

Overall, the aim of this book is to provide, for the first time, a comprehensive examination of the nature of opposition of the Saudi 'ulamā' to Shī'ism, and of how the 'ulamā' view particular Shī'a sects, political actors, and communities. It reveals that the 'ulamā' are not just rigid theologians. They are alert to political circumstances and try to influence political discourse to support their theological and political outlook.

 I

The Saudi 'Ulamā'

The Emergence of Wahhābism

The Saudi 'ulamā' have an interdependent relationship with the ruling elites of Saudi Arabia.¹ The 'ulamā' were significantly involved in the establishment of the Saudi nation and were granted a religious monopoly over the Saudi community. Muḥammad Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb was determined to spread his teachings, and he found that Muḥammad Ibn Saud and his political ambitions offered a vehicle through which to do so. The main religious objectives of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb were to cleanse Islam of corrupt practices and, in particular, to rid the religion of idolatry.

The partnership between Muḥammad Ibn Saud and Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb formed when the latter was expelled from his home village of 'Uyaynah after gaining prominence as a young preacher. When he arrived in Dir'iyah (40 miles away from 'Uyaynah), he was received by Muḥammad Ibn Saud and was granted protection. A pact was sealed between the two men in 1744. Pursuant to the pact, Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb agreed to support Ibn Saud as a political leader in return for the latter's commitment to *jihād* against "unbelievers."²

As part of the pact, Muḥammad Ibn Saud allowed Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb to hold a monopoly as the authority over matters of religion, and a mosque was specially built for him to propagate his religious doctrines. His doctrine justified war against non-Muslims, and even against Muslims who did not conform to the teachings of Wahhābism. This religious mission dovetailed with Muḥammad Ibn Saud's ambitions for the expansion of his power and the conquest of new territories.³ Crucially, as described by Madawi Al-Rasheed, "Wahhābism impregnated the Saudi leadership with a new force," and significantly assisted in the consolidation of the rule of Ibn Saud.⁴

Over the coming centuries, the Saud family never abandoned Wahhābīsm. It provided them with the legitimacy to rule. The relationship between the ruler and the shaykh was thus continued by the descendants of the original members of the pact. 'Abdullah Ibn Shaykh Muḥammad Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb (the son of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb) served under three Saudi rulers: 'Abd al-'Azīz, Saud (whom he accompanied in the conquest of Mecca), and 'Abdullah.⁵ The *'ulamā'* are closely linked to the ruling family by marital connections, reinforcing the interdependence of the two groups.⁶ For example, 'Abdullah Ibn 'Abd al-Laṭīf Āl al-Shaykh married his daughter off to Ibn Saud (she would become the mother of King Fayṣal) to renew the alliance with the Saud family.⁷

In his quest to spread his teachings, Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb invested in a group of dedicated clerics. His children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren also continued to teach his doctrines to the point where they ultimately became the state ideology of Saudi Arabia. Traditionally, the early *'ulamā'* were derived from the "Āl al-Shaykh" family (the descendants of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb were also known as "Āl al-Shaykh"). However, over time, *'ulamā'* of non-Shaykh backgrounds joined the Wahhābī establishment. These *'ulamā'* included members of the al-Bassām, al-Bulayhid, al-Angārī, al-Sayf, and al-Fawzān families. These families preserved the Wahhābī tradition, but it was localized within the Najdī regional domain.⁸ The expansion of Wahhābīsm beyond the Najdī region only began to take place in the twentieth century, particularly with the conversion of other families to the Wahhābī persuasion. Conversely, since the 1940s, the number of *'ulamā'* from the Āl al-Shaykh family has dwindled as some family members followed different career paths, and polygamous marriages within the family declined. Other possibilities have been suggested, including that the ruling family sought to curb the religious monopoly of the Āl al-Shaykh by empowering other families.⁹

King 'Abd al-'Azīz (also known as Ibn Saud), the founder of the third and modern Saudi state (1876–1953), continued the mission to expand Saudi Arabia by employing the doctrines of Wahhābīsm. The *Ikhwān*, Ibn Saud's militia, were used as a fighting force to subdue his political enemies. They were, in the words of As'ad Abu Khalil, "drawn from the tribal confederations and helped to conquer and preserve territory under Saud's control."¹⁰ However, they revolted against Ibn Saud in 1927. Ibn Saud later unified the Saudi nation, proclaimed the Saudi kingdom in 1932 (with a great deal of help from the British),¹¹ and adopted Wahhābīsm as the state theology. Wahhābīsm was taught at madrasas and mosques, and the

expansion of Wahhābīsm saw the extermination of non-Wahhābī activists to ensure the survival of both Ibn Saud's reign and Wahhābī teachings.¹² Accordingly, from the origins of the nation of Saudi Arabia, and just as it had earlier, Wahhābīsm provided political legitimacy for the ruling authority in exchange for its theological ascendancy.

