Courtney Freer, Ph.D.
“Mapping Religious Authority in Wahhabi States: An Examination of Qatar and Saudi Arabia”

This report is part of a two-year project on religious authority in the Middle East. The study is generously supported by a grant from the Henry Luce Foundation.
Introduction

When it comes to understanding Islamic authority in the Middle East, Wahhabi structures in the Gulf, traditionally considered to be the strictest in the world and in some respects the most politicized, perhaps also remain the most opaque. In this report, I assess which religious authorities have the most influence in the world's only two Wahhabi states, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. In particular, I have three hypotheses. First, Saudi religious figures linked to the state establishment—because they are government employees—will receive broader support among citizen populations than other figures in that country, while state alignment will be less consequential in Qatar. Second, expatriate and citizen populations will have different opinions about religious figures, with expatriates tending to support or follow religious figures from their home countries rather than their countries of residence. Third, the status of Qatar and Saudi Arabia as wealthy rentier states renders the effects of income levels on opinions about religion and religious authority irrelevant. In particular, religious organizations in these countries do not gain followers by providing material disbursements as they do in other states in the Middle East, and so the income levels of respondents will not correspond with their support for specific religious authorities.

In this paper, I examine the differences and similarities between the two Wahhabi states when it comes to which religious authorities are followed. Studying these two states and examining which religious figures are trusted and shape local opinion will allow us to better understand the religious landscapes in states that are otherwise often seen as closed. This research, based on survey data collected in December 2017—the first of its kind to be collected in Qatar and Saudi Arabia—will also allow us to make policy recommendations to aid in countering violent extremism throughout the Middle East.

What is Wahhabism?

As an ideology, Wahhabism is linked to Salafism in its emphasis on returning to the original sources of Islam and the Hanbali school of Islamic jurisprudence. Wahhabism is unique, however, in its heavy reliance on 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. Beginning in 1744, the al-Saud ruling family had an institutionalized relationship with the descendants of Abd al-Wahhab (the al-Sheikh or ash-Shaikh family), who still provide many of the country’s official religious leaders today. The Council of Senior Scholars, established by royal decree in 1972 under King Faisal, is supplied by the king and is the only entity that can produce official religious rulings, or fatwas, within the kingdom. As of 2009, the council includes clerics from the Hanbali, Shafii, and Maliki schools of Islamic jurisprudence. It previously included only the Hanbali school, which is commonly regarded as the strictest in terms of interpretation and is the dominant school in both Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

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.
Wahhabism requires that “Muslims must have a ruler in order to provide unity, carry out religious duties, enforce Islamic law, and wage jihad. As long as the ruler performs these roles and does not command believers to violate sharia (Islamic law), subjects owe him obedience.”

The ruler relies on the advice of clerics to uphold sharia, leading to a division of labor whereby Al Saud ensures the security and welfare of the population and upholds a moral public order defined by Islamic principles. The ulama counsel the rulers on the details of Islamic principles, and if they see the rulers deviating from or violating those principles, they offer private advice; they are not to denounce rulers in public, for to do so could cause disorder and division.

This arrangement is very straightforward in the Saudi case, since that country features an institutionalized Wahhabi clergy employed by the state. Qatar, however, provides a different model of a Wahhabi state, since it lacks a state-linked or even institutionalized religious clergy. In fact, Qatar’s clerical staff is largely comprised of non-Qatars, meaning that they are reliant on the state not only for employment but also to remain in the country. These non-Qatars can potentially bring in different religious traditions and influences to the state. As Baskan and Wright correctly point out, this critical difference in the composition of clergy has granted Qatari society, by and large, a more secular character than that of Saudi Arabia: no dress code is enforced; businesses do not close for prayer time; gender segregation is not strictly enforced; and alcohol is readily available in five-star hotels and through a central state-run liquor store.

Nonetheless, government authorities retain considerable power in religious affairs in both states, particularly through Ministries of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs. On the whole, though, Qatar’s “historical reliance on non-nationals for religious guidance has allowed for a great deal more autonomy on behalf of the government, and ruling tribe in particular, in regard to state-religion relations.” Indeed, the role of the ulama, like the role of Islamists outside of the religious establishment, “is relegated to one of personal contacts or informal influence,” whereas involvement of the Saudi clergy in state decision-making is very much institutionalized. Tellingly, the best known (though not most influential, as shown below) religious authority in Qatar is Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who was born in Egypt but naturalized in Qatar, has never held a government position, but instead served as Dean of the College of Sharia and Islamic Studies at Qatar University and hosted television programs on Al Jazeera. When it comes to institutionalization, then, Qatar differs considerably from the Saudi case; simply because members of the clergy are not part of an institutionalized entity, however, does not mean they lack authority or influence, as evidenced by the prominence of al-Qaradawi, who is widely considered a Muslim Brotherhood ideologue and definitively not part of any Wahhabi clergy.

