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## The Rhetoric and Reality of Religious Reform in Egypt and Saudi Arabia

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Two Arab leaders recently garnered favorable international attention for calling their religious establishments to account. Beginning in 2015, and repeatedly since then, Egyptian President Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi has directed the country's religious leaders to "renew religious discourse" to prevent religion from being used as a tool of violence or to stall social reform.[1] And Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman has curbed the influence of the religious police and obtained endorsements from the country's senior religious scholars to allow women to drive.[2]

These demands for change can appeal to international audiences seeking allies to contain "violent extremism" or advance women's rights. In that sense, they communicate commitment to religious visions that seem more inclusive to global observers—more tolerant of doctrinal differences, more open to women having a public role, and less insistent on adhering to specific religious interpretations. But what is actually unfolding domestically may be something quite different: centralizing regimes and authoritarian rulers appear to be seeking control of religious sectors that have become too autonomous. It is not so much the doctrines themselves that interest these regimes and rulers as it is the ability to control a critical part of the state apparatus that has a far-reaching impact on society.

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Religious approaches in the two countries are often understood at the level of dominant ideas. Egypt's official religious leadership presents itself as the bastion of a 1,000-year-old heritage but also one that seeks to cultivate a center path, holding fast to that heritage while interpreting it in a way that is appropriate for modern conditions. Since its founding, Saudi Arabia was built on rendering canonical the teachings of Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, the 18th century scholar whose name has been linked—despite the wishes of many followers—to the Wahhabi approach. Insistent on strict fidelity to religious texts and fearful of the introduction of perceived accretions or corruptions like mysticism or Shiism, Wahhabi followers evince a particular reluctance to accommodate differences even from their own understanding of Islamic teachings, much less non-Islamic doctrines.

But a closer examination of the two societies reveals that much more than the content of teachings, the reasoning of *fatwas* and the rhetoric of sermons is at stake. Though the religious establishments in Egypt and Saudi Arabia are constructed in different ways, new leaders in both countries are trying to assert much more political control over them. To the extent that they succeed, Saudi Arabia and Egypt will resemble each other far more. Thus, international endorsements of the pleasing religious claims made by these rulers constitute support for regimentation and authoritarianism just as much as reform.

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## DIVERGENT PASTS

Both the Egyptian and Saudi Arabian states have vast religious apparatuses, but they are structured very differently. The religious establishment in Egypt is dominated by al-Azhar, a huge complex of schools, research institutes, and a university that was brought under closer regime control in the second half of the 20th century (though it has sometimes battled for autonomy). Other religious structures include, most notably, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, which oversees mosques and religious endowments, and a state Mufti. But other state functions—policing, adjudication, and education—are not managed by religious officials.

In contrast, Saudi Arabia has a "religious police" (formally named the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice) and courts whose judges are trained primarily in Islamic sharia law and retain general jurisdiction. The country also has a Ministry of Islamic Affairs, which historically has been a more powerful body than its Egyptian counterpart; the influence of the religious establishment on the content of educational material is far greater.

These differences are a product of divergent state–building histories in the countries, which have led not only to distinctive institutional patterns but also to very different ways in which religious structures and social constituencies have been folded into modern states. The most distinctive element of the Saudi state, the body often termed the "religious police," for example, is a very modern and bureaucratized form of the classical *muhtasib*, an office that actually existed in Egypt in earlier centuries and was very much consistent with the Azhari approach.

Similarly, while Saudi resistance to codification of law is sometimes described in doctrinal terms, it seems to stem much more from the judiciary's suspicion that being forced to rely on written codes rather than directly consulting Islamic jurisprudence will transfer authority from the judiciary to the ruler.

Neither Egyptian nor Wahhabi dominant doctrines say much about the bureaucratic structure of a modern state; while religious institutions operate within such structures, they have actually shown some malleability in how they function. Scholars trained in both traditions have adjusted to the bureaucratic and institutional structures that have been established, though they often have sought to maximize their own autonomy within the states that encompass their authority and activity.

In Egypt and Saudi Arabia, three historical forces operated in very different ways to produce the current structures. First, Egypt was nominally part of the Ottoman Empire and was deeply influenced by the Ottoman bureaucratization of Islam as well as Ottoman institutional changes (especially the commitment to comprehensive legal codes and judicial reform). Many of the key structures of the Egyptian state were either inherited from the Ottoman Empire or deeply affected by Ottoman models. The Saudi state, by contrast, was largely built on a bureaucratic basis very distinct from the Ottoman path. While some regions had been under Ottoman rule, when Saudi national institutions were built beginning in the fourth decade of the 20th century, they were constructed less on those foundations and more by creating a religious state within the broader state, staffed by those with training in Wahhabi Islam and dominated by those from favored sectors of Saudi society.

Second, imperialism had very different effects in the two locations. In Egypt, imperialism led to a set of religious institutions that, while part of the state, were separate from other governance structures. Efforts by Egypt's own leaders (before but especially after the British occupation) led to a state religious apparatus that allowed religious institutions to operate in specific fields (personal status law, education, mosque administration, etc.) in ways that kept them separate and, to a lesser extent, autonomous from other parts of the state apparatus. Thus, from the late 19th century onward, a distinct set of schools, law courts, and other structures that could be identifiably labelled as "religious" were established.

In contrast, Saudi Arabia developed institutions in the same areas—law and education most especially—that did not feature such a strong separation between

the religious and non-religious parts of the Saudi state. When such separation eventually emerged, the motivation for the split was obscured; the subsequent structures were ultimately designed more to anticipate domestic opposition and co-opt it than to escape the influence of foreign occupiers, as was the case in Egypt. To be sure, European powers played a role in shaping some of the country's borders and in leading the country's leadership to ignore and even silence individuals and organizations that cause international complications. However, imperialism played a far less prominent role in shaping the contours and purview of religious institutions.

