

FPC Briefing: Da'ish, the Ikhwan and Lessons from History
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When Bastian Vasquez, a Norwegian-Chilean member of Da'ish stood on the border between Iraq and Syria and declared an end to the Sykes-Picot agreement,² many analysts declared the beginning of a new form of militant Salafism. While such an argument is persuasive when considering the contemporary Middle East, a deeper historical look into events across the Arabian Peninsula reveals interesting parallels between Da'ish and a group at the forefront of the formation of Saudi Arabia, the *Ikhwan*. In understanding Da'ish, it is helpful to consider lessons from history, notably the role of the *Ikhwan* in the formation of the third – and current – Saudi state, coupled with the seizure of the Grand Mosque of 1979.

The Wahhabi Context

Wahhabism has played a fundamental role in the creation – and development – of three Saudi states along with the power and survival of the Al Saud, culminating in the establishment of the third state of Saudi Arabia. Exploration of the relationship between the House of Saud and this once fringe Islamic group exposes inherent tensions between power politics and religious legitimacy in Saudi Arabia, a situation which can perhaps be best understood as a double edged sword, wherein religion can simultaneously be used as a source of legitimacy and opposition.

The term Wahhabist is considered pejorative by many Saudis who typically refer to themselves as Muslims or *Muwahidin* (Unitarians), making reference to *Tawhid* (the oneness of God) on the assumption that their creed is the purest. Despite this the Saudi form of Islam is a direct legacy of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab who can be described as the founder of the Wahhabist faith.

Al-Wahhab was a disciple of Ibn Taymiyyah, a 14th century scholar who despised what he deemed to be un-Islamic behavior and declared war on Shi'ism, Sufism and Greek philosophy. The concept of *takfir* was used by al-Wahhab to delegitimise any Muslims who engaged in activities that undermined his strict Salafist belief that all Muslims should aspire to the period of the Prophet's stay in Medina.³ Al-Wahhab's rhetoric advocated extreme prejudice against those deemed to be *takfiri*, the violence practised by Wahhabist militias throughout history against anyone – including other Sunni Muslims – is a demonstration of the intolerance of such a position. Yet perhaps the most problematic manifestation of Wahhabi views across Saudi Arabia – and the wider Middle East – concerns relations with Shi'a Muslims, who are viewed as heretics by Wahhabi clerics and followers, leading to a schism that when politicized is becoming increasingly violent.

State Formation and the *Ikhwan* Revolt

Efforts to create the current state of Saudi Arabia can be traced back to the turn of the 20th century, where Abdulaziz ibn Saud set out to unite the tribes of the Arabian Peninsula. In 1912 with Ibn Saud embarked on territorial expansion, he harnessed the military prowess of *Ikhwan*, a group of Bedouin tribes, with a religious zeal. The *Ikhwan* operated at the vanguard of Ibn Saud's expansionist agenda, yet as expansionist aspirations began to wane

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² An agreement that never came into reality yet gained traction as a means of depicting colonial involvement in the region.

³ Alastair Crooke, You Can't Understand ISIS if you don't know the History of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia, Huffington Post, August 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alastair-crooke/isis-wahhabism-saudi-arabia_b_5717157.html

and tolerance of practices deemed un-Islamic pervaded the territories captured by Ibn Saud, a fractious relationship emerged with the *Ikhwan*.

What was initially discontent at Ibn Saud's apparent failure to promote the Wahhabist cause by not converting Shiites or cracking down on 'un-Islamic' practices such as tobacco trading⁴ had turned to open disobedience. Ibn Saud became increasingly concerned at the rising power and influence of the *Ikhwan* to consolidate his territory and these concerns were coupled with British concerns over the use of the group.

The move away from the *Ikhwan* was complicated somewhat by the vagueness of British diplomacy, in this case regarding the 1922 Treaty of Muhammarah and in particular the subsequent Uqair Protocol.⁵ Misunderstandings generated by these documents strained relations between Britain and Ibn Saud and it was this vagueness that caused the British to appear to contradict one of their own conditions by constructing a fort at Busaiya, established in an area that many had been defined as non-military in 1922. Fuelled by feelings of betrayal and anger at Western interference, coupled with the perception that Ibn Saud had sold his country's rights to the British,⁶ the *Ikhwan* raided the fort and began a rebellion against Ibn Saud. In order to ensure victory over the *Ikhwan* rebels, Ibn Saud received diplomatic and military assistance from the British in the 1929 Battle of Siballa. The prominent and arguably defining⁷ role of the British in the defeat of the *Ikhwan* is a factor which has the potential to play into narratives over the separation of *Dar-al Harb* and *Dar-al Islam*.