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5 Baskan and Wright, “Seeds of Change,” 100.
Both Qatar and Saudi Arabia, have the unique advantage of being able to fund a variety of religious programs primarily through Ministries of Awqaf and Religious Affairs. This provides another avenue beyond ministerial control to ensure that the state-approved version of Islam is being propagated. This dynamic does not suggest, however, that other sources of religious authority do not exist, as demonstrated by the survey data in this project. Indeed, religious leaders from outside of the Gulf have managed to garner considerable following in both states, despite traditional Wahhabi hesitance to accept other interpretations of Islam.

As a result of different levels of religious institutionalization, cases of conflict between the clergy and the government have tended to be much more public in Qatar than in Saudi Arabia. Commins explains of the ulama in the Saudi case: “Broadly speaking, their fatwas fall into two categories. They cling to well-established doctrine on ritual practices, gender segregation, and public morality but bend to accommodate change on mundane issues such as medicine and media.”8 In the Qatari case, lacking a unified ulama means that the government does not always need to communicate a consistent religious message, leading to rather public missteps, like the controversial construction of a statue of Zinedine Zidane and the Damien Hirst sculptures of egg fertilization, both of which were removed or covered following social media campaigns and small public protests.

Despite differences in the organization of the religious establishment, both countries notably have closed political systems, which makes it more difficult to determine public opinions about religion and religious authorities since participatory politics and free media are limited, in addition to making it near impossible for independent Islamist groups to form.

The Survey

In order to examine the nature of religious authority and attitudes toward religious and religiously oriented leaders in the Middle East, the author and a team of researchers worked with the global polling firm YouGov to conduct an online public opinion survey in 12 countries across the region in December 2017. As an online survey, the YouGov sample is not representative at the national level: the respondents are disproportionately male, educated, and urban. However, the survey is representative in regard to various indicators of religiosity, which is one of the most important characteristics in our study of religious authority, in addition to indicators such as employment and marital status. For a discussion of the demographics of the survey sample and the advantages and disadvantages associated with this sample, see the Survey Appendix (http://bit.ly/2TNDpP). This report presents the findings from the survey data collected from Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which included 2,010 respondents in Saudi Arabia and 245 respondents in Qatar.

To this end, several questions about general political attitudes were asked, with respondents ranking them on a 1 to 5 scale ranging from disagree strongly to strongly agree; the same scale was used with a variety of religious authorities to discern the extent of popular support they enjoyed. In Saudi Arabia, 1,008 of the respondents were nationals and 1,002 non-

8 Commins, Islam in Saudi Arabia, 47.
nationals. Among non-nationals, 46 percent were Arab expatriates, meaning that most survey respondents were either Saudi or from another Arab country, and 99.5 percent were Muslim. Of this sample, 87 percent self-identified as Sunni, compared to 6 percent Shiite, 1 percent Salafi, and the remainder listed as other. Sixty percent of Saudi respondents were male, and 79 percent held at least a university degree, so the survey was slightly skewed toward well-educated men, over half of whom lived in Saudi Arabia’s largest cities (32 percent in Riyadh and 22 percent in Jeddah). This survey was also very heavily skewed toward the Sunni population (the Shiite population in Saudi Arabia is estimated to comprise between 15 and 20 percent of the total population). Further, 10.5 percent of the respondents were unemployed, despite the relatively high level of education among all respondents, reflecting the lingering systemic economic issues inside the kingdom.

In terms of their general opinions on politics and religion, 32 percent of respondents in Saudi Arabia agreed that democracy was “a better system of government than any of its alternatives,” compared to 11 percent who disagreed. This result is not terribly surprising, yet it is a useful metric since so little survey work has been done in Saudi Arabia. Support for the implementation of sharia was far more widespread than was support for democracy as a form of government; 64 percent of respondents agreed that they supported the implementation of sharia, versus 3 percent opposed to it. Others responded neutrally (13 percent) or marked that they did not know (20 percent). Despite support for the implementation of sharia, only 42 percent of respondents opined that religion should have a moderate to major influence in politics, versus 15 percent who said it should have minor to no influence. Support for the implementation of sharia and generally for religious influence in politics did not, however, correspond to support for violence. This is an important finding that challenges the link between religiosity and violence: 66 percent of respondents said violence was never or almost never justified, versus 9 percent who say it is occasionally, often, or always justified and 25 percent who marked that they did not know.