Finally, Egypt and Saudi Arabia constructed their modern states in distinctive and different ways that accentuate the differences wrought by Ottoman and imperial influences. The Egyptian state was built gradually in a manner that tended to maintain older religious institutions and fold them unambiguously into the state, placing them under the direct oversight of senior regime officials. Schools, personal status courts, al-Azhar, and religious endowments were all brought under clearer state rule, governed by specific laws and regulations, and placed under the authority of senior executive branch officials. From the mid-20th century onward, presidential authoritarianism deeply reshaped the state, bringing all state bodies under stronger central control and allowing senior officials to deploy their power to secure ideological, policy, or other ends. It is no accident that when religious members of Egyptian society mobilized, they found they had to do so outside the state.

Saudi Arabia might similarly be viewed as authoritarian in its development, but the state evolved into a far less coherent entity, shaped from the mid-1940s on—and especially since the mid-1970s—by the existence of oil revenues. With a strong fiscal base that eliminated the need for difficult economic decisions; ruling family members sprinkled throughout the state, society, and economy; and a privileged and somewhat autonomous religious sphere, Saudi state formation allowed for fiefdoms within the state and enabled an inclusionary approach toward some groups while marginalizing others. The public could certainly voice criticism and opposition in Saudi Arabia, but such actions occurred—mostly informally—within state structures. Only toward the end of the 20th century did distinct political and social movements arise, and even then the extent to which they represented not just trends but actual organized movements continued to be obscured by the informal nature of Saudi politics.

By the 21st century, Egypt was marked by a bifurcation between hierarchical official structures and unofficial movements. In Saudi Arabia, by contrast, the religious establishment had a far less clear chain of command, and the division of responsibility was informal and in constant flux. In addition, Saudi religious institutions were not segregated from others; courts, schools, and police agencies tended to avoid establishing a distinct religious sphere.

## SIMILAR FUTURES

Many of the differences between the two countries are now eroding, however, as a result of the triumph of state bureaucracies and their attempts to subordinate their religious constituencies. The historical forces that created distinct evolutions in the nations may be losing some of their strength, as both countries are now led by regimes that are centralized, security conscious, and focused on controlling all parts of the state apparatus. Even the differences between their respective regimes have diminished: Egypt is a republic and Saudi Arabia is a monarchy, but leaders of both exhibit a similar determination to manage autonomous state structures, scatter potential opposition movements or block them from organizing, and prevent parts of the state apparatus from protecting opposition voices.

Most significantly, the segmented Saudi state, with its ability to use an enormous fiscal base to be many things to many people, is being reshaped to become more hierarchical, responsive to regime commands, and compliant with policy directions sketched from the country's top rulers. In that respect, Saudi Arabia is finally returning to the more common trajectory of modern state-building

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in the region, one very clearly followed by Egypt for two centuries. This is most evident in the legal field. The Saudi king has traditionally issued a stream of rules and regulations that help shape the Saudi legal system. But the issuance of such declarations has been occurring more frequently; thus, the king's directives are beginning to dominate most legal areas. Islamic sharia law has not been abandoned, but the way courts apply it has been brought under greater official oversight and standardization. Second, a limited kind of codification is taking place. Full codification (*taqnin*) might no longer be spoken of, but *tadwin*, a process in which decisions are written down for guidance so that judges tend to operate a bit more within known and predictable interpretations, is well underway. The judiciary is being expanded beyond its traditional Najdi base, with universities built all over the country, discussions on admitting law school (rather than just sharia) graduates into the judiciary (provided they receive additional training in sharia), and a clear trend toward appointing loyalist judges to leading positions and shutting down dissident voices. Deprived of its power to arrest in 2016, the "religious police" was transformed into an institution that now has the same authority as private citizens in Egypt to impose sanctions: just as Egyptian citizens lost the right to resort to courts directly in cases involving public normality, the official Saudi religious force is now required to submit complaints to the police and the Public Prosecution Office, which decide whether and how to proceed.

## IMPLICATIONS

In Egypt and Saudi Arabia, regimes are striving hard to ensure that states are more responsive to the rulers' needs and direction. The trend has been underway for more than half a century in Egypt but has taken on renewed vigor since 2013. In the wake of the 2011 revolution, al–Azhar managed to assert a great deal of autonomy and even increase its influence over parts of the religious apparatus (such as the state Mufti) that had escaped its control. President al–Sisi's current efforts to shape the religious establishment's

understanding and promotion of Islam uses some gentle words but packs a powerful punch: the primacy of the presidency and the enforcement of its view of national security are being forcefully asserted. Mohammad bin Salman's moves have a similar message in Saudi Arabia: the religious establishment has to follow the line established by the country's top leaders. Those who do so loyally will be rewarded; independent voices will be policed and even silenced.

In both Egypt and Saudi Arabia, the current rulers seem to view autonomous religious institutions and religious publics as bodies to manage and control. The lesson both regimes took away from the Arab upheavals seems to have not been the necessity of pluralism, but instead the need for more regimentation, hierarchy, control, and exclusion. The results will garner them some favorable international attention, and sometimes for good reason. But for those inside the religious structures in both countries, what is happening is not more inclusive but less.

## ENDNOTES

1. See, for example, AlHayah TV Network, YouTube video, 5:47, January 1, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4vgOS3_ettQ.

2. See, for example: http://bit.ly/2OMWqYy.

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