
**CONTRADICTIONS BETWEEN ISLAMISTS
IN THE REGIONAL AND GLOBAL CONTEXTS:
WAHHABIS, MUSLIM BROTHERS,* AND AL-QAEDA ****

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The 1990–1991 Gulf War of the US-led coalition forces against Iraq had far-reaching global and regional implications. Islamists – that is, those for whom religion had become a part of political discourse, organizational affiliation and political struggle – sharply diverged in their assessments of that war. While the Wahhabis supported the Saudi government, which invited the US troops and their allies, the Muslim Brothers and the related Sahwa Movement in Saudi Arabia condemned the deployment of non-Muslim forces to the land of the two Holy Places and the war against ‘Muslim Iraq’ with the assistance of non-Muslim soldiers, as well as questioned the very legitimacy of the government of Saudi Arabia, which made such a decision. Previous dogmatic disagreements – such as those over attitudes towards the Sufis or the application of Sharia law – had not previously hindered the cooperation between Brothers and Wahhabis on the basis of the struggle against nationalism, communism, socialism, laicism, the penetration of culture and other Western values. Yet, the former dogmatic divisions deepened, and the politicization of Islam revealed the sharply anti-Western positions of the Islamists from among the Brothers and the Sahwa.

The Sahwa movement in Saudi Arabia was defeated. But it was replaced by extremists from Al-Qaeda and other organizations that declared a global jihad against the United States and other Western countries and called to rebel against the governments that were ‘serving the interests of the West,’ including in Saudi Arabia, which forfeited their Muslim legitimacy. The jihadist movement became a terrorist one. It was paradoxical, but true: jihadists had a certain social base among Salafis (Wahhabis) in a number of countries. Superficial socio-political reforms in Saudi Arabia did not change the situation.

The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 in the United States delineated the differences between the Islamists that were ready to cooperate with the West and jihadist terrorists who perceived the West as an enemy.

The events of the Arab Spring did not change this situation. However, the struggle for leadership in the region turned into a confrontation between Saudi Arabia and its allies, on the one hand, and the coalition of Turkey, Qatar, and the Muslim Brotherhood, on the other, which was accompanied by the fluctuations in the regional influence of one or the other side. This confrontation was tearing apart both the Middle East and the whole world. Only in ear-

ly 2021 did the coalitions achieve some degree of consensus, and Saudi Arabia and Qatar seemed to have restored relations.

Keywords: Wahhabis, Muslim Brothers, Sahwa, al-Qaeda, Gulf War, 9/11 attacks, Arab Spring.

Saudi Arabia, after the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait in 1990, was under the threat of foreign invasion. Though one hardly expected Iraq to capture the kingdom, it was impossible to rule out a new venture by Saddam Hussein. The Saudi armed forces themselves were unable to defend against Iraq, so the government invited the United States to help. The American troops began to arrive in Saudi Arabia, and gradually their number reached about half a million people. The war in January-February 1991 ended with a quick and easy defeat of the Iraqi forces (see, e.g., Vasiliev 2018; Kechichian 2001: 105, 115, 116).

However, the impact of that war on the region, the world as a whole and the Saudi society has remained controversial from the early days of the conflict till the present day. This extends to the domestic and foreign policy of Saudi Arabia, the ideological struggle within the country, in the region and on the global scale, as well as to the nature of new conflicts, with their religious overtones (Vasiliev 2018).

Critics of the government asked and continue to ask about what happened to the \$300 billion that Saudi Arabia has spent on the purchase of arms over the last half-century. How did these arms help the kingdom? The very presence of foreign troops in Saudi territory, the land of the two Holy Places, seemed to indicate the dependence of the kingdom on the United States for security. In the eyes of many Saudis, this represented the humiliation of their country due to the inept leadership. While the majority accepted American military aid as a necessity, a sizable minority saw it as a violation of Islamic principles (Al-Rasheed 2010: 160).

From Dogmatic Disagreements to Political Confrontation

The former tacit collaboration between the Wahhabis and the Muslim Brothers fell apart. Previously, their dogmatic differences were put aside in the name of the regional and global struggle against nationalism, communism, secular ideas and Western cultural influences. However, the Gulf War became the 'moment of truth'. The Muslim Brotherhood spoke in support of a Muslim country – Iraq – in the war against Western infidels, but also against the Saudi government that invited them. The Brothers were supported by the related Saudi Arabian Sahwa Movement and some of the young *ulema* (Islamic scholars) (Lacroix 2011: 266).

On the contrary, the Wahhabis – an invariable ally of the Saudis, and especially their leadership – the Supreme Ulema Committee (SUC) – endorsed the government's actions. In January 1991, the head of the SUC Abd al-Aziz Ibn Baz issued a fatwa, which argued that Sharia allowed to invite non-Muslim troops to help defend Muslim countries against external danger even if could cause *fitnah* (sedition) with severe consequences. Subsequently, he repeated these arguments more than once (Mouline 2014: 244; Commins 2006: 184).

