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Jihad, Yes, But Not Revolution: Explaining the Extraversion of Islamist Violence in Saudi Arabia

THOMAS HEGGHAMMER*

ABSTRACT *Patterns of Islamist violence in Saudi Arabia suggest that it has been much easier to mobilize Saudis for extreme pan-Islamist activism than for revolutionary activism. This is unlike most Arab republics which show the opposite pattern. This article empirically documents the curious extraversion of Saudi militancy, contrasts it with patterns of Islamist violence in Algeria and Egypt, and presents four explanations to account for it: first, that the typical grievances of revolutionary Islamism are less pronounced in Saudi Arabia; second, that structural characteristics of Saudi state and society inhibit anti-regime mobilization; third, that Wahhabism or socio-cultural isolation make Saudi Islamists particularly hostile to non-Muslims; and fourth, and most important, that the Saudi regime has promoted pan-Islamism to divert challenges to its own legitimacy.*

Introduction

Saudi Arabia is often perceived as a regime on the brink of collapse. Many studies of Saudi politics have assumed the existence of a deep undercurrent of political discontent just waiting to be unleashed to flush away the House of Saud.[1] In the aftermath of dramatic episodes such as the 1979 Mecca rebellion or the 2003 terrorism campaign, commentators often have explained the violence as the near-inevitable outcome of the many alleged tensions and contradictions in Saudi society. In this paper I turn the issue of violent contestation on its head and ask: If the regime is so unpopular and the radicals so numerous, why has there not been more violence in the Kingdom, especially against the government?

In a region where several regimes have fought large Islamist insurgencies and at least one president has been assassinated, Saudi Arabia stands out as an exception by virtue of having experienced remarkably low levels of anti-regime violence.[2] This absence would perhaps not have been so remarkable were it not for the fact that Saudi Arabia is home to a large community of militant Islamists. These

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[1] See e.g. Helen Lackner, *A House Built on Sand: A Political Economy of Saudi Arabia* (London: Ithaca Press, 1978); Peter W. Wilson and Douglas Graham, *Saudi Arabia: The Coming Storm* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1994); Saïd K. Aburish, *The Rise, Corruption, and Coming Fall of the House of Saud* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1995) and Robert Baer, 'The Fall of the House of Saud', *Atlantic Monthly*, 291 (2003), pp. 53–62.

[2] In this article, the term 'Islamist' is defined broadly as *Islamic activist*, while 'jihadist' is defined as *violent Sunni Islamist*.

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activists have attacked Westerners in the Kingdom and travelled in the thousands to fight in Afghanistan, Bosnia and elsewhere, but as of 2008 they have never assassinated a senior prince or attacked a royal palace.

The principal aim of the article is to document and explain the 'outward orientation' of Islamist violence in Saudi Arabia.[3] By contrasting the Saudi case to that of Egypt and Algeria at appropriate stages in the analysis, I also hope to contribute to the study of the comparative politics of the Middle East. The analysis will proceed in two steps. I start by examining the record of internal violence in Saudi Arabia since the 1960s before proposing four explanations for the extraversion of Islamist militancy in Saudi Arabia: lack of local grievances, structural obstacles to revolutionary mobilisation, xenophobia, and political diversion.

Patterns of Violence in Saudi Arabia

Before the age of satellite TV and the Internet, information on Saudi domestic security incidents was scarce and tightly controlled by the Saudi government. In recent years, more details of past and recent events have become available as documents have been declassified and the Kingdom has opened up to field research. What, then, do we know about the patterns of political violence in Saudi Arabia from the 1960s until today?

First of all, the overall level of political violence has been relatively low. The three main existing databases for terrorism incidents, the Global Terrorism Database,[4] the RAND/MIPT database[5] and the ITERATE database,[6] each of which use slightly different counting criteria, all suggest that there has been markedly less terrorism in Saudi Arabia than in Egypt and Algeria, except for the 1998–2004 period (see Table 1). Given that all these datasets underreport domestic terrorism (where attackers and victims are from the same country), and that Islamist militancy in Saudi Arabia has had a more transnational character than that of Algeria and Egypt, as we shall see below, it is reasonable to assume that the relative level of terrorism in Saudi Arabia has been even lower than these figures suggest.

There are numerous methodological problems associated with counting terrorist incidents, many stemming from the difficulty of defining terrorism.[7] We should therefore not attach too much importance to these numbers beyond what they tell us about the overall relative level of internal violence. To get a better sense of the scope and nature of the violence in the Kingdom, we must take a closer look at specific cases. Generally speaking, violent political activism in the Kingdom has been of three kinds: leftist, Shiite and Sunni Islamist. While this article is primarily

[3] The same puzzle was observed and addressed in Madawi al-Rasheed, 'The Minaret and the Palace: Obedience at Home and Rebellion Abroad', in Madawi al-Rasheed (ed.), *Kingdom without Borders* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), pp. 199–220.

[4] Gary LaFree and Laura Dugan, *Global Terrorism Database 1.1, 1970-1997* [Computer file]. ICPSR22541-v1 (College Park: University of Maryland, 2006 and Ann Arbor: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, 2008), www.start.umd.edu/data/gtd/ (accessed 14 September 2008).

[5] *RAND-MIPT Terrorism Incident Database*, www.terrorisminfo.mipt.org/incidentcalendar.asp (accessed 14 September 2008).

[6] Edward F. Mickolus *et al.*, *International Terrorism: Attributes of Terrorist Events (ITERATE), 1968-2007* (Dunn Loring: Vinyard Software, 2008).

[7] For more on the weaknesses of terrorism incident data, see e.g. Alex P. Schmid and Albert J. Jongman, *Political Terrorism: A New Guide to Actors, Authors, Concepts, Data Bases, Theories & Literature* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1988), pp. 137–175; Andrew Silke, 'The Devil You Know: Continuing Problems with Research on Terrorism', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 13(4) (2001), pp. 1–14; Leonard Weinberg and William Eubank, 'Data Daze', *Criminology and Public Policy*, 8(3) (2009), pp. 601–606.

Table 1. Number of International Terrorist Attacks in Algeria, Egypt and Saudi Arabia According to Major Terrorism Databases

	GTD 1970–1997	GTD 1998–2004	RAND/MIPT (1930–2007)	ITERATE (1968–2002)
Algeria	1159	426	234	83
Egypt	459	6	41	161
Saudi Arabia	19	32	11	38

concerned with the latter, a brief review of other forms of militancy helps contextualise Sunni Islamist violence.

Leftist and Shiite militancy

In the 1950s and 1960s, the organised opposition consisted primarily of leftist and Arab nationalist movements.[8] In 1953, a massive strike among Aramco workers famously prompted the intervention of the Army.[9] Throughout the 1960s, the authorities reportedly foiled a number of alleged plots and 'subversive acts'. In late 1962, police pre-emptively arrested and deported large numbers of Yemenis suspected of communist sympathies. The most serious violence to take place was a series of bomb blasts in Riyadh in late 1966 and early 1967. The bombings, which caused no known casualties, were claimed by the North Yemen-based Nasserite organisation Union of the People of the Arabian Peninsula [*ittihad sha'b al-jazira al-'arabiyya*] (UPAP).[10] After the attacks, Saudi authorities arrested several hundred Yemenis, executed 17 of them and expelled the rest.

The most serious development occurred in the summer of 1969, when intelligence services arrested hundreds of individuals in a crackdown on what was described as two separate conspiracies to topple the government. One network allegedly consisted of Hijaz-based civilian reformers linked to Prince Talal. The other, allegedly much more serious, conspiracy included officers in the Air Force and the Army.[11] This may have been the closest Saudi Arabia ever came to a military coup.

The 1970s were quieter, although the 1977 trial of 17 officers and a group of civilians charged with plotting another coup showed the regime was still wary of leftist opposition.[12] It is difficult to judge how serious the threat from the Arab nationalists really was, because most of the available information stems from government sources or from the unreliable statements of the UPAP. There was no doubt a certain paranoia in the government about the leftist threat, and the authorities are known to have made extensive use of torture in their interrogation

[8] For more details on leftist activism, see Alexei Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia* (London: Saqi Books, 2000), pp. 368–372; John E. Peterson, *Historical Dictionary of Saudi Arabia* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2003), pp. 108–110; Fred Halliday, *Arabia Without Sultans*, 2nd ed. (London: Saqi, 2002), pp. 66–69; James Buchan, 'Secular and Religious Opposition in Saudi Arabia', in Tim Niblock (ed.), *State, Society and Economy in Saudi Arabia* (London: Croom Helm, 1982), pp. 106–124.