The Relationship between the 'Ulamā' and the Ruling Family (Umarā'): State Bureaucratization

The nature of the relationship between *'ulamā'* and *umarā'* (rulers) in Saudi Arabia has received attention from scholars who have debated the significance of the institution of the *'ulamā'* and whether, over time, the *'ulamā'* have lost their influence within the Saudi state. There are, generally speaking, two views explaining the position of the Saudi *'ulamā'* within the kingdom. The first view is that the independence of the institution of the *'ulamā'* has diminished, although the religious establishment still manages to exercise some degree of influence over government policies. The other view is that the *'ulamā'* have lost significant power and influence in both religious and political terms.¹³

An understanding of the relationship between the clerics and the state must start from an appreciation of how Wahhābī religious doctrine itself considers the relationship should be. The Wahhābī doctrine emphasizes that the main role of the government in Islam is to guard the *sharī'ah* and enforce its implementation. It is the responsibility of the political leader to ensure that the rule of *sharī'ah* is carried out, and, for this purpose, obedience to such a ruler is promoted.¹⁴ The ruler, on the other hand, must always confer with the *'ulamā'*, who are the authority when it comes to understanding and clarifying the *sharī'ah*, before executing the *sharī'ah*. Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb divided Saudi Arabia's governing authorities between the *'ulamā'* and the *umarā'* (rulers), clearly specifying the role of the *'ulamā'* in interpreting the *sharī'ah* and the role of the *umarā'* in implementing it, although he did not specifically outline how the two groups were to relate to each other.¹⁵

According to Wahhābī doctrine, a ruler may be disobeyed in one circumstance: if his rulings violate the *sharī'ah*. This does not mean that the people are allowed to *challenge* the ruler openly: rebellion and revolt are not permissible.¹⁶ A ruler should be advised discreetly, and confrontational methods are not to be considered, even when the ruler has clearly

strayed from Islam. This line of thought is entrenched in the Wahhābī religious tradition. In a *fatwā*, Ibn Bāz went so far as to prohibit political activism and urged obedience to the ruler even if he contradicts the *sharī'ah*. According to Ibn Bāz, "obey him [ruler] until God finds you a way out. Any rebellious person is a rejectionist who abandons the community, threatening dissent."¹⁷

It can be concluded that, theoretically, based on the Wahhābī '*ulamā*'/*umarā*' understanding, the '*ulamā*' are not meant to overrule the king or undermine his authority, as they play only advisory roles within the power structure of the kingdom. Seemingly, their position in deciding the affairs of the state was marginal to begin with.¹⁸ But even if their formal influence is low, one reason that the '*ulamā*' were highly regarded and perceived as close to equals within the power structure of the kingdom during the first and second Saudi states was the attitudes of the rulers toward them. Saudi rulers during these periods were always in close proximity to the '*ulamā*', praying with them, learning from them, and traveling with them on missions. The '*ulamā*' were not only the source of their legitimacy to rule but, at a senior level, a principal source of knowledge. 'Abdullah Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn Ṣāliḥ Bassām, who wrote extensively about the Saudi '*ulamā*', highlighted a number of examples showing the positions of the '*ulamā*' within the Saudi ruling family as trusted advisors, teachers, and travel companions to the kings.¹⁹ The '*ulamā*' had significant access to the rulers and were within the circles of power and decision-making. It is narrated that Ibn Saud greatly respected Shaykh 'Abd al-Laṭīf Āl al-Shaykh and would shake with terror when he encountered him in the streets. After the death of Shaykh 'Abd al-Laṭīf in 1924, Ibn Saud remarked that "only now am I truly free."²⁰

It is commonly observed that the relationship between the '*ulamā*' and *umarā*' gradually changed under the leadership of Ibn Saud himself. Unlike his predecessors, Ibn Saud established contact with foreign officials and befriended a British officer, John Philby, who later became his counselor and accompanied him on many occasions, including his mission in 1918 to conquer Jabal Shammar and Hail.²¹ The incorporation of non-'*ulamā*' as advisors in the affairs of the kingdom was a demotion for the '*ulamā*' and significantly affected the '*ulamā*'/*umarā*' relationship. Similarly, the king's determination to modernize the kingdom gave rise to an intellectual gap between the pragmatic leader and the conservative clerics, who nonetheless adhered to the king's reform efforts. Ibn Saud's ability to convince the '*ulamā*' to accept modern technology is legendary;

he relied on Qur'ānic verses and Prophetic traditions to legitimize new innovations.²² For example, the king cleverly managed to justify the radio as a new technological development by organizing a Qur'ānic recitation over the air.²³

The discovery of oil created immense wealth in Saudi Arabia. This development required a competent administration to deal with the complexities arising from the wealth. The '*ulamā*', who had traditionally only dealt with matters of religion, were obviously not equipped to deal with the administration of the country's economy.²⁴ The consequent establishment of large-scale administrative institutions has created significant changes in the role of religion and the state in Saudi Arabia. First, it has strengthened the differences between religion and politics. Second, it has allowed the state to monopolize new and broader areas of control.

Similarly, King Fayṣal's (r. 1964–1975) policy of bureaucratizing the '*ulamā*' significantly limited their political independence and influence. The bureaucratization of the institution of '*ulamā*' under Fayṣal, who incorporated the '*ulamā*' within the state system, was designed to ensure control over the religious establishment. This, according to Al-Rasheed, "was the beginning of the institutionalisation of Wahhābīyyah, although its subjugation to political authority dates back to the 1920s."²⁵

In 1970, King Fayṣal created the Ministry of Justice and assigned a religious shaykh to be the responsible minister. The position of the shaykh as a minister obligated him to answer to the king, thus limiting his independence. The policy enabled the king to control all the religious courts in the country, which resulted in the king having the last word over religious issues, including the interpretation of the *sharī'ah* by the grand muftī, who previously had the sole control of the task.²⁶ King Fayṣal declared the formation of Board of Senior '*Ulamā*' (BSU) (*Hay'at Kibār al-'ulamā*') in 1971, headed by Shaykh 'Abd al-'Azīz Ibn Bāz. The BSU is composed of fifteen to twenty-five members, who are selected by the king. They are held in high regard and have some ability to influence the ruling family.²⁷

