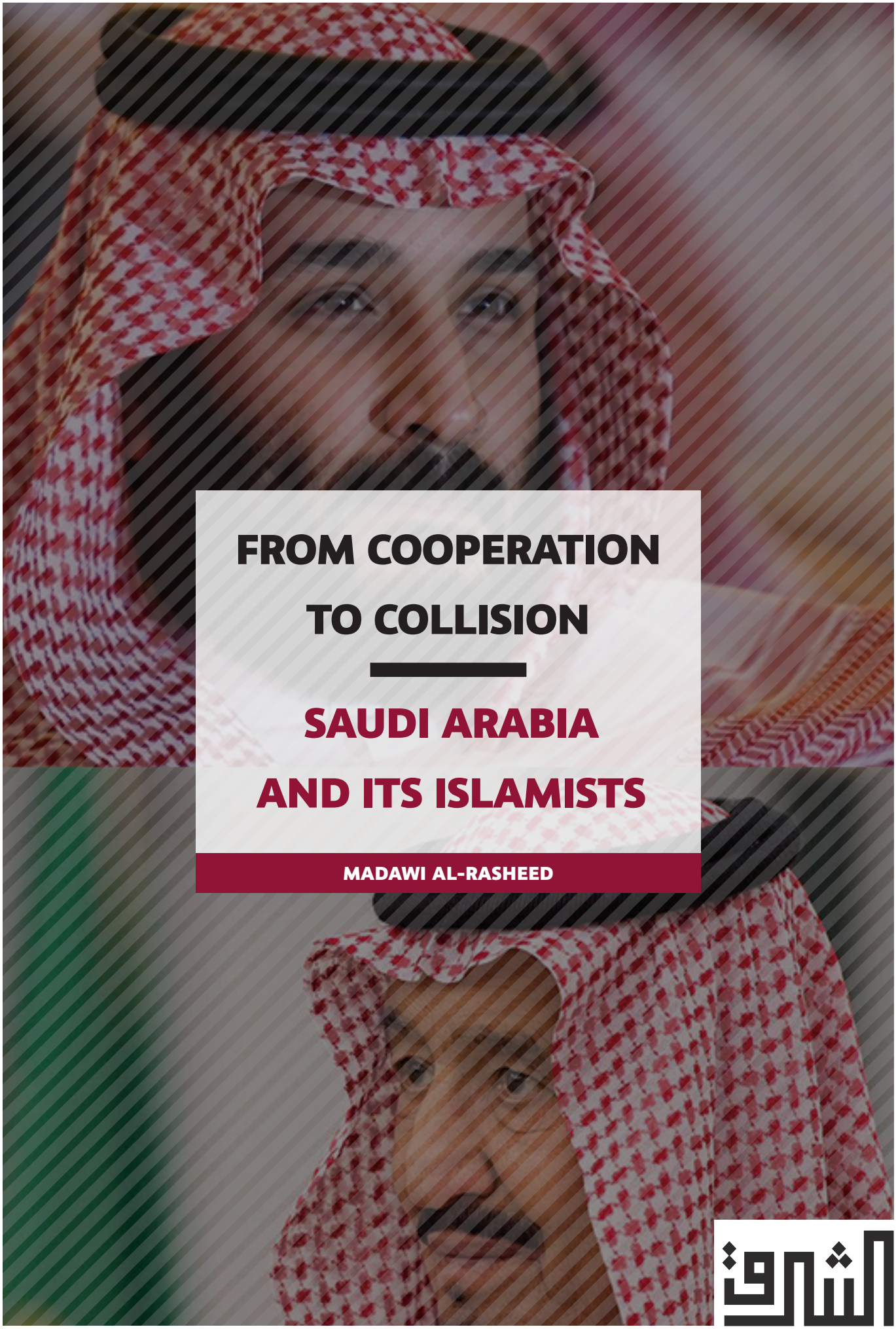

FROM COOPERATION TO COLLISION

SAUDI ARABIA AND ITS ISLAMISTS

MADAWI AL-RASHEED

ALSHARQ FORUM ANALYSIS SERIES

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Contents

Abstract: Saudi state relations with Islamism are old and complex. This report traces the historical transformations and recent shifts in this relationship. As a state based on religious legitimacy, the Saudi state is the first Islamic state in the post-colonial Arab world. Yet, as a self-declared Islamic state, it was ironic that an Islamist trend critical of the state similar to those that flourished under secular Arab republics in places like Egypt, Syria, Iraq and elsewhere in the region, emerged in the kingdom in the early 1970s. Drawing on historical data and contemporary analysis, this paper concludes that state-Islamist relations follow the logic of political expediency rather than dogmatic principles. As a result, the relationship oscillates between cooperation, repression and collision. It remains volatile even when reconciliation is fostered between the regime and its multiple Islamist trends.