[9] Robert Vitalis, *America's Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 149.

[10] Halliday, *Arabia Without Sultans*, p. 68.

[11] Anita L.P. Burdett (ed.), *Records of Saudi Arabia, 1966-1971*, Vol. IV (Slough: Archive Editions, 2004), pp. 3–91; Halliday, *Arabia Without Sultans*, p. 68; Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia*, p. 371.

[12] Adeed Dawisha, 'Saudi Arabia's Search for Security', Adelphi Paper 158 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1979), p. 7.

of suspects. What is certain is that by the 1980s the threat from leftist groups had practically disappeared.[13]

Meanwhile, discontent grew in another part of Saudi society, namely the minority Shiite community.[14] Several of the most significant security incidents in Saudi Arabia in recent decades have been instigated by Shiite militants. In the late 1970s, tensions between the regime and the marginalised Shiite population increased, culminating in the seven-day riots in the Eastern Province in November 1979, which left at least two dozen people dead and hundreds wounded.[15] The 1979 clashes, combined with the Saudi–Iranian rivalry in the 1980s, fuelled an organised Shiite Islamist movement that remained very active throughout the 1980s and beyond.

Most Shiite Islamists followed the relatively moderate 'Organisation of the Islamic Revolution' [*munazzamat al-thawra al-islamiyya*] (OIR) led by Hassan al-Saffar. A relatively large organization with branches in several countries, including Iran, Syria and Britain, the OIR sought concessions from Riyadh on issues such as the right to observe Shiite rituals, an end to discrimination on the labour market, and a greater share in oil income. The OIR did not engage in terrorist activities and would enter into a reconciliation agreement with the Saudi government in the autumn of 1993.

However, the late 1980s had seen the emergence of a smaller and much more radical organisation, 'Hizbollah of the Hijaz' [*Hizballah al-Hijaz*]. Pro-Khomeini (as opposed to the pro-Shirazi OIR[16]), the Saudi Hizbollah is believed to have been responsible for a number of serious attacks in Saudi Arabia in the second half of the 1980s, including the August 1987 bombing of an Eastern Province gas plant and the March 1988 bombing of oil installations at Ras Tanura and Jubayl, as well as a series of bombings in Riyadh in 1985 and 1989.[17] Some have also suspected organised domestic Shiite involvement in the Hajj riots Mecca in July 1987 in which more than 400 people died after Saudi police cracked down on demonstrating Iranian pilgrims.[18] Questions also shroud the June 1996 Khobar bombing, which was officially blamed on the Hizbollah of the Hijaz. The group may have wanted to assert its disapproval of the 1993 reconciliation between the Saudi Government and the OIR, and may have received operational assistance from the Lebanese Hizballah. Some observers have disputed this assessment and argued that the operation was carried out by al-Qaida, but this author considers that on balance, the available evidence suggests Shiite responsibility.[19]

[13] One of the last signs of life from radical Saudi leftists came in November 1979, when Nasir al-Sa'id, head of the UPAP, curiously claimed responsibility for the Mecca uprising. Shortly afterward, al-Said mysteriously disappeared; liquidated, some believe, by an intelligence agency. Although Kuwait-based leftists had printed Juhayman al-Utaybi's letters, the UPAP had nothing to do with the Mecca events. Soviet media took al-Sa'id at his word and reported a working-class uprising in the Hijaz in November 1979; this, incidentally, is the source of the misrepresentation of the Juhayman incident in Alexey Vassiliev's otherwise reliable *History of Saudi Arabia*.

[14] For more on Shiites in Saudi Arabia, see Fouad Ibrahim, *The Shi'is of Saudi Arabia* (London: Saqi, 2007); Toby Jones, 'The Shiite Question in Saudi Arabia', in *Middle East Report* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2005) and Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics. Political and Religious Networks in the Gulf* (London and New York: Hurst and Columbia University Press, 2008).

[15] Toby Jones, 'Rebellion on the Saudi Periphery: Modernity, Marginalization, and the Shi'a Uprising of 1979', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 38(2) (2006), pp. 213–233.

[16] Followers of the 'Shirazi marja' considered Grand Ayatollah Muhammad ibn Mahdi al-Hussayni al-Shirazi (1928–2001) as their main religious authority.

[17] Peterson, *Historical Dictionary of Saudi Arabia*, p. 110.

[18] Martin Kramer, *Arab Awakening and Islamic Revival* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1996), pp. 161–187.

[19] Thomas Hegghammer, 'Deconstructing the Myth about al-Qa'ida and Khobar', *The Sentinel*, 1(3) (2008), pp. 20–22. Thus far, the strongest case for al-Qaida responsibility for Khobar has been made by Gareth Porter in a five-part article series in *Inter Press Service* (www.ips.org), 22–26 June 2009.

In April 2000, the southern city of Najran experienced violent unrest in the local Ismaili community.[20] The Ismailis, who follow their own calendar, had prepared to celebrate Id a few days earlier than the Sunni majority when the Wahhabi establishment ordered the closure of Ismaili mosques, sparking a small two-day riot that left two Ismailis dead and two wounded. The events were followed by a massive police crackdown on the Ismaili community.

Despite these occasional outbursts of violence, Shiite Islamists never represented an existential threat to the Saudi government, if only because the Shiite population is so small (an estimated 10 to 15 per cent of the overall population, though no reliable figures exist). Rebellion in Sunni quarters, on the other hand, was potentially much more dangerous.

Sunni Islamist violence

Prior to 1979, modern Saudi Arabia experienced very few cases of Sunni Islamist violence. The late 1920s had seen the famous 'Ikhwan revolt' in which Ibn Saud's army of religiously indoctrinated tribal fighters refused to heed the King's order to stop their raids at international borders.[21] Following the Ikhwan revolt, the Kingdom experienced five decades with virtually no organised Islamist militancy. There were instances of low-level vigilante violence, such as skirmishes in early 1960s Medina between local residents and pietistic activists acting as self-appointed religious police.[22] There were also a few cases of spontaneous violent protests against social or technological innovations, such as the August 1965 demonstrations in Riyadh in response to the introduction of the television.[23] The introduction of girls' education in 1961 allegedly also prompted demonstrations in Burayda, but it is not clear whether these were particularly violent.[24] There were also demonstrations in response to international events; during the six-day war in June 1967, anti-Israeli demonstrators allegedly marched on the US consulate in Dhahran and threw an explosive device at the US consulate in Jeddah.[25]

The history of organized Sunni militancy in the Kingdom thus begins in the late 1970s. How much violence has there been since then, and where has it been directed? Before answering this question, it is necessary to clarify the analytical concepts I use to determine the patterns of Sunni Islamist violence. A central premise in my analysis is that there are different types of Islamist violence,

[20] Human Rights Watch, *The Ismailis of Najran: Second-class Saudi Citizens* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2008), pp. 19–28.

[21] For more on the Ikhwan, see John Habib, *Ibn Saud's Warriors of Islam: The Ikhwan of Najd and Their Role in the Creation of the Sa'udi Kingdom, 1910-1930* (Leiden: Brill, 1978); Christine Moss Helms, *The Cohesion of Saudi Arabia: Evolution of Political Identity* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1981), pp. 127–150, 225–274; Joseph Kostiner, *The Making of Saudi Arabia: From Chieftaincy to Monarchical State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 72–79.

[22] Thomas Hegghammer and Stéphane Lacroix, 'Rejectionist Islamism in Saudi Arabia: The Story of Juhayman al-Utaybi Revisited', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 39(1) (2007), p. 106.

[23] Mufid al-Zaydi, *al-tayyarat al-fikriyya fi'l-khalij al-'arabi, 1938-1971* [Ideological Currents in the Arab Gulf, 1938-1971] (Beirut: Markaz Dirasat al-Wihda al-Arabiyya, 2000), p. 268. See also William A. Rugh, 'Saudi Mass Media and Society in the Faisal Era', in Willard Beling (ed.), *King Faisal and the Modernisation of Saudi Arabia* (London: Croom Helm, 1980), p. 30.

[24] Haya Saad Al Rawaf and Cyril Simmons, 'The Education of Women in Saudi-Arabia', *Comparative Education*, 27(3) (1991), pp. 287–295.

