State Legitimacy in Saudi Arabia after 2011. Between Debate and Repression of Dissent (ricerca originale)
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Abstract

The Saudi state is often regarded as a theocracy, as its Basic Law declares the Quran and the Sunna to be the Constitution (Article 1) and claims to apply the sharia (Articles 23, 48, 55). However, the official Saudi juridical interpretation, as well as its political system, are not generally acknowledged as closer to the precepts of Islam than other Muslim traditions. This paper explores how the religious legitimacy of Saudi Arabia has been in fact highly disputed not only from the outside, but within the public opinion of the country itself. In particular, the present article examines relevant texts and speeches that appeared after the 2011 popular upheavals in the Arab world, which led many Saudi thinkers to reflect on their State structure and its legitimacy. The discourse over governance, political authority and participation has evolved in multiple ways since then, by reframing traditional concepts such as *fitna*, *ḫurūǧ* and *kufr*, and by relating religious doctrine with contemporary issues such as democracy, secularism, revolution, human rights, and terrorism. In analyzing the diversity in religious-political interpretation, the paper contributes to the understanding of the complex relationship between Salafism and Islamism in the contemporary Saudi space.

1 - Introduction

Accounts on the relationship between religion and politics in the Islamic world are quite common in academic and informative writings. However, this topic is often subject to simplifications, which depict politics in Islamic countries as subordinate to the immutable imperatives of religion, failing to understand how in fact religion is used as a tool for exerting power. The case of Saudi Arabia is, in this sense, particularly significant. Considering the pervasive references to religion in most aspects of public life, the country has been generally regarded as a theocracy, where political power derives its legitimacy from religion. The Saudi Basic Law (1412H/1992) seems to enforce this perception, as it declares the Quran and the Sunna to be the Constitution (Article 1), affirming the strict correlation between governance and application of the sharia

(Articles 23, 48, 55).[1] Nevertheless, the attempt of the regime to legitimate its authority through religious language[2] has proved to be a double-edged sword: most critical voices have challenged its claimed monopoly over the correct interpretation and application of Islamic precepts. Debates on the true interpretation of the Scriptures, other traditional sources, and their relation to political power have emerged in several moments of Saudi history, in what has been aptly defined as «the struggle over divine politics».[3]

Moving from these assumptions, this paper will explore the ongoing evolutions and contradictions expressed by contemporary Saudi public opinion, which discusses the legitimacy of the country's political system through religious language. As we have pointed out, this debate is not new to Saudi Arabia, but it has experienced a renewed relevance since the 2011 upheavals in the Arab world. Although massive protests interested Saudi Arabia only marginally (except for the Eastern, predominantly Shiite region of the country),[4] events in other countries have indirectly affected political balances inside the kingdom. Some observers have described the link between the regional political turmoil and the increased interest in political themes. In particular, this paper will consider the recent religious-political debate on the Saudi State itself. Since 2011, this debate has continued to be influenced by subsequent internal and regional events. The former include the change in leadership – with the death of king ʿAbdullāh in 2015 and the replacement as crown prince of prince Muḥammad bin Nāyyif with king Salmān's son, Muḥammad bin Salmān, in 2017. At the same time, the promulgation of a new law on counterterrorism in 2014, subsequently amended in 2017,[5] has offered the authorities a renewed legal framework to target dissent. Among the regional events, it is noteworthy to mention the evolution in international alliances and rivalries, marked

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[1] For an English official version of the Saudi Basic Law, see: *Basic Law of Governance*. Royal Decree No. A/90, 27 Šaʿbān 1412H/2 March 1992. Last accessed 21/03/21. https://www.saudiembassy.net/basic-law-governance.

[2] According to Saudi historian Madawi al-Rasheed, the Āl Saʿūd dynasty has traditionally found in the asserted defence of Islamic values as articulated in the Wahhabi doctrine the main narrative to justify its claim to power, as it lacked historical and territorial sources of legitimacy over most areas of the Arabian Peninsula. See Al-Rasheed, Madawi. 2010. *A History of Saudi Arabia.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

[3] al-Rasheed, Madawi. 2015. *Muted Modernists. The Struggle over Divine Politics in Saudi Arabia.* New York: Oxford University Press.

[4] Although the Saudi Shiite tradition has produced interesting reflections on the Saudi political context, the public religious-political discourse considered in this paper will be focused mainly on the dominant Sunni tradition. For a detailed analysis on the Saudi Shiite question across history, comprehensive of an account of the 2011 protests, see Matthiesen, Toby. 2014. *The Other Saudis. Shiism, Dissent and Sectarianism.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

[5] For the current version of the law, see *Niẓām mukāfaḥat ǧarāʾim al-irhāb wa tamwīli-hi.* Royal Decree No. M/21, 12 Ṣafar 1439H/2 November 2017. Last accessed 26/03/21. https://laws.boe.gov.sa/BoeLaws/Laws/LawDetails/57694209-3eed-46c7-a5d8-a9ed012761d4/1.

by converging interests with the UAE and ʿAbd al-Fattāḥ al-Sīsī's regime in Egypt, and tensions with other regional players such as Iran, Turkey, and Qatar.

Drawing on contemporary Saudi texts on the topic, the study analyzes the major features of the competing discourses on the legitimacy of governance related to the defence, respect, and implementation of Islamic principles. The term "discourses" refers not only to the material existence of texts dealing with the issue considered, but also to the way they represent political reality and social relations. In this sense, the religious-political discourses here examined are not merely different opinions expressed individually by scholars, intellectuals, activists or journalists. They are in fact narratives which engage with diverging systems of meaning and ultimately affirm a particular truth. Assessing how these narratives interact in the discussion of power will allow us to make some considerations on recent changes in the relationship of scholars and preachers with the State, and the reasons behind this.

The recent developments in the debate on State legitimacy challenge the traditional academic understanding of religious trends in Saudi Arabia. The pioneering work of Wiktorowicz,[6] which distinguished between purist, political, and jihadi Salafism is largely based on an evaluation of the Saudi context of the '90s. Many authors have then revisited his categorization in order to describe the nuances and the changing trends more accurately.[7] Despite efforts to take such features into account, the categorization inevitably presents some limits and is in constant need of revision. Significantly, recent research on religious politics and movements has increasingly focused on the analysis of the peculiarities of a specific context, being increasingly aware of the partiality of rigid categorizations when representing current changes and fluid identities.[8] So far, this approach has been applied to contexts more overtly invested by political changes, but it may offer a better understanding of the Saudi case as well. Describing the salient trends of the contemporary debate on State legitimacy, this study contributes to the understanding of Salafism and Islamism in the country, giving an account of their complexity, which makes it difficult to establish exact boundaries between and within these macro-categories.