The Wahhabi doctrine was to a certain degree xenophobic, or rather anti-Western, but the Wahhabi ulema invested too much in the support of the Saudi government and

the House of Saud, depended on the regime financially and were linked with it too closely to condemn the royal family for inviting American troops to the kingdom.

The disputes on the legitimacy of the presence of foreign troops in the Saudi territory from the Islamic point of view relatively quickly escalated into a discussion of the very foundations of the Saudi political system and the legitimacy of the Saudi ruling family.

The strongest criticism came from the ranks of young ulema, which were influenced by the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Sahwa Movement (Awakening). The latter movement was in fact a symbiosis of the doctrine of the Brothers and the teachings of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. In some mosques, Friday prayers included criticism of the government's decision to invite American troops to defend the land of Islam. Could a government that resorted to such a measure be considered a legitimate Islamic government? In September 1990, a prominent ulema Safar al-Hawali began to spread cassette recordings of his sharp anti-government sermons, and then also articles and pamphlets about the crisis in the Gulf, the relationship between the US and the Muslim world. He believed that Saudi Arabia's real adversary was not Iraq, but the West. Al-Hawali interpreted the fact of the presence of foreign armed forces on the Saudi territory as a manifestation of the growing dependence of the kingdom, the government and Saudi society on the West. The Gulf War, in his view, provided an opportunity for Western dominance in the region. He was not a supporter of the Baathist regime in Iraq, but raised the question of how one could resort to a 'greater evil than Saddam, that is, to the US,' in order to liberate Kuwait (Al-Rasheed 2010: 160).

Another prominent Islamic scholar Salman al-Awda also began to express the criticism of the Saudi government in his Friday prayers. He believed that the order in the Islamic world was based on Sharia law, which meant that it was impossible to employ non-Muslim troops to fight Saddam Hussein's army (Al-Rasheed 2010: 161).

In the first months of 1991, the spiritual unrest in Saudi society intensified. This was the time of open letters to the king that were demanding reforms. The first letter, called the Secular Petition to distinguish it from other messages, was signed by 43 public figures, including former cabinet members, powerful business women, writers and university professors. They proposed ten reforms, including the establishment of a consultative assembly (Majlis ash-Shura) of opinion leaders, the formation of municipal councils, the modernization of the judicial system, the implementation of full equality of all citizens, greater freedom of the press to promote 'the command of virtue and the prohibition of vice', the reform of the religious police – that is, of the very Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, and greater participation of women in political life within the framework of Sharia. Their demands reflected the general frustration of a part of society with the status quo. The Secular Petition demanded to limit the excessive influence of the religious police activists – the *mutawwa*. Therefore, it was called 'secular'. In fact, however, all demands were in line with Sharia (Al-Rasheed 2010: 163).

In May 1991, another letter – the so-called Religious Petition – was sent to King Fahd. It was signed by 52 Islamists, including al-Hawali. Joseph Kechichian believed that it was also signed by Ibn Baz and al-Uthaymeen, who stood at the head of the Wahhabi corporation (Kechichian 2001: 200). The signatories demanded to increase the role of the ulema in society, improve laws and regulations, the legal system and courts, public

administration, economy and finance, social institutions, the army, the media, and foreign policy. They demanded to ‘Islamize’ the policy of Saudi Arabia, and, most importantly, – to increase the role of the ulema in all government institutions, including ministries and embassies, to ‘Islamize’ all institutions of power and politics and better distribute wealth, and also to create an independent advisory council (Al-Rasheed 2010: 164; Mouline 2014: 246).

However, the Islamist dissidents did not make their ‘letter’ (*nasihah*) closed, as they had promised Ibn Baz, but published it widely. The Supreme Ulema Committee in its fatwa on June 3, 1991 condemned the Religious Petition. The SUC insisted that it was only possible to offer advice to the authorities (*nasihah*) under certain conditions and, above all, to do it secretly, so as not to cause sedition – *fitnah* (Mouline 2014: 246). A special body was created, again headed by Ibn Baz, to censor all sermons and disseminated religious literature. The point was to prevent actions outside the control of the Wahhabi corporation (*Ibid.*: 246–247).

The May petition served as the basis for a more detailed letter called the Council Memorandum. This was a brochure sent to Ibn Baz in September 1992 and signed by 107 Islamists. The Memorandum repeated the previous petition and added and expanded its subject matter. It demanded that the rights of preachers in mosques be increased when discussing political and current affairs. This was in response to the recent prohibition of the sermons of al-Hawali and al-Awda. The Memorandum also demanded the government to respect human rights as defined in Sharia law: only on the basis of Sharia law could an individual be detained, and all forms of torture, surveillance and spying on people had to be prohibited. The Saudi media should preach Islamic principles and express opinions on current affairs and behavior of the rulers, as well as ensure that public opinion was not corrupted by Western influence.

Foreign policy issues were not ignored either. The Memorandum asked the government to pursue an ‘Islamic’ foreign policy. The employment of a greater number of women in embassies was condemned as a manifestation of Westernization and corruption. The Memorandum issued the demand to eliminate inequality in the distribution of wealth, spend more money on social needs, education, health care, and not help regimes that did not follow Islamic principles.