Qatar had far fewer respondents (n=245), and only seven were Qatari, while 85 percent were Arab expatriates. Within this sample, 90 percent self-identified as Sunni, compared to 2 percent Shiite, 1 percent Salafi, and the remainder other. The Qatari sample, like the Saudi, was skewed toward well-educated men in the city, as 68 percent of respondents were male, 82 percent at least college educated, and 73 percent resided in Doha; only 5 percent listed themselves as unemployed.

As far as political attitudes are concerned, a considerably larger percentage appeared to support democracy than in Saudi Arabia: 54 percent said they agreed that democracy is “a better system of government than any of the alternatives,” with only 9.5 percent disagreeing with that statement. Around the same proportion was in favor of the implementation of sharia: 47 percent supported sharia implementation, versus 4 percent opposed. In terms of those who supported religious leaders influencing political matters, 43 percent agreed on moderate to high religious influence, almost an identical percentage as in the Saudi sample. Furthermore, 24 percent responded that religious figures should have little to no influence in politics, 15 percent did not know, and 18 percent responded neutrally. Political violence was similarly rejected in the Qatari sample, with 80 percent
responding that violence is never or almost never justified, versus 5 percent who said that it was occasionally, often, or always justified.

**Major Religious Figures in Saudi Arabia**

In Saudi Arabia, the top three most trusted religious leaders identified in the survey were from the official religious establishment. Wahhabi cleric Shaykh Saad bin Nasser al-Shethri, who is a member of the Council of Senior Scholars, ranked as the most trusted religious leader in the survey. The second and third were two other Wahhabi figures from this council, Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdulaziz bin Abdullah al-Sheikh and Sheikh Saleh bin Abdulaziz ash-Shaikh, respectively. Surprisingly, the results were the same among both expatriate and Saudi respondents, who were asked the same set of questions, and none of the most influential leaders came from outside of Saudi Arabia, despite the fact that several non-Saudi religious leaders were included in the list of influential religious authorities.

Saad bin Nasser al-Shethri, who received the highest scores for trust, was removed from the Council of Senior Scholars in 2009, although he currently serves as advisor to the Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman’s court. Al-Shethri’s removal stemmed from his failure to support co-education at the King Abdullah University for Science and Technology, yet Mohammad bin Salman restored him to his position in 2015 after he became outspoken against political violence and particularly ISIS.9 Perhaps expectedly, al-Shethri has hewed more closely to the state line in recent years, remaining very outspoken against ISIS, calling it “atheist” and “more infidel than Jews and Christians.”10

Sheikh Abdulaziz bin Abdullah al-Sheikh, who received the second highest score on trust, is technically the highest ranking religious authority in Saudi Arabia, serving as head of the Permanent Committee for Islamic Research and Issuing Fatwas. He was appointed to this position in 1999, succeeding Sheikh Abd al-Aziz Ibn Baz. Sheikh al-Sheikh, perhaps unsurprisingly, conforms closely to the state’s line, taking on explicit political positions through his condemnation of the Houthis in Yemen as “corrupt tyrants,”11 his declaration that Iranians are not Muslims,12 and his criticism of Qatar.13 Perhaps more controversially, al-Sheikh famously declared in 2012 that “all churches in the Arabian Peninsula must be

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destroyed,” leading to backlash from Christian religious leaders. In the same year, al-Sheikh issued a fatwa allowing ten-year-old girls to marry.14

Despite these conservative social stances, al-Sheikh has also been instrumental in condemning violent jihadist groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda, stating that they “are not in any way part of Islam, but are enemy number one of Islam, and Muslims are their first victims.”15

The Minister of Islamic Affairs, Dawah, and Guidance, Sheikh Saleh bin Abdulaziz ash-Shaikh, is another unsurprising source of religious inspiration and guidance, especially for Saudi nationals, due to his official role in the ulama. While somewhat unexpected that he did not score the highest in terms of trust, the fact that the three most trusted authorities in Saudi Arabia came from the official religious establishment suggests that religious leaders with both a strict Wahhabi background and clear association with the regime are considered most trustworthy. Thus, state endorsement of religious figures matters in Saudi Arabia, even to non-Saudis.