In the Arab world, the relationship between regimes and Islamists is complex. Across the region, regimes' political interests rather than pure ideological affinity have driven the relationship. All Arab regimes have flirted with Islamism at one time or another. From Saudi kings to secular military presidents, since the 1970s Arab leaders have found in Islamism an antidote to threatening ideologies such as nationalism, socialism and communism, with the capability of mobilizing the population. Islamists reached out to disenfranchised pious masses, who immersed themselves in the new piety and propriety movement that swept the Arab world after the Arab defeat in the 1967 war with Israel. Whether a result of identity politics, humiliation after this defeat, or deteriorating socio-economic conditions, the new religiosity benefited from pervasive educational, charitable and welfare networks that began to replace the crumbling state infrastructure and services, especially in countries that suffered most as a result of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The wave of religiosity flourished as a result of Islamism's defiant rhetoric against both defeated authoritarian regimes and the West, thus bringing both the elite and the masses into a diverse and multi-faceted socio-political and religious movement. Arabs of all classes and sects in both poor and oil-rich countries endorsed the new wave of religiosity. In the Maghrib, the Mashriq and the Arabian Peninsula, the new religiosity had a political wing, committed to changing the world through action, and thus confirming the rootedness of such developments in the political context of the Arab world. The politicized version of this religiosity came to be referred to by different names: fundamentalism, Islamism, and political Islam were all used to label movements that drew on Islam to change both the self and the world.

In part I of this paper, I use the label Islamists to discuss how Arab regimes fluctuated between conflict, reconciliation, competition, and accommodation in their relations with Islamic political trends. In part II, I show that while there are certain historical affinities between the Saudi regime and Islamists, the Saudi leadership resembled other Arab regimes as they pursued their own survival at the expense of the close ideological or religious agendas when they dealt with Islamists on their own soil. This paper discusses only Sunni Islamists, although some of its conclusions apply also in countries where Shia Islamism is the dominant trend: for example, in Iraq and Bahrain and to a lesser extent Lebanon. But regardless of the diversity of their rhetoric, outlook and strategies, Islamists emerged under the banner of returning to an imagined authenticity, empowering and ensuring the salvation of the individual, the community, and the transnational Muslim umma at large. Within this broad project there are many variations in the discourse and strategies adopted by each Islamist group.

But regardless of the diversity of their rhetoric, outlook and strategies, Islamists emerged under the banner of returning to an imagined authenticity, empowering and ensuring the salvation of the individual, the community, and the transnational Muslim umma at large

Many regimes with different outlooks including both republics and monarchies responded to the challenge of this new wave of Islamist politics either by endorsing the aspirations of Islamist groups and supporting them both materially and symbolically (Saudi Arabia under King Faisal in the 1960s and after, Egypt under Anwar Sadat in the same period). At other moments, regimes repressed Islamists (Nasser in the 1960s, Hafiz Assad and Saddam Hussein in the 1980s). At the same time, regimes encouraged the non-politicized forms of religiosity, for example the quietist Salafis and Tablighis, who objected to political zeal but saturated their discourse with theological treatises on obedience to rulers, ritual purity, gender

inequality and orthodox religious practices. The quietist Salafi trend within Islamism[1] initially represented in the eyes of these regimes an antidote to the more vigorous politicized Islamists, for example the Muslim Brotherhood and Hizb al-Tahrir,[2] both of which had spread across the region from Rabat to Riyadh.[3]

Regimes and Islamists have never been engaged in an eternal love or hate relationship. Their relationships are determined by their struggle to survive in a turbulent region. Both regimes and Islamists play a well-known political game as they strive to assert their authority and legitimacy in order to increase their appeal to their audiences. Authoritarian and repressive unelected monarchies and republics are both constantly preoccupied with their legitimacy and the consent of the masses in order to avoid the consequences of brutal force to extract acquiescence, although they occasionally resort to sheer brutality to suppress dissent. They aspire to extract loyalty and voluntary consent as this saves them embarrassment both domestically and internationally. Regimes strive to eliminate rivals to their rule and mitigate against the emergence of alternative credible future leadership regardless of the ideological outlook of any potential leadership. On the other hand, Islamists strive to embed themselves among the masses and reach out to them in order to achieve wide horizontal grassroot networks to be used for support and mobilization.