As for its structure, the paper will focus on the main themes around which the discourses have developed. Paragraph 2 will introduce the question of the role of sha-

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[6] Wiktorowicz, Quintan. 2006. "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29(3). 207-239.

[7] See Wagemakers, Joas. 2020. "Salafism. Generalisation, Conceptualisation and Categorisation", Ranstorp, Magnus (ed.), *Contextualising Salafism and Jihadi-Salafism*. Copenhagen: Nationalt Center for Forebyggelse af Ekstremisme. 21-36.

[8] Recent works on Salafism or Islamism organised in chapters focusing on different aspects or contexts testify of this awareness. Just to mention some: Cavatorta, Francesco, & Merone, Fabio (eds.). 2017. *Salafism After the Arab Awakening.* London: Hurst & Company. Burgat, Francois. 2016. *Comprendre l'islam politique.* Paris: La Decouverte.

ria in the country and its perception from different religious actors. Paragraph 3 will present the views on State legitimacy and its relationship to secularism as expressed by conservative Islamists, who are doctrinally close to the Salafi official tradition but have been recently targeted as extremists because of their criticism towards the State. The response of the establishment *'ulamā'* will be assessed in Paragraph 4, that will present the main arguments against opposition, but also the emerging of innovative features in institutional Saudi Islam that respond to the changing needs of the State. Paragraph 5 will discuss quests for participation in public affairs and condemnation of political oppression from the authorities by Islamist reformists. The article will rely on written books and articles, as well as oral speeches, as primary sources. More informal forms of expression, such as online news articles, TV programs, and interviews, will also be mentioned, considering their wide diffusion and consequent impact in fueling the debate.

2 - State legitimacy and compliance with sharia

Reflections on State legitimacy from a religious perspective have moved – more or less directly – from the following question: can Saudi Arabia be considered a country that respects the Islamic Law? Inevitably linked to the peculiar situation of the Saudi legislative and judicial system,[9] this question extends in practice to all the State policies and acts, which are judged from the standpoint of the interpretation of the sacred texts.

Renowned Salafi *'ulamā'* such as ibn Bāz, al-'Uṯaymīn and al-Albānī[10] have established the mainstream terms of the discourse as we know it today. Responding to doubts on the possibility of acting against a government because of its supposed rejec-

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[9] The Saudi authorities have traditionally been reluctant to systematize a legislative code: in a State that bases its legitimacy on the claim of continuity with the Islamic legal tradition, an overall reform of the legal system is certainly problematic. For a long time, Islamic law as applied by sharia courts has continued to be the general law; in parallel, separate juridical institutions applied administrative legislation on issues not specifically regulated by sharia. A reform of the judiciary, which divided the courts on the basis of their fields of law (general, penal, labor, commercial, family), was promoted under king 'Abd Allāh with the Royal Decree No. M/78, 19 Ramaḍān 1428H/1 October 2007. For an account of the Saudi national law, see Van Ejik, Esther. 2010. "Sharia and National Law in Saudi Arabia", Otto, Jan Michiel (ed.), *Sharia Incorporated. A Comparative Overview of the Legal Systems of Twelve Muslim Countries in Past and Present*. Leiden: Leiden University Press. 139-180.

[10] Although not Saudi, *šayḫ* al-Albānī had a huge influence on Saudi religious milieu, and on global Salafism in general. His legacy is mostly linked to his method of *ḥadīṯ* validation, and to the concepts of *taṣfīya* (purification of the creed) and *tarbīya* (education) in pursuing the ideal model of the first Muslim generations. For al-Albānī, *al-taṣfīya wa-l-tarbīya* are the only actions a Muslim should consider for obtaining a bottom-up change in society: he excludes the legitimacy of both peaceful and violent manifestations of political dissent. For his position on the issue, followed by comments and *fatāwà* of both Ibn Bāz and al-'Uṯaymīn, see Abū Lūz, Abū Anas (ed.). 1417H/1996. *Fitnat al-takfīr wa-l-ḥukm bi-ġayr mā anzala Allāh*, Riyadh: Dār al-waṭan li-l-našr.

tion of the Islamic tradition, these *ʿulamāʾ* have focused mainly on proposing a detailed interpretation of Quranic verses and hadith related to the concept of misbelief (*kufr*), while also suggesting prudence in applying them, especially when referring to an authority, because this may lead to dangerous social disorder (*fitna*).[11] Obedience to the ruler, which can only be withdrawn if the authority «forbids what God has permitted and permits what God has forbidden» (*taḥrīm mā aḥalla Allāh wa-taḥlīl mā ḥarrama Allāh*), is another common feature of their production.[12] Their positions have circulated particularly since the '90s, after some well-known episodes of internal unrest linked to the Gulf War, when a popular movement known as *Ṣaḥwa* ("Awakening") manifested its discontent towards State policies deemed contrary to religious principles.[13] Doctrinally speaking, most arguments on the relationship between sharia and national law that have emerged since that time within the Saudi Salafi context agree on one, fundamental point: the State should preserve Islamic values by governing in compliance with the sacred law. However, establishing whether Saudi Arabia and its policies respect this rule remains a matter of interpretation.

As this study will show, conservative scholars – both critical and supportive of the government – continue to consider the legislative question, and more generally the preservation of traditional religious values in the public space, as the core of the discourse over the legitimacy of the State. At the same time, discourses which reframe the topic of Islamic law in relation to other priorities, such as political reform and accountability of the authorities, have emerged.

Arguably, contemporary approaches critical of the government reflect the twofold legacy of political Islam derived from the Saudi *Ṣaḥwa*: some thinkers base their arguments on the defense of Islamic tradition and condemnation of secularism (*ʿilmāniyya*). In contrast, others have been inspired by demands for civil and political rights, whose denial is considered contrary to the true message of Islam.[14] Faced with this increased

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[11] The word *fitna* appears several times in the Quran, with different meanings: temptation, oppression, sedition. The term has often been used with a negative meaning in reference to conflicts, riots, social unrest.

[12] Whereas al-Albānī believes that it is not possible to affirm that the ruler has abandoned Islam only from his actions, without an explicit declaration of apostasy from him, many Saudi *ʿulamāʾ* consider the hypothesis of judging the faith of a ruler within the concept of *taḥrīm mā aḥalla Allāh wa-taḥlīl mā ḥarrama Allāh*, already expressed by Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb in his *Kitāb al-tawḥīd*. See al-Rūmī, ʿAbd al-Azīz b. Zayd, Bilṭāǧī, Muḥammad, & Ḥaǧāb, Sayyid (eds.). 1978. *Muʾallafāt al-*šayḫ *al-imām Muḥammad ibn* ʿAbd *al-Wahhāb*. Riyāḍ: Ǧāmiʿat al-imām Muḥammad b. Saʿūd. 102-103.