The religious authority Shaykh Hassan al-Saffar scored the fourth highest and is interestingly a Saudi Shiite cleric from Qatif. Because most respondents were Sunni, I can assume that al-Saffar holds appeal across sectarian lines. Notably in 2016, he publicly criticized the Saudi police for their attacks in Qatif, charging that these forces “do not represent the true values of people from the province.”16 Nonetheless, al-Saffar is broadly seen as taking conciliatory stances, especially in comparison with Shaykh Nimr al-Nimr, another leading Saudi Shiite cleric who was executed in 2015 on charges of terrorism. In marked contrast to al-Nimr, al-Saffar supports integration within the kingdom and working with the ruling family to achieve this goal.17 Thus, while al-Saffar has consistently backed reforms, he has sought to enact them through—rather than in contestation of—the Saudi ruling family.18

Salman al-Odah, the fifth most trusted religious figure, was famously arrested in September 2017, before this survey was conducted, on charges of being affiliated with a “terrorist organization,” or the Qatar-based International Union of Muslim Scholars (IUMS).19 The organization, founded in 2004, is headed by the Muslim Brotherhood ideologue Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi and thus has been seen as an arm of the Muslim

18 Ismail, Saudi Clerics, 204.
Brotherhood. Al-Odah held considerable sway through his role as director of the Arabic version of the website *Islam Today*, having first come to prominence in the 1990s through the Sahwa movement, which heavily criticized American involvement in the Gulf. Like many members of that movement, he is also considered to be informally linked to the Muslim Brotherhood. Al-Odah has called for greater democracy and political reforms to grant more representative government, which are considered problematic for the ruling family. In the social sphere, al-Odah has been quoted as saying that homosexuals should not be prosecuted, an outlandish statement in a Wahhabi country where homosexuality is criminalized. Al-Odah’s unorthodox stances garnered a large following; he had 14.6 million followers on Twitter when he was arrested in September 2017, allegedly for statements that were not supportive enough of the Saudi blockade of Qatar.

Mohammad al-Arefe, the next most trusted religious authority, teaches at King Saud University in Riyadh and boasts over 21 million Twitter followers. Educated by the highly influential leader of the *ulama* Sheikh Abd al-Aziz Ibn Baz, al-Arefe was ranked by *Forbes* in 2015 as the world’s 77th most influential celebrity, with BBC dubbing him the clerical “Brad Pitt.” Al-Arefe has been an outspoken critic of Shiite Muslims and Western influence in the Middle East, in addition to being publicly opposed to women being allowed to drive. Al-Arefe once referred to Shiites as “evil,” and he dubbed Ayatollah Sistani an “infidel.” Al-Arefe famously opposed former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and favored the Muslim Brotherhood-led government, like al-Odah and many other members of the Sahwa movement. Al-Arefe was detained in 2013 for using a YouTube account to criticise the coup d’état in Egypt that led to the overthrow of elected Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohammad Morsi. This detention may have been the result of complaints filed by the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and al-Arefe signed a pledge not to interfere in Egyptian politics. In 2014, al-Arefe was arrested for 40 days for calling the train linking Mecca to the Grand Mosque in Medina and other holy sites as “one of the worst in the world.” After being released, al-Arefe posted photos of himself with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman in 2016, perhaps signalling his efforts to be accepted by the political leadership despite his past, though some unconfirmed reports suggest that he is now banned from preaching. In the past, al-Arefe has been criticized for inflaming violence, especially against Shiites, so even tacit state support of the cleric would be interesting and potentially problematic for the country’s Shiite population.