With the gradual elimination of previous ideological challenges presented by nationalists and communists in the 1960s, Islamists appeared to be the only organized opposition left to the regimes. In some instances, Islamists and regimes worked together and cooperated to undermine other opposition groups and rivals. This paper is an attempt to examine the complex relationship between the Saudi regime and its Islamists while at the same time offering a nuanced interpretation of the complexity of how the relationship is never static, but is in fact in a constant state of flux.

Part I: Arab Regimes and Islamists

Arab regimes have often dealt with Islamists by deploying multiple strategies: co-operation, co-optation, appeasement and repression have all been deployed, and occasionally these strategies have been used at the same time against a spectrum of Islamist groups that also quarreled and competed with each other. Regime multiple strategies may have empowered, delegitimized or radicalized Islamism at different times, but so far, they have not succeeded in eliminating Islamism altogether from the Arab political scene.

In Algeria (1990s), Gaza (2006) and Egypt (2013) Islamists were deposed or side-lined after coming to power through elections. In Morocco, they formed agovernment for the first time after the 2011 Arab uprisings. In other countries, they were allowed to participate in elections and eventually won substantial number of seats in parliament (Jordan and Kuwait).

Islamism has proven to be more resilient than imagined. Islamism even survived under severe repressive conditions such as, for example, those in Egypt, Syria, Tunisia and Iraq, where republican leaders have deployed excessive repression, deportation, and exile to eliminate a whole range of Islamist activists and supporters

Whether they have removed them by force or merely tolerated them, no Arab regime has been able to successfully eliminate Islamists from the public sphere. Their elimination is above all dependent on the development of an alternative political current that offers a language of both political opposition and reconstruction. At the moment, there does

not seem to be an alternative political current that can fill a vacuum should Islamists be successfully eliminated or sidelined.

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However, the mutation can also give rise to violent trends both at the domestic and global level. The rise of al-Qaida in the 1980s and later IS in 2014 attests to the sinister side of Islamism when it becomes violent

Three reasons behind Islamist resilience are important to note. First, domestically, repression seems to strengthen Islamist internal group cohesion and resilience. It reinforces the victimization narrative and the aspiration for martyrdom, glorified in some Islamist circles as a price to pay for belief and perseverance. Second, Islamists have become tools in the hand of rival Arab regimes to score victory against their opponents. So Saudi Arabia supported and promoted Egyptian Islamists such as the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1960s against Nasser when he threatened it with his anti-American and anti-imperialist rhetoric. This regional support was important in keeping Islamism alive during extended periods of severe brutality. And thirdly, Islamism incorporates preaching activities that enable its adherents to go underground during times of repression and also claim the moral high ground against other secular groups. Its grounding in Islamic discourse endows it with a certain authenticity, privilege and aura that is lacking in other social and political movements.

Islamist political parties, summer camps, charities, and welfare services may be curbed and shut down, but under these conditions Islamists often retreat into their dawa (missionary) activities, blurring the boundaries between their political and religious activism and projects. In general, Islamists have offered their audiences an empowering moral dream, a utopia that is grounded in both authenticity and modernity, the two key factors behind their horizontal spread across the Arab and Muslim world. This applies to a spectrum of Islamists from the Muslim Brotherhood and al-Qaida to the Islamic State (IS).

As political actors, Islamists have developed strategies to respond to their changing relationship with different regimes. Under pressure, they mutate rather than disappear. The mutation can produce good outcomes, or it can be violent. For example, both the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis transformed themselves into political parties (al-Nahda in Tunisia and the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi al-Nur in Egypt) that respect the democratic process including participating in elections and representative government. In Kuwait, Yemen, Morocco, Jordan and Bahrain, a mix of Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi political parties and societies have participated in the political process alongside other groups.

However, the mutation can also give rise to violent trends both at the domestic and global level. The rise of al-Qaida in the 1980s and later IS in 2014 attests to the sinister side of Islamism when it becomes violent. Repression in Libya, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia in the 1990s led to violent Islamist rebel groups such as al-Takfir wa al-Hijra (Excommunication and Exile) in Egypt and al-Jamaa al-Musalaha wa al-Muqatila (known as the Militant Islamic Group) in Libya challenging their regimes and precipitating serious threats to their security.[4] In Saudi

Arabia, local jihadis emerged at a critical moment when the regime was moving from accommodating Islamists to suppressing them. The changing geopolitical contexts of the 1980s saw international players such as the U.S. cooperate with regional aspiring hegemons such as Saudi Arabia who were pledged to defeat communism by deploying Islamism across the Muslim world. This also precipitated a global violent jihadi movement.