Overall, the Memorandum advocated a major reform of Saudi society and government policy, including the task of increasing the weight of the ulema in administrative structures. This was an attempt by the Islamists to gain more power and influence, which would lead to a decrease in the power of the royal family, the economic elite and the ‘official’ Wahhabi corporation, in which representatives of the Sahwa Movement were not allowed to reach top positions.

The Memorandum was published both inside and outside Saudi Arabia. The government demanded an apology from the signatories. On September 16, 1992, the Supreme Ulema Committee issued a fatwa condemning the Islamists' Memorandum. Many ulema signed it without even reading it. True, Ibn Baz himself condemned the publication of the Memorandum, but not its content. He reiterated that advice to the government was the responsibility of the ulema, but should be given in the form of a secret council, not publicly (Al-Rasheed 2010: 164–165; Mouline 2014: 245–246).

The war by no means rallied Saudi society around the government. The political situation in the country became the focus of debate and criticism. It is important to note

that after the war, American troops did not completely withdraw from Saudi Arabia, but kept large military bases, which spoiled the image of the government and outraged both secular and religious opposition. Society was increasingly divided, and the new terminology of political and religious dissidence became part of the political discourse.

King Fahd, Crown Prince Abdullah and people around them carefully maneuvered, in some ways yielding to critics. Rejecting substantial reforms, they preferred the struggle not to go beyond dogmatic disputes. The instability of the monarchy had been shown by the Iranian revolution, when the unity of the religious Shiite establishment had been formed on the basis of the opposition. So far, the situation in Saudi Arabia was different (Kechichian 2001: 109).

In March 1992, King Fahd issued the *nizam* – the Basic Law (sometimes incorrectly referred to as a ‘constitution’, which would be contrary to Sharia law). The *nizam* said: the system of government of Saudi Arabia is monarchical, the dynastic right is transferred to the sons of the founder – King Abdulaziz bin Abdul Rahman Al Saud (Ibn Saud) and the sons of his sons. The best of them will take the throne through the process of *bay'ah* (taking the oath – *A.V.*) to rule in accordance with the Book of Allah (Koran) and the Sunnah of Prophet.

Article 6 stated that citizens must show loyalty to the king, obey him in good and bad times. This was the government's response to the opposition's criticism of the regime in the face of the Gulf crisis.

The Consultative Assembly (Majlis ash-Shura) was created. Its appearance was a direct response to the demands expressed in the petitions. The Law on the Consultative Assembly stated that it would be composed of 60 members (this number was increased to 90 in 1997) and a chairman. They were all appointed by the king, who selected members from among scholars, people of knowledge and experience. The Consultative Assembly appeared at the end of December 1993.

The third reform concerned the province. Before 1992, Saudi Arabia did not have a clear-cut local administration regulation. The status of an emir (provincial governor) of the province and his personal ties with the king determined the relationship with the central government. The new law outlined the responsibilities of emirs and reaffirmed the role of the interior minister in overseeing regional administration (Al-Rasheed 2010: 167–169; 2018: 55; Kechichian 2001: 209–240).

These limited concessions by the government did not pacify the dissident ulema. Their condemnation of the government's actions and its ties with the West grew louder. In response, repressions began. Beginning in late 1992, dissident Islamist leaders started to lose their jobs, were placed under house arrest, or were imprisoned. Mutawwa from the religious police gained more influence. The Interior Ministry, intelligence and security services were mobilized to contain the opposition. This included observing public discussions, sermons in mosques, and banning the distribution of printed literature and cassettes containing messages that were considered hostile to the government or criticized the ruling dynasty (Mouline 2014: 249; Al-Rasheed 2010: 169).

On May 3, 1993, six Saudi religious leaders openly challenged the Saudis by announcing the creation of the Committee for the Defense of Legitimate Rights (CDLR). Its mission was ‘to fight for the elimination of injustice, the restoration of legitimate rights and a guarantee for the people to express their opinions freely, to live in honor and dignity in an atmosphere of equality and justice’ (CDLR 1994: 9–10).

Among the most charismatic dissident religious leaders who supported the committee were Salman al-Awda and Safar al-Hawali, who had been drawing the ire of the government since 1991. Many of the founders of the CDLR were young ulema who stood in opposition to the older ulema. It should come as no surprise that the SUC called the new organization 'illegal'. King Fahd warned that tough measures would be taken against the 'extremists'. New arrests began. Only seven ulema refused to put their names under the official statement of the SUC, and for this they were dismissed. They were replaced by people more loyal to the Saudi family. All six founders of the CDLR were stripped of their posts, arrested and interrogated. A few days later, their leader, Mohammad al-Masari, secretly moved to Yemen, flew from Sana'a to London and asked for political asylum (Kechichian 2001: 108–109).