[25] Eric Schmitt, 'FBI Agents Join Search In Saudi Blast', *New York Times*, 15 November 1995, p. 7; Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia*, p. 370.

because Islamists fight for different things.[26] Islamist violence may be classified according to its direction, i.e. the nature of the target, and its rationale, i.e. the immediate agenda of the perpetrator. I further posit that Sunni Islamist violence presents itself in five ideal-types:

- *revolutionary violence:* usually directed against government targets and rationalised as a struggle to depose the Muslim ruler
- *pan-Islamist violence:* usually directed against Western or non-Muslim targets and rationalised as defence of the Muslim nation
- *vigilantist violence:* usually directed against symbols of moral corruption and rationalised as a means to correct the moral behaviour of Muslims
- *sectarian violence:* directed against Shiites, rationalised as intimidation of the competing sect.
- *irredentist violence:* directed against the local non-Muslim occupier, rationalised as a struggle for national liberation. This type only occurs in territories contested or occupied by non-Muslim forces (such as in Palestine, Chechnya, Kashmir, etc.) and hence does not apply in the Saudi context.

How much violence of each type has taken place in Saudi Arabia since 1979? To answer this question, I compiled a detailed chronology of violent incidents in Saudi Arabia, taking John E. Peterson's data as a starting point and adding further news reports and relevant primary sources.[27]

There have been, broadly speaking, seven major episodes (defined as attacks or waves of attacks) in the modern history of Sunni Islamist violence in Saudi Arabia. First was the 1979 Mecca incident in which several hundred militants led by Juhayman al-Utaybi seized the Great Mosque in Mecca, claiming that one of their companions was the Mahdi, an Islamic messianic figure.[28] The precise intentions behind this unique incident are difficult to ascertain, because Juhayman was never able to publicly explain them in detail after the operation (he was executed within weeks). However, the writings of Juhayman combined with the nature of the target—which indicates an utter lack of concern for his political legacy—suggest that the attack had an important apocalyptic dimension and may have been intended as an act of collective moral purification.[29] As such, the Mecca incident is closest to the vigilantist type of violence described above. This is consistent with the fact that the movement from which most rebels emerged had previously engaged in private moral policing in Medina. The militants were certainly not pure revolutionaries, for they envisaged no alternative government, explicitly refused to excommunicate the King, and chose to attack the main sanctity of Islam when they had the firepower to strike at a government target.

[26] For a more detailed explanation of this typology, see Thomas Hegghammer, 'Jihadi Salafis or Revolutionaries? On Theology and Politics in the Study of Militant Islamism', in Roel Meijer (ed.), *Global Salafism* (London and New York: Hurst and Columbia University Press, 2009), pp. 244–266.
[27] J.E. Peterson, 'Saudi Arabia: Internal Security Incidents Since 1979', *Arabian Peninsula Background Note*, 3 (2005); available at www.jepeterson.net/source_material.html.
[28] Florian Peil, 'Die Besetzung der Großen Moschee von Mekka 1979', *Orient*, 47(3) (2006), pp. 387–408; Hegghammer and Lacroix, 'Rejectionist Islamism in Saudi Arabia'; Yaroslav Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca: The Forgotten Uprising in Islam's Holiest Shrine and the Birth of al Qaeda* (New York: Doubleday, 2007).
[29] For more on Juhayman's apocalypticism, see Jean-Pierre Filiu, *L'apocalypse dans l'islam* (Paris: Fayard, 2008), pp. 112–118.

The 1980s saw virtually no Sunni Islamist violence in the kingdom. This quiet was broken during the Gulf War in early 1991, when the Kingdom witnessed at least three minor attacks on US targets. On 3 February 1991, unknown persons fired shots at a US military bus in Jeddah, injuring three US soldiers and a Saudi guard. The same day, unidentified individuals doused a US transport bus in Jeddah with kerosene. On 28 March at least six shots were fired at a US Marine vehicle, injuring three marines.[30] The perpetrators were never identified, but they were most likely independent groups of low-level activists expressing their hostility to the foreign military presence.

The third wave of incidents is much less well known and occurred in the Riyadh and Burayda areas around 1991, in the form of around ten attacks against video stores, women's centres and empty cars of people suspected of leading 'sinful lives'.[31] There were no casualties. The perpetrators, some of whom were interviewed by this author in 2005, said that they had wanted to exact *isba* or moral policing. They explicitly said they were not, at the time, interested in politics, neither domestic nor international. These incidents can therefore be considered acts of vigilantist violence. It is worth noting that in November 1994, Abdallah al-Hudhayf, one of the 1991 vigilantists, threw acid in the face of a police officer whom he suspected of torturing imprisoned Islamists.[32] This isolated attack, the first in modern Saudi history to explicitly target a policeman, may be considered an early act of revolutionary violence.

The fourth major development was the November 1995 bombing of the American training mission to the Saudi National Guard (APM/SANG building) in Riyadh.[33] This operation, which killed five Americans and two Indians, was the first major terrorist attack on a US target in Saudi Arabia. It was carried out by four Saudi veterans of the Afghan and Bosnian jihad who acted independently on the call to expel the US military from the Kingdom, a message that had been repeated by Saudi Islamist leaders throughout the early 1990s. The perpetrators had allegedly radicalised after the September 1994 crackdown on the non-violent opposition (the Sahwa movement), and decided to take action after the August 1995 execution, behind closed prison doors, of the abovementioned Abdallah al-Hudhayf, who was a close friend of the attackers.[34]

The available evidence suggests that Osama Bin Laden was not directly involved in neither the 1995 Riyadh bombing nor the 1996 Khobar bombing, but in early 1998 al-Qaida did try to mount an attack against a US target (most likely the US consulate in Jeddah) with anti-tank missiles. The plot fell apart when the missiles were seized and the operatives arrested on the Yemeni border in January 1998.[35] The crackdowns following the Riyadh and Khobar bombings as well as the 1998 missile plot crippled the Saudi jihadist community, which partly explains the near-absence of Islamist violence in the Kingdom in the second half of the 1990s.

[30] *Report to the President and Congress on the Protection of US Forces Deployed Abroad* (Washington DC: US Department of Defense, 1996), p. 29.
[31] Interviews with Nasir al-Barrak, Dammam, December 2005, and Mansur al-Nuqaydan, Riyadh, April 2004.
[32] 'Urgent Action 200/95', Amnesty International, 15 August 1995; *Statement 38* (London: Committee for the Defence of Legitimate Rights, 1995).
[33] Joshua Teitelbaum, *Holier Than Thou: Saudi Arabia's Islamic Opposition* (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Studies, 2000), pp. 73–82.
[34] Interview with unidentified Islamist, Jeddaah, April 2004, and Nasir al-Barrak, Dammam, December 2005.
[35] *The 9/11 Commission Report* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), pp. 152, 491.

The fifth major wave of Islamist violence occurred between 2000 and 2003 and consisted of a series of low-level attacks against Western targets, primarily individual expatriates. These attacks, which took the form of drive-by shootings, booby traps and letter bombs, killed a total six Westerners and wounded at least 13 in the course of two and a half years.[36] Some of the incidents were blamed by Saudi authorities on Western alcohol traders, but these allegations have never been substantiated by forensic evidence and are most likely fabricated. Although the precise identity and motivations of the perpetrators have never been established, circumstantial evidence strongly suggests the attacks were carried out by scattered groups of amateur anti-Western jihadists.[37]

The sixth development was a series of five drive-by shootings of policemen and judges in the city of Sakaka in the northern Jawf region in late 2002 and early 2003.[38] Two policemen were killed, as was a court judge and the deputy governor of the Jawf region. Another policeman was wounded. These assassinations were perpetrated by a small and independent group of militants who had returned from Afghanistan in the spring of 2002. This violence was clearly revolutionary in nature. Moreover, the two killings of the judge and the deputy governor are very interesting, because they represent the only cases, in modern Saudi history, of Islamist violence against civilian representatives of the government. There have been unconfirmed reports of foiled assassination attempts on the royal family, but all actual instances of anti-regime violence have targeted the security establishment.[39]

The seventh, final, and by far the most significant wave of violence was, of course, the campaign launched in 2003 by al-Qaida on the Arabian Peninsula (QAP). The scope, duration, and complexity of the violence call for a closer analysis, not least to answer the question of whether the QAP had a revolutionary or a pan-Islamist agenda.

The QAP campaign

The QAP campaign began in May 2003, reached a high point (in terms of attack frequency) in the spring of 2004, only to peter out from late 2004 onward as a result of blows to the organisation. By 2007, the QAP organisation had effectively been crushed by the security services, although scattered cells of activists continued to plot minor attacks across the kingdom.