Unlike in other Arab states, including other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, the Saudi state-Islamist relationship is more complex because alone in the Arab world and the Gulf, Saudi Arabia was founded on Wahhabi religious nationalism, considered here as an early version of Islamism

In their relations with Islamism, regimes often have the upper hand. Consequently, they determine the constraints within which Islamists react and develop their discourse and practices, mutate into different groups or fragment.

Part II: Saudi state-Islamist relations

Unlike in other Arab states, including other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, the Saudi state-Islamist relationship is more complex because alone in the Arab world and the Gulf, Saudi Arabia was founded on Wahhabi religious nationalism, considered here as an early version of Islamism.[5] This Islamism was a politicized collective representation embedded in institutions, the purpose of which was to create a unified godly community. The Saudi state turned Wahhabiyya from an 18th century religious revivalist movement into a religious nationalist ideology serving as an umbrella to construct a homogenous nation out of fragmented, diverse, and plural Arabian society. As other Arab and GCC countries have not based their legitimacy on the basis of religious nationalism, and neither were their states created as a result of invoking a religious nationalist ideology, it has been easier for them to be more flexible on a whole range of urgent issues in the process of state building. With the exception of Saudi Arabia, other GCC countries do not promote a relationship with Islamists guided by religious nationalism. The sheikhs and emirs ruling the Gulf do not seek legitimacy from a Grand Mufti who presides over a Council of the Higher Ulama like the Saudis. Islam features in the constitutions of all Arab countries, but only in Saudi Arabia has Islam been turned into a religious nationalist project. This complicates state-Islamist relations.

Given the importance of historical Saudi-Wahhabi religious nationalism in state and nation building, the regime had to over-emphasize its Islamic credentials especially those that aim to create a homogeneous nation. Wahhabi theology provided both the rhetoric of homogeneity under the guise of a pure Islam, but at the same time it created new insurmountable divisions between the central Arabian Wahhabi religiosity, the Hijazi Sufi tradition, the Shia community,[6] the Ismailis and other less-well-known religious groups in Saudi Arabia. Wahhabiyya was meant to unify Arabia but in reality, it contributed to its religious and political fragmentation in ways that benefited the stability of the regime and delayed the crystallization of national political movements that cut across regions, ethnic groups, tribes and sects.

Wahhabiyya was meant to unify Arabia but in reality, it contributed to its religious and political fragmentation in ways that benefited the stability of the regime

The Islamists were an exception, as only they appealed to a cross section of society and helped create a common identity and destiny

after the demise of both Arab nationalism and leftist movements in both Saudi Arabia and the Arab world in general. The regime needed the Islamists as much as the Islamists needed the regime. They were both embedded in mutual support networks that benefited both. But this was not a constant feature of the relationship at all times. In the following section, I outline the shifts and the mutations in the relationship between the regime and the Islamists.

Cooperation (1960-1990)

The Saudi regime found in Islamism an important ideological tool to secure the regime from the threat of fashionable Arab leftists and nationalist ideologies that flourished in the region in the 1960s. Because of the connection between Wahhabi theology and Islamism, the latter was not initially seen as a threat. In fact, Islamism flourished in Saudi Arabia because the distinctions between its outlook and the dominant religious tradition of Wahhabism were blurred. Activist Islamists were initially indistinguishable from mainstream Wahhabi channels. In fact, Islamism flourished, as it was supported by the traditional official religious institutions and forums. For example, the careers and ideological outlook of both Juhaiman al-Otaibi and Muhammad al-Qahtani, the two rebels who sieged the Mecca Mosque in 1979 illustrate the intimate relationship between official Saudi Islam and Islamism.[7] The rebels formed a group, al-jamaa al muhtasiba (The Salafi Group That Commands Right and Forbids Wrong), that drew on the teachings of the Mufti of Saudi Arabia, Abd al-Aziz ibn Baz, who had praised their beliefs before they attacked the mosque.

The proximity between official religious scholars, state interests and Islamism resulted in three decades (1960-1990) of cooperation between the regime and Islamists in domestic and international politics. At the domestic level, Islamism was regarded as an antidote to revolutionary Arab movements, but internationally it helped Saudi Arabia to spread a pan-Islamic hegemony across the Muslim world and among Muslim minorities in the West. This proximity led to cooperation at the international level, culminating in the regime using Islamism as a tool in seeking Islamic legitimacy abroad and in Saudi foreign policy during the Cold War. For example, many Saudis participated in the Afghan jihad of the 1980s as preachers, combatants and donors.

