
The Kingdom's Failed Marriage

Why it's time for Saudi Arabia to divorce the Wahhabi Establishment

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IT has often been claimed that King Abdulaziz Ibn Saud founded the modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia with the Koran in one hand and a sword in the other. Yet it is more accurate that the Kingdom was founded with a red and white Najdi headscarf in one hand and the sect of Wahhabism in the other. With the European Allies having portioned out the defunct Ottoman Empire and with the ideological and political underpinnings of modern nation states beginning to take shape in the Middle East, Ibn Saud was aware that the loose smattering of Arab tribes and tribal alliances that dotted the interior of the Arabian Peninsula would be unable to withstand the era's geopolitical tumult. A modern state was needed, but Arabia's tribes, mired in feuds over blood and water rights, were woefully ignorant of modern geopolitics. To construct the new state Ibn Saud would also need to construct a modern identity. The brick and mortar of both would be the cultural identity of the Najd, the central highlands region from where the Al-Saud hailed, and the ultra-orthodox Wahhabi brand of Islam.

Often classified as a rather severe and conservative form of Sunni Islam, Wahhabism's founder, Muhammad Ibn Abdulwahhab (d.1792), claimed to cleanse Islam of centuries of accumulated unorthodoxies and to return it to the pristine religion of the Prophet Muhammad and his early followers. For the pundits, popular contemporary activists and authors often claim that [Islam is in need of a reformation](#). An answer to their call is that it has already happened - Wahhabism was it. Much akin to 16th Century Protestantism, Wahhabism threw out centuries of accumulated spiritual gnosis and scholarly jurisprudence in favor of simplistic, prima facie readings of Islam's texts, the Koran and Hadith to the extent that its theology asserted far more anthropomorphic understandings of God. Despite its theological railing against religious innovation ("bid'a" in Arabic), Wahhabism is itself an innovation that flies in the face of what much of the Sunni world has codified and understood to be Islam

All would have been well and done had it not been for the discovery of oil in Saudi Arabia in 1938. Petro wealth allowed Saudi Arabia to make the export of Wahhabism an integral part of its foreign policy to other Muslim states, both in the Middle East and further afar. From millions of Korans complete with Wahhabi exegetical commentary translated into dozens of languages to opulent mosques staffed with Saudi-trained imams and stocked with Wahhabi literature, Saudi Arabia has invested enormous sums into proliferating their brand of Islam as far afield as North America and Indonesia. Perhaps because of this far-reaching diffusion and impact, Wahhabism has not remained monolithic and thus has undergone several metamorphoses and consequently Saudi Arabia has not been able to reign them all in. Politically quietist in its home Kingdom (often turning a blind eye to royal family excess), it more or less became a political movement in Egypt in the guise of the Muslim Brotherhood. Finally, in the Kasbahs of Algeria and the battlefields of Afghanistan, it morphed into its violent jihadist incarnation whereupon it returned to the Middle East in full force, bent on regime change and social upheaval. The truth is undeniable: wherever and whenever Muslims have been accused of violence and intolerance - be it al-Qaeda or a lone suicide bomber detonating his explosives in a Kuwaiti mosque-; Wahhabism and its offshoots have always been the incubator.

The stark reality is that Wahhabism has now become a liability for the Saudi Kingdom. The country's anhedonic social puritanism juxtaposed with the tabloid-worthy excess of Saudi royals and citizens abroad engenders indignant calls of hypocrisy from Muslims the world over. Even within the Kingdom there are signs that Saudis themselves are tiring of state-imposed ultraconservatism. A smartphone video was uploaded to YouTube last year showing a young Saudi woman angrily dismissing and threatening a member of the *mutaww'a*, the Wahhabi establishment's vice police, who had accosted her at a shopping center for wearing makeup and nail polish. In 2010, an MTV broadcast of "True Life – Resist the Power Saudi Arabia" showcased three Saudi youths fighting three desperate uphill battles: to get society to accept women wearing a color other than black, allowing women to participate in the Jeddah City Council and finding a public venue for a local Saudi heavy metal band. It is worth noting that since the 2010 US broadcast Wahhabi clerics have successfully brought legal charges against the youths for "openly declaring sin."

The divide between Wahhabism and society transcends far beyond teenage angst. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has staged violent attacks within the Kingdom, at times targeting expatriate workers and mounting assassination attempts on Saudi princes themselves. The royals have responded with social and education programs that aim to reeducate jihadists and cure them of their "deviant ideologies" (an Al-Saud euphemism for salafi-jihadis). But how can a state reign in deviant ideologies when one of its foundational keystones is an ideology that considers all ideologies but itself as deviant?