The QAP executed between 20 and 25 operations between 2003 and 2007—not counting planned attacks foiled before execution stage and not counting shootouts or sieges initiated by police (most of the shootouts during the QAP campaign were in fact initiated by police, not militants). The operations included five suicide car

[36] Thomas Hegghammer, 'Violent Islamism in Saudi Arabia, 1979–2006: The Power and Perils of Pan-Islamic Nationalism' (PhD thesis, Sciences-Po Paris, 2007), pp. 128–132, 134–135.

[37] The size and overall activity of the jihadist community in the Kingdom increased dramatically in the 2000–2003 period. Moreover, an assassination manual published by a Saudi writer on jihadi websites in 2004 included several of the same tactics employed in the 2000–2003 period; see Abu Jandal al-Azdi, '*tahrid al-mujahidin al-abtal ala ihya sunnat al-ightiyal* [Encouraging the Heroic Mujahidin to Revive the Practice of Assassinations]', www.tawhed.ws, 2004.

[38] Hegghammer, 'Violent Islamism', pp. 132–133.

[39] In November 2001, the *Washington Times* reported an attempted assassination attempt on King Fahd that had allegedly occurred in the form of an attack on his motorcade. These reports were vehemently denied by Saudi authorities; See 'Al-Riyadh Denied Assassination Attempt at King Fahd', *ArabicNews.com*, 24 November 2001.

Table 2. Major Premeditated Operations Executed by Sunni Militants in Saudi Arabia, 2003–2008

	DATE	LOCATION	TARGET	DEAD	TACTICS
Suicide car operations					
East Riyadh operation	12 May 2003	Riyadh	Western compounds	35	3 suicide car bombs
Muhayya operation	9 Nov 2003	Riyadh	Western compound	17	suicide car bomb
Al-Washm operation	21 Apr 2004	Riyadh	Police building	5	suicide car bomb
Interior ministry operation	29 Dec 2004	Riyadh	Interior Ministry, National Guard facility	10	2 suicide car bombs, premature explosion
Abqaiq operation	24 Feb 2006	Abqaiq	Oil refinery	4	suicide car bomb, premature explosion
Coordinated shooting sprees					
Yanbu operation	1 May 2004	Yanbu	Office buildings of Western companies	7	
Khobar operation	30 May 2004	Khobar	Office buildings of Western companies	22	
US consulate operation	6 Dec 2004	Jidda	US consulate	9	
Burayda police operation	27 Dec 2005	Burayda	Saudi police officers	5	
Mada'in Salih operation	26 Feb 2007	Medina	French tour group	4	
Assassinations					
Abd al-Aziz al-Huwayrini	4 Dec 2003	Riyadh	Saudi intelligence officer	0	Shooting
Jonathan Bengler (Germany)	22 May 2004	Riyadh	Western expatriate	1	Shooting
Unidentified American	2 Jun 2004	Riyadh	Western expatriate	0	Shooting
Simon Cumbers (Ireland) and Frank Gardner (UK)	6 Jun 2004	Riyadh	Western expatriate	1	Shooting
Robert Jacobs (US)	8 Jun 2004	Riyadh	Western expatriate	1	Shooting
Kenneth Scroggs (US)	12 Jun 2004	Riyadh	Western expatriate	1	Shooting
Paul Johnston (US)	mid-June 2004	Riyadh	Western expatriate	1	Kidnapping, decapitation
Anthony Higgins (UK)	3 Aug 2004	Riyadh	Western expatriate	1	Shooting
Edward Muirhead-Smith (UK)	15 Sep 2004	Riyadh	Western expatriate	1	Shooting
Laurent Barbot (France)	23 Sep 2004	Jidda	Western expatriate	1	Shooting
Mubarak al-Sawwat	19 Jun 2005	Riyadh	Saudi police officer	1	Shooting
Unidentified Saudi	March 2007	Burayda	Saudi police officer	1	Kidnapping, decapitation

operations (involving altogether eight vehicles), five coordinated shooting sprees, and 12 individual assassinations.

The QAP displayed a consistent preference for Western targets. A clear majority of the premeditated attacks by QAP militants were directed against Westerners: three of five suicide car operations; four of five shooting sprees; and nine of 12 assassinations.

The QAP started targeting security forces relatively late in the campaign, only after the police had cracked down hard on the organisation. The first few small attacks on police took place in December 2003, but the first serious bombing of a security target did not occur until April 2004, nearly a year after the outbreak of the campaign. This suggests that the group originally preferred Western targets, but that vengeance factors drew the militants into a spiral of tit-for-tat violence with the police.

It is noteworthy that the militants never actually attacked a government target outside of the security establishment. There were no assassination attempts on the King, ministers or senior princes, with the exception of Deputy Minister of Interior Prince Muhammad bin Nayef, who was lightly wounded in an attack on his office in August 2009.[40] No royal palace or ministry (except the Interior Ministry) nor any Saudi embassies abroad were attacked. US and Saudi authorities have claimed that the militants had been planning large-scale attacks on government targets since 2002, but these allegations have never been substantiated and there are no indications of such plans in the QAP's own texts.[41] Until substantial evidence to the contrary is presented, we have rely on the positive evidence, which clearly indicate that the QAP chose to spend most of their precious military resources on attacking Western targets, not the government.

These political preferences also manifest themselves in the group's ideological production. The QAP's 'manifesto', a book entitled *This is How We View the Jihad and How We Want It*, placed the 'Jews and the Crusaders' on the top of its hierarchy of enemies and stated that 'this is the enemy against which we must act at this stage'.[42] Statements to the same effect are found throughout the QAP literature, not least in their bimonthly journals *Sawt al-Jihad* and *Mu'askar al-Battar*. The QAP explicitly dismissed accusations that they wanted to attack Muslims. Keen to rid himself of the 'takfiri' label, QAP leader Yusuf al-Uyayri stated in May 2003: 'How logical is it that we should sacrifice our blood and our throats for those far away, and then decide to terrorize and shed the blood of our own people?'[43]

In the early part of the campaign, the militants explicitly said they would not target the security forces unless the latter interfered to protect the Crusaders. As the campaign proceeded, the discourse grew more hostile to the regime and the militants began carrying out premeditated offensives against Saudi security forces.

[40] 'Saudi Royal Survives Attack Claimed By Qaeda', *Reuters*, 28 August 2009. Since the late 1990s, Muhammad bin Nayif has been the main contact point for militants wishing to surrender. The 2009 assassination attempt occurred when a wanted militant pretending to surrender slipped through security and blew himself up.

[41] See e.g. Alan Sipress and Peter Finn, 'Terror Cell Had Recent Gun Battle With Police', *Washington Post*, 14 May 2003.

[42] Hazim al-Madani, '*hakadha nara al-jihad wa nuriduhu* [This is How We View the Jihad and How We Want It]', www.qa3edoon.com, 2002.

[43] Anonymous, '*ghazwat al-hadi 'ashar min rabi' al-awwal: 'amaliyyat sharq al-riyadh wa-harbuna ma' amrika wa 'umala'iha* [The 12 May Raid: The East Riyadh Operation and Our War with America and its Agents]', www.qa3edoon.com, 2003.

After the 20 April 2004 bombing of a police building in the al-Washm district of Riyadh, the QAP published a book called *The Prophet's Guidance on Targeting Emergency Forces*.[44] The book blamed the police for provoking the violence and explained that the aggression of the security forces had prompted another organisation, the 'Haramain Brigades', to step in and defend the mujahidin. The QAP literature from early 2004 onward is full of verbal attacks against the Saudi regime in general and the security establishment in particular. No strangers to humour and irony, QAP leaders used terms such as *kha'in al-haramayn* (the Traitor of the Two Holy Mosques) instead of *khadim al-haramayn* (Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques) and *hay'at kibar al-umala* (The Council of Collaborators) instead of *hay'at kibar al-ulama* (The Council of Senior Scholars).

Nevertheless, the declared main purpose of the QAP campaign was still to evict the Crusaders, not to topple the Saudi regime. Moreover, the main accusation levelled against the government was collaboration with the Crusaders, not corruption or oppression of the people. Finally, the overall discursive theme of the QAP's propaganda texts and videos was more pan-Islamist than revolutionary.

