary infrastructure for economic, industrial, and commercial growth, and enhancing the country's regional and international standing.

The global conditions of the present era have provided Saudi Arabia with greater opportunities to pursue its objectives. The relationships between Saudi Arabia, China, and Russia have expanded significantly, driven by both natural factors and calculated considerations. China and Russia have a vested interest in maintaining stability and fostering development in their relationship with Saudi Arabia. As a result of these policies, Saudi Arabia has experienced a current growth rate of around eight percent, which is one of the highest in Asia.

Saudi Arabia's influence within the GCC, the Arab world, and even the broader Muslim world has increased and is expected to continue growing. While challenges remain in implementing the ambitious 2030 project, the shift away from total dependence on the United States has created new possibilities. Saudi Arabia has also learned how to navigate its relationships with China and Russia to its advantage.

Conclusion

The seeds of Saudi nationalism were sown during the reign of King Faisal bin Abdulaziz. Various domestic and international events played a crucial role in its development and consolidation. The overall effect initially strengthened the religious dimension of Saudi nationalism, marginalizing its national identity. With the ascension of King Salman, however, a shift began. The emergence of a new social class and the pursuit of a more modern state agenda led to the cultivation of a new form of Saudi nationalism. This new identity

differs from its predecessor, which emphasized religious and Arab elements more prominently.

In today's Saudi nationalism, the religious aspect is less pronounced and less central. The Arab element remains relevant, but only insofar as it aligns with the interests of the modern state. This evolution has impacted both domestic and foreign policy. Examples include the emphasis on rediscovering and celebrating historical heritage, initiatives like Saudi Vision 2020 and 2030, and so on. These developments are influenced by broader regional and global trends, which will likely continue to shape Saudi Arabia's domestic and foreign policy in the coming years.

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