The council was allowed to advise the king on political and religious matters. It was also granted the ceremonial role of confirming the successor to the throne. Beranek argues that King Fayṣal's policy of bureaucratizing the '*ulamā*' made religion in Saudi Arabia dependent on the authority of the state.²⁸ However, some scholars disagree with the argument that the bureaucratization of the Saudi religious establishment has so significantly impacted the role of the '*ulamā*' within the kingdom. Al Atawneh suggests that the incorporation of the '*ulamā*' has enabled them to influence

policymaking from within and has ensured that Saudi Arabia's religious institutions remain relevant and active within the state's power structure.²⁹

Establishment 'Ulamā'

The Saudi *'ulamā'* can be divided into two categories: establishment³⁰ and non-establishment. Establishment *'ulamā'* are the *'ulamā'* within the state bureaucracy. These *'ulamā'* have given their endorsement of, and support for, the ruling family. The establishment *'ulamā'* are on the government payroll and act generally in the interests of the Saudi ruling family. However, the bureaucratization of the Saudi *'ulamā'* has arguably created unintended consequences for the ruling family. Disillusioned by what they see as "un-Islamic" practices among the ruling family, some *'ulamā'* have dissociated themselves from the regime and, by extension, the establishment *'ulamā'*. These non-establishment *'ulamā'* have embarked on a difficult political path and, at various times and to varying extents, have acted as a voice of dissent, challenging the ruling family. The extent of their opposition to the ruling family has at times resulted in imprisonment and political intimidation.³¹

Bachar et al. divide the establishment *'ulamā'* into two groups: senior *'ulamā'* and less senior *'ulamā'*. The senior *'ulamā'* hold higher positions and are more influential in state affairs and among the general public. There are five organizations of senior religious figures that vary in influence and role. According to Bachar et al., BSU is at the pinnacle of the Saudi "religious pyramid" and is responsible for issuing *fatāwā* on public concerns. The BSU is also the ultimate reference regarding the interpretation of the *sharī'ah* in Saudi Arabia. The second organization is the Permanent Committee for Scientific Research and Legal Opinion (CRLO) (*al-Lajnah al-Dā'imah lil-Buhūth al-'Ilmiyyah wal-Iftā'*), which conducts research and provides administrative support for the BSU. The third organization is the office of the grand muftī, who is the president of the BSU and the CRLO. The fourth and the fifth organizations are the Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs (*al-Majlis al-A'lā lil-Shu'ūn al-Islāmiyyah*) and the Council for Islamic Mission and Guidance (*al-Majlis lil-Da'wah wal-Irshād*). These two organizations are the providers of guidance for Saudis outside Saudi Arabia, are responsible for the moral behavior of the Saudi public, and are given the task of ensuring the proper conduct of mosque functionaries.³² Bachar et al. also explain that the clerics who are members of these organizations are the most influential in the Saudi state.

On the other hand, the less senior *'ulamā'*, who are thousands in number, hold less significant positions within various governmental religious organizations. These organizations include the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Endowments, Instruction, and Preaching (*Da'wah wal-Irshād*) and the Committee of Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong (*Hay'at al-Amr bil-Ma'rūf wal-Nahī 'an al-Munkar*, also known as *Muṭawwa'in*). Some of the less senior *'ulamā'* also function within the Muslim World League (*Rābiṭah al-'Ālam al-Islāmī*), a government body that aims to spread the doctrine of Wahhābīsm globally. Less senior *'ulamā'* also hold positions as *qāḍīs* under the Higher Council of Qāḍīs, Muftīs, and Sharī'.

As they are aware of the importance of religion within the kingdom, the Saudi government cleverly exploits the reputation of prominent *'ulamā'* to ensure the continuity of its authority by appointing these *'ulamā'* to high positions within the government. Shaykh Ibn Bāz was, because of his credibility, consulted by the ruling elites for *fatāwā* on a constant basis.³⁴ However, the ruling family is not in a position to allow the *'ulamā'* to undermine its authority; as a result, the role of the *'ulamā'* is restricted, especially in the affairs of state, which are considered to be the exclusive or near-exclusive domain of the ruling family. The religious establishment, on the other hand, aware of its diminishing role in a state controlled by modern, highly educated technocrats, limited themselves to "being guardians of public morality." The establishment *'ulamā'* endeavored to maintain the religious outlook of the kingdom and to promote visible Islamic symbolism, while taking the view that only the kingdom's rulers are equipped to deal with matters of public interest.³⁵

From the 1980s, the latitude given to the religious establishment by the ruling family, in relation to defining and regulating morality, was calculated. The *'ulamā'* mandated by the government imposed stricter social policies, including shutting down cinemas in Jeddah, banning female photos in the newspapers, and effecting prominent changes in the education system.³⁶ The Saudi monarchy needed the official *'ulamā'* to provide religious legitimacy for its operations to deal with the Juhaymān al-'Utaybī incident (the siege of the Grand Mosque) in 1979.³⁷ Al-'Utaybī was a charismatic man who led the Jamā'ah al-Salafiyyah al-Muḥtasibah, an offshoot of the Ahl al-Ḥadīth movement.³⁸ He was critical of the Saudi government for, according to him, undermining and violating Islam. Although he did not name any clerics and had profound respect for Ibn Bāz, he questioned the establishment *'ulamā'* and their silence. He was especially disturbed by the Saud family and saw

himself as the heir of the *Ikhwān* who rebelled against Ibn Saud in 1927. The siege of the Grand Mosque ended with the arrest and execution of 67 surviving males of the siege, including al-'Utaybī himself. These events naturally caused the Saudi regime to look for religious legitimacy, and the establishment '*ulamā*' were the obvious source. Similarly, Saudi Arabia's cooperation with the United States, especially in allowing troops to be stationed in Saudi Arabia during the Gulf War in 1991, required support from the establishment '*ulamā*'. The BSU, under the leadership of Ibn Bāz, endorsed the government's decision.³⁹