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In addition to the clerics chosen specifically for each country, the survey also asked respondents across all country cases the degree to which they trusted the following seven religious figures: Qatar-based Egyptian theologian Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, leader of ISIS Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Secretary General of Hezbollah Hassan Nasrallah, Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmed El Tayeb, Egyptian television preacher Amr Khaled, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and Tunisian Islamist politician Rached Ghannouchi. Among the 1,889 respondents in Saudi Arabia, Recep Tayyip Erdogan scored the highest in terms of being the most trusted, with roughly 28 percent people saying they trusted him, yet an even higher proportion of respondents (32 percent) said that they did not trust him. Interestingly, most of these individuals were distrusted by the majority of respondents in Saudi Arabia: 26 percent of respondents said they trusted Ahmed El Tayeb, yet 28 percent said they did not trust him. Similarly, 21 percent of respondents said they trusted Amr Khaled, yet roughly 41 percent responded that they did not trust him. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi meanwhile was clearly not trusted, with 65 percent of respondents saying they do not trust him (while only 82 people in total, or 4 percent, claimed to trust him); Hassan Nasrallah was similarly distrusted, with 65 percent of respondents saying they do not trust him (only 102 people, or 5 percent, said they trusted him). The third least trusted figure was Yusuf al-Qaradawi, with 42 percent of respondents saying that they did not trust him (19 percent said they did trust him), followed by Rached Ghannouchi, with 25 percent of respondents saying that they did not trust him and 6 percent saying they trusted him. These results suggest, then, that trust in such international figures is generally quite low, thereby demonstrating the extent of religious authority wielded by local leaders. It is unsurprising that the lowest levels of trust were for figures al-Baghdadi and Nasrallah, with the global popularity of ISIS diminishing and with Nasrallah’s links to Hezbollah, widely seen as an Iranian proxy, making him widely distrusted within Saudi Arabia. We also see predictably low levels of trust for the two figures most associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, Rached Ghannouchi and Shaykh Yousef al-Qaradawi, considering the fact that the group has been outlawed as a terrorist organization since 2014 and remains demonized today. Overall, these results confirm the primacy of Saudi religious authorities inside Saudi Arabia, which is illustrated in Table 2 and supported in the endorsement experiments below.
Table 1. Rankings of Trust for Religious Figures in Saudi Arabia

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Major Religious Figures in Qatar

Respondents in Qatar (there were only seven Qatari respondents, so the results were not broken down by nationality) expressed trust in a number of individuals, including both government-employed and nongovernment religious figures, as well as Qataris and non-Qataris.

Wahhabi Shaykh Anwar al-Badawi, ranked the most trusted religious authority, is a judge and head of the Qatari Islamic Judges. In June 2017, shortly after the start of a blockade against Qatar, he publicly criticized a fatwa issued by the Saudi grand mufti that praised the decision to blockade Qatar, suggesting that al-Badawi’s role is not completely apolitical.24 Al-Badawi charged that the blockade violated the Qur’an, Sunnah, and consensus of Islamic jurists, and he called on Muslim countries to work together to resolve the rift. He has such

power within the informal Qatari religious establishment that he is often described as Qatar’s grand mufti, though such a position does not formally exist.

Shaykh Abdullah bin Zayd al-Mahmud, ranked the second most trusted in the survey, is a Qatari Wahhabi scholar. He had a major role in putting together the country’s judicial system and is based at the government-funded Islamic Cultural Center in Doha.

Tariq Ramadan—grandson of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood founder Hasan al-Banna and an internationally known Muslim scholar—was the third most trusted religious authority in Qatar. After this survey, Ramadan was jailed in France for alleged rape in February 2018. Prior to his arrest, he held a post at the University of Oxford and regularly taught in Qatar on Islam, in particular espousing a message of tolerance and integration.

The Minister of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs, Ghaith bin Mubarak al-Kuwari, is the fourth most trusted religious source according to the survey. He was educated in sharia and Islamic sciences and has held his position since 2013, having worked in the ministry previously. He comes from a prominent Qatari family whose members have often held ministerial posts.

Shaykh Saad bin Ateeq al-Ateeq was the fifth most trusted religious authority in the survey. He is a Saudi cleric who has regularly preached at Qatar’s Imam Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab Mosque and on Qatar TV; he has notably courted controversy through his criticism of Shiites, Christians, Alawites, and Jews.25

Shaykha Moza bint Nasser, the sixth most trusted source of religious authority according to the survey, is interestingly not strictly a religious figure; rather, she is the consort of former Emir Shaykh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani (r. 1995–2013) and mother of the current Emir Shaykh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani. Under the reign of her husband, Shaykha Moza was instrumental and highly visible in the establishment of Qatar Foundation for Education, Science, and Community Development,26 which she has led as chairperson since its founding. Her very public role in political and social life is unusual for wives in the Gulf, and it has spurred some criticism that she is too Western-leaning.