To understand the relationship between pan-Islamist and revolutionary motivations it is useful to distinguish between short- and long-term strategies and between low and top levels of the organisation. There are indeed indications that the top al-Qaida leadership ultimately wanted to topple the Saudi regime. Khalid Sheikh Muhammad allegedly told interrogators that Bin Laden's highest priority was to spur a revolution in Saudi Arabia and overthrow the government.[45] Captured QAP militants have allegedly said that QAP leaders envisaged a two-stage campaign; a first phase aimed at mobilising the Saudi people for jihad against the crusaders, and a second stage in which the enthusiastic masses would turn against the Al Saud.[46]

However, even if we suppose that such a secret long-term plan existed, it had few operational consequences. For a start it did not inform the QAP's short-term operational priorities, which was clearly geared toward attacking Westerners. Moreover, the revolutionary agenda was by all accounts not known to low-level operatives. The QAP leadership went to great lengths to conceal its revolutionary agenda both from its own constituency and from the broader Saudi public. For example, when the QAP began the controversial task of attacking Saudi police targets, it claimed these operations in the name of a fictitious entity called the 'Haramain Brigades'. This was to preserve the clarity of the QAP's 'Americans first' strategy and to avoid staining the QAP's reputation with Muslim blood.[47] Why would the QAP leadership keep its revolutionary agenda secret when other militants, such as the GIA or Egyptian Islamic Jihad, have been explicit about it? The most likely reason is that the QAP realised that revolutionary discourse and violence would not draw sufficient followers in Saudi Arabia.

We have seen that most of the Islamist violence in the Kingdom has been of the pan-Islamist kind, to a lesser extent, of the vigilantist type (see Table 3). Interestingly, there has been no anti-Shiite violence and very little anti-regime

[44] Abu Bakr al-Husni, '*hidayat al-sari fi hukm istihdaf al-tawari*' [The Prophet's Guidance on Targeting Emergency Forces]', www.qa3edoon.com, 2004.
[45] George Tenet, *At the Center of the Storm: My Years at the CIA* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), p. 248.
[46] Rawya Rageh, 'Ex-Militants: al-Qaida Preys on Young Men', *Associated Press*, 22 September 2004.
[47] Interview with Saudi security source, Riyadh, November 2005; Mahmoud Ahmad, 'Al-Qaeda Operatives Are an Ignorant Lot, Say Former Members', *Arab News*, 3 October 2003.

violence. Apart from two assassinations in Sakaka in 2002, there have been no confirmed attacks on civilian representatives of the government or on government buildings unrelated to the security establishment. The semi-successful attack on the Ministry of Interior in December 2004 could be seen as an attack on the civilian government, but this operation was one of the last carried out by the QAP, which underscores the fact that the group's primary focus was on Western targets.

One might of course argue that this is merely a series of historical accidents, and that the total number of incidents is too low to establish a pattern. One might also argue that the pattern reflects not the intentions of Islamists but the capabilities of the Saudi security services; perhaps the latter simply did a better job at protecting the royal family than Westerners. Both these hypotheses are theoretically possible, but unlikely. Not even the best security services would have been able to keep a clean record for decades in the face of a serious intention to attack the government. Moreover, the pattern of attacks is mirrored by the declared intentions of the militant Islamists: there are more explicitly anti-Western texts than there are explicitly anti-government texts in the corpus of post-1980 Saudi jihadist literature. In any case, even if we assume that anti-regime violence is somewhat underreported, the figures are such that the balance would most likely still tilt toward anti-Western violence.

More importantly, if we contrast this pattern with the record of Islamist violence in Arab republics such as Algeria and Egypt the difference is striking. These countries have not only seen more violence in absolute terms, but also a very different pattern of attacks. Until 2002, these countries saw considerably more revolutionary activism than anti-Western violence.[48] Unlike Saudi Arabia, they have experienced several assassination attempts on government ministers, and in Egypt's case, even on the head of state.[49]

Saudi Arabia does not seem to have had a strong revolutionary movement of the Egyptian or Algerian type. On the other hand the Kingdom does seem to have had a large community of extreme pan-Islamists. It has in other words been relatively difficult to mobilize for revolutionary activism and relatively easy to mobilize for pan-Islamist militancy. Why?

Explanations

In the following I shall consider four possible explanations; two of which address the absence of revolutionary violence and two of which concern the high levels of pan-Islamist violence.

[48] See for example *Terrorism in Egypt—A Timeline*, gemsofislamism.tripod.com/timeline_egypt.html (accessed 26 October 2008); and Salah-Eddine Sidhoum, *Chronologie des Massacres en Algerie 1992-2005*, www.algeria-watch.org/francais.htm (accessed 26 October 2008).

[49] For example, Egyptian militants have attacked high-level officials on numerous occasions: Awqaf Minister Muhammad al-Dhahabi abducted and killed, July 1977; President Anwar Sadat killed, October 1981; Interior Minister Zaki Badr almost killed, December 1989; Speaker of the Parliament Rifaat al-Mahgoub killed and Interior Minister Abdel Halim Moussa almost killed, October 1990; Information Minister Safwat Sharif almost killed, April 1993; Interior Minister Hasan al-Alfi badly injured, August 1993; Prime Minister Atef Sidqi almost killed, November 1993; Deputy Chief of the Security Service Rawf Khayrat killed, April 1994; and President Mubarak almost assassinated in June 1995.

Table 3. Patterns of Sunni Islamist Violence in Saudi Arabia, 1979–2007

EPISODE	DOMINANT RATIONALE	ATTACKS AGAINST NON-MUSLIMS?	ATTACKS AGAINST SECURITY ESTABLISHMENT?	ATTACKS AGAINST CIVILIAN GOVERNMENT?
1979 Mecca event	Messianic/vigilantist	No	No	No
1991 Gulf war attacks	Pan-Islamist	Yes	No	No
1991 moral policing	Vigilantist	No	No	No
1995 Riyadh bombing	Pan-Islamist	Yes	No	No
2002 Jawf incidents	Revolutionary	No	Yes	Yes
2000-2003 assassinations	Pan-Islamist	Yes	No	No
QAP campaign	Pan-Islamist	Yes	Yes, late in campaign	No

Lack of grievances

It is natural to start our analysis by looking for the presence or absence of factors that are known to have contributed to the production of revolutionary Islamist violence in other countries. Studies of the Egyptian and Algerian experience have identified two sets of factors that may be considered the principal—although certainly not the only—causes of revolutionary Islamist violence. First are economic deprivation (relative and absolute) and social mobility closure. The violence in late 1970s Egypt and early 1990s Algeria was in each case preceded by 3–5 years of severe economic hardship experienced by large parts of the population.[50] Reduced state income combined with population increases led to unemployment and social mobility closure for talented and entrepreneurial university graduates, who would form the backbone of militant Islamist groups, particularly in Egypt.[51] Second are political factors such as violent state repression and political exclusion. Although the level of repression varied over time in both Egypt and Algeria, both countries have remained police states with pervasive security services that make extensive use of torture. In both countries, moderate Islamists have been systematically excluded from meaningful official politics, despite enjoying considerable popular support. In each country, early manifestations of revolutionary activism were met with draconian measures and collective punishment of entire communities. Nasser's brutal crackdown of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1960s was a major factor in the radicalisation of the Islamist community in Egypt.[52] The brutal and indiscriminate counterterrorism tactics employed by the Algerian regime in the early 1990s—in the form of mass arrests,

[50] See e.g. Rodney Wilson, 'Whither the Egyptian Economy?', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 20(2) (1993), p. 205; Miriam L. Lowi, 'Algeria, 1992–2002: Anatomy of a Civil War', in Paul Collier (ed.), *Understanding Civil War: Evidence and Analysis* (Herndon, VA: World Bank, 2005), pp. 224–225.
[51] Saad Eddin Ibrahim, 'Anatomy of Egypt's Militant Islamic Groups: Methodological Notes and Preliminary Findings', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 12(4) (1981), pp. 423–453.
[52] See e.g. Gilles Kepel, *Muslim Extremism in Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 26–35.

torture camps, and arming of unaccountable paramilitaries—are widely considered to have fuelled the insurgency.[53]

Both these sets of factors have been less pronounced in Saudi Arabia than in Egypt and Algeria. For a start, the post-1970 standard of living (measured in GDP per capita) has been many times higher in Saudi Arabia than in Egypt and Algeria.[54] Moreover, although the Kingdom experienced economic downturns in the mid-1980s and the late 1990s, the Saudi population was shielded from the worst consequences of the crisis by the government's upholding of food subsidies and a public sector employment regime.[55] Although the state eventually had to end its jobs-for-all policy in the late 1980s and unemployment rose again in the late 1990s, unemployed Saudis generally did not face a life in poverty as might be the case of young men in the suburbs of Cairo and Algiers.[56] Relative deprivation may have been a factor in the increased Islamist mobilisation in the late 1980s and early 1990s (to Afghanistan and to the so-called Sahwa movement) as well as in the increased recruitment to al-Qaida training camps at the end of the 1990s. However, the Sahwa movement never turned violent, and the late 1990s al-Qaida recruits did not fight the regime, which suggests that relative deprivation on its own is not a sufficient cause for revolutionary activism.