Education

Saudi Arabia introduced a secular education system to cope with the growing demand for well-educated employees to run the administrative institutions required of the modern and wealthy Saudi state. To this end, Fayṣal Ibn Saud established the Ministry of Education in 1954. Meanwhile, the popularity of religious education plummeted due to the demand for secular-trained professionals. However, although this change in education reflected Saudi Arabia's broader modernization, religion has remained a key foundation of the Saudi state.

This has created a subtle competition between the '*ulamā*' and the ruling authorities, as both try to dictate the future direction of the kingdom where their respective natural territories overlap. Education is one such area. The initiation of girls' education in Saudi Arabia in 1960 by King Fayṣal was furiously opposed by the '*ulamā*', leading to riots in many parts of the kingdom. Fayṣal finally managed to establish education for girls, but in order to pacify the '*ulamā*', he entrusted the development and supervision of female education to prominent clerics. Although female education in Saudi Arabia was allowed, the education was very traditional in nature. Female students were taught the values that would enable them to perform their role as good wives and mothers, and were prepared for professions considered suitable for women, such as teaching and nursing.⁴⁰

Similarly, changes made to accommodate the growing wealth of Saudi Arabia were rationalized in religious terms: for example, secular-educated government ministers have used religion as a ground for supporting policies. Religious symbolism is deployed by cabinet ministers, even those with little religious education, such as Hishām Nāzīr, minister for

planning in the 1980s, who promised that economic development for the welfare of Muslims would be carried out within an Islamic framework.⁴¹ Moreover, the public education system is designed to indoctrinate Saudi students with religious knowledge and understanding. Yassini, quoting the Ministry of Education of Saudi Arabia, says:

The purpose of education is to have the students to understand Islam in a correct and comprehensive manner, to plant and spread the Islamic creed, to furnish the students with the values, teachings and ideals of Islam, to equip him [*sic*] with various skills and knowledge, to develop his [*sic*] conduct in constructive directions, [and] to develop the society economically, socially and culturally.⁴²

Mordechai Abir notes that the Saudi education system incorporates Wahhābī teachings and that students are obliged to study many religious courses. Students are also constantly reminded of the historical alliance between Muḥammad Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb and Ibn Saud.⁴³ The introduction of a secular education system in Saudi Arabia has therefore not undermined the presence or significance of religion within that system. The full effect of secular education has failed to permeate Saudi society, because of the extent to which Islam is deeply rooted within the education system. The Saudi secular education makes it compulsory for students to take religious courses at the high school and university level. Religious courses are taught seriously, and students are graded with high expectations, unlike the Egyptian system, in which high school students are not expected to be graded and religious courses are not compulsory at the university level.⁴⁴ The Saudi education system has thus preserved a significant religious element, even in its secular streams.⁴⁵

The '*ulamā*' began to exercise more influence over the education system following the 1979 Meccan rebellion. Reporting experiences of ordinary Saudi citizens, Lacey states,

"Modern science, geology, the history of civilisation, the history of Europe—I remember studying all that in my Saudi school in the 1970s," says Mahdi al-Asfour, an Aramco planning consultant. "That vanished. Now it became just the history of Islam and the al-Saud, with hours of extra religious studies—and even science and maths had to include some Islamic content. When my child went to school, he came home crying one day because one of his teachers

told him that he would be going to hell. Why? Because he listened to music and because his thobe was not cut short enough.”⁴⁶

The Saudi educational system has come under scrutiny since the events of September 11, 2001. Most of the 9/11 hijackers were from Saudi Arabia and were products of that system, leaving it susceptible to charges that it had produced radical Islamists.⁴⁷

Although Saudi officials refuse to acknowledge the concerns with the kingdom's education system publicly, some have privately admitted that there is inappropriate content.⁴⁸ The Saudi ruling family under the leadership of King 'Abdullah, who came to power in 2005, embarked on reforming the education system. Saudi teachers were retrained, and school textbooks had many extreme elements removed. The king entrusted the Ministry of Education to his son-in-law, Prince Fayṣal Ibn 'Abdullah. He also established the King 'Abdullah University of Science and Technology in 2009, the objective of which is to promote co-education, and which focuses on secular subjects, including engineering, life sciences, and computer sciences.⁴⁹ The Saudi government began to promote educated Saudi women to give “the regime a soft and sophisticated modern face.”⁵⁰

