

Orthodoxy and Radicalism in Saudi Arabia

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“The Saudi regime has never been stronger than it is today,” argued Thomas Hegghammer in a meeting with Congressional staffers on March 3, 2008. Yet the Saudi government continues to walk a delicate line as it seeks to steer religious impulses in the Kingdom toward personal piety and away from political engagement. Hegghammer is a Postdoctoral Research Associate at Princeton University and a Research Fellow at the Norwegian Defense Research Establishment (FFI) in Oslo.

Hegghammer argued that the ruling family’s religious legitimacy in Saudi Arabia rests on two distinct pillars. The first is Wahhabism, a highly literal, extremely pietistic movement that is centered around social conservatism and notions of moral purity. The second is pan-Islamism, based on a notion of Muslims’ responsibility for other Muslims’ welfare and emphasizing intra-Muslim solidarity. Wahhabism has its origins in the alliance between the Saud family and the preacher Muhammad ibn Abdel Wahhab in the eighteenth century; pan-Islamism is of far more recent emphasis, dating back only to the 1960s and the conflicts between conservative monarchies and the revolutionary secular nationalist regimes exemplified by Gamal Abdel Nasser’s Egypt.

As Saudi Arabia became increasingly integrated into the world in the 1960s and 1970s, these twin currents produced three basic impulses in Saudi society. The first was an effort to make the state more avowedly Islamic, much as the Muslim Brotherhood movement sought to do in many Arab countries. This movement evolved into the “*Sahwa*” or “Awakening” movement, a non-violent trend that has enjoyed significant support among Saudi clergy and which the state tightly controls. Another impulse is a turn toward extreme pietism and a rejection of modern life. The last impulse is jihadism, which calls for using state power to defend Muslims from foreign encroachment. Most Saudi jihadism follows a “classical” model that only supports Muslims fighting for their own freedom and permits neither “out of area operations” nor attacks on civilians; some, typified by al-Qaeda, is more unconstrained in its targets and methods.

Hegghammer suggested that the Saudi state has confronted all of these impulses with great energy, generally ceding control to the clergy on moral issues while retaining control on political issues. To this end, it poured money into clerical coffers, gave the religious establishment increased control over educational curricula, and gave the clerics more leeway on defining Muslim “wars of liberation,” all while protecting its political

prerogatives. This strategy allowed the government to firmly meet the challenges of the “Awakening” movement. Pietism has been somewhat more of a challenge, but as a wholly domestic and mostly lower-class movement, it has not explicitly threatened the state. Clearly the most difficult has been jihadism, which is dangerously close to the twin pillars of state legitimacy yet often exists beyond state control. The Saudi regime has publicly supported some jihadist causes in the past, although it has rarely supported them officially and has never supported jihadis of the more expansive, global variety. The Saudi government began cracking down on al-Qaeda in the 1990s, but for the most part it was not energetic combating jihadis fighting overseas until relatively recently.

Hegghammer pointed out that official Saudi opposition to jihad in Iraq has proven confusing, if not contradictory, for segments of the Saudi public. Hegghammer quoted one Saudi official who sympathized with this confusion, asking why the regime could send fighters and materiel for the Afghan jihad in the 1980s but now asked its youth not to do so today in Iraq.

The central driver behind Saudi efforts to combat the jihadist threat was al-Qaeda’s mass-casualty bombing attacks inside Saudi Arabia in May and November, 2003. Rather than the 9/11 attacks, it was only after the 2003 violence that the state recognized the extent of the jihadi threat to the Kingdom itself. Hegghammer argues that the Saudi government has begun to get a handle on the situation in the Kingdom, in part because the domestic jihadis badly overestimated their own strength. They were never able to recruit successfully inside Saudi Arabia, and the regime has successfully marginalized their support still further by portraying them as revolutionaries. Still, the Saudi government’s response to jihadi violence is to reemphasize its Islamic credentials rather than walk away from them. For this reason, the Saudi government will continue to work to alternately coopt and coerce whatever religiously inspired opposition movements emerge in the Kingdom.