Religious Authorities in Wahhabi States

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Wahhabism is a central element of debates on Islam and religious extremism, especially in educational institutions in the Arabian Peninsula. The structures linked to Wahhabism, one of the most conservative strands of Islam, are perhaps the most opaque in the Middle East, leading to considerable misconceptions about this religious ideology and the figures linked to it. In Saudi Arabia, the practice of Wahhabism is also undergoing significant changes under the leadership of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman. While traditionally the strictures of Wahhabism have influenced everyday life in the kingdom and have even been enforced by a religious police force, this arrangement appears to be changing, with restrictions on gender segregation and entertainment recently having been partially lifted and with the institutionalized clergy and police increasingly separate from the mechanisms of central political power.

In Saudi Arabia, the role of religion in public life has generally remained static during this period, with the political leadership largely separate from religious authorities. This brief evaluates whether the Wahhabi countries of Saudi Arabia and Qatar are qualitatively different in terms of which religious authorities are followed, how religious affairs are managed by the state, and what the implications of such differences are.

Wahhabism is linked to Salafism in its emphasis on returning to the original sources of Islam and the Hanbali school of Islamic jurisprudence. Unlike Salafism, however, Wahhabism has its origins in the work of eighteenth-century theologian Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab who preached in the Najd region of Saudi Arabia and forged a close relationship with the Saudi political leadership, the al-Saud family. This relationship underlies the institutionalization of religious authorities in the form of Wahhabi scholars who are state employees in Saudi Arabia. Although Qatar is also officially a Wahhabi state, the religious sphere is not similarly bureaucratized, with no institutionalized form of state religious authority in the form of a grand mufti or bureaucratized state ulama (religious scholars). In fact, most religious authorities in the country are not Qatari, and so an indigenous and state-linked ulama has not emerged as it has in Saudi Arabia.

Our regionwide survey mapping the religious landscape in the Middle East offers key insights on the influence of Wahhabism—a previous report discussed the results in detail for Saudi Arabia and Qatar (https://bit.ly/2U61ptU). The survey was part of a larger Baker Institute study on religious authority in the Middle East (https://bit.ly/2WfoqXT). In examining the survey results from Qatar and Saudi Arabia, I find that in both countries religious figures linked to the state, such as figures of the bureaucratized ulama in Saudi Arabia and figures linked to the Ministry of Awqaf in Qatar, are more likely to be trusted. The three most trusted scholars in Saudi Arabia, among a nearly equal number of nationals and non-nationals, were all Saudis from the Council of Supreme Scholars (Shaykh Saad bin Nasser al-Shethri, Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdulaziz bin Abdullah al–Sheikh, and Sheikh Saleh Al–Sheikh), which is appointed by the king and is the only body permitted to grant religious rulings in that state.

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Meanwhile in a Qatari sample that was overwhelmingly expatriate, Wahhabi Shaykh Anwar al-Badawi, who is a Qatari Islamic judge and head of Qatari Islamic Judges, was ranked most trusted, followed by another Qatari Wahhabi scholar, Shaykh Abdullah bin Zayd al-Mahmud, who had a major role in putting together the country’s judicial system and is based at the government–funded Islamic Cultural Center in Doha. Interestingly, Tariq Ramadan, the Europe–based scholar and grandson of Hasan al–Banna, founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, ranked third in terms of trusted religious authority in Qatar. There is more variety, then, in which religious authorities are followed in Qatar, reflecting the fact that the state is less directly involved in religious life compared to Saudi Arabia. While both states house considerable expatriate populations (87 percent in Qatar and 27 percent in Saudi Arabia), citizens and non–nationals have similar opinions about which religious authorities they trust, at least in the Saudi case where we had a nearly even number of each group of respondents.

**POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

My findings about the power of state–linked religious authorities lead to four core recommendations for policymakers. First, when it comes to influencing messaging on citizen and non–citizen populations in the Gulf, it is important to engage with state religious authorities since they hold considerable sway in the religious sector and in society more broadly. It is also essential to understand their limitations, since their authority, though significant, is not absolute. Indeed, it is for that reason that independent Islamist movements have managed to emerge even within Saudi Arabia, as evidenced most clearly by the rise of the Sahwa movement in the 1990s and more recently in 2011 when independent clerics linked to that movement, including Shaykh Salman al–Odah, collectively sent a petition to the Saudi leadership requesting reform.³ This move, among others, led to the release of a fatwa, or official religious ruling, from the Supreme Council against demonstrations.⁴ Further, state–linked authorities who were once considered widely influential across borders no longer wield the influence they once did, which is most clearly evidenced by the overwhelmingly negative endorsement effect we saw for the Grand Imam of Al–Azhar. As a result, engagement with local ministries of awqaf is perhaps the most important means of ensuring that messaging about religion is diffused in a manner that resonates with local populations of both expatriates and citizens. The role of ministries is critical given the finding that state–linked religious authorities remain important in influencing religious belief and practice.