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Repression since the Gulf War (1990)

The repression of Islamists in Saudi resulted from the Islamist rejection of the government's invitation of foreign troops to defend the kingdom during the Gulf War immediately after Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in August 1990. Islamists voiced unprecedented criticism of this government policy, and engaged in mobilization across various Saudi regions. Many Islamist activists, known as Sahwa (awakening) Islamists were put in jail, while others fled the country to Western capitals where they found asylum. Many others joined Osama Bin Laden in exile in Afghanistan and Sudan. The critical moment came after 9/11 and the involvement of Saudis in the attack on New York. The U.S. put pressure on the regime to curb the influence of preachers, Islamist activists and many other groups (known as takfiris) that criticized the West, issued excommunication fatwas against both Muslims and non-Muslims, and called for global jihad against the "far enemy", i.e., the U.S. and Western governments who supported Arab dictators. Those were also the same Islamists who prioritized targeting the near enemy, namely

local regimes including the Saudi regime itself.

After the 2001 U.S. war in Afghanistan and the dispersal of Bin Laden's al-Qaida followers, Saudi Arabia witnessed its worst episode of domestic terrorism between 2003–2008. This led to severe repression under the pretext of American President George W. Bush's War on Terror, which the Saudi regime was part of. Excessive repression eventually gave rise to the fragmentation of the Saudi Islamist scene and the strengthening of the fringe radical Islamist movement. Since then, the regime has remained on alert as the current wave of Islamic State terrorism has begun creeping into the country.[8]

The Saudi leadership resorted to sectarianism not only as a counter-revolutionary tactic in Bahrain and its Eastern province where it faced a Shia uprising, but also to contain Iran's expansion

The Arab uprisings in 2011

The post-Arab uprising period is critical in state-Islamist relations in Saudi Arabia. The key policy in this phase centered on repression, with long and short term detentions, executions, and criminalization under anti-terrorism laws becoming an entrenched regime strategy. In addition to direct repression, the regime showed less tolerance towards the largest Islamist trend in Saudi Arabia, namely the Sahwis (Salafi-Ikhwanis) who strongly criticised Saudi policy in Egypt after the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Saudi diplomatic and financial contribution to the ousting of elected Muslim Brotherhood Egyptian President Muhammad Morsi and the support for General Abd al-Fatah Sisi were heavily criticized in an Islamist petition and on social media during King Abdullah's reign. Many Saudi Islamists used social media and hashtags such as al-malik la yomathilani (the King does not represent me) to voice dissent over the general Saudi counter-revolutionary strategy in Egypt and Tunisia, two countries in which Islamists had come to power through elections.

Saudi inability to contain Iran, especially during the last years of King Abdullah's reign, led to an image of Saudi Arabia as weak, unable to deal with the Iranian challenge, and abandoned by the U.S. following the U.S.-Iran nuclear deal that then-president Barack Obama initiated behind Saudi back. The Saudi leadership resorted to sectarianism not only as a counter-revolutionary tactic in Bahrain and its Eastern province where it faced a Shia uprising, but also to contain Iran's expansion. The regime appeased the Islamists, who were critical of Saudi impotence against a rival Shia power that quickly dominated politics in Arab capitals such as Beirut, Damascus, Baghdad and Sanaa. Sectarianism was a counter-revolutionary tactic used by the Saudi regime to show its commitment to Sunni identity and the protection of Muslims worldwide against the Iranian menace. Since he became king in 2015, King Salman appeased the Islamists by launching a war in Yemen in March 2015 against the Zaydi Houthis, who are reportedly supported by Iran. The king's strategy of showing decisiveness – his Yemen war came to be knows as Decisive Storm – worked to silence Islamist dissent across the Islamism spectrum from loyal Salafis to Sahwi Islamists.

There is clear ideological affinity between the Saudi regime and IS, just as there was previously with al-Qaida. The regime and these violent groups share a common enemy represented in Iran and Shia militias from Baghdad to Beirut

This new decisiveness was very important, especially after five years of Saudi failure in Syria, which many Saudi Islamists saw

through the prism of sectarian politics. Islamists considered the uprising in Syria as a Sunni revolt against the infidel Alawite regime of Bashar al-Assad and his Iranian backers. Although a majority in Syria, Sunnis simply reminded many Saudi Islamists of the plight of Sunnis in Iraq after it had become a "Shia"-run state following the 2003 U.S. invasion. Saudi Islamists held their regime partially responsible for the plight of Iraqi Sunnis and hoped that the regime would redeem itself by supporting Syrian rebels, which it did, but so far without the prospect of a clear and swift victory.