[13] For a detailed analysis of this historical period, see Lacroix, Stéphane. 2011. *Awakening Islam. The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

[14] The '91 *Ṣaḥwa* "Letter of Demands" addressed to King Fahd expresses both these issues of concern. For a translation of the document see Lacroix, *Awakening Islam, op. cit.*, 179-181.

complexity, the category of Saudi political Islam appears today more heterogeneous than in the past. Nonetheless, the response of the government and religious institutions has tried to reduce dissent to an indistinct, un-Islamic front. This response has involved accusations of undermining national security and social order, and of being linked to foreign political forces – particularly the Muslim Brotherhood. This counter-discourse has been accompanied by a wave of repression, with arrests and harsh sentences on critical thinkers and activists in recent years.

3 - Warning against secularism: conservative Islamist-Salafi criticism

Of the four petitions that circulated in 2011 calling for change in Saudi Arabia, only one was focused on the demand of complying more strictly with the sharia law.[15] According to its promoters, national issues such as corruption and unemployment are linked to an excessive influence of secularists on the government, which undermines traditional good governance by importing alien values. Therefore, the petition recalled the ancient pact between the two "imams", the religious preacher Muḥammad Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb and the political leader Muḥammad Ibn Saʿūd, as the foundation of the Saudi kingdom and its strength.[16] Even though the petition presents itself as a *naṣīḥa*, a non-binding religious advice, the publication of the petition was controversial. Giving *naṣīḥa* in a public statement is blamed by scholars of national religious institutions, who consider this Islamic legal institute to be due only in the private sphere, in order to avoid social unrest.[17] The demands expressed in the petition represent a politicized Salafism, quite traditionalist in its references, which does not necessarily oppose the government, but has recently expressed discontent with its policies. Politicized Salafist representatives distinguish themselves from the "official" Salafi school, which participate in national religious institutions and unconditionally defend the government (a position usually labelled by academic literature as "quietism"). Instead, they present their position as an "independent" Salafism, engaged in dialogue with society and advocating its needs.[18] Their discourse on governance and its compliance with the sharia law has traditionally focused on the extent to which a State introduces in its legislation practices deemed as non-Islamic, and the reasons behind this decision.[19] Therefore, this approach is not

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[15] al-Rasheed, *Muted Modernists, op cit.*, 37-38.

[16] On the foundation of the Saudi kingdom, see Commins, David. 2006. *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia.* London: I.B. Tauris.

[17] Vogel, Frank. 2000. *Islamic Law and Legal System. Studies of Saudi Arabia.* Leiden/Boston: Brill. 209.

[18] Al-Sulūmī, Muḥammad b. ʿAbd Allāh. 1432H/2011. *Al-waḥda al-waṭaniyya fī al-saʿūdiyya bayn al-ḫiṭābayn al-salafī wa-l-lībrālī.* Al-Moslim (online). https://almoslim.net/documents/book34.pdf.

[19] For example, see al-Maḥmūd, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān. 1433H/2011. *Al-ḥukm bi-ġayr mā anzala*

inherently critical of the Saudi government, which is deemed more respectful of Islam than other governments in Muslim countries. However, it implies a certain attention to the political choices of the authorities, who can become the target of *naṣīḥa* if they are perceived to go astray from the correct application of the sharia.

In recent years, this approach has been adopted by representatives of the more conservative trend derived from the *Ṣaḥwa*. In the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings, while supporting in general the quest for regime change pursued by Islamist political forces in foreign countries governed by "secular" regimes, most Islamist-Salafi scholars agreed with institutional *ʿulamāʾ* on the unnecessary nature of revolts in Saudi Arabia.[20] The country was regarded as a virtuous exception in the region, for its overall endorsement of Islamic principles. For this reason, many conservative *Ṣaḥwa* scholars blamed demands for a broader political participation in the country as divisive and, to some extent, contrary to the Quran and the Sunna. According to them, the only legitimate action was to remind the political authorities of the importance of complying with the sharia.[21] During the subsequent years, however, the relationship of such scholars with the government has been deteriorating. As the 2011 events prompted a growing interest in secularist and liberal influence on Muslim societies,[22] some scholars started to condemn the strengthening of secularism in Saudi Arabia explicitly. Arguably, this happened because their political views had come short with the image Saudi Arabia has been trying to build lately, internally and internationally. As a result, the recent State-led socio-political reformism has not been welcomed by some scholars and preachers,

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Allāh: aḥwālu-hu wa-aḥkāmu-hu. Riyāḍ: Dār Ṭayyiba li-l-našr wa-l-tawzīʿ.

[20] For a general overview on the perception of 2011 regional events in Saudi Arabia, see Lacroix, Stéphane. 2014. *Saudi Islamists and the Arab Spring.* Kuwait: Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States.

[21] For example, prominent conservative Islamist figures such as Nāṣir al-ʿUmār criticized the participation of Saudi Islamist reformists to the "Reinassance Forum" (*multaqà al-nahḍa*, which should have taken place in Kuwait in 1433H/2012), asserting that it would have fuelled division and departed from a correct interpretation of the Scriptures. See "al-Kuwayt tulġī multaqà al-nahḍa baʿda istinkār ʿulamāʾ saʿūdiyyīn la-hu". Laha. Last accessed 06/04/21. https://www.laha-online.com/articles/view/40434.htm. Condemnation of the event with similar arguments came also from institutional *ʿulamāʾ* such as the Great Mufti: "Muftī al-mamlaka. Multaqà "al-nahḍa" ġišš wa ḫidāʿ li-l-umma wa-l-šabāb". Tawāṣul. Last accessed 06/04/21. https://twasul.info/9575/. According to Saudi Shiite thinker Tawfīq al-Sayf, the condemnation from conservative Islamist-Salafi scholars to Islamist reformism hides behind religious concerns the suspicion against movements that transcend their circles of socio-political influence: al-Ṣayf, Tawfīq. "Salafī siyāsī wa šīʿī ḥadāṯī. Taʿqīb ʿalà maqālat al-ustāḏ Muhannā al-Ḥubayyil". Al-Maqāl. 23/03/12. Last accessed 11/04/21. https://www.almqaal.com/?p=2160.