The level of violent state repression has also been lower in Saudi Arabia than in Egypt and Algeria. Of course, Saudi Arabia is no liberal democracy: it is an authoritarian state with record of detention without trial and torture of security suspects. Nevertheless, on most available measures for state repression such as Gibney and Dalton's *Political Terror Scale*[57] and the *Cingranelli-Richards Human Rights Dataset*,[58] Saudi Arabia compares favourably to Algeria and Egypt (see Table 4).

Moreover, by all available historical accounts, the level of physical violence used by the state to repress Islamists has been considerably lower in Saudi Arabia than in Egypt and Algeria. One might of course argue that Saudi Arabia never needed to be heavy-handed because other factors prevented a revolutionary mobilisation in the first place; in other words that the Saudi relative softness toward Islamists is a consequence, not a cause, of the lack of anti-regime militancy. However, this is unconvincing. For a start, ever since the 1950s, the state handling of *non-violent* Islamist activism has consistently been much more heavy-handed in the republics than in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, if we look at the three countries' counterterrorism policies in the *initial* stages of their respective insurgencies (1991–1992 in the case of Egypt and Algeria, 2003 in the case of Saudi Arabia)—at points in time when the full potential of the insurgencies was not known—the republics used considerably more brutal and less discriminate methods than did Saudi Arabia.

[53] See e.g. Luis Martinez, *The Algerian Civil War: 1990-1998* (London: Hurst, 2000), p. 147ff.
[54] Average GDP per capita (in constant 2000 USD) for Saudi Arabia, Algeria and Egypt in the period 1970–2007 was $10,850, $1,805 and $1,123 respectively; *World Development Indicators* (Washington DC: World Bank, 2007).
[55] Email correspondence with Steffen Hertog, 25 November 2007.
[56] Steffen Hertog, 'Segmented Clientelism: The Politics of Economic Reform in Saudi Arabia' (Oxford University, 2006), p. 218.
[57] M. Gibney, L. Cornett, and R. Wood, *Political Terror Scale 1976–2006* (2008), at www.politicalterrorscale.org/ (accessed 14 September 2008).
[58] David L. Cingranelli and David L. Richards, The Cingranelli-Richards (CIRI) Human Rights Dataset (12 March 2008 version), at www.humanrightsdata.org (accessed 14 September 2008).

Table 4. Indicators of Political Repression in Algeria, Egypt and Saudi Arabia

	POLITICAL TERROR SCALE, 1976–2006 (1–5, 5 IS WORST)	PHYSICAL INTEGRITY RIGHTS INDEX, 1981–2004 (0–8, 0 IS WORST)
Algeria	3.36	3.77
Egypt	3.15	3.73
Saudi Arabia	2.69	4.28

On the issue of political exclusion it is more difficult to make comparisons. On the one hand the Saudi state has provided ample space for religious activity and has given the religious establishment considerable power to influence the education and judicial sectors. On the other hand, the royal family has never allowed clerical interference in core matters of state policy, and never authorised organised opposition activism of any kind.[59] However, one might speculate that the political exclusion in the Arab republics produces more resentment among Islamists because it is uneven—it treats religious and secular actors differently. In both Saudi Arabia and the Arab republics, Islamist reformists are excluded from official politics, but in the republics, non-Islamist forms of organised political activity *are* allowed, at least on paper.

The relatively low levels of socio-economic hardship and violent regime repression may help explain the absence of revolutionary violence in the Kingdom. Put very simply, Saudi Islamists have had fewer material reasons to complain about their regime than have their Algerian and Egyptian counterparts. However, violent contestation is of course not a linear expression of the level of objective suffering or discontent in a population. Opportunities and resources for contestation are also highly important. At the same time, as shown above, pervasive security has not constituted such a restraint, nor has access to militant resources. Unlike in police states such as Syria or pre-2003 Iraq, it has not been particularly difficult, from a purely operational point of view, to mount violent attacks in Saudi Arabia. Could there be other structural obstacles to revolutionary mobilisation in the Kingdom?

Obstacles to mobilisation

Another possible explanation for the extroversion of Islamist violence in the Kingdom is that the Saudi state and society has certain structural or cultural characteristics that make it relatively difficult to mobilize significant numbers of people for revolutionary activism. Four such inhibiting factors seem particularly plausible.

First is the charismatic legitimacy of the regime. Saudi Arabia was not colonised and has been ruled by the same family on and off since the eighteenth century, longer than most countries in the region. While this does not automatically translate into government legitimacy, the charismatic legitimacy of the Al Saud is arguably often underestimated. Saudi Arabia has also avoided the militarisation of the government apparatus that eroded the legitimacy of the post-colonial Arab republics. There may also be a self-perpetuating dimension

[59] Ayman al-Yassini, *Religion and State in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1985).

to Saudi regime stability, as the absence of a revolutionary precedent in recent Saudi history arguably makes the task of Saudi revolutionaries harder.

Second is the rentier economy. While too big a subject to be analysed in detail here, it may be argued that the rent constitutes an additional instrument of political control which most of the Arab republics do not have. It essentially adds a spectrum of leverage above that of physical coercion. While Egyptian militants had little to lose and the state little to offer, Saudi Islamists often have jobs and money to lose and the state is wealthy. The Saudi regime thus has more 'power of cooptation', which it can use to demobilize aspiring Islamist entrepreneurs and divide nascent social movements. There are many examples in Saudi history of the government combining soft coercion with financial incentives to rein in dissidents or rebels. The imprisonment, liberation and eventual cooptation of the Sahwa leaders in the late 1990s is a prominent example. The current rehabilitation programmes for imprisoned jihadists, in which detainees are given lump sums of money for education and marriage, is another.[60] Such measures require a very high 'GDP per militant capita', which countries such as Egypt do not enjoy.

A third factor may be the relative strength of traditional social structures such as tribes and extended families. The so-called 'tribal factor' is often seen by Western observers as a destabilising force in Saudi Arabia. In fact, however, it is very difficult to empirically document such a factor.[61] If anything, tribes seem to play a politically stabilising role, as tribal identity cuts across interest groups and prevent class identity formation. Even more significant for political stability are family structures, which are arguably stronger in Saudi Arabia than in the Arab republics, where they are more rapidly dismembered by economic migration and underdeveloped communication infrastructure. The extended family seems to play a very important role in limiting political activism in the Kingdom, because family structures add a significant social cost—in the form of family dishonour and possibly severed family links—to individual revolutionary activism. It is no coincidence that the rehabilitation programs for imprisoned jihadist in post-2003 Saudi Arabia systematically involve prisoners' families in the process.[62]

The fourth possible obstacle to revolutionary Islamist mobilisation is the role of religion in Saudi society. The Saudi state puts a much greater emphasis on the observance and promotion of religious conservatism than do the Arab republics. This probably affords the Saudi state a higher degree of protection against accusations of apostasy than the secular Arab republics. The Saudi state emphasis on religion has also produced a political culture in which all political arguments, including those of the opposition, have to be carefully couched in religious terms.[63] Political legitimacy has thus become very closely connected with religious legitimacy and scriptural proficiency. Because the most able scholars are employed by the state, and because official ulema still enjoy considerable legitimacy, revolutionaries may have

[60] Christopher Boucek, *Saudi Arabia's 'Soft' Counterterrorism Strategy* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008).

[61] Most assumptions on the role of tribes have been based on the profiles of the Saudi 9/11 hijackers, which included several southern tribesmen. More recent research has shown that the composition of the 9/11 attack team was not representative of Saudi al-Qaida members. Moreover, in the absence of overall figures on the size of Saudi tribes, it is impossible to know whether certain tribes are over-represented. See Thomas Hegghammer, 'Terrorist Recruitment and Radicalisation in Saudi Arabia', *Middle East Policy*, 13(4) (2006), pp. 39–60.

[62] Boucek, *Saudi Arabia's 'Soft' Counterterrorism Strategy*, p. 13.