The rise of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq complicates Saudi-Islamist relations even more. In the summer of 2014 after self-proclaimed Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the establishment of the Caliphate from Mosul, Saudi Arabia reluctantly joined the U.S. led international alliance against IS and participated in the symbolic bombing of IS targets, without such participation becoming mainstream news in the Saudi public sphere. Then Deputy Crown Prince and Minister of Defence Muhammad Bin Salman led the campaign against the Houthis in Yemen while then-Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Naif remained well-established in his position as the defeater of al-Qaida on the Arabian Peninsula. But defeating IS remained coined in vague terminology as part of fighting terrorism in general. Muhammad Bin Naif thrived on the memory of his early success against al-Qaida in 2003–2008; but even this success did not prevent his abrupt removal from office in July 2017, when King Salman appointed his own son Muhammad as crown prince and completely sidelined ibn Naif.

Although the Saudis announced that they would join international coalition against IS, not many Saudis are aware of their government's airstrikes, which died down immediately after they had started. Saudis have become more enthusiastic about airstrikes in Yemen, which are heavily reported in the official and social media. Then IS terrorism came to Saudi soil – so far more than 15 attacks have taken place – but this wave of terrorism was unlike that of 2003–2008. Although some Saudi security forces were targeted in 2015, the terrorism now is sectarian, targeting mainly the Shia not only in Saudi Arabia but also in the Gulf (for example in Kuwait). Just before the airstrikes in Yemen in March 2015, Saudi Arabia may have struck a deal with al-Qaida to liberate its diplomats kidnapped in Yemen several months before the war. It seems that Saudi Arabia had successfully established networks within al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula and Yemen that led to freeing the kidnapped Saudi diplomat. In Yemen, reports about how al-Qaida and IS have expanded further in areas so far "liberated" by Saudi and Emirati forces in Aden and the south in general began to surface.[9] It is clear that both the regime and the terrorists consider the Shia and Iran as enemies.

There is clear ideological affinity between the Saudi regime and IS, just as there was previously with al-Qaida.[10] The regime and these violent groups share a common enemy represented in Iran and Shia militias from Baghdad to Beirut. But most importantly, they both seem to rely on Wahhabi religious treatises to mobilize their supporters. This further complicates Saudi efforts to fight IS, which enjoys some popularity in Saudi Arabia itself. Saudis constitute the second-largest cohort of foreign fighters after Tunisians in Syria.

The regime launched a new pan-Islamic anti-terrorism coalition in December 2015 and called upon several Sunni countries to join it. So far the objectives of this coalition are vague and certainly no obvious military success has resulted for the regime, which has reached out to countries like Indonesia

and Malaysia. With the exception of spectacular military exercises like that held on Saudi soil with the participation of several Muslim countries in March 2016 and dubbed Northern Thunder, there is no sign that such joint military efforts are actually intended to fight IS or enhance Saudi military capabilities. Saudi Arabia seems to be seeking Islamic international support that is more directed towards preserving authoritarian rule across the Muslim world, stifling opposition to its hegemony domestically and globally rather than eliminating IS.

The rise of IS has definitely absorbed Saudi jihadi effervescence at a critical moment in the region. This is very much like al-Qaida did in the 1990s when repression at home became unbearable for Saudi Islamists, who had to live with several contradictions. Islamists have yet to resolve the contradiction between jihad at home and jihad abroad. In the first instance, a jihadi can face execution, while jihad abroad is often tolerated by the government if not encouraged at certain times. We only need to remember the Afghan jihad and how the regime encouraged its youth to join it.

With the rule of the new king, Salman, state-Islamist relations have turned into outright repression. The current Crown Prince, Muhammad ibn Salman, has turned the tables in alliance with the United Arab Emirates and ended the semblance of peace between the state and the Islamists. On September 10, 2017, the final blow came when the regime arrested several Islamists and others, the most famous and popular of whom being veteran sheikhs Salman al-Awdah and Awadh al Qarni. The regime carried out these abrupt detentions as a response perhaps to the brewing crisis with Qatar. The Saudi regime accuses Qatar of interfering in its domestic affairs through the promotion of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists considered by Saudi Arabia as terrorist organizations. The recent arrests reflect the nervousness of the Saudi regime, especially after all powers became concentrated in the hands of King Salman and his son. This recent wave of repression is matched only by that which had occurred in the 1990s, when many Saudi Islamists criticized the regime for inviting foreign troops to defend the country against the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Today, it is very difficult to see how the repression can be reversed in the context of the tense situation in Saudi Arabia and the erratic domestic and foreign policy of the crown prince.