[22] Some examples are: al-Ṭarīfī, ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz. 1432H/2011. *al-ʿAqliyya al-lībrāliyya fī raṣf al-ʿaql wa-waṣf al-naql.* Alexandria: Dār al-Ḥiǧāz li-l-našr wa-l-tawzīʿ. 74-76; al-ʿUmār, Nāṣir. 1434H/2013. *Ǧadal al-dīmūqrāṭiyya wa-l-mušāraka al-siyāsiyya.* Riyāḍ: Maktabat al-malik Fahd al-waṭaniyya. 16 ff; al-Sulūmī, *Al-waḥda al-waṭaniyya fī-l-saʿūdiyya, op. cit.*.

for it has been perceived as a secularization effort that marginalizes the role of religion in the public sphere. Moreover, the endorsement of a foreign policy that opposes Islamist governments and parties, which became more explicit after the support granted to the Egyptian coup in 2013, has been highly contested by Islamist sympathizers.[23]

Due to their growing criticism, *Ṣaḥwa* scholars who had reconciled with the State in the previous decade have been arrested during the last years. The same has happened as well to younger, popular preachers calling for a stricter compliance with the sharia. According to them, secular and liberal influence on the political authorities could spread un-Islamic practices, determining a progressive relegation of religion to the private domain. Moreover, laws and policies ignoring issues of Islamic justice are seen as the roots of recent national problems such as corruption, youth unemployment, lack of services, and social protection policies. A similar view is extensively expressed, for example, in a 2018 book by Safar al-Ḥawālī, one of the leading figures of the '90s' *Ṣaḥwa*.[24] According to al-Ḥawālī, funds destined for leisure activities by the national program *Saudi Vision 2030* – the symbol of the socio-economic reformism endorsed by the kingdom – represent a waste of money. Instead, the funds should be spent in «preparing for jihad, eliminating unemployment» and building infrastructures such as schools, hospitals, and public housing.[25] In addition, the rulers' current disregard for religious duties and issues of social justice from the rulers has led to hostility towards those scholars who draw the attention of the public to these topics. This neglect is the consequence of a «transition from not-religious secularism to secularism combating religion», which has recently increased its influence on the authorities.[26] Al-Ḥawālī dedicates an entire section of his book to a *naṣīḥa* to the royal family,[27] meant as a reproval not of their pri-

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[23] On the discontent towards the Egyptian case, see al-Rasheed, *Muted Modernists, op. cit.*, 38-39.

[24] The book was released in an online preliminary version, which allegedly caused the author's arrest in July 2018. See al-Ḥawālī, Safar b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān. 1439H/2018. *al-Muslimūn wa-l-ḥaḍāra al-ġarbiyya*. Preliminary Edition, s.l.: s.n.

[25] *Ibid.*, 9.

[26] *Ibid.*, 9.

[27] The arrest of Islamist-Salafi scholars who express disagreement with national policies is often depicted by supportive media as the consequence of their *naṣīḥa*. For example, a similar position emerges from articles and tv services of Al Jazeera on the arrest of famous preachers. See Fattūḥ, Muḥammad. "Salafī lam yuḥibba-hu ibn Salmān: limāḏā yaʿtaqilūna al-Ṭarīfī". Al-Jazeera, 10/11/2019. Last accessed 20/05/21. https://bit.ly/3FPAjel; "al-Suluṭāt al-saʿūdiyya taʿtaqilu al-šayḫ ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Maḥmūd bi-sabab muqṭaʿ fīdiū". Al-Jazeera Channel. Last accessed 20/05/21. shorturl.at/fFIM4. National media, conversely, reverse this perspective, defending the idea that spreading criticism towards the government is a divisive, un-Islamic act that undermines national security. For this reason, discourses supportive of the government constantly refer to the proximity of critical scholars to jihadist terrorism and to the negative influence of non-Salafi movements, especially the Muslim Brotherhood, which has been labelled as a terrorist organization by the Saudi government and, more recently, by the Council of Senior Scholars.

vate behavior, but of the acts of public governance that have deviated from religion.[28] The author argues that many of the Āl Saʿūd behave in good faith, but they are being deceived by secularists who advise them to abandon the tradition.[29] For al-Ḥawālī and like-minded scholars and preachers, disregarding the revealed message in the public domain leads to the decay and weakness of the nation. In compliance with the principle of *al-amr bi-l-maʿrūf wa-l-nahī ʿan al-munkar* ("commanding right and forbidding wrong"),[30] it is a duty of the *ʿulamāʾ* as knowledgeable people to address the mistakes of political authorities: silence over them may amount to complicity, possibly leading to divine punishment.

4 - Saudi Arabia as the perfect Islamic model: a Wahhabi-Salafi nationalism?

Challenged with doubts expressed by several influential scholars on the Saudi religious legitimacy, the *ʿulamāʾ* of the institutional establishment promote instead a discourse in which the Saudi kingdom represents the best example of a country complying with the sharia. The respect of Islamic principles is considered evident and undeniable in all the main aspects of public life. Management of the pilgrimage, internal security efforts, support to disadvantaged Muslims in other countries were among the actions praised as signs of Saudi Arabia's complete implementation of Islam, in a recent speech held by the Grand Mufti ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz Āl al-Šayḫ at the Mohammad bin Saud Islamic University.[31] Therefore, claims that the Saudi authorities are deviating from the revelation do not possess any real basis in the view of these scholars. The refusal of critical positions has continued to be motivated by two main arguments, which had entered the mainstream language during the past decades:

This narrative is present in liberal media such as Arab News (see its series "Preachers of Hate" in which famous *Ṣaḥwa* scholars such as al-ʿUmār, al-Ḥawālī and al-Qarnī figure as backward and dangerous thinkers. "Preachers of Hate: Arab News Launches Series to Expose Hate-Mongers from all Religions". Arab News, 25/03/2019. Last accessed 10/04/21. https://bit.ly/3JarUEl), and in religiously-connotated blogs and news channels (some examples in English: http://www.islamagainstextremism.com/, http://www.takfiris.com/takfir/). Although in different ways and languages, they equally emphasize the effort of the State and its official creed to fight extremism.

[28] al-Ḥawālī, *al-Muslimūn wa-l-ḥaḍāra al-ġarbiyya, op.cit.*, 2733-2735.

[29] *Ibid.*, 2743.

[30] On the principle and its role, among others, in Salafi tradition, see Cook, Michael. 2004. *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[31] "Samāḥat muftī ʿāmm al-mamlaka al-šayḫ ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz ibn ʿAbd Allāh Āl al-Šayḫ. Ǧuhūd al-mamlaka al-ḥaṯīṯa fī muḥārabat fikr al-ġulūw wa-l-inḥirāf wa-l-taṭarruf yuʾakkidu ʿalà mā tatawaḥḥā-hu min nahǧ al-iʿtidāl wa-l-wasaṭiyya". 1442H/2021. Last accessed 04/04/21. https://imamu.edu.sa/NewsConferenceEfforts/Pages/news-20-7-1442-54.aspx

the warning against *fitna* and partisanship (*ḥizbiyya*) which cause division inside the Islamic community (*umma*), and the labelling of open criticism as *ḫurūǧ*[32] and unlawful declaration of misbelief (*takfīr*) against a legitimate ruler.