The CDLR materials which challenged the royal family and criticized its submission to the Western dictatorship were distributed by radio and faxes all over the world, including Saudi Arabia. They were also available to those who began to use the Internet. Many of the arguments of the CDLR were sharply anti-Western in nature; the Western world was referred to as 'imperialists' who used the Saudi rulers 'as their servants'. The Committee's propaganda argued that the institution of monarchy was generally illegitimate in Islam (Kechichian 2001: 109–112; Al-Rasheed 2010: 171).

Earlier, overseas opposition was based on leftist, Marxist and nationalist ideas. In the 1990s, it mainly used Islamic rhetoric.

Al-Masari began to cover more general problems of the Arab world and moved away from exclusively Saudi topics. Another important figure in the CDLR, Sa'ad Al-Faqih, left the organization in March 1996 and created his own – the Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia (MIRA) (Commins 2006: 183).

From 1992 to 1994, the campaign against Islamist dissidents intensified in Saudi Arabia. Al-Hawali and al-Awda were arrested. In 1994, Interior Minister Prince Nayef admitted that 110 Saudi citizens had been arrested for actions that 'undermined national security' (Al-Rasheed 2010: 169). There were also large numbers of prisoners (Lacroix 2011: 3). In the past it had been preferred not to talk about such arrests at all, but after the Gulf War it became more difficult to hide this information. Naturally, both the government and the pro-government press opposed the dissidents.

In 1994, the authorities decided to get rid of the overt dissidents from the Sahwa Movement. The SUC analyzed their publications and sermons on audio cassettes, found them contrary to the Wahhabi doctrine and called on the main figures of the movement to confess that they were wrong. When they refused to do so, Ibn Baz forbade them to speak in public. The government soon threw them in jail (Commins 2006: 182). Some CDLR supporters were sentenced to capital punishment in 1995. This only intensified oppositional sentiment. Students from eight male universities joined the protests. Some in the business community also opposed the family's attempts to control all economic life in the kingdom (Kechichian 2001: 113).

Disagreements between the Wahhabis, the Sahwa Movement and the Muslim Brotherhood took the form of a discussion about how to interpret the Sharia norms and certain religious dogmas. However, their political divisions, hidden behind religious discourse, both in essence and in terms of the methods of their propaganda became deeper and deeper.

Attempts to Find a Compromise

After the terrorist attacks in Riyadh in 1995 and the bombings in Dhahran in 1996, when both Saudis and Americans were killed, the ruling family could not accept the weakening of its power. In the late 1990s, the government decided to show some flexibility. It was decided to restore cooperation with dissident religious leaders and at the same time be tolerant of Shiites in the Eastern Province. But at the same time, additional material incentives were given to servicemen.

In 1999, al-Hawali and al-Awda were released from prison. They were allowed to teach and publish in the hope that working with respected dissident ulema would strengthen the position of both the government and the Wahhabi corporation. The freed Sahwa sheikhs condemned the attacks in Saudi Arabia itself, but continued to criticize the government's ties to Washington. However, looking ahead, we should note that in April 2003 the United States closed its bases in Saudi Arabia. When the Americans failed to stabilize the situation in Iraq after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, disagreements emerged again between Sahwa representatives and the Saudi government. Some of the ulema supported the jihad in Iraq against the Americans and declared everyone who did not agree with the global jihad an atheist (Kechichian 2001: 106; Commins 2006: 195).

Public discussions were allowed. The views of the Wahhabis, the Sahwa, the jihadists, and the liberal Islamists were discussed. In open discussions, Wahhabi ulema lost ground in disputes with followers of the Brothers. During debates, Ibn Baz and other prominent ulema opposed the writings of Sayyid Qutb and the more moderate Muslim Brotherhood.

However, the recognized leaders of the Wahhabi corporation also left the political scene. Ibn Baz died in May 1999, and al-Uthaymeen – in January 2001. There were no other ulema of this caliber and influence.

Ibn Baz described Arab nationalism as atheistic *jahiliyya*, that is barbarism and ignorance, the purpose of which was to destroy Islam. In the history textbooks overseen by the Supreme Ulema Committee, Arab nationalism was defined as ‘European in origin, Jewish in motivation.’ It leads to conflict and chauvinism and is contrary to the spirit of Islam. Nationalism is a conspiracy between the West and Zionism to undermine the unity of the Muslims. Westernization leads to the loss of Islamic ideals and harms Islamic practice. Politically, Westernization supports ‘the introduction of Western political systems, political parties and parliaments, which leads to the destruction of social ties, unity and consensus.’ Westernization leads to ‘mixing genders, opening nightclubs, abolishing the hijab, introducing Western banking interest, and celebrating non-Muslim holidays such as Christmas, Mother’s Day and Labor Day’ (Al-Rasheed 2010: 181).

The government appointed a member of the Al ash-Sheikh family to head the Supreme Ulema Committee, and another family member became Minister of Islamic Affairs (Mouline 2014: 179). Having directly descended from Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the family survived until the twenty-first century and had its own hereditary historical and symbolic capital, demonstrating the preservation and transmission of ‘true religion’.