Interpreters of the Sharī'ah

The Saudi state recognizes the authority of the Sunni religious establishment in interpreting the *sharī'ah*.⁵¹ This is made possible because the Basic Law of Saudi Arabia (*al-Niẓām al-Asāsī lil-ḥukm bil-Mamlakah al-'Arabīyyah al-Su'ūdiyyah*) stipulates that the *sharī'ah* is the law of the Saudi state. The Basic Law creates a dependency on the 'ulamā' to interpret the Qur'ān.⁵² The position of the Saudi 'ulamā' is considerably stronger than that of their counterparts in most other Muslim countries, where the 'ulamā' are not the absolute authority in interpreting *sharī'ah*. For example, in Pakistan and Egypt, the interpretation of the *sharī'ah* is a matter of contention between the 'ulamā' and the higher civil courts.⁵³ Frank Vogel describes the relationship between the 'ulamā' and the ruling family on matters relating to criminal law as “complementary and cooperative.” He argues that in this sphere, the Saudi 'ulamā' are often permitted to dictate terms. However, in the context of civil adjudications and the development of legislation, the ruling family and the 'ulamā' are in competition. The 'ulamā' consider commercial law as within their jurisdiction, identifying

it as a matter of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence). They also refuse the codification of laws in statutes, as it might “arouse issues of secularisation, state monopolisation of legislation, demotion of non-positive sources of law like natural law or religious law, the formation of the nation state, centralisation of state power and the invention of new positive legal and constitutional institutions.”⁵⁴ According to James Piscatori and Dale Eickelman, “[t]he monarchial elite has often circumvented the 'ulamā' by relying on royal decrees (*niẓāms*), rather than *fatāwā*, to make administrative, economic and social changes.”⁵⁵

In retaliation, the 'ulamā' have opposed certain policies of the ruling family and have managed, in some cases, to get their way. For example, in 1950, the government proposed a universal income tax. The 'ulamā' opposed the measure on the basis that it would impede the obligation of Muslims to give alms (*zakāt*). The government compromised by restricting the tax to non-Saudis.⁵⁶ In 1955, the Grand Muftī Muḥammad Ibn Ibrāhīm Āl al-Shaykh (1952–1969) attacked the decrees that permitted the establishment of a tribunal and chamber of commerce to deal with “commercial disputes.”⁵⁷ In his famous epistle, *Risālāt Taḥkīm al-Qawanīn*, he also debunked and criticized secular labor legislation. The shaykh condemned the introduction of the legislation, arguing that the *sharī'ah* should be the source of all legislation.⁵⁸

The grand muftī lacked the capacity to influence the public discourse on these issues because he simply articulated what Stéphane Lacroix describes as “a language that was abstruse for ordinary Saudis.”⁵⁹ Nevertheless, while winning battles like this, the ruling family continued to acknowledge the legitimacy of the 'ulamā'. In 1965, the 'ulamā' ardently opposed the opening of a television station in Riyadh; however, the station was eventually launched, following a compromise between the 'ulamā' and King Fayṣal. Although Fayṣal managed to proceed with his plan, he promised the 'ulamā' that the broadcasts of the station would be limited to religious programs and news. He further assigned the 'ulamā' the task of overseeing the station's programming content.⁶⁰

The issue of *jihād* and its interpretation within the context of the *sharī'ah* has been one of the most contentious topics in the cleric–regime relationship. The official Wahhābī discourse stipulates that “[a]rmed *jihād* under the banner of the ruler is considered an aspect of obeying him.” This doctrine assisted the establishment and consolidation of the Saudi state.⁶¹ In the early twentieth century, the establishment 'ulamā' supported Ibn Saud against the *Ikhwān*. This is not to say that Saudi 'ulamā' were

unsympathetic to the *Ikhwān*, who criticized and revolted against Ibn Saud for his flirtations with foreign powers and for halting *jihād*. On the contrary, Al-Rasheed argues that the failed rebellion created a lasting division within the Saudi religious establishment "between those pragmatic Wahhābīs who were close to political authority in Riyadh and those who maintained their autonomy and allegiance to God rather than worldly authority."⁶²

Declarations of *jihād* by the establishment '*ulamā*' often coincide with government policy. In the case of Afghanistan, during the Soviet invasion in 1979, the official '*ulamā*', including Shaykh Ibn Bāz, encouraged *jihād* while the Saudi government funded *jihādī* operations there. However, *jihād* in Afghanistan proved to be problematic for the Saudi kingdom, as many young Saudi men were radicalized there and later turned their struggles against the ruling family. Following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, Saudi *jihādīs* who fought in Afghanistan and other places, including Osama bin Laden, offered their assistance to liberate Kuwait against the denounced "infidel," Saddam Hussein. The Saudi government refused and, supported by the official '*ulamā*', endorsed the international coalition formed to liberate Kuwait. This angered the non-establishment '*ulamā*' and *jihādīs* alike.

Similarly, despite condemning the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 as unlawful, the establishment '*ulamā*' refused to declare *jihād*. In a leaked tape, Chief Justice Shaykh Sālih al-Luḥaydān appeared to be promoting *jihād* in Iraq, arguing that "if someone knows that he is capable of entering Iraq in order to join the fight, and if his intention is to raise the word of God, he is free to do so." This seemed designed to humiliate the Saudi government, as it was leaked during Crown Prince 'Abdullah's visit to the United States in 2005. Interestingly, the shaykh retracted his position and, in a letter issued by him, did not employ the term *jihād*.⁶³

Despite Saudi Arabia's involvement in financing and arming some of the rebel forces in Syria following the uprising and civil war that started there in 2011, establishment '*ulamā*' forbade Saudi citizens from participating in *jihād*, arguing that it is unlawful unless allowed by the Saudi authorities.⁶⁴ This position has been reiterated by various official '*ulamā*', including Saudi Arabia's grand muftī, Shaykh 'Abd al-'Azīz Āl al-Shaykh. The shaykh even reminded other Saudi preachers not to encourage *jihād* in Saudi Arabia, stating that "Muslims should be fearful of God and not deceive young Muslims and exploit their weakness and lack of insight and push them to an abyss."⁶⁵ To the establishment '*ulamā*', the *jihād* in Syria should be supported, but localized. In other words, only Syrians

should actively partake in the struggle. This view coincides precisely with the policy of the Saudi government, and will be discussed further in later chapters.