[63] Madawi al-Rasheed, 'God, the King and the Nation: Political Rhetoric in Saudi Arabia in the 1990s', *Middle East Journal*, 50(3) (1996), pp. 359–371.

found it more difficult to articulate religiously credible calls for regime change. This tendency may have been strengthened by the content of the state ideology; the Wahhabi doctrine as promoted by the state places a particularly strong emphasis on obedience to political authority. As Madawi al-Rasheed has demonstrated, a Saudi 'theology of obedience at home' has served to depoliticize the population.[64]

The inhibiting effect of these four factors on anti-regime violence remains hypothetical, as it is very difficult to measure empirically. Further research into each of these four dynamics is required before their precise role can be established.

So far we have seen that the absence of grievances and presence of obstacles to anti-government mobilisation may help explain the low levels of revolutionary violence in the Kingdom. However, these factors only explain one half of the puzzle; they do not account for the high levels of pan-Islamist violence. How could it be so easy to mobilise for pan-Islamist activism when it was so difficult to mobilise for revolutionary activism?

Xenophobia

The third proposed explanation is that a peculiar Saudi xenophobia has made Saudi Islamists are more hostile to non-Muslims than are other Islamists from other countries. It is of course difficult to measure the level of xenophobia in a given society, but in the case of Saudi Arabia the anecdotal evidence of hostility to outsiders is so overwhelming that this hypothesis deserves to be taken seriously. This presumed Saudi xenophobia is likely to have two possible sources, one ideological, the other sociological.

One possibility is that the Wahhabi religious tradition promotes stronger hostility to non-Muslims than do other religious traditions.[65] While one must be careful in ascribing a doctrinal essence to a living religious tradition such as Wahhabism, it is fair to say that a distinguishing feature of Wahhabi doctrine as articulated by Najdi theologians since the eighteenth century is the emphasis on the purity of Islamic doctrine and practice.[66] A central tenet in the Wahhabi tradition is the notion of 'loyalty and disassociation' [*al-wala' wa'l-bara*] which encourages believers to actively distance themselves from and publicly declare their hostility toward infidels, and, conversely, to declare their loyalty to good Muslims.[67] This is one of the main sources for the strong emphasis in Saudi religious education on the distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims and the superiority of the former. Critics may object that the Wahhabi concern for purity was historically directed more at sinful Muslims than at outsiders. From the eighteenth to the early twentieth century, Wahhabi zealots fought mainly other nominal Muslims, not infidels. However, this may have had more to do with the geopolitics of the day, notably the sheer absence of non-Muslim populations

[64] Al-Rasheed, 'The Minaret and the Palace', pp. 204–206; Madawi al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State: Islamic Voices from a New Generation* (Cambridge: University Press, 2007) p. 22ff.

[65] In a related argument, Madawi al-Rasheed has maintained that the Wahhabi religious establishment has developed and promoted a peculiar 'theology of rebellion abroad'. Since the 1940s, she argues, the state systematically allowed and promoted the glorification of jihad in certain conflict zones abroad, notably in Palestine and Afghanistan; Al-Rasheed, 'The Minaret and the Palace', pp. 206–208.

[66] See e.g. David Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006) and Guido Steinberg, *Religion und Staat in Saudi-Arabien* (Wurzburg: Egon, 2002).

[67] David Cook, *Understanding Jihad* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 141–142; Joas Wagemakers, 'Framing the 'Threat to Islam': al-wala' wa al-bara' in Salafi Discourse', *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 30(4) (2008), pp. 1–22.

in the vicinity of the Najd. When Wahhabi scholars and Islamists came into regular contact with non-Muslims in the twentieth century, they were hardly at the forefront of inter-religious dialogue. Another possible source is social distance. Ordinary Saudis' lack of exposure to and knowledge of non-Muslims and non-Muslim cultures may have fuelled a certain xenophobia which in turn has made Saudi Islamists particularly hostile to non-Muslims. Scholars such as Senechal de la Roche have written about the link between 'social distance' and conflict, suggesting that long cultural and relational distance between two collectivities increases the likelihood of inter-group violence.[68] This seems intuitively applicable to Saudi Arabia, which, unlike other countries in the region, receives virtually no Western tourists and encourages expatriate workers to stay in isolated compounds. Saudi Arabia is also religiously extremely homogenous, lacking a significant Christian Arab population. While difficult to prove empirically, anecdotal evidence suggests that until recently, the majority of Saudis had minimal normal social interaction with non-Muslims in Saudi Arabia. Some Saudis study abroad and interact with Westerners in the Kingdom, but they represent a small minority of the overall Saudi population. In the Islamist community such interaction has been particularly rare. This author has studied the biographies of 800 Saudi jihadists active between 1980 and 2006; only a tiny minority had studied in the West and the vast majority seem to have had little or no personal contact with Westerners, or non-Muslims for that matter, in their lives.[69]

The Saudi education system has also come under heavy criticism, from both inside and outside Saudi Arabia, for emphasizing the superiority of Muslims over non-Muslims and for providing Saudi pupils with an ethnocentric understanding of history and limited knowledge about other cultures.[70] Others will point out that all education systems are ethnocentric and that the number of Saudi militants is too small to blame the education system as a whole. However, the degree of ethnocentrism in the Saudi education system has until recently been so high that it cannot be disregarded. We can thus not exclude the possibility that the level of social interaction with and knowledge about non-Muslims has been particularly low in Saudi Arabia and that this has stimulated xenophobia and anti-Westernism.

Of course, in the absence of good polls, this hypothesis is difficult to test. The few quantitative studies on Saudi political and religious attitudes show mixed evidence. On the one hand, available polls show that Saudis are considerably more socially conservative than for example Egyptians and Iranians.[71] On the other hand a 2002 poll placed Saudi Arabia in the middle of the list of Muslim states in terms of declared anti-Americanism.[72]

[68] Roberta Senechal de la Roche, 'Collective Violence as Social Control', *Sociological Forum*, 11 (1) (1996), pp. 118–122; Donald Black, 'The Geometry of Terrorism', *Sociological Theory*, 22 (1) (2004), pp. 14–25.
[69] Hegghammer, 'Violent Islamism', pp. 635–721.
[70] For a good treatment of the subject of Saudi education, see Michaela Prokop, 'Saudi Arabia: The Politics of Education', *International Affairs*, 79(1) (2003), pp. 77–89. For more critical treatments, see e.g. Nina Shea, *Saudi Arabia's Curriculum of Intolerance* (Washington DC: Hudson Institute, 2008) and *Excerpts from Saudi Ministry of Education Textbooks for Islamic Studies: Arabic with English Translation* (Washington DC: Freedom House, 2006). Criticism of Saudi curricula has also been voiced publicly by Saudi intellectuals, notably by the Islamist lawyer Abd al-Aziz al-Qasim. For a Wahhabi response to the criticism, see *Does Saudi Arabia Preach Intolerance and Hatred in the UK and US? An Independent Study of the Neo-Con and Sufi Partnership*, www.SalafiManhaj.com, 2007.
[71] Mansoor Moaddel, 'The Saudi Public Speaks: Religion, Gender and Politics', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 38(1) (2006), pp. 79–108.
[72] Zogby International, 'The Ten Nations 'Impressions of America' Poll Report' (2002).

Either way, the problem with these explanations, as with all essentialist paradigms, is that they do not explain chronological variation. If Saudis are so hostile to non-Muslims, why did they not fight them until the 1980s Afghan jihad? And why was there not more violence against Westerners in the Kingdom before the year 2000? To account for these variations we will probably need to look at politics.

Political diversion

The last explanation we shall consider is that the Saudi regime, at particular times in recent decades, has encouraged or allowed extreme pan-Islamist activism in order to divert Islamist challenges to its own legitimacy.