The politicization of dogmatic differences reflected the general atmosphere of tension in the country. Nevertheless, in the late twentieth – early twenty-first century it was still difficult to determine the strength or weakness of the opposition on the basis of

materials in the electronic and print media and the growing use of the Internet. Inside Saudi Arabia, the voices of religious dissidents were muffled, while organizations in exile were suffocated by the lack of money and active personnel.

The first clouds of an approaching sandstorm were already appearing on the horizon – it was the activity of the global organization al-Qaeda, uncompromising in its anti-Western and anti-monarchical rhetoric and merciless in its terrorist practice. Its foundation and activities are associated with the name of a Saudi citizen – Osama bin Laden.

Bin Laden and the Creation of al-Qaeda

In the 1980s, businessman bin Laden collaborated with Saudi intelligence to support the Afghan armed opposition against Soviet troops and the pro-communist government and, accordingly, received full approval from Washington. He raised funds in Saudi Arabia for the ‘Afghan jihad’, helping the armed opposition with money, weapons, road construction machines and other equipment. After the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, bin Laden created the al-Qaeda organization, initially to collect information on the activities of Muslim veterans scattered around the world. A civil war broke out in Afghanistan, in which all Muslim groups clashed. Bin Laden returned to Saudi Arabia, where he talked about his recent ‘exploits’.

When Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, he invited the Saudi leadership to organize a resistance based on Afghan veterans. His call was not taken seriously. Therefore, bin Laden began to repeat in his statements the arguments of the Sahwa Movement, which argued that the Saudis were ruling the country in violation of Sharia law and had put oil wealth at the service of American interests (Commins 2006: 185–186).

Bin Laden then settled in Sudan and began to establish business ties in Europe, Africa and Asia, which served as a cover for the financial operations of al-Qaeda. He also created the Advice and Reformation Committee as a platform for change in Saudi Arabia, adopting a ‘memorandum’ issued in 1992 by Saudi Islamist dissidents. In 1995, the Advice and Reformation Committee called on the monarchy to reject all man-made laws, to take measures to eliminate the debt of citizens and unemployment, to stop spending the country’s wealth on luxurious palaces for members of the royal family. This statement ended with a call for King Fahd to leave the throne. Thus, bin Laden openly challenged both the Saudis and the Wahhabi establishment. He accused Ibn Baz of ‘betraying’ Islam ‘in order to serve his masters, the Saudis’. When authorities attacked religious dissidents in 1994–1996, he condemned the persecution of the Sahwa ulema (Commins 2006: 186).

According to bin Laden, the United States was the leader of the ‘Crusader-Zionist’ alliance, while Washington was inspiring crimes against Muslims everywhere, the most recent one being the American occupation of Saudi Arabia. ‘They came to rule, not defend these lands’. He justified the attacks as a defensive response by Muslims to humiliation, oppression and poverty. In these conditions, the main duty of Muslims was to free the land of the two Holy Places from the American occupation (Commins 2006: 188–189).

Al-Qaeda organized a terrorist attack in Riyadh in 1995, which killed both Americans and Saudis. Washington and Riyadh pressured Khartoum to expel bin Laden. In May 1996, he returned to Afghanistan and a few months later, in August 1996, announced

a new phase of his mission by issuing the Declaration of Jihad against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holiest Sites. Published in London by the MIRA organization, this document is replete with quotes from the Koran, Hadith and early Islamic rhetoric, which are used to blame the Saudis and the United States for all the sins. Bin Laden called for an uprising against the Saudis and for a jihad against the United States. In his declaration, he echoed the arguments of the Sahwa dissidents, which they expressed in the early 1990s: poor governance of the country's economy, resulting in inflation, unemployment, poverty, restricting oil production to set prices in the interests of Washington, not Muslims, and the inept handling of national defense. The declaration claimed that King Fahd was lying when he announced in 1990 that American troops would only remain in Saudi Arabia for a short time. In accusing the Saudis, this declaration used the arguments of Sayyid Qutb, who had argued that Muslim rulers relied on man-made laws, not Sharia, that they allied with 'infidels' against Muslims and thus became apostates. Bin Laden followed the logic expressed by Sayyid Qutb: a ruler who did not rule in accordance with Sharia was 'unfaithful' and had to be overthrown. The Wahhabi doctrine allows disobeying the ruler only if he requires believers to violate religious laws. Thus, according to the Wahhabi doctrine, a ruler can be considered unfaithful only if he openly rejects the authority of religion and requires believers to violate it.

For the time being, bin Laden, in accordance with the existing rules of jihad, did not call for terrorist attacks against civilians, but soon changed his mind. Since the United States was killing peaceful Muslims, all Americans were responsible for the policies of their government, which they elected and to which they paid taxes. If Americans did not want to be attacked, they had to elect a government that would end America's war on Muslims (Commins 2006: 189–190).

The emergence of Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda organization can be explained by the persuasion of extremists who set themselves the task of freeing Muslims from foreign or domestic apostate oppression. Al-Qaeda's logic contradicts Wahhabi doctrine on two critical points. First, al-Qaeda calls for the overthrow of the Saudis. Secondly, the call for jihad against the West is not legitimate from the point of view of the Wahhabis, since only the ruler can declare jihad.