Regulators of Morality

The ruling family has given the '*ulamā*' the mandate to regulate the social behavior of the Saudi public. The '*ulamā*' have thus viewed themselves as the social leaders of Saudi Arabia and strive to preserve the Islamic image of the Saudi nation. The establishment '*ulamā*' have close contact with the public, through mosques, state radio, television, and newspapers. They disseminate religious teachings through these means and are active in preaching to the public. This, of course, works to the state's advantage. The use of media by the establishment clerics, given that they usually act in support of the regime, strengthens the position of the ruling family.⁶⁶ The social position of the '*ulamā*' is in turn enhanced by their access to the media services provided by the state. Further, as mentioned in the introduction to this work, the '*ulamā*' are savvy users of the Internet. Many of the establishment and non-establishment '*ulamā*' have their own websites, Twitter feeds, and YouTube accounts, uploading *fatāwā*, sermons, and lectures without delay. These have proved to be very effective communication tools, enabling clerics to reach audiences both within Saudi Arabia and throughout the Muslim world.

The Saudi '*ulamā*' are, in general, very conservative about social change. Arguably, societal evolution in Saudi Arabia takes place within the boundaries established by the '*ulamā*'. While Saudi muftīs can be relatively open and liberal when deciding on political issues and modern innovations, often at the behest of the government, when it comes to social matters, including the position of women within the Saudi state, the performance of religious practices, and so on, the '*ulamā*' impose a puritanical understanding of Islam, in line with Wahhābī doctrines.

Al Atawneh argues that *Dār al-Iftā'* (the official Saudi religious establishment for issuing *fatāwā*) "has played a significant role in creating the current Saudi socio-cultural dynamics, an uneasy coexistence of modernity and traditionalism, a reality often perceived as being paradoxical."⁶⁷ *Dār al-Iftā'* issues *fatāwā* requested by government officials, members of the Saudi public, and even foreigners residing outside the kingdom.⁶⁸ As a result, Saudi Arabia has become a nation that encompasses contradictory

characteristics. Mamoun Fandy states that “different times and different places exist at once. Saudi Arabia is both a pre-modern and a post-modern society.”⁶⁹

The domination of the social sphere by the *'ulamā'* has led to some resistance from the population. Recently, a small number of women have openly defied the prohibition against women driving (as some did in 1991) and have criticized gender segregation in the workplace. Conscious of this resistance, the ruling family often attempts to push through societal change against the opposition of the *'ulamā'*. In January 2012, the kingdom passed a new law allowing women to work in lingerie shops. This infuriated the clerical establishment, and in a *fatwā*, the grand muftī warned employers that allowing women to take up such positions contravened the *sharī'ah*.⁷⁰ King 'Abdullah also announced that women would be able to vote and stand as candidates in municipal elections in 2015, drawing criticism from some high-profile *'ulamā'*.⁷¹ Similarly, the state-sanctioned participation of women in the 2012 Olympic Games was opposed by the clerical establishment, who argued that allowing women to participate in the Olympics was tantamount to succumbing to Western values.⁷² King 'Abdullah remained unmoved and, after a series of negotiations, he managed to secure the consensus of leading *'ulamā'*, including the grand muftī, to allow women to participate.⁷³ The government has gradually reduced the role of clerics in defining the status of Saudi women, while granting more opportunities to other actors to debunk clerics' rulings, including on state television.⁷⁴

Non-establishment 'Ulamā'

The main non-establishment clerical movement in Saudi Arabia is the *Sahwah al-Islāmiyyah* (Islamic awakening), which became prominent during the first Gulf War. The movement emerged among *'ulamā'* and intellectuals to combat what was seen as a growing trend of secularism in Saudi Arabia.⁷⁵ The movement arose in the 1960s, influenced by Muslim Brotherhood activists who had fled to Saudi Arabia from Egypt and Syria to avoid persecution, among them Muḥammad Qutb (Sayyid Qutb's brother) and Shaykh Muḥammad Surūr Zayn al-'Ābidīn (a Syrian Muslim Brotherhood supporter).⁷⁶

The movement's main focus of attention was originally Western-educated Saudis and modern intellectuals. The Saudi ruling family had

granted freedom to Saudi intellectuals who promoted modernization and social reforms, but soon succumbed to pressure from the *Sahwah 'ulamā'*. According to Stéphane Lacroix, “to calm the waters in the religious field, the princes decided to drop their support for intellectuals who were [. . .] much less vital to them than their historic partners, the heirs of the religious cofounder of the Saudi state.”⁷⁷ It must be noted that it is difficult to clearly demarcate the *Sahwah 'ulamā'* as a group. It is a broad movement with a number of different strands. One early strand was the Surūrīs, followers of Shaykh Muḥammad Surūr Zayn al-'Ābidīn.⁷⁸ The Surūrīs can be described as supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood who followed Sayyid Qutb's style of activism. Another strand was the Muslim Brotherhood's networks, also known as Ikhwānīs, who followed the Egyptian Brotherhood's founder, Ḥassan al-Bannā. These two groups diverged theologically, especially after the weakening of non-*Sahwah* Islamism following the failed 1979 siege of the Grand Mosque.⁷⁹