The Seizure of the Grand Mosque

On the 20th November 1979, 300 militants led by Juhayman al-Utaybi – the grandson of a member of the *Ikhwan* - took control of the Grand Mosque in Mecca.⁸ Al-Utaybi drew support from the burgeoning anti-regime sentiment across the state but also mobilized followers from the presence of the *Mahdi*, the Islamic equivalent of the Messiah, Muhammad al-Qahtani, who was revealed to al-Utaybi in a dream.⁹ Of course, such a claim was hugely controversial within Saudi Arabia, whose Islamic credentials would be called into question. The same year, a revolution in Iran established the Islamic Republic and unrest in the Shi'a dominated Eastern Province would further challenge the Al Saud's Islamic credentials.

It is estimated that 100,000 hostages were taken and the event resulted in a death toll of over 1,000¹⁰ which was the biggest violent resistance the regime had been met with since the creation of Saudi Arabia. The logistics of the attack demonstrate the legacy of the *Ikhwan* Revolt, where al-Utaybi was able to acquire arms from sympathetic members of the National Guard. After the defeat of the *Ikhwan*, members of the group had been absorbed into the organization and a number of these individuals were willing to hide arms and provisions within the Mosque in support of al-Utaybi.¹¹ The apparent link between the

⁴ Silverfarb, D. *Great Britain, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia: The Revolt of the Ikhwan, 1927-1930*, *The International History Review*, Vol. 4, No. 2. pp. 222-248.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Renne Montagne, 1979: Remembering 'The Siege of Mecca', NPR, August 2009,

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=112051155>

⁹ Hegghammer, T. Lacroix, S. *Rejectionist Islamism in Saudi Arabia: The Story of Juhaym Al-Utaybi Revisited*, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 39. pp. 103-122.

¹⁰ Montagne ibid

¹¹ Alastair Crooke, Middle East Time Bomb: The Real Aim of ISIS is to Replace the Saud Family as the New Emirs of Arabia, Huffington Post, February 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alastair-crooke/isis-aim-saudi-arabia_b_5748744.html

Grand Mosque seizure and *Ikhwan* revolt demonstrates the undercurrent of Islamic discontent within the Kingdom.

The militants who stormed the mosque were born out of a group known as the al-Jama'a al-Salafiyya al-Muhtasiba (JSM), predominantly comprised of young men, many of whom were students and from Bedouin backgrounds.¹² The group had been influenced heavily by the likes of Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani, a scholar who preached a fundamental interpretation of Islam which relied only on the Qur'an and Sunna, the same approach taken by Wahhabism.

Such teachings contributed to the emergence of a 'rejectionist Islamism'¹³ which led to criticism of the regime and its use of Islam, coupled with the laxity of the wider *ulemma* when it came to dealing with 'disbelief'.¹⁴ Al-Albani suggested that Saudi Wahhabis did not put enough credence in *hadith*, reflected in the behaviour of the JSM who became increasingly conservative on social issues, going as far to reject ID cards and passports as they 'suggested an allegiance to an entity other than God'.¹⁵

Tensions and debate over what the state deems to be suitable interpretation and practice of Wahhabism has been a recurrent theme throughout the House of Saud's ongoing struggle. Wahhabism naturally leads to rejectionist challenges to the ruling elite and yet any movement away from Wahhabism by the regime could lead to religious delegitimation. Moreover, behavior deemed as 'un-Islamic' fuels criticism of the regime.

Ultimately al-Utaybi felt compelled to act on the grounds of the corruption and impropriety of the Al Saud but also through the presence of the *Mahdi*. Such similarities with the original *Ikhwan* help to illustrate the balancing act which the Saudi regime endures; in order to maintain its power, stability and status on the global stage, the regime often acts in a way which fuels the grievances of the rejectionist form of Islamism which has resurfaced through different manifestations of the *Ikhwan* cause.