Despite forecasts that Islamism has now been eclipsed, the ideology will remain a relevant intellectual, moral, religious and political trend, with fragments posing serious security challenges and others coexisting with secular political forces

Conclusion

Like other Arab regimes, Saudi Arabia follows the same repetitive patterns that have become so obvious in state-Islamist relations. A number of correlations emerge at times of repression:

1- Islamists enhance their global outreach, seeking solidarity among Muslims abroad.

2- Islamists may fragment into splinter radical movements privileging military struggle over preaching, elections, and charitable work. They may also mutate and develop religious and political justifications for participating in regimes they do not particularly respect or accept.

3- Islamists may seek hijra – internal or external migration – to either alternative Muslim territories (a state, emirate, caliphate) or to non-Muslim countries, for example the West.

4-Islamists may also seek metaphorical internal migration, that is, living in their own countries as ghuraba, strangers psychologically detached from their own society.

Regime strategies deployed vis a vis Islamists, for example appeasement and co-optation, often result in them becoming part of the political process in their country as they seek to occupy acceptable and well-managed spaces in parliaments, governments, and the public sphere in general. In countries where there are no elections or any kind of rudimentary political representation, appeased Islamists are allowed to dominate and monopolize certain public spheres, for example the education system, the judiciary, or even the regime itself may create spaces for them such as special media channels, preaching spaces and dawa (missionary) activities at home and abroad. This has been a feature of Saudi-Islamist relations at times of cooperation.

Despite forecasts that Islamism has now been eclipsed, the ideology will remain a relevant intellectual, moral, religious and political trend, with fragments posing serious security challenges and others coexisting with secular political forces. This situation will not change until there is a paradigm shift, an alternative political discourse that allows the youth to dream alternative dreams to those designed by autocratic governments. Unfortunately, the neo-liberal focus on individual improvement, personal initiative, start-up culture, and excessive consumption will not resolve the ancient struggle of peoples to find a comfortable place between individualism and collectivism. The Islamists have successfully combined in their rhetoric the two problematic aspects of human life, namely the duality between the person and his community. The struggle of Islamists to gain power either by peaceful means or by coercion will continue as long as there are causes believed to be worth dying for in the Arab world, including Saudi Arabia and beyond.

However, this reconciliation is untenable in the long term as two totalitarian systems (regimes and Islamists) clash, collide and occasionally come together to enforce authoritarianism in its political, social, moral, religious, and gender dimensions

It is possible to initiate reconciliation between regimes and Islamists not only in Saudi Arabia but also across the Arab region when a serious rift occurs, for example in Egypt since 2013. However, this reconciliation is untenable in the long term as two totalitarian systems (regimes and Islamists) clash, collide and occasionally come together to enforce authoritarianism in its political, social, moral, religious, and gender dimensions. It is possible that two totalitarian regimes may coexist and work together, but this usually comes at the expense of political liberties and human and civil rights. The only way forward is an Arab democratic open sphere that allows Islamists and others to compete and cooperate, while leaving societies to choose those who best serve their interests. Both repression and cooperation are counter-productive in an authoritarian context like the one dominant in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere.

Endnotes

1- See Meijir 2009; Roy 2010
2- Pankhurst 2016,
3- Tripp 2013; Mervin & Mouline 2017.
4- Filiue 2015.
5- Al-Rasheed 2010; 2007.
6- Matthiesen 2015.
7- Hegghammer and Lacroix 2007.
8- McCants 2015.
9- See http://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/yemen-aqap/ 8 April 2016.
10- Al-Rasheed 2014; Al-Rasheed 2015.

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ABOUT ALSHARQ FORUM

The Sharq Forum is an independent international network whose mission is to undertake impartial research and develop long-term strategies to ensure the political development, social justice and economic prosperity of the people of Al-Sharq. The Forum does this through promoting the ideals of democratic participation, an informed citizenry, multi-stakeholder dialogue, social justice, and public-spirited research.