The 1991 Gulf War saw the inclusion of political issues in the *Sahwah*'s platform.⁸⁰ The *Sahwah 'ulamā'* were generally frustrated by what they saw as the un-Islamic policies of the ruling family and the submissive attitudes of the establishment *'ulamā'* toward the government. The main plank of opposition to the ruling family was its positive relationship with the West, and in particular its permission for US troops to be stationed on Saudi soil. To the *Sahwah* clerics, the government was perceived as working with the enemies of Islam.⁸¹

Although the *Sahwah 'ulamā'* are arguably Wahhābīs, they refused to accept traditional Wahhābī attitudes toward politics and activism. They rejected the notion of absolute obedience to the ruler and promoted nonconformist behavior.⁸² One of the most influential *Sahwah* clerics is Salmān al-'Awdah, who emerged during the first Gulf War. He urged the Saudi government to return to “true Islam” and uphold the original pact between Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb and Ibn Saud. He was considered the most vocal critic of the Saudi ruling family.⁸³ In 1994, the Saudi government rounded up opposition clerics, including al-'Awdah, and imprisoned them. Another prominent non-establishment cleric is Safar al-Ḥawālī, who has opposed the Saudi ruling family mainly because of its close relationship with the West, particularly the United States. His platform is to protect Saudi Arabia, culturally and politically, from foreign domination.⁸⁴ However, it is argued that al-Ḥawālī is a religious nationalist rather than an Islamist, and that he has never intended to question the authority of the Saudi government. Consequently, al-Ḥawālī's incarceration in 1994 can be

interpreted as a sign of the Saudi government's inability to cope with public censure rather than a sign that al-Ḥawālī posed a genuine risk.⁸⁵

The Saudi government has a harsh policy toward dissenters, resulting in the oppression of non-establishment 'ulamā' from time to time. However, the non-establishment 'ulamā' have at least influenced the state in an indirect way. Although the *Sahwah* 'ulamā' were marginalized, they indirectly strengthened the position of the establishment 'ulamā' in Saudi Arabia. The ruling family granted the government 'ulamā' more authority after arresting al-'Awdah and al-Ḥawālī.⁸⁶ This is because the Saudi government needed the support of the establishment 'ulamā' to carry out its assault on non-establishment 'ulamā'.

The *Sahwah*'s opposition to the government has created a voice of dissent and has encouraged political discourse. Salmān al-'Awdah and Safar al-Ḥawālī continue to be highly influential and are respected by many sections of the Saudi community. The support for *Sahwah* clerics increased significantly in the 1990s, as measured by, for example, attendance at the sermons of clerics such as al-'Awdah. Mamoun Fandy quotes al-'Awdah as saying,

I admire what is happening. Yesterday there were two lines of young men in midday prayers. Now there are more than five lines. Brothers, I was called by a few housewives, some of them are elderly. . . . One woman told me . . . that neither she nor her guests ate their food last night . . . because of the arrest of the 'ulamā'.⁸⁷

Tapes of speeches and messages by these 'ulamā' became highly popular among Saudis. Prominent *Sahwah* 'ulamā' articulated their messages to the public through cassette tapes.⁸⁸ In a similar vein, the non-establishment 'ulamā' "enjoyed a great deal of popular legitimacy," and in the last decade the Internet has become an avenue for the 'ulamā' to deal directly with the public.⁸⁹ However, recent works on the *Sahwah* 'ulamā' in Saudi Arabia have questioned the relevance of *Sahwah al-Islāmiyyah* today and have detailed the movement's co-optation within the state system. There is an argument that the movement no longer questions the legitimacy of the Saudi government and has become more accommodating in its dealings with the ruling family.⁹⁰

After their release from prison in the late 1990s, *Sahwah* 'ulamā' began to distance themselves from al-Qaeda, local Saudi *jihādīs*, and even *Sahwah* 'ulamā' residing outside the kingdom. This is particularly

the case following September 11, 2001, and the terrorist attacks on Saudi soil from 2003 onward. Establishment 'ulamā' denounced the *Sahwah*, including prominent clerics such as Rabī' al-Madkhalī and 'Abd al-Muḥsin al-'Ubaykān. Rabī' al-Madkhalī has a large following (the Madkhalīs) and is known for his entrenched loyalty to the state and promotion of state policies. He stated,

"Sahwis (Ikhwānis and Qutubis)" are more dangerous than the *kāfir* groups fought by Muḥammad Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb. Qutubis disguise themselves under the label Salafiyah, but they are worst [sic] than the obvious *kāfir*. Muslims cannot be deceived by real *kāfirs* but they are deceived by those innovators who lead people astray.⁹¹

In May 2003, al-'Awdah, al-Ḥawālī, and other *Sahwah* clerics declared the *jihādīs* as "ignorant and misguided young men."⁹² Further, the Saudi government felt the need to employ prominent *Sahwah* clerics to counter the *jihādīs*. Although al-'Awdah and al-Ḥawālī have, to some extent, been co-opted by the regime, their popularity among Saudis has remained unaffected. They are younger than most prominent members of the establishment 'ulamā' and are able to connect with the public more effectively. More important, they have managed to remain relatively independent of the state by not becoming entangled in the government bureaucracy. This relative independence serves the government well, as they now have two sets of 'ulamā' to counter extremism and to promote government policies. For example, al-'Awdah was heavily involved in the 2003 National Dialogue initiated by Crown Prince 'Abdullah.⁹³