As for the seven international religious figures who were listed across all countries in the survey, the most trusted among the 241 respondents in Qatar was Recep Tayyip Erdogan, with 39 percent of respondents trusting him and 21 percent not trusting him. He is followed by Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, with 37 percent of respondents saying they trusted him and 29 percent saying they do not trust him. These two figures, both with Islamist


26 The Qatar Foundation for Education, Science, and Community Development, established in 1995 by then-Amir Shaykh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani and his wife Shaykha Moza, is one of Qatar’s largest nonprofit organizations. It spearheaded the establishment of Education City, which houses Western branch campuses, as well as the construction of Sidra Medical and Research Hospital, among other initiatives related to research and education.
backgrounds, are the only ones who were more trusted among respondents in Qatar, suggesting the appeal of either the Muslim Brotherhood's ideology or of figures considered allied to the Qatari government. Still, only 18 respondents or roughly 8 percent, stated that they trusted Rachid Ghannouchi, another Islamist, and 21 percent stated that they did not trust him. The least trusted figures, as in Saudi Arabia, were Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, with 62 percent of respondents saying they did not trust him and only eight respondents saying they trusted him, and Hassan Nasrallah, with roughly 61 percent of respondents saying they did not trust him and only nine respondents saying they trusted him. Overall, these results, summarized in Table 2, suggest the limited appeal of political Islam in Qatar, but not of the violent strand linked to al-Baghdadi or the Shiite strand linked to Nasrallah.

Table 2. Rankings of Trust in Religious Figures in Qatar

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>Do not know the figure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Al-Badawi</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>71.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Mahmud</td>
<td>12.2%</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>68.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ramadan</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>67.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Kuwari</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
<td>11.0%</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>65.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Atlanta</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>60.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shaykh Moza</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
<td>13.6%</td>
<td>21.6%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>18.1%</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Drivers of Religious Influence

Due to the potentially sensitive nature of the subject, we employed a series of endorsement experiments in the survey as a means of indirectly measuring the favorability of religious leaders. If a religious statement experiences higher support when it is endorsed by a particular religious figure compared to the no endorser option, I interpret this result as support for that religious leader. The results of the endorsement experiments show that the drivers of religious influence seem to vary for different populations in Saudi Arabia, with the figures linked to the government ulama being more universally trusted among nationals, while independent clerics are more trusted among non-national respondents. There is less variation in the Qatari case, perhaps due to the small number of Qatari citizens (seven) surveyed.

Sunni Saudi Endorsement Effect

To illustrate the endorsement effect in the Saudi case, I divided results between Sunni Saudi and Sunni expatriate respondents. The Saudi case provided somewhat expected results among Sunni Saudi citizens, since the official religious leadership was found to hold
the most sway over the opinions of Sunni Saudis. Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdulaziz bin Abdullah al-Sheikh and Minister of Islamic Affairs, Dawah, and Guidance Sheikh Saleh bin Abdulaziz ash-Shaikh were most influential, with almost equal endorsement effects of 0.5, meaning that respondents were 0.5 points more supportive on the 1-5 scale; this was the largest endorsement effect among Saudi Sunnis. The only non-establishment figure with a proven endorsement effect among Saudi nationals was Mohammad al-Arefe, who has become increasingly closer to the political leadership in recent years under Deputy Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman. The endorsement experiment appeared to confirm some of our findings from the survey about the levels of trust in specific religious figures.

In terms of negative endorsement effects, Rached Ghannouchi and Recep Tayyip Erdogan had the strongest effects at over -1, meaning that respondents were one point less supportive on the 1-5 scale for statements endorsed by these figures. Notably, these effects are stronger than the positive endorsement of the institutionalized Saudi clergy, suggesting that the political Islam linked to the Muslim Brotherhood is unfavorable, at least for Saudi nationals. Shaykh Hassan al-Saffar, who was interestingly listed as one of the most trusted religious figures previously, also had a negative endorsement effect, as did Grand Imam of Al-Azhar in Egypt Ahmed El Tayeb, Egyptian television preacher Amr Khaled, Qatar-based Muslim Brotherhood ideologue Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Iranian Shiite cleric Hasan Nasrallah, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi of ISIS, and Salman al-Odah. The only Saudi with a negative endorsement effect was Salman al-Odah, the only figure who is considered linked to the political Islam associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, suggesting distaste for that ideology among this sample of Sunni Saudi nationals.
Figure 1. Endorsement Effect for Sunnis

![Graph showing endorsement effect for Sunnis](image)

**Note:** The graphs show the aggregate effect of randomly assigning each religious leader’s name to 14 religious statements. Higher values indicate that respondents, on average, were more likely to agree with a statement when they were shown the name of that religious leader; lower scores indicate that respondents, on average, were more likely to disagree with the statement.