Interestingly, in the last decade a narrative focused on the unique position of Saudi Arabia among the other Muslim countries has been strengthening. In numerous speeches, *šayḫ* Ṣāliḥ al-Fawzān, a prominent member of the Council of Senior Scholars, claims for the Saudi kingdom this special role. While the society was characterized by ignorance and poverty before the spread of the Wahhabi reformism, the defense and propagation of religion from political authorities has distinguished Saudi Arabia from other Muslim countries.[33] Historical works also present this narrative of Saudi history and its role in the Islamic world, locating the root of the kingdom's strength in its endorsement of Islamic law and refusal of un-Islamic ideologies.[34] Moreover, the Saudi rulers' compliance with the sharia has become intrinsically associated with moderation (*wasaṭiyya*) and with the fight against radicalism (*ġulūww*), extremism (*taṭarruf*) and terrorism (*irhāb*).[35] These changes in the discourse supporting the *status quo* reflect the image that Saudi Arabia has struggled to display during the last decades. As a reaction to suspicions that the state-sponsored Wahhabi-Salafi doctrine is sectarian and associated to the ideologies of terrorist-jihadi movements, national religious and educational institutions have been emphasizing the moderate and universal character of Saudi Islam.[36] The celebration of Saudi *wasaṭiyya* and its pan-Islamic vocation seems complementary to the narrative of the Saudi specificity as the model of a modern Islamic state.

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[32] The term *ḫurūǧ* refers to the Kharijites, the faction that separated from ʿAlī's supporters during the war against Muʿawiya. Kharijites believed that un-Islamic conduct amounted to *kufr* ("misbelief"), allowing the punishment for apostasy against the transgressor. For an analysis of doctrinal arguments against disobedience, see Hassan, Muhammad Hanif. 2017. *Civil Disobedience in Islam. A Contemporary Debate.* Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan. 23 ff.

[33] Some examples are: *al-Šayḫ Ṣāliḥ al-Fawzān. Kayfa kānat al-Saʿūdiyya wa-kayfa aṣbaḥat? Wa-mā masʾūliyyatunā?* YouTube. Last accessed 13/04/21. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pWy-Vd-jkfDU&list=PLteE3Z7sIibcUFtXyyRW29M2zknBBcVJH&index=15. "Ǧawāb al-šayḫ Ṣāliḥ al-Fawzān li-man yufaḍḍilu turkiyyā wa-ḥākima-hā ʿalà al-Saʿudiyya wa-ḥukkāmi-hā". 30/12/18. Last accessed 14/04/21. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rxtPkv7DTw&list=PLteE3Z7sIibcUFtXyyRW29M2zknBBcVJH&index=16.

[34] al-ʿAql, Nāṣir bin ʿAbd al-Karīm. 1432H/2011. *Islāmiyya lā wahhābiyya.* Riyāḍ: Maktabat al-malik Fahd al-waṭaniyya. 264 ff.

[35] al-Madḫalī, Rabīʿ bin Hādī. 1437H/2016. *Ġazā Allāh ʿalà al-Mamlaka al-ʿarabiyya al-saʿūdiyya.* Al-Nahǧ al-wāḍiʿ. Last accessed 04/12/21. https://ar.alnahj.net/article/20. Al-ʿUmār, ʿUmār. "al-Dawla al-saʿūdiyya wasaṭiyya, fa-hiya kamā anna-hā tuḥāribu al-taṭarruf fa-hiya tuḥāribu al-inḥilāf kamā qāla al-malik Salmān". YouTube. Last accessed 18/04/21. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cV819LZK-z4.

[36] "Suʾāl al-*šayḫ* Muḥammad bin Hādī al-Madḫalī ḥawla daʿwat al-imām Muḥammad bin ʿAbd al-Wahhāb li-l-šayḫ al-wālid Ṣāliḥ al-Fawzān". YouTube. Last accessed 30/04/21. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JGO4c6MUgRE; al-ʿAql, *Islāmiyya lā wahhābiyya, op. cit.*

It may be argued that for Salafi-Wahhabi scholars who support Saudi Arabia, the country has become the object of a religiously-connotated nationalism. This represents the partial overcoming of some traditional Salafi stances blaming political rhetoric and ideologies, including nationalism, as a form of polytheism (*širk*) and innovation (*bidʿa*) derived from Western influence, with no basis in the Quran and the Sunna.[37] Nationalism is now presented as inherent to the Salafi-Wahhabi tradition, in virtue of the unique role of Saudi Arabia as an Islamic state among many secular countries. Words as homeland (*waṭan*) and State (*dawla*) appear with unprecedented frequency in sermons and speeches from Saudi religious scholars. Nonetheless, nationalism is not accepted indistinctly, but only as a recognition of Saudi exceptionalism. In this perspective, the pact between Ibn Saʿūd and Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb becomes a blessed and celebrated event. From that moment onward, Saudi Arabia has held a governance in compliance with Quranic principles, where the public good is ensured by the collaboration between the rulers (*wulāt al-umūr*), who care about politics, and the *ʿulamāʾ*, who preserve religious knowledge.[38] Thus, the Saudi political system does not need any change or reform: people in power are considered as rightfully entitled to it. Similarly, the elite in charge of advising the government (commonly identified as *ahl al-ḥall wa-l-ʿaqd*),[39] which includes religious scholars, acts in the best interest of all the people, thanks to its greater knowledge and expertise. Underlining the legitimacy of the system, the institutional *ʿulamāʾ* dismiss any claim for a broader political participation.

The legitimacy of the rulers assumes a divine and universal dimension in the works of Rabīʿ al-Madḫalī and followers of his thought, which has become to be known as "Madkhalism" even outside the Saudi borders.[40] According to al-Madḫalī, opposition to any ruler is forbidden in Islam, because power is assigned by God for reasons humanity cannot question. However, this position is highly controversial, and it is often seen as a doctrine instrumental to legitimate any form of power. Mainstream Wahhabi-Salafi

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[37] Negative opinions about nationalism were expressed by Bin Bāz and the Permanent Committee for Research and *fatāwà*, while presided by Bin Bāz himself: Bin Bāz, ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz. *Calling to Nationalism is a Call to Ignorance*. Fatāwā Islamiyya. 362. Last accessed 18/04/21. http://www.fatwaislam.com/fis/index.cfm?scn=fd&ID=1114. Permanent Committee. *Ruling Regarding Standing for National Anthems or Flags*. Fatāwā al-laǧna al-dāʾima. Last accessed 18/04/21. http://fatwaislam.com/fis/index.cfm?scn=fd&ID=1330.