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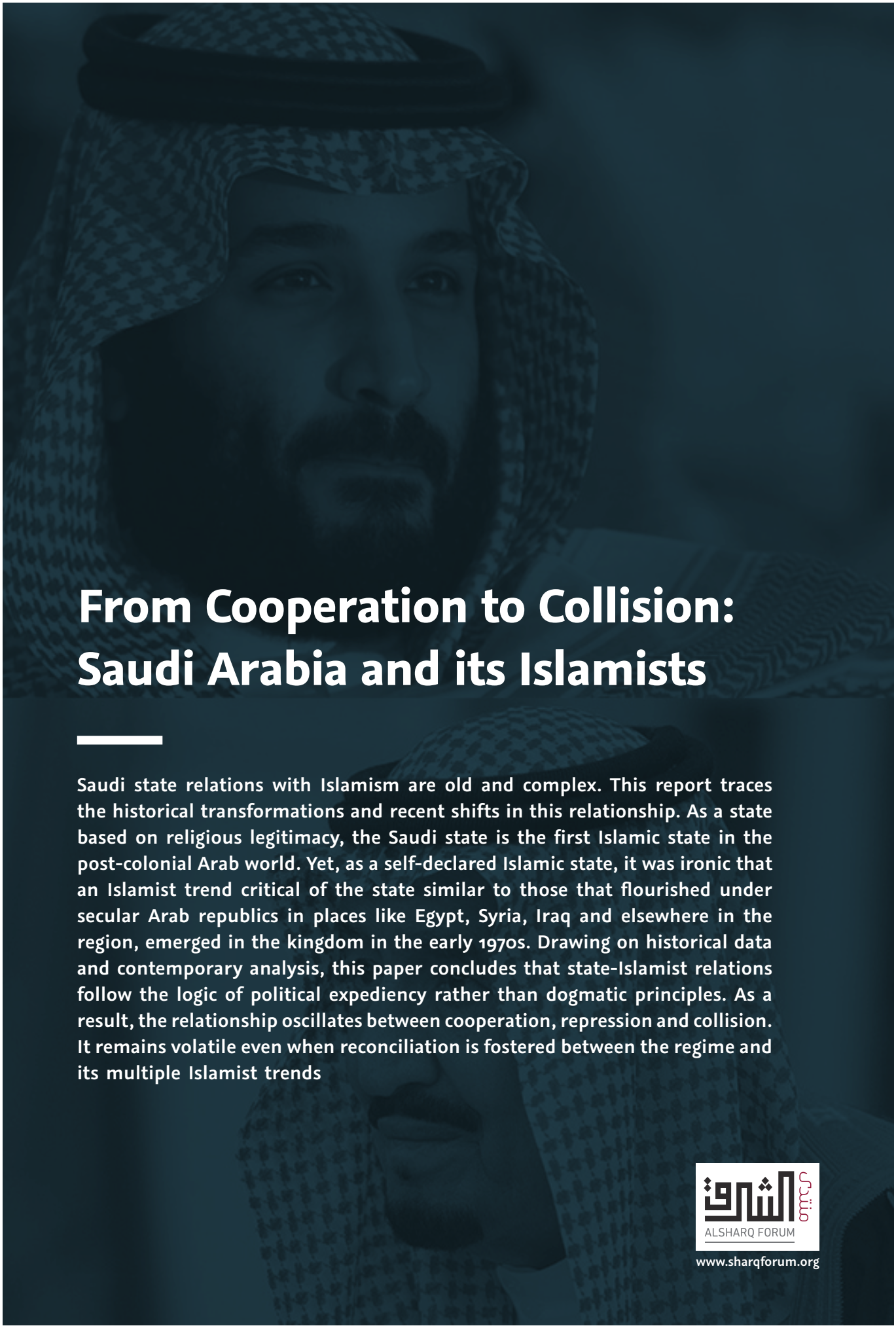

From Cooperation to Collision: Saudi Arabia and its Islamists

Saudi state relations with Islamism are old and complex. This report traces the historical transformations and recent shifts in this relationship. As a state based on religious legitimacy, the Saudi state is the first Islamic state in the post-colonial Arab world. Yet, as a self-declared Islamic state, it was ironic that an Islamist trend critical of the state similar to those that flourished under secular Arab republics in places like Egypt, Syria, Iraq and elsewhere in the region, emerged in the kingdom in the early 1970s. Drawing on historical data and contemporary analysis, this paper concludes that state-Islamist relations follow the logic of political expediency rather than dogmatic principles. As a result, the relationship oscillates between cooperation, repression and collision. It remains volatile even when reconciliation is fostered between the regime and its multiple Islamist trends

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