Over the years, many have accused the Saudi state for having a double standard toward Islamist militancy, i.e. for leaving Saudi militants alone so long as their violence did not take place on Saudi territory.[73] This suspicion is not unfounded. Saudi Arabia long treated its jihadists relatively softly. In the 1980s, the state encouraged and supported Saudi volunteers who wanted to fight in Afghanistan. In the early 1990s, the government did little if anything to prevent volunteers from heading off to fight in Bosnia. In 1993, as a result of the controversial activities of Arab Afghans around the world, the government began imposing mild restrictions on recruitment for the jihad in Bosnia, but it was not until after the 1995 Riyadh bombing that the regime ended its policy of tacit support for Saudi participation in jihad fronts abroad.[74] However, when the second Chechen war and the second Palestinian intifada broke out in 1999 and 2000 and caused a massive increase in recruitment and fundraising to jihadist groups abroad, the authorities did not interfere much in this kind of support activity. Even in 2002, foreign fighters were treated relatively softly, at least compared to veteran jihadists in other countries. Most of the hundreds of Saudi fighters who returned to the Kingdom from al-Qaida training camps in Afghanistan in 2002 were not detained by Saudi police for more than a few weeks upon arrival, if at all. In the early 2000s, al-Qaida leaders rightly considered Saudi Arabia as its most important source of recruits, money and clerical opinions.[75] It was only after the outbreak of the QAP campaign in 2003 that support structures for militants abroad were being systematically dismantled by the state. Yet even today, Interior Ministry officials are open about the fact that returnees from Iraq are treated more softly than captured members of the QAP.[76]

In contrast, government responses to large-scale terrorist activity on Saudi soil have been merciless.[77] In the aftermath of the 1995 Riyadh bombing and the 1996 Khobar bombing, police arrested and tortured hundreds of suspects. After the foiled al-Qaida missile plot in early 1998, an alleged 800 people were rounded up

[73] Some analysts have even suggested that the government had secretly paid al-Qaida not to conduct terrorist attacks in Saudi Arabia. This, however, is a conspiracy theory. The absence of al-Qaida operations in the Kingdom in the late 1990s was due, first, to lack of capability, and subsequently to a lack of intention; see Thomas Hegghammer, 'Islamist Violence and Regime Stability in Saudi Arabia', *International Affairs*, 84(4) (2008), pp. 701–715.

[74] Hegghammer, 'Violent Islamism', p. 298.

[75] *Sawt al-Jihad*, 2 (2003), p. 24.

[76] Interview with unidentified Interior Ministry official, Riyadh, May 2008.

[77] I specify 'large-scale terrorism' because small-scale violence was largely ignored by the authorities. A large number of small but lethal attacks on individual Westerners in the Kingdom between 2000 and 2003 were never properly investigated by Saudi police. Instead, some of the attacks were even blamed on Western alcohol traders in what most outside observers view as gross miscarriage of justice. See Hegghammer, 'Violent Islamism', pp. 128–135.

by the security services.[78] When the terrorism campaign broke out in May 2003, the state threw its full weight behind the fight against the QAP, albeit with less brutal methods than in 1996 and 1998.

At the heart of this systematic differential treatment is of course an issue of legitimacy. There is a difference between guerrilla warfare against the Russian military in Chechnya and suicide car bombs on civilians in Saudi cities. The Saudi regime no doubt considered 'classical jihadism'—private military involvement in other Muslims' struggles of national liberation—as less reprehensible than global jihadist or revolutionary violence. This, of course, is a view they share with most Muslims (and probably by many non-Muslims, for that matter). However, why would the Saudi regime be more positively inclined to pan-Islamist activism than other regimes in the region?

Part of the answer to this question lies in the religious basis for the Saudi state and the role of pan-Islamism in Saudi state discourse since King Faisal. In the 1960s and 1970s, Saudi Arabia had invested considerable prestige and money in promoting the notion of Muslim solidarity. When, from the 1980s onward, when the pan-Islamist movement gained momentum—primarily as a result of the communications revolution and the real increase in the number of conflicts pitting Muslims versus non-Muslims—it was politically difficult for the Saudi regime to prevent mobilisation for jihad in the name of Muslim solidarity.

This path dependency might have sufficed as an explanation, were it not for the fact that the variations in Saudi support or tolerance for pan-Islamist militancy since the 1980s correlate so closely with domestic political challenges to the State. For example, the massive increase in state support for the Afghan jihad in the 1980s occurred at a time when oil income was plummeting, Saudi unemployment was soaring, and the so-called Sahwa movement was gaining momentum. Similarly, the massive Saudi state support for the Bosnian jihad—which was higher (measured in financial support per annum) than for any other foreign cause in Saudi history—occurred at a time when the confrontation between the Sahwa and the regime was at its most fierce.[79] After the Sahwa was neutralised in the mid-1990s, it became much more difficult for Saudi volunteers to reach foreign jihad fronts. This suggests that in the 1985–1995 period at least, the Saudi regime was not just tolerating, but actively promoting pan-Islamism, most likely to undermine regime-oriented political contestation. Put somewhat crudely, the regime may have promoted pan-Islamism as Saudi Arabia's 'opium for the people'. This type of 'diversionary politics' is well known from other contexts. For example, in the 1970s and 1980s, government religious spending in Algeria increased as GDP per capita went down.[80]

However, despite the end of direct official support for jihadist causes in the mid-1990s, private support would continue. Pan-Islamism could not be ruled out by decree—it would remain a very strong force in Saudi political culture for years to come. The state's ability to crack down on support networks in the Kingdom thus remained restricted. Authorities could not easily arrest people involved

[78] Hegghammer, 'Violent Islamism', pp. 298–302.
[79] See Ziyad Salih al-Hadhlul and Muhammad Abdallah al-Humaydhi, *al-qissa al-kamila li'l-dawr al-sa'udi fi al-busna wa'l-harsak* [*The Full Story of the Saudi Role in Bosnia-Herzegovina*] (Riyadh: Al-Homaidhi Printing Press, 1998) and Hegghammer, 'Islamist Violence and Regime Stability in Saudi Arabia', p. 704.
[80] Abdelaziz Testas, 'The Roots of Algeria's Ethnic and Religious Violence', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 25 (2002), pp. 161–183.

in fundraising to Chechnya in the late 1990s, for example, because most Saudis viewed this sort of activity as charity and altruism, not terrorism. It was not until after the outbreak of the QAP campaign that the Saudi regime dared take measures that ran counter to pan-Islamist sentiment and publicly admitted that its previous soft stance on jihadism abroad was problematic.

The regime's crackdowns on violence at home and tolerance of militancy abroad in the 1980s and 1990s created a skewed incentive structure which may be considered the principal cause of the extraversion of Saudi Islamist violence. Without entering into counterfactual speculation, it seems reasonable to assume that the Kingdom would have seen more revolutionary activism had it pursued a zero tolerance policy for radical pan-Islamist activism in this period. It is telling that when such a zero-tolerance policy was finally implemented in 2003, anti-regime violence in the form of attacks on security forces increased considerably.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to document and explain the curious outward orientation of Islamist violence in Saudi Arabia. Unlike several of the Arab republics, Saudi Arabia has seen very little violence directed against the government and a large number of attacks against non-Muslims, primarily Westerners. The absence of revolutionary violence in the Kingdom seems to be due to two main sets of factors: first are the low levels of socio-economic hardship and violent regime oppression; second are the structural characteristics of Saudi state and society, notably the charismatic legitimacy of the regime, the rentier economy, the tribes, and the state's religious profile, all of which make revolutionary Islamist mobilisation difficult. The Saudi Islamist propensity for violence against non-Muslims may have been facilitated by a certain Saudi xenophobia, rooted in the Wahhabi hostility to non-Muslims and the social distance between Saudis and non-Muslim societies. Most important, however, was the Saudi state's ambiguous policy toward Islamist militancy, in particular its tolerance of extreme pan-Islamism and intolerance of revolutionary activism. The government set an incentive structure for aspiring Saudi Islamists that implicitly said 'jihad, yes, but not revolution'. Since 2003, the regime seems to have implemented a zero-tolerance policy toward all forms of militancy, including so-called 'classical jihadism' abroad. If the current analysis is correct, and if the new Saudi policies are maintained, we should expect to see a somewhat more inward-oriented pattern of Islamist activism—though probably no revolution—in the Kingdom in the years to come.

The analysis has provided useful insights into the dynamics of Islamist violence and on the comparative politics of the Middle East. The findings support the hypothesis that there are different types of Islamist violence and that the causal dynamics differ somewhat from one type to another. Moreover, differences in structure and political culture between states in the Middle East seem to affect the patterns of Islamist violence in the same countries. It would seem, for example, that poor, secular and repressive Arab republics are much more likely to see revolutionary activism than a relatively rich, religious and consensus-based kingdom such as Saudi Arabia. The distinction between the ideal types of Islamist activism should not be exaggerated, as extreme pan-Islamists and revolutionary Islamists have partially overlapping agendas. Nor should we overemphasize the analytical distinction between religious kingdoms and secular republics in the

Middle East. Nevertheless, the comparative politics of Islamist contestation seems to constitute a fruitful avenue for further research.

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