The rise of the *Shu'aybī* group saw the emergence of another set of Saudi 'ulamā' who are "on the radical side of the Saudi Islamist field" working to replace *Sahwah al-Islāmiyyah* and who represent the new non-establishment 'ulamā'.⁹⁴ Thomas Hegghammer has identified two factors that led to the establishment of the *Shu'aybī* school.⁹⁵ The first was the deaths of three prominent and charismatic scholars, including Shaykh Ibn Bāz and Shaykh 'Uthaymīn (who were part of the state-endorsed religious establishment), which left a "theological power vacuum." The second was the disappearance of the non-establishment 'ulamā', first through their arrests and imprisonment, and later through their co-optation as government-friendly clerics.⁹⁶

The *Shu'aybī* school consists of 'ulamā' who share a mutual understanding on a number of political issues and are loosely tied to each other. They

are mostly from Riyadh and Burayda. The name *Shu'aybī* is derived from the movement's central figure, Ḥamūd Ibn 'Uqlā al-Shu'aybī. The movement is controlled and dominated by 'Alī al-Khudayr and Nāṣir al-Fahd, who were both disillusioned with the *Sahwah*. Besides being theologically and politically frustrated with the religious establishment and the *Sahwah* 'ulamā', the *Shu'aybī* 'ulamā' seem to have also personally clashed with the *Sahwah* and establishment 'ulamā', which subsequently contributed to the establishment of their own movement. Ḥamūd al-Shu'aybī himself was at loggerheads with Shaykh 'Utahymīn and, similarly, Nāṣir al-Fahd's encounter with Salmān al-'Awdah adversely affected their relations, which subsequently motivated al-Fahd to distance himself from the *Sahwah* movement.⁹⁷

Shu'aybī 'ulamā' often take radically conservative approaches to issues. One example is their opposition to the issuance of identity cards for women. Another is their declaration that social clubs for women are un-Islamic. Politically, these 'ulamā' condemn the presence of US troops in the region, arguing that it is impermissible to allow non-Muslims to be stationed on Muslim land, and calling for evictions of Jews and Christians from the Arabian Peninsula.⁹⁸ Many *Shu'aybī* 'ulamā', including Nāṣir al-Fahd, Ahmed al-Khālīdī, and 'Alī al-Khudayr (also known as the "takfīrī troika"), were arrested and imprisoned in 2003. They subsequently appeared on state television and apologized for their attacks on the ruling family. They then wrote letters, smuggled from prison, to the Saudi public, retracting their apologies.⁹⁹ The works of the *Shu'aybī* 'ulamā' galvanized *jihādī* tendencies, which encouraged recruitments of *jihādīs* in Saudi Arabia. Their writings provided a religious legitimacy for *jihādī* operations that *jihādīs* of a non-'ulamā' background, including Osama bin Laden, lacked.¹⁰⁰

Conclusion

The Saudi 'ulamā' remain influential within Saudi Arabia. Their position as men of religion and representatives of Islam has been protected since the establishment of the Saudi nation. The official Saudi 'ulamā' generally assume the social leadership of Saudi Arabia and are granted significant authority to deal with religious matters. The non-establishment 'ulamā' have not only created a platform for political discourse in the kingdom but have changed the traditional conception of the role of the 'ulamā' by becoming political actors. Although the 'ulamā', both establishment and

non-establishment, have limited powers within the Saudi state, especially in the context of decision-making, where they are mostly consulted as a formality and to grant the ruling family religious legitimacy, this does not deter them from expressing their views about matters concerning the country. From minor social practices to the government's domestic policies and even foreign policies, most 'ulamā' are opinionated, regardless of their individual social and religious standing. Considering that the 'ulamā' have essentially unlimited access to the Saudi public through sermons, lectures, television channels (both state-owned and commercial networks) and the Internet, the attitude of Saudi 'ulamā' regarding Shī'ism is an important topic to study because the 'ulamā' are likely to help shape the opinions of the Saudi public and, more significant, to help influence and legitimize the policies of the ruling family toward Shī'a, internally and externally.

As we shall see, the 'ulamā' in Saudi Arabia, both establishment and non-establishment, have expressed near-uniform views regarding Shī'ism and its place within the Muslim community. 'Ulamā' of both persuasions have declared most Shī'a sects as infidels. The *Sahwis* and *Shu'aybī* 'ulamā' have also openly declared support for Sunnis in Iraq and Syria and have expressed animosity and suspicion toward the Shī'a, both domestically and within the broader region.

One point that will become apparent is that the establishment/non-establishment categorization explains little in the context of attitudes toward Shī'ism. Shaykh Nāṣir al-'Umar, a prominent *Sahwah* cleric and a Surūrī, is one of the most uncompromising when discussing Shī'ism. However, Shaykh Salmān al-'Awdah, who is known to be of a similar political persuasion, is more accommodating: he has participated in reconciliatory efforts initiated by the ruling family. In the context of the Shī'a, a more illuminating categorization is one that focuses on the particular inclinations of clerics toward sectarian matters: traditionalist or progressive. This categorization will be developed further in subsequent chapters. But first, before embarking on investigating the attitudes of the Saudi 'ulamā' toward Shī'ism, it is necessary to discuss the history of Sunni-Shī'a divide.