The House of Saud has played a supreme balancing act between its geopolitical interests and its Wahhabi bride from hell since the Kingdom's inception. Like all marriages it has been one of push and pull; pulling the plug on Wahhabi Bedouin warriors in 1927 and massacring them as Ibn Saud did when they threatened to rebel over accusations of ideological non-commitment. Or pushing for increased religious conservatism in the wake of the 1979 Mecca Grand Mosque coup at the hands of Wahhabi fanatics (Riyadh executed the upstart rebels but then handed them an ostensibly posthumous victory by sweeping away budding social freedoms). The royals pushed again on the clerical establishment in 1990, this time in need of the appropriate fatwas that would allow "infidel" American troops on Saudi soil when Saddam's Republican Guard divisions threatened to move south beyond Kuwait.



As the summer of 2015 draws to a close and Syria lies in complete devastation, the ISIS reign of madness nears no end and the Saudi ideological nemesis of Shiite Iran appears to be coming in from the cold, it seems that the Kingdom's establishment adheres to its Wahhabi playbook more out of historical inertia than out of any heartfelt ideological commitment. It is well known that the Kingdom's deeply traditional society is reticent to

change at anything but a hobbled camel's pace, but in light of the Arab Spring's subsequent reverberations and ISIS' considerable regional impact, it might behoove the Saudis' closest allies, namely Washington, London and brotherly Arab monarchies from Rabat to Abu Dhabi to advocate for divorce.

It would be irreverently foolish to deny the social cohesion and stability that the Al-Saud Family has brought to a nation comprised of more cultural and social diversity than is often apparent. No one with a nuanced understanding of the Arab Middle East's geopolitical fabric would suggest that Arabia is better off without the "Saudi." The Middle East needs the Saudi royals and the "deep state" network of diplomacy and familiarity that they have built in the region. The recent and sudden changes in governments across the Arab World have not yielded opportune results in the long run. Instead, it would befit the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to reconsider and downgrade the marriage of necessity with the Wahhabi religion because for all intents and purposes, Wahhabism has served its aim and is no longer necessary.

Uncontested power has always been The Al-Saud bottom line, but undeniable power was cemented long ago. The vast majority of Saudi citizens are no longer ignorant nomads with little idea of the outside world as they were when Ibn Saud united his new Kingdom. Riyadh has masterfully created a welfare state where the majority of citizenry would have little idea of how to function if princess and kings disappeared tomorrow. Singular understandings of national identity and religious cohesion are well embedded in the local psychology and the continued need for a guiding clerical establishment fettered to a ultraconservative reading of Islam seems perfunctory in this day and age. If anything, it is the country's continued insistence on Wahhabism that is breeding the socially stifling discontent at home and the accusations of jihadist incubator abroad that make many question the validity of the Saudi monarchy. Furthermore Saudi Arabia is surrounded by examples of successful tribal Arab monarchies that do not use or abuse (nor are used and abused by) a mafia of fanatical clerics and the Wahhabism that they safeguard. Both Qatar and the UAE have enjoyed economic and political success regionally and abroad without the need of an overreaching religious component in their foreign and domestic policy. The Emirates follows a staid and traditional form of Islam predicated on the Maliki school of jurisprudence and both Abu Dhabi and Dubai are the operating bases of several world renowned Sufi Muslim preachers and scholars. Qatar has allowed the quiet presence of Christian churches and Hindu temples for the benefit of its expatriate population.

Popular sentiment across the Islamic World is beginning to shift in that Saudi Wahhabism is being regarded as a "gateway drug" for intolerance, jihadism and violence. In many places where it has been introduced it has upended traditional, often syncretic, forms of Islam and created disharmony where the religion had peacefully existed for centuries. In recognition of this, other Muslim majority states have moved in to pickup the slack. Burgeoning Turkey has begun throwing its Muslim weight around by building opulent mosques and [Islamic centers in places such as suburban Maryland](#) and Havana, Cuba, beating Wahhabi Islam to the Caribbean punch in favor of the more docile Ottoman Hanafi Islam. Morocco, another Arab Kingdom with long brotherly bonds to Saudi Arabia, has also initiated its own brand of spiritual diplomacy on its own continent by pledging to build training centers for African Muslim scholars and preachers with the intent of combating extremist thought and promoting the values of tolerance.

Recent informed speculations on oil futures markets have forecasted [the looming economic bankruptcy of Saudi Arabia](#). Between the lower production costs of US-based fracking and Riyadh's gamble earlier this year to flood oil output in a bid to beat out competitors, Saudi Arabia has placed itself in the precarious spot by risking its petro-rentier livelihood. The Kingdom could be facing an "existential crisis" by the end of the decade. The modern Saudi State has only three things in its possession that have ever conferred legitimacy: Mecca, Medina and Oil. If forecasters are correct then a series of bad decisions could run the Kingdom's economy into the ground, but few decisions in life are as ruinous as that of a bad spouse and the subsequent failed marriage. With this union's unhappy home life in the streets of Jeddah and Riyadh, its quickly failing social standing amongst the neighbors and its pathological children running amok in Iraq and Syria, it might be time to call it quits.