[38] See the response by al-Fawzān to a question from the public in a *fatwà* programme broadcasted by SBA: *Barnāmaǧ fatwà al-šayḫ Ṣaliḥ al-Fawzān. 1441/04/01*. 28/12/19. Last accessed 21/04/21. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5qqWRqpaDDM,.

[39] Al-ʿAssāf, Aḥmad. 1436H/2015. "Kull šayʾ ʿan ahl al-ḥall wa-l-ʿaqd". Al-Moslim. Last accessed 21/04/21. https://almoslim.net/node/224567.

[40] Madkhalism has become popular, at least to a certain extent, also in Libya during the last two decades: see Wehrey, Fredric. 2019. "Salafism and Libya's State Collapse. The Case of the Madkhalis", Wehrey, Fredric, & Boukhars, Anouar (eds), *Salafism in the Maghreb. Politics, Piety, and Militancy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 107-181.

scholars do not usually share this doctrinal stance: they consider a regime that openly rejects Islam as in principle condemnable, even if they usually do not approve rebellion because it may be a vehicle for *fitna* and a danger for the collective interest of the community (*maṣlaḥa*). Although the debate on the possibility of assimilating Madkhalism to Salafism is open,[41] this doctrine – that has been labelled as «propagandist» –[42] has surely become mainstream among Saudi institutional *'ulamā'*, at least when they refer to the Saudi context. This is the consequence of the abovementioned emphasis on its claimed exceptionalism, which has been functional for the monarchy to regain credibility after the legitimacy crisis in the '90s. Arguably, today Saudi institutional Islam appears more dependent than ever on State support to maintain its privileged role as the "official" Islam, in the face of growing competing narratives: this may explain the recent prominence acquired by the nationalistic, propagandistic approach which stresses the unique merits of the Saudi system. This prominence is coherent with the reforms promoted during the last decades that have strengthened the dependency of the *'ulamā'* on the State.[43]

5 - Political oppression as a violation of Islamic political principles

Some Saudi scholars and intellectuals have promoted a rather original interpretation of the relationship between politics and the sharia beyond traditional Salafi doctrinal positions. In their works, the sharia is conceived as a system of values aimed at collective good, including issues such as justice, freedom, accountability of the authorities, and citizens' representation. These relatively new concepts are interpreted as inherent to Islamic values, which are incompatible with political oppression and abuses of power. In this perspective, the image of Saudi Arabia as an Islamic model becomes vulnerable to criticism. The positions that relate the issue of the compatibility of the sharia with the rights of the citizens and the duties of the authorities are not mainstream in the Saudi religious context. Indeed, they are considered too innovative by traditionalist Salafists, while they may be labelled as too conservative and bound to religion by liberalists. No-

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[41] Some people blame the use of the term Madkhalism as misleading because they consider al-Madkhali and his followers perfectly coherent with traditional Salafism: see for example Abu Khadeejah, Abdul-Wahid. "Ibn 'Uthaymeen and Rabee' Al-Madkhali: Rift or Harmony?". Abukhadeeja. 29/03/19. Last accessed 22/04/21. https://www.abukhadeejah.com/ibn-uthaymeen-rabee-salafi/. Others instead assert that Madkhalism presents substantial departures from "pure" Salafism, distorting its message for preserving the *status quo*: see "al-Madḫaliyya laysat salafiyya - al-šayḫ Muṣṭafā al-Badrī". YouTube. Last accessed 22/04/21. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xI1t6Mj6hwA&t=456s.

[42] Wagemakers. "Salafism", *op. cit.*

[43] Boucek, Christopher. 2010. "Saudi Fatwa Restrictions and the State-Clerical Relationship". Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Last accessed 22/05/21. https://carnegieendowment.org/2010/10/27/saudi-fatwa-restrictions-and-state-clerical-relationship/6b81.

netheless, their legacy is important and will certainly impact future political discourses in the country. The ideas of some authors have become well-known outside Saudi Arabia, especially after the arrest of their promoters and the subsequent attention of international human rights association and media for their stories. The abovementioned work of al-Rasheed accurately reconstructs this intellectual milieu, which she labels as Islamist modernism.[44] While her research considers several characteristics of this environment, we will focus on particular aspects relevant to our analysis that emerge from selected works of some Islamist-modernist thinkers. In particular, the discourse on the implementation of the sharia, its relation with representativeness, freedom and equality, and the preservation of Islamic principles in a contemporary context will be considered.

Indeed, the most famous Saudi religious scholar who developed modernist ideas in interpreting the connection between governance and Islam is Salmān al-ʿAwda. A *Ṣaḥwa* veteran, he has developed an interest in the topic of a just government and the rulers-ruled relationship. However, he progressively moved away from traditional Salafi thought, with significant Islamist influences, to an eclectic reinterpretation of this tradition, which distinguishes his recent position from that of other well-know *Ṣaḥwa* scholars, such as the already-mentioned al-Ḥawālī and al-ʿUmār. This is visible in his thoughts on the sharia and the duty of the government to respect it. While in the early ʿ90s al-ʿAwda praised the conservative character of Islamic Law, which resisted political changes over the centuries,[45] his more recent production emphasizes its adaptability to multiple contexts, maintaining at the same time the core universal values derived from the sacred texts. In his book *Asʾilat al-ṯawra* ("The question of the revolution"), he addresses the topic of *al-siyāsa al-šarʿiyya* ("sharia-compliant politics"), affirming that it is misleading to completely overlap the concepts of sharia and politics, as the former does not regulate every aspect of the political life. Therefore, governing in compliance with sharia does not only mean applying those rules that are explicitly stated in the Quran and the Sunna, but also acting coherently with the moral principles derived from them. On the one hand, those who govern should ensure justice, security, accountability, benevolence, and representativeness; on the other hand, they must refrain from oppression, injustice, and despotism.[46] According to these values, the concept of *ahl al-ḥall wa-l-ʿaqd* needs to be revisited: although it has no basis in the Quran or the Sunna, the concept has become popular through history to justify the restriction of political competences to an elite, that can adopt arbitrary decisions contrary to collective wellbeing,

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[44] al-Rasheed, *Muted Modernists, op. cit.*

[45] Alshamsi, Mansoor Jassem. 2011. *Islam and Political Reform in Saudi Arabia. The Quest for Political Change and Reform.* Oxon: Routledge. 32.