The Rise of Da'ish

With the emergence of Da'ish in the summer of 2014, a number of parallels between aforementioned groups have become apparent. The killing of individuals as a consequence of their faith or creed, stemming from the justification that they are not truly Islamic is one of the defining features of Da'ish, yet can be seen in parallel with earlier groups.¹⁶ Moreover, claims of Islamic purity made by Da'ish present a real challenge to the monarchy which in the pursuit of power has often strayed from the most fundamental aspects of Wahhabism.

The establishment of the Saudi state was facilitated by violent expansionism, which also sought to rid the Islamic world of 'shirk' (idolatry practices) through a religious war justified by concepts such as *tawhid*.¹⁷ This approach to the concept of jihad is one which is difficult to separate from that practised by Da'ish today, with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi making

¹² Hegghammer, T. Lacroix, S. *Rejectionist Islamism in Saudi Arabia: The Story of Juhaym Al-'Utaybi Revisited*, International Journal of Middle East Studies, Vol. 39. pp. 106-109.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Alastair Crooke February 2014 *ibid*

¹⁵ Hegghammer, T. Lacroix, S. "Rejectionist Islamism in Saudi Arabia: The Story of Juhaym Al-'Utaybi Revisited", International Journal of Middle East Studies, Vol. 39. pp. 103-122.

¹⁶ Rose Troup Buchanan, Paris attacks: Isis responsible for more Muslim deaths than western victims The Independent, November 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/paris-attacks-isis-responsible-for-more-muslim-victims-than-western-deaths-a6737326.html>

¹⁷ Bunzel, C. *The Kingdom and the Caliphate*, (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016). pp. 4-6.

declarations such as the “end to which fighting the unbelievers leads is no idolater (*mushrik*) remaining in the world”.¹⁸

Da’ish literature and propaganda has also borrowed directly from the texts of al-Wahhab. Alistair Crooke suggests that the aim of the group is to replace the al-Saud as the leaders of Saudi Arabia by painting themselves as purer than the ruling family, once more demonstrating issues arising from the idea of Islam as a double edged sword.¹⁹ This challenge has increasingly moved from a battle of doctrines to mobilisation, with an estimated 3,000 Saudis in militant groups abroad and over 5,000 incarcerated on domestic terrorism charges,²⁰ along with concerns about the threat posed by returning fighters. Da’ish has been able to undermine Saudi legitimacy to the extent that it has successfully managed – on at least three occasions²¹ – to persuade Saudi citizens to kill members of their own family who were part of the security services. Such acts demonstrate the resonance of the Da’ish’s message across particular facets of Saudi society, increasing the amount of people who adopt a rejectionist stance towards the central authority. Furthermore Da’ish has attempted to delegitimise of the Saudi regime to recruit members from other groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Peninsula (AQAP). A 2014 issue of *Dabiq* – the Da’ish magazine – made reference to a paper attacking the regime and U.S intelligence has since detected ‘groups of fighters’ defecting to Da’ish from groups such as AQAP which are founded on a desire to oppose the Saudi monarchy.²²

Consequences

Similarities between the formation of the current Saudi state and the emergence Da’ish are clear to see. Moreover, the parallels between the *Ikhwan*, the seizure of the Grand Mosque and the emergence of Da’ish highlight the problems of using religion as a ‘double edged sword’, both in Saudi Arabia and across the region broadly. The politicization and securitization of religious identities – and sectarian difference in particular – proves dangerous when mobilized across divided societies, leading to increased tensions across the regions. Beyond the humanitarian consequences, the rise of Da’ish highlights the tensions that plague the Saudi state along with those other regimes that seek to use religion as a source of legitimacy. Ultimately, these issues can serve to undermine the sovereignty and authority of regimes across the region.

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¹⁸ Bunzel, C. “From Paper State to Caliphate: The ideology of the Islamic State”, The Brookings Project on U.S Relations with the Islamic World, No. 19, (2015).

¹⁹ Alastair Crooke, February 2014 *ibid*

²⁰ Ben Hubbard, ISIS Turns Saudis Against the Kingdom, and Families Against Their Own, New York Times, march 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/01/world/middleeast/isis-saudi-arabia-wahhabism.html>

²¹ *Ibid*.

²² Lister, C. *Profiling the Islamic State*, Brookings Doha Centre Analysis Paper (2014), p. 25