For non-Saudis, Grand Mufti Abdulaziz bin Abdullah al-Sheikh and Mohammad al-Arefe were the most influential, with nearly the same positive endorsement effect. Because al-Arefe is well-known worldwide, it is unsurprising that he had more influence on expatriates than on Saudis; his well-known and rather radical opinions on Shiite Islam, however, may indicate anti-Shiite sentiment among Sunni nonnationals. Al-Shethri, Baghdadi, Odah,
and al-Sheikh were also shown to positively influence opinions to varying degrees, in that order. This result demonstrates the variety of religious beliefs among expatriates in Saudi Arabia. It is notable that more religious leaders had positive endorsement effects among expatriates compared to Saudi nationals, yet all of these figures aside from Baghdadi are Saudi, demonstrating the power of the local religious sector. In terms of negative endorsement effects, again Rachid Ghannouchi and Recep Tayyip Erdogan were the strongest, and they were followed by Shiite cleric Shaykh Hassan al-Saffar, Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmed El-Tayeb, Egyptian preacher Amr Khaled, and Hassan Nasrallah. The negative endorsement effects for al-Baghdadi and al-Odah among Sunni Saudis did not hold for expatriate Sunnis in Saudi Arabia, suggesting a greater willingness among non-nationals to engage with political Islam of both the moderate and more extreme strands. The sample of Shiite Saudis who answered the relevant question was quite small, and the endorsement effects were therefore not very clear due to the large margins of error.

Comparing the trust and approval questions with the endorsement questions, it appears that the results were rather consistent. For Sunni Saudis, al-Shethri, al-Sheikh, and ash-Shaikh were listed as the most trusted, while the positive endorsement effect was also strongest for al-Sheikh, ash-Shaikh, and al-Arefe. The addition of al-Arefe in the endorsement effect is interesting, yet he may be considered generally less trusted since he is not linked to the state ulama. For expatriate Sunnis in Saudi Arabia, al-Shethri, al-Sheikh, and ash-Shaikh are the most trusted, while the highest endorsement was for al-Sheikh, al-Arefe, and al-Shethri. Again, al-Arefe is more influential than he is trusted, potentially demonstrating the ability of independent religious figures in Saudi Arabia to exert influence but not enjoy the same level of trust as the state-linked clergy.

**Endorsement Effects in Qatar**

Because respondents in Qatar were overwhelmingly non-Qatari and Sunni, I did not disaggregate the population further when analyzing endorsement effects. Overall, Shaykha Mozah appears to be the figure holding the most sway, on average increasing respondents’ support for each statement by nearly 0.5 on a 1-5 scale. This result is rather surprising, given that Shaykha Mozah is not, strictly speaking, a religious figure, perhaps a testament to the higher degree of secularity in a Wahhabi context lacking a state-managed religious sector. The next most popular figures were Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, followed by, more predictably, head of Qatari Islamic judges Shaykh Anwar el-Badawi, Saudi cleric Shaykh Saad bin Ateeq al-Ateeq, and Minister of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs Ghaith bin Mubarak al-Kuwari. The endorsement effect of Shaykha Mozah and al-Baghdadi is unexpected, since the two represent almost polar opposites on the spectrum of moderation. This result suggests a similar polarization among expatriates within Qatar, some of whom may have moved there to live in a more religious and conservative society while others seem to be attracted to the values of tolerance propagated by Shaykha Mozah. That state-linked figures like el-Badawi and al-Kuwari, who are also religious scholars, had an effect on respondents’ answers to questions about their political opinions more broadly illustrates the extent to which local Qatari religious leaders hold appeal and indeed influence the sizable Arab Muslim expatriate population.
Figure 2. Endorsement Effect in Qatar

Note: This graph shows the aggregate effect of randomly assigning each religious leader's name to 14 religious statements. Higher values indicate that respondents, on average, were more likely to agree with a statement when they were shown the name of that religious leader; lower scores indicate that respondents, on average, were more likely to disagree with the statement.

For the respondents in Qatar, al-Badawi, al-Mahmud, and Ramadan are the most trusted, while Shaykha Mozah, al-Baghdadi, and al-Badawi have the strongest positive endorsement effects. The fact that only one figure, al-Badawi, is linked to the state and is considered both trusted and influential is notable. The positive endorsement effects of Shaykha Mozah and al-Baghdadi may illustrate the limited appeal of very different models of Islamic practice, even though these may not be the most trusted.