[46] al-ʿAwda, Salmān. 2012. *Asʾilat al-ṯawra.* Bayrūt: Markaz Nimāʾ li-l-buḥūṯ wa-l-dirāsāt. 53-56.

without being held accountable.[47] For this reason, the right of the people to choose their representatives, which al-ʿAwda identifies with the Islamic concept of *šūrà*, guarantees a better application of the sharia: it protects the people from despotism while preventing the rulers from abusing their power.[48] Consequently, the pledge of allegiance to the ruler (*bayʿa*), an Islamic institute often invoked by Saudi scholars to condemn opposition, should be preceded by the right of the people to choose their ruler. Even though *Asʾilat al-ṯawra* presented itself as a reflection on post-revolutionary countries, it is easy to see criticism of the Saudi context in this work.[49]

ʿAlī al-ʿUmrī,[50] a young preacher who had been an enthusiast supporter of the Arab revolutions, reflected on the topic of freedom in Islam in relation, among others, to the political field. Exploring the positions expressed by different contemporary thinkers – mostly I slamists – on whether the application of the sharia should be prioritized over the enjoyment of rights and liberties or *vice versa*, he affirms that the two dimensions are deeply interconnected.[51] The refusal of an arbitrary rule is an inevitable consequence of this conception, which sees freedom as a core principle of religion: absolutism and the absence of an opposition are not deemed compatible with Islam. Rather, an Islamic politics should promote separation of powers and the right of the *umma* to appoint its representatives.[52] Therefore, al-ʿUmrī warns against the use of some expressions such as *šūrà* and *ahl al-ḥall wa-l-ʿaqd* in contexts where people supposed to represent the national community are selected instead by the authority and do not have a real power to participate in political decisions.[53] The reference to Saudi Arabia, whose *maǧlis al-*šūrà is not elected and has a merely consultative function, is evident. Furthermore, al-ʿUmrī criticizes those instrumental interpretations of the Islamic texts that see the principle

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[47] *Ibid.*, 83-84.

[48] *Ibid.*, 77.

[49] Unsurprisingly, the book was banished in Saudi Arabia and his author forced to close his popular website and limit his public appearances. In 2017, al-ʿAwda was arrested, allegedly under several accuses such as incitement against the monarchy, stirring public discord (*fitna*), ties with the Muslim Brotherhood, and criticism towards the change in relationship with Qatar. According to the last news from Amnesty International, the public prosecutor asked for the death penalty, but the trial is still ongoing. See "Silence is King. Prisoners of conscience in the gulf". Amnesty International. 02/02/21. Last accessed 26/05/21. https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2021/02/prisoners-of-conscience-in-the-gulf/.

[50] Similar to al-ʿAwda, al-ʿUmrī has been detained since 2017 and is allegedly facing death penalty. Known for cultural programs before 2011, he then started debating political issues as well; his channel 4shbab had become very popular in recent years. See Fattūḥ, Muḥammad. 1440H/2019. "Min "for shabāb" ilà mišnaqa "Bin Salmān". Li-māḏa yastahdifūna ʿAlī al-ʿUmrī?". Muntadà al-ʿulamāʾ. Last accessed 30/05/21. https://bit.ly/3msNJFl.

[51] Al-ʿUmrī, ʿAlī. 1435H/2014. *Āfāq al-ḥurriyya*. Ǧidda: Našr wa-tawzīʿ al-umma. 123-128.

[52] *Ibid.*, 211-214.

[53] *Ibid.*, 215-216.

of obedience to the ruler as unquestionable. Some «jurists of the authorities» (*fuqahāʾ al-salāṭīn*), whether they act with good or bad intents, claim that the people should be patient in front of injustice and oppression.[54]

Even before 2011, opinions on the importance of political representation in an Islamic system of governance have notably been expressed by well-known Saudi human rights defenders. For example, ʿAbd Allāh al-Ḥāmid, one of the founders of Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA) who died in detention in 2020,[55] was among the thinkers and activists who interpreted the Islamic message as incompatible with the absence of political representation and freedoms. He believed that «the core of the political creed in Islam is that the *umma* [community], as the custodian of the sharia, is the guardian of the people in power, so the pledge of allegiance between the *umma* and the ruler implies that the ruler in Islam acts on behalf of the *umma* and not above it».[56] Indeed, this conception of politics raises doubts about the Saudi's claim of being an Islamic state, as it does not allow its population to exert any form of control over the behavior of the rulers. In addition to this indirect reference to the Saudi situation, Al-Ḥāmid openly questions the Islamic credentials of the State under other perspectives, all linked with the lack of accountability of the authorities: the inequalities in enjoining rights, the widespread corruption and privileges are considered the demonstration that the definition of Saudi Arabia as an Islamic model is inadequate. No country, in al-Ḥamīd's view, can claim to apply the sacred law if it punishes the weak while sparing the wealthy and the powerful for worse crimes.[57] The principle of equality of rights is therefore inherent to Islamic ethics as expressed in the Scriptures and interpreted by important Islamic thinkers of the past. As al-Rasheed points out, despite the imprisonment of al-Ḥamīd and other prominent human rights activists condemned to long sentences after 2011, their efforts to spread a language of rights and combining it with traditional values are destined to have a significant impact in a country where the State invokes religious values to justify its authoritarianism.[58] In recent years, the endorsement of their positions on democracy and rights by popular religious is a significant step towards a wider sup-

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[54] *Ibid.*, 141-143.

[55] al-Ḥamīd was condemned to 11 years in 2013 by the Specialized Criminal Court of Riyadh, which deals with terrorism and national security charges but has become a tool to target dissidents and activists. Accuses against him included breaking the *bayʿa* to the ruler and inciting disorder (*fitna*) by calling for demonstrations. See "Saudi Arabia. Prisoner of Conscience Dr Abdullah al-Hamid Dies while in Detention". Amnesty International. Last accessed 27/05/21. https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/04/saudi-arabia-prisoner-of-conscience-dr-abdullah-alhamid-dies-while-in-detention/.

[56] al-Ḥāmid, ʿAbdullāh. 1431H/2010. *Ḥuqūq al-insān bayna nūr al-islām wa-fuqahāʾ ġabaš al-ṭuġyān.* s.l.: s.n. 30.

[57] *Ibid.*, 38-42.