Second, economic incentives are not likely to effect social and political change in the wealthy countries of the Arabian Peninsula. Because governments of these states benefit from hydrocarbon wealth, they are able to provide handsomely for their citizenry, granting them free education and health care, as well as high–paying public sector jobs. As a result, groups like the Muslim Brotherhood that provide materially for their followers do not have an advantage over other types of groups as they do in places like Egypt and Jordan, where governments provide less for their citizens. Indeed, among Saudi nationals, 12.9 percent reported that they had received assistance from the government, compared to 4.5 percent from the Muslim Brotherhood, 2.9 percent from Salafis, and 1.8 percent from Sufis. Results were similar for non–nationals, even though they have less access to state resources: 8.2 percent had received assistance from the government, compared to 5.4 percent from the Muslim Brotherhood, 4 percent from Salafis, and 1.5 percent from Sufi groups. In Qatar, only 8 percent had sought aid from a government religious agency, followed by 5.7 percent from the Muslim Brotherhood, and 3 percent from Salafis, again demonstrating that the government is the primary dispenser of aid to both nationals and expatriates. As expected, there is overall little need or at least little use made of religious groups for material support. For religious organizations
to hold influence, they must hold ideological appeal or provide a social function since they cannot attract followers with material disbursements greater than those provided by the rentier governments of the Gulf.

Third, expatriates follow and are influenced by local religious authorities to a larger extent than we may realize, which needs to be taken into account in messaging to these countries. The most trusted religious authorities in both countries were state-affiliated, reflecting either their appeal or the ubiquity of state-sanctioned religious messaging. It is also quite interesting how the influence of state-affiliated Wahhabi religious leaders undermines the sway that mainstream Islamist leaders hold elsewhere in the region. For example, Islamists Rachid Ghannouchi of the Tunisian Ennahdha party and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan had the strongest negative endorsement effects among both nationals and expatriate populations in Saudi Arabia, suggesting that political Islam of the strand linked to the Muslim Brotherhood is unfavorable. In Qatar, the strongest negative endorsement effect was for Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmed El Tayeb, followed by Recep Tayyip Erdogan. These results demonstrate the extent to which expatriates also appear to be swayed by local religious authorities and the degree to which Islamist leaders or leaders of Islamic authorities like Al-Azhar do not hold influence across borders, contrary to my initial expectations.

On a related note, this strong negative endorsement effect of religious leaders linked to the Muslim Brotherhood or more broadly to mainstream Islamist ideas reflects some Gulf governments’ efforts to depoliticize Islam in a way that enables them to strengthen their control over local populations for whom Brotherhood-linked figures once held appeal. This dynamic could lead to greater popularity of Salafi or Wahhabi figures instead, or to a general weakening in terms of appeal of figures linked to politically engaged Muslim groups.

Fourth, Wahhabism shows variation based on sociopolitical environment, underscoring the flexibility of Wahhabism despite the rigidity its proponents claim. As a result, a single strategy to engage with Wahhabism across different countries will likely be unsuccessful, even in nations that appear similar at first glance like Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Neither state allows opportunities for meaningful political reform, yet Saudi Arabia institutionalizes the religious sphere and more stringently enforces the strictures of Wahhabism. By contrast, Qatar has a largely foreign class of ulama and does not enforce the social tenets of Wahhabism. Thus, political and social context matter despite similarities in religious practice or doctrine.

**IMPLICATIONS**

The divergent religious structures and religious authorities in the two Wahhabi states of Qatar and Saudi Arabia reveal a number of common threads in both countries, such as the enduring strength of state–linked religious figures, the limits of support for Islamist political and religious leaders, and the extent to which Muslim expatriates appear to reflect their local religious environments. Saudi Arabia is unique in terms of the extent to which the religious sector is bureaucratized, which leaves less space for independent religious activity or support for non–state religious actors. The clear co-optation of the religious sphere, illustrated by the government’s employment of clergy, has neutralized the ability of the religious sphere to challenge the state on religious practice. This arrangement thus ties a specific religious ideology to the state and its legitimacy. Nonetheless, despite the fact that preachers have traditionally been employees of the state with exclusive power to release religious rulings, independent clerics like Salman al-Odah and independent movements like Sahwa have emerged.

Since Mohammad bin Salman rose to power, however, both state–linked and independent clerics have lost power: the religious police no longer has the power to make arrests; social functions like concerts and cinema openings are occurring despite the contestation of some members of the state ulama; and several independent clerics and activists were imprisoned in

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In a famed interview with The Atlantic in April 2018, Mohammad bin Salman went so far as to question the existence of Wahhabism itself: “No one can define Wahhabism. There is no Wahhabism. We don’t believe we have Wahhabism.” Clearly, a reconfiguration is under way in Saudi Arabia in terms of the relationship between the state and religious authorities, with the central political leadership eager to demonstrate its dominance over the religious sphere. Meanwhile in Qatar, notwithstanding efforts to educate an indigenous clergy, the relationship between the state and religion remains largely unchanged. Qatar did reassert its place as a Wahhabi state by naming its state mosque Shaykh Mohammad ibn Abdul Wahhab in 2017—a move that provoked Saudi anger and claims that the Qatari ruling family is not linked to Wahhab himself, demonstrating the extent to which links to Wahhab remain an important part of establishing religious legitimacy for these states.

The Arab world’s two Wahhabi states are not exceptional because of the strict form of Islam embraced in these contexts; rather, the results of our survey demonstrate the extent to which political and social context matters in terms of religious attitudes. Given the results of this survey, I therefore stress the importance of engagement with official religious authorities and the inclusion of expatriate populations in discussions about religious trends in the Wahhabi states of Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

ENDNOTES

1. The Hanbali School of jurisprudence is the smallest and strictest of the four traditional schools of Sunni jurisprudence, deriving sharia primarily from the Quran and hadiths and seen as textualist in its interpretation.