Osama bin Laden's origins and Saudi Arabia's support for al-Qaeda in the early stages of its activities gave the impression that Wahhabism was, as it were, a base of religious violence in various parts of the world. The matter was more complicated. In each of the doctrines, extremists sought and found arguments for their actions; accordingly, Sayyid Qutb stood out among the Muslim Brothers. The Islamic State (ISIS),^{***} which first followed al-Qaeda and then split from it, was based on the works of the founder of Wahhabism, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (Al-Rasheed 2010: 178–179).

Nabil Mouline quotes the Norwegian researcher of jihadism Thomas Hegghammer: al-Qaeda is 'a political movement based on the idea that the Muslim nation is being attacked by external forces, and all Muslims are obliged to come to the aid of other Muslims who are in a difficult situation'. This idea requires a global jihad against both the Western powers and the Arab regimes that support them. The ultimate goal of the struggle is to expel all non-Muslim countries from Muslim lands, overthrow regimes that were considered apostate, and re-establish the unity of the Ummah within a well-governed caliphate. In relation to Saudi Arabia, al-Qaeda declared that its objectives included expelling

American troops from the territory of the two Holy Places, using political and military means to fight against the monarchy, which was compromised by cooperation with the West, and discrediting the religious establishment (Mouline 2014: 250).

The spread of the Wahhabi understanding of Islam, which was preferably referred to as Salafism, attracted followers in all parts of the world from New Jersey to Amsterdam, Paris, Kuwait and Jakarta (Lacroix 2011: 268). Jihadists were finding supporters among the very Salafists.

The ideological and propaganda struggle of the Wahhabi corporation against al-Qaeda was tough and uncompromising. Considering how dangerous the ideological argument in the hands of extremists – *takfir*, that is declaring Muslim rulers to be non-believers – was, it became the main target for the theoretical arguments of the Wahhabis. Wahhabi ulema condemned calls for jihad, believing that this could only be the prerogative of legitimate Muslim rulers. Jihad should generally be defensive. Wahhabi ulema unanimously considered suicide attacks illegal, since suicide was prohibited by Islam, whatever the circumstances (Mouline 2014: 253–255).

The 9/11 Attacks on the USA and the Global Response

The terrorist attacks in the USA on September 11, 2001 became a new ‘moment of truth.’ They drew condemnation from the majority of the Muslim world, from the Muslim Brothers, Al-Azhar, and prominent political and religious authorities in Islam to the head of the Supreme Ulema Committee of Saudi Arabia, Abdul Aziz Al ash-Sheikh. Bin Laden was announced to be the main culprit.

Saudi Arabia broke off relations with Afghanistan and the Taliban in September 2001. In response, Bin Laden called the Wahhabi ulema ‘corrupt puppets of the apostate regime’ who refused to acknowledge the need to wage a jihad against the United States. There were also discussions within the Wahhabi establishment. Among the speakers there were bin Laden supporters. However, the leadership of the Wahhabi corporation condemned both terrorist acts and any form of extremism (Commins 2006: 195). In cyberspace, al-Qaeda tried to justify the killing of civilians with the same logic: since Americans killed civilians, they could be killed as well (Mouline 2014: 195).

In 2003–2004, al-Qaeda members carried out several dozen terrorist attacks throughout the country. There were shootouts between extremists and special services, including in the Holy City of Mecca. Although it was possible to arrest some suspects and seize weapons depots, terrorist attacks continued in 2004 (Mouline 2014: 250).

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula committed murder, ostensibly in order to expel all ‘infidels’, be they Christians (‘crusaders’), Jews (‘Zionists’) or Hindus (‘cow worshipers who killed Kashmiri Muslims’). All of them had to be expelled from the land of the two shrines. The Saudi security organs were called ‘dogs that served the apostate regime’ (Commins 2006: 195).

In the wake of the September 11 attacks, the American media, public opinion, and administration officials for some time did not differentiate between Wahhabis, Taliban and al-Qaeda. When the Taliban leadership rejected the American demand to expel bin Laden from the country, the United States invaded Afghanistan in the fall of 2001. The Northern Alliance – the armed opposition to the Taliban – armed by Russia and Iran, captured the capital, and the American invasion swept away the Taliban government. Bin Laden fled to Pakistan, but in 2011 he was captured and allegedly killed by

American special forces. Although al-Qaeda lost its base in Afghanistan, in the following years it was able to carry out attacks in Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Spain, Turkey, Indonesia, Kenya and Egypt (Commins 2006: 123–124).

After September 11, 2001, the task of dissociating themselves from extremism and terrorism both inside the country and outside it became a necessity both for the authorities, that is for the Saudi family, and for the Wahhabi corporation. There began a short period of political ‘liberalism’ (Mouline 2014: 227).