Religious Opinion in Rentier States

The rentier nature of Qatar and Saudi Arabia makes income relatively unimportant when it comes to reasons for supporting religion in politics—a rather expected result but one that underscores the power of ideology even in states where religious groups tend not to
provide materially for their followers. Indeed, states benefiting from hydrocarbon wealth—or rents—can afford to co-opt the religious sector using their substantial coffers, leaving less space for independent religious charities and organizations to operate. Due to disbursements from their governments, a small minority of respondents sought assistance from nongovernmental religious agencies of any ideology. 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 religious aid to both nationals and expatriates. As expected, there is little need or at least little use made of religious groups for material support.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

Despite being Wahhabi states, Qatar and Saudi Arabia’s differently structured religious establishments mean that there is more consensus in Saudi Arabia among nationals and non-nationals in terms of relevant religious figures, likely due to the very public and official state religious narrative. Furthermore, figures linked to Saudi state religious institutions are more widely supported than are other figures in that country.

To further understand the relationship between populations and government-linked religious authorities, I examined whether, or to what extent, government type influences which religious authorities are supported in Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Because neither state allows for meaningful institutionalized political participation, however, it is difficult to know whether support for clerical figures linked to state-funded religious institutions was derived from the fact that these are nondemocratic states or due to the popularity of these figures. In the absence of variation in the political systems, I anticipated that the more institutionalized indigenous religious influence is, the more likely constituents are to adhere to these authorities. In fact, survey data reveal that respondents in Saudi Arabia are more likely to express trust in or approval of members of the state religious apparatus than were respondents in Qatar, which lacks an institutionalized state religious apparatus along the lines of the Saudi model, although certain religious posts certainly enjoy government endorsement.

In addition, no notable differences of opinion exist between expatriate and citizen populations in terms of which religious authorities they trust. In fact, the endorsement effects demonstrate the power of Saudi religious authorities among Saudis and non-Saudis, as well as the varied and somewhat polarized results in Qatar primarily among expatriates. Unlike the other countries under study like Egypt and Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar host large expatriate populations of varying sizes: Qatar is around 87 percent
expatriate, while Saudi Arabia is approximately 27 percent non-national.²⁷ Due to the large numbers of non-citizens, I anticipated that international religious authorities would remain influential for non-citizen residents of these states and thus that national authorities would have less influence. I found instead that Saudi establishment figures, and Qatari establishment figures to a lesser extent, remained popular even among non-nationals according to survey results. Expatriates surveyed in the Saudi case held different opinions from nationals in some respects, but also appeared influenced by state religious authorities. Further studies of Qatar involving more Qatari nationals would provide useful insight into the extent to which the Saudi institutional environment dictates influence over expatriates.

Furthermore, the wealthy rentier status of Qatar and Saudi Arabia negates the effects of income levels on opinions about religion and religious authority. While in other states in the Middle East religious groups have mobilized support through their provision of social services not provided by their governments, the same dynamic does not exist in Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Indeed, because the Qatari and Saudi governments have strong welfare systems in place for their citizenry, material considerations do not appear to influence religious groups’ ability to mobilize support. In addition, because they do not need to put in place infrastructure or provide materially for their followers, religious groups in the Gulf can be more flexible in terms of structure and even function, leaving them, for instance in Qatar, to serve primarily as social gatherings.

Having found that 1) government-linked religious authorities enjoy considerable influence among both citizen and expatriate populations in both Qatar and Saudi Arabia, 2) that differences in opinion between citizen and expatriate populations are not as stark as anticipated, and 3) that the rentier nature of these states changes the ability of religious groups to operate, we can draw important lessons 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 do hold considerable sway in the religious sector and in society more broadly. It is also essential to understand their limitations considering that their authority is by no means absolute. Perhaps nowhere is the limitation of so-called official religious authorities starkest than the overwhelmingly negative endorsement effect of the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar.

In addition, levers of social change, either from the top-down or bottom-up, will not be economic in the wealthy countries of the Arabian Peninsula. Thus, groups that provide materially for followers do not have an advantage over other types of groups; organizations with ideological appeal, however, can hold influence. Furthermore, expatriates buy into local religious authorities to a larger extent than we may realize, and therefore need to be considered in messaging to these countries.

Wahhabism, though a strict form of Islam, also looks different in different political and social environments, and so a single strategy to engage with it will likely be unsuccessful. Finally, there appears to be a negative endorsement effect of religious leaders linked to the Muslim Brotherhood among expatriates in the Arabian Peninsula, reflecting some Gulf governments’ efforts to depoliticize Islam in a way that strengthens their control over local populations for whom Brotherhood-linked figures once held appeal.