[58] al-Rasheed, *Muted Modernists*, *op. cit.*, 60.

port for these demands. Moreover, the international resonance of their cases may also contribute to an increased diffusion of their ideas.[59]

The discourse on State legitimacy we have presented in this section considers authoritarianism and political oppression as the most relevant signs of deviation from Islam in politics. Therefore, the nature of the Saudi political system itself becomes the main feature under scrutiny. This is considerably different from criticism which targets secularism as the main threat to the realization of an Islamic politics and society. Rejecting the nature of Saudi Arabia as an absolute monarchy, a form of government deemed contrary to Islamic ethics, is not the same as denouncing the loss of relevance of Islam in public life in favor of secularist ideas. However, this does not mean that conservative Salafi-Islamism in Saudi Arabia ignores the issue of political injustice. Accusations against corruption, despotism, arbitrary arrests and undue processes have become common in speeches and works of conservative critical scholars as well. Nonetheless, they do not identify in the absence of rights and democratic representation the origin of such problems. Their hostility towards Western influence in Muslim societies and their bond with Salafi tradition leads many of them to regard with suspicion, or at least prudence, any quest for democratization, a concept considered innovative in relation to the Islamic tradition.[60]

6 - Conclusions

The analysis of recent trends in the Saudi debate on State legitimacy allows us to make some final considerations. Firstly, doctrinal interpretations are not merely theoretical issues, as they are related to the circumstances in which they arise. Such circumstances may change, displaying their effects on theory and ideologies as well. Indeed, the 2011 upheavals have had a significant influence in prioritizing the topic of a just government and its relationship with Islam. Regional events have led many Saudi scholars and thinkers to review their positions on political issues or elaborate their reflections for the first time. The topics of justice, political change, freedom, authoritarianism, representation, and democracy have emerged in the public debate with unprecedented relevance. Whether to express support of or criticism against political reform in the kingdom, religious environments could not ignore such issues in front of their increased visibility. The prominence acquired by the abovementioned topics can be considered in a positive

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[59] In 2018, al-Ḥamīd was awarded the Right Livelihood Award, together with two other prominent Saudi activists, Muḥammad al-Qaḥṭānī and Walīd Abū al-Ḥayr.

[60] As al-Ḥawālī writes: «I demand the reform of all the aspects of life to conform to the doctrine expressed in the Qurʾan and Sunna, and I do not call for either a constitutional monarchy or anything similar. We have always stood against injustice, even if the oppressed is an infidel». Al-Ḥawālī, *al-Muslimūn wa-l-ḥaḍāra al-ġarbiyya, op. cit.*, 9.

light, as it means that debating politics in these terms is not limited anymore to narrow circles of intellectuals and human rights defenders. Before 2011, discussing rights and representation was less common in the Saudi public opinion, which has traditionally been dominated by Salafi religious scholars and preachers. After the repression of the *Ṣaḥwa* in the '90s and the internal security emergency in the early 2000s, discourses on political change were largely put aside in favor of debating social reformism and unity against extremism. The penetration of the issues raised by the political shift in the region into a national, religious language has now probably led to an increased public awareness of them.

Nevertheless, the traditionalist approach to political questions that mainstream academic literature on Salafism has defined as quietist has demonstrated a certain resilience, largely ascribable to the government's support. As it is clear, traditionalist positions are grounded in their role within the kingdom, which leads to interpretations of the Texts that favor the rulers. The diffusion among these scholars of a nationalist narrative, and the increased emphasis on the separation of roles of religious and political authorities respond to the changing interests of the State in front of recent regional and national events. It is difficult to predict whether this coping strategy will be successful in the long term or not. The first case may ensure that quietist and propagandist Salafism will continue to monopolize national political discourse. Otherwise, this strategy may instead fuel competing narratives because of its clear subordination to the government. Indeed, the coercive methods used by the State against religious opposition, as well as the mediatic condemnation of political Islam and criticism against the government, are apparently favoring the first outcome in the short term. But protracted repression could turn against the efforts of the State to preserve its legitimacy in front of its population.

Regional politics has clearly continued to impact Saudi public opinion after 2011. The increased competition with the Muslim Brotherhood-influenced regimes during the last years – particularly Turkey and Qatar – has accentuated the polarization between sympathizers and opposers of Islamist ideas in Saudi Arabia. The expression of appreciation or criticism towards foreign political figures, such as the former Egyptian president Muḥammad Mursī, the current president ʿAbd al-Fattāḥ al-Sīsī, or Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has become a common feature, allowing to express and detect self-identification. However, these differences in political ideas should not lead to operating a rigid distinction between Islamists and Salafists. It is important to discern between politicized mediatic representations, which in Saudi Arabia tend to depict *Iḫwānī* (i.e. Islamist) sympathizers as dangerous and alien to local tradition, and actual similarities and differences in religious-political discourses.[61] The picture that

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[61] The interaction between Islamist and Salafi ideas has produced complex identities through time and in multiple contexts other than Saudi Arabia. The most evident example is the ex-

emerges from the analysis of competing narratives in the Saudi context is significantly more nuanced: language and issues typical of political Islam constantly interact with concepts of the Salafi tradition, that has in turn inevitably dealt with political notions and perspectives proposed by Islamism. But Islamist theory is not homogeneous in approaching the question of power in Saudi Arabia: while some thinkers claim that the illegitimacy factors in the Saudi system are due to the secularist influence and subsequent repression of voices which stand for Islamic justice, others support the idea that the Saudi state system itself is illegitimate because it lacks representation and accountability. Therefore, the category of "political Salafism" in relation to Saudi Arabia seems more complex today than it was in the '90s.

As mentioned in the Introduction, academic studies concerned with establishing accurate definitions of Salafism and Islamism, as well as interactions and sub-groups within them, may show some limits. Without necessarily being bound to such categories, a meaningful analysis could focus both on identity features and political purposes expressed in texts like those here briefly presented. For example, a detailed study on the references used, and on the interpretation of those references, could be useful to further investigate issues of identification and representation. This would mean assessing which traditional texts of the Salafi heritage are used as references, which authors – both from Muslim countries and the West – are mentioned, and to what purpose. A similar research would give an original contribution on patterns in order to understand the Saudi religious and intellectual milieu and its relationship with other traditions. This approach could be combined with the focus on the political aims and representations that individuals and groups propose. This would imply exploring the different answers to the question of a just government, the type of action needed to contribute to it, and the social actors who are entitled to undertake such action. Therefore, a further elaboration of inputs that the present research has tried to offer, together with a detailed analysis of references, could provide a significant integration of current academic knowledge on Saudi Salafism and Islamism.

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istence of Jihadi groups, which present features of both traditions: see Maher, Shiraz. 2016. *Salafi-Jihadism. The History of an Idea.* London: Penguin Books. Another interesting feature is the Salafi influence on the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood: see Tammam, Hossam. 2010. *The Salafization of the Muslim Brothers.* Alexandria: Marased.