In Saudi Arabia, there were relative freedom of the press, organization of municipal elections, national dialogues, and certain reforms in the academic sphere. The religious police caused growing popular dissatisfaction. The reputation of the super-Orthodox religious police, especially the mutawwa, was blackened by the tragedy that took place in a boarding school for teenage girls in March 2002. During a fire in the boarding school, the mutawwa did not allow the firefighters and police to rescue the girls, did not allow them to escape from the school, and did not allow the rescuers to enter the building, because the girls were not wearing a hijab. It was preferable for the mutawwa for them to burn alive or suffocate in smoke than to appear without a hijab. Public anger over this tragedy forced the government to change the administration of the women's schools and to take them away from the hands of the religious authorities and turn them over to the Ministry of Education (Commins 2006: 194).

Finally, following the operation to topple Saddam Hussein and the intervention in Iraq, the United States closed its military bases in Saudi Arabia in 2003.

Al-Qaeda cells were defeated by security forces. A significant part of the population, for which security and stability were important, opposed the terrorists, most wanted to improve the situation without breaking the established structures of Saudi society, so they did not reject the rule of the House of Saud. The authorities suppressed the movement of extremist terrorists by force, and the ulema carried out their propaganda, defending social stability, maintaining political order; without it, they would say, people would be in danger of losing their faith and then be punished appropriately (Commins 2006: 250).

In January 2003, a group of so-called ‘liberals’ sent a document entitled ‘Strategic Vision for the Present and the Future’ to Crown Prince Abdullah. The message reformulated previous proposals from 1990–1991 aimed at reorganizing the government. The authors dressed their demands in quotations from Hadith, referring to the fact that one of them recommended that believers give advice to rulers. They declared as their goal the creation of a constitutional order to ensure national unity, justice and equality within the framework of Sharia. The goal of any government should be to ensure justice, so they proposed changing the 1992 Basic Law – *nizam*, establishing a division of powers into the executive, legislative and judicial. They proposed the creation of elected legislatures at the national and provincial levels and called for the freedom of speech and assembly, economic reforms, changing the status of women and preventing discrimination on a sectarian basis (Commins 2006: 194).

A group of Shiite leaders wrote their own petition in April 2003 and handed it over to Crown Prince Abdullah. Among the signatories were businessmen, religious leaders, and university professors who would like to end decades of discrimination against the Shiite minority in the country.

It was unlikely that their demands would be met by the authorities. It was also unlikely that their authors expected a positive reaction. Yet, this was the time when they were allowed to put forward various ideas and discuss them freely enough. The ‘liberal’ and Shiite authors of the petitions may have realized that they lacked an organizational structure and social base in comparison to the royal family and the deeply entrenched Wahhabi establishment in the country, but they continued to issue their demands (Commins 2006: 201–202).

The government decided to hold a nationwide dialogue, during which participants discussed extremism and Sufism, relations between Sunnis and Shiites, the Sahwa Movement, and women's rights. It was attended by Wahhabi ulema, religious dissidents, reformers, and Shiites. Similar dialogues took place two more times. There were various currents of Islamic thought in the country, but the Wahhabi corporation believed that there was only one correct point of view – its own one while its opponents had their own granite set of views. In any case, even the slightest compromise with other movements (be it Sufis, Sahwa ulema or extremist jihadists, not to mention Shiites) was absolutely unacceptable for the Wahhabis. However, the discussions demonstrated that it was necessary to respond to the critics of the regime, who spoke about unemployment, corruption, and the excessive power of the House of Saud.

Communication technologies, satellite television and the Internet began to influence the religious and political discourse (see, *e.g.*, Fadaak and Roberts 2019). They evolved in spite of censorship, opening up Saudi Arabia to other religious movements and worldviews (Haykel, Hegghamme, and Lacroix 2015: 334). Repression of terrorists proved effective, but there remained the question of whether Wahhabism would be able to maintain its dominance. The Wahhabi corporation of ulema had serious traditions, social support and material and political resources. True, the regime vacillated between offering full support to its traditional ally and relying on a broader assortment of various currents of Islam. These fluctuations depended on the circumstances, and therefore there was either a weakening or an increase in the power and influence of the Wahhabi corporation. Yet their alliance with the government, which had developed over the centuries, remained unshakable. Grand Mufti Abdul Aziz Al ash-Sheikh stated: ‘Insubordination is one of the aspects of jahiliyya... Our task as ulema is to promote the dignity of rulers... Obeying a ruler means avoiding fitnah’ (Mouline 2014: 251).

After September 11, 2001, when Western media declared Wahhabism to be the ideological basis of terrorism, school textbooks, which brought up xenophobia, especially among adolescents, began to be revised. The textbooks denied the need for contact with ‘infidels’, that is, with Christians and Jews. The Saudi textbooks argued that Western aggression took the form of political ideologies (nationalism, socialism, secularism, cultural invasion, Western forms of recreation and consumption, and Zionist expansionism). The textbooks were edited, but among the teachers there remained adherents of the previous views – both local ulema and Muslim Brothers (Mouline 2014: 251).

Liberal ‘freedoms’ did not last long. On August 12, 2010, Abdullah, who had become king in 2005, issued a decree that only the Supreme Ulema Committee and members of the religious establishment who were officially appointed by the Grand Mufti could publicly express their views on television, radio, in newspapers, in the course of sermons in mosques, *etc.* In fact, strict censorship was introduced, aimed against those who were displeasing to either the regime or the Wahhabi corporation (Mouline 2014: 256).

Arab Spring and its Aftermath

The Arab Spring practically bypassed Saudi Arabia, judging by the internal situation in the country. The stability of the kingdom surprised many. Both the prevalence of conservative sentiments and the preservation of an unwritten ‘social contract’ – the Saudis would share part of the oil revenues with the population, which in turn would not interfere with their rule, that is, their policies and their alliance with the Wahhabi corporation – allowed to maintain stability in the kingdom.

On the one hand, attempts to stage demonstrations or uprisings were suppressed, and on the other, colossal investments were made to confirm the interdependence between the government and the population with the aid of enormously generous subsidies (see, *e.g.*, Al-Rasheed 2018: 34; Vasiliev 2018).

In two decrees in February and March 2011, King Abdullah promised to spend additional \$100 billion on his subjects, which was done immediately. The king also promised to build 500,000 houses over five years and make it easier to get loans to buy homes (Al-Rasheed 2018: 13; see, *e.g.*, Vasiliev and Petrov 2012).

The regime needed an enemy, and it was at hand – Iran with its slogans. Propaganda in Saudi Arabia spoke of ‘Iranian conspiracies’ that made Saudi Shiites an Iranian ‘fifth column’. The regime responded to the demand for political reforms with repressions. New anti-terrorism laws were introduced and some peaceful activists and lawyers were arrested.

In Western media and in scholarly works, it was believed that Saudi Arabia was an incubator of terrorist groups, and the basis of jihad was Wahhabism in both Syria and Iraq. After all, works of Ibn Abd al Wahhab were published by the ISIS and distributed in schools in controlled territories. When the kingdom itself became the target of attacks by ISIS terrorists, the assessment of Wahhabism and its role in politics began to change.

Saudi Arabia faced a new wave of terrorism launched by ISIS, which announced the establishment of a ‘caliphate’ in Mosul in July 2014. Its representatives committed over a dozen of terrorist acts in Saudi Arabia in 2015–2016, killed fanatically even relatives, and for ideological reasons justified the killing of fathers by the deeds of their sons. The unthinkable brutality dramatically reduced the popularity of ISIS in Saudi society. Terrorism strengthened rather than weakened the regime (Al-Rasheed 2018: 15).

At the international level, the contradictions between the Wahhabis and the Muslim Brothers after the Arab Spring flared up with renewed vigor and acquired a highly politicized character. Turkey was gaining more and more weight in the region; its ruling Justice and Development Party preached an ideology close to the Brothers. In Qatar, a small but phenomenally wealthy monarchy, Muslim Brothers were employed not only in the education system, but also in the spheres of administration and propaganda. The disagreements between Qatar and Saudi Arabia concerned the problem of borders, personal contradictions between dynasties, and the propaganda of the Al-Jazeera channel, which broadcasted ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood, including those directed against the Saudi family and Wahhabis, and which found many viewers and listeners in the kingdom (see, *e.g.*, Khayrullin 2019).

The triumph of the influence of the Brotherhood and, accordingly, Qatar and Turkey in the region was the victory of the Muslim Brothers represented by the Freedom and Justice Party in Egypt in the June 2012 presidential elections. The contradictions

between Saudi Arabia and the Turkey-Qatar-Muslim Brotherhood alliance spread to Libya, Tunisia, Morocco, Yemen, and Syria (see, e.g., Vasiliev *et al.* 2019).

However, in Egypt, where the Muslim Brothers did not manage to restore order in the country, especially in its economic and social spheres, the pendulum swung again in favor of Saudi Arabia. Widespread anti-government unrest broke out. Taking advantage of them and Saudi support, the military staged a coup d'état on July 3, 2013 and drove the Muslim Brotherhood underground. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates pledged several billion dollars to support the Egyptian economy. In March 2014, the Muslim Brotherhood was declared an illegal terrorist organization in the kingdom (Haykel, Hegghammer, and Lacroix 2015: 332; see, e.g., Vasiliev *et al.* 2019).

In 2015, the coming to power in Saudi Arabia of King Salman bin Abdulaziz and his son Mohammed led to tougher methods of governing the country in an era of imminent socio-economic changes.

It is currently impossible to predict how and when the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia, will recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and economic crisis. Nonetheless, it is already obvious that a religious form of ideological struggle, which will employ both the use of information technology and physical violence, will characterize the political and economic landscape of the entire Middle East and the whole world. What will be the future of the regimes, including the Saudi regime, their regional and non-regional alliances, their choice of development path, and what will be the impact of global players on the situation? Only time will answer these difficult questions.

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NOTES

* This organization is banned in the Russian Federation.

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