

The Islamic Utopia: The Illusion of Reform in Saudi Arabia

Andrew Hammond

London: Pluto Press, 2012. 240 pages.

This book is an interesting exposition of the reform discourse and reform ironies in the desert kingdom of Saudi Arabia ... a country ambivalent in its sense of security and insecurity, content in its presumed “orthodoxy,” uncertain about where it fits in this world and about its future, and unsure as to what extent it can continue to linger in its self-imposed cocoon – and yet, by the same token, how far it can go in opening up to a perceived threatening world. All of this ambivalence, as one senses while reading the book, hinders, obstructs, and consequently undermines King Abdullah’s alleged attempts at reform. In fact, as Hammond points out, many of these reforms have been nothing but “window dressing ... driven entirely by the desire to protect the extraordinary powers of the Saudi royal family,” as well as by a felt necessity to appease the Americans (p. 150).

Despite the king’s efforts to project the image of himself as a reformist, one “religious reform” (*ṣaḥwah*) figure describes him as simply being “out of the arena” (p. 137). Reforms, particularly judicial reforms, which Hammond describes as Abdullah’s “central plank,” are defined by a Najdi context as well as in Najdi terms (Najd is the central region of the Arabian Peninsula). The result has been a polity “trapped” within a pre-modern framework and

idealized as an “Islamic Utopia” (p. 11), a utopia that, and in the name of a “manufactured cultural particularism (*khuṣūṣīyah*)” repeated *ad nauseum*, perpetuates “religious obscurantism, tribalism, misogyny, inequality and a notion of the citizen as little more than consumer.” As such, not much can be expected of reform claims as long as the “Saudi-Wahhabi” state continues to “lock itself in time” in collusion with “colonialism” and “Western imperial power.” So long that is, as the “status quo,” is both justified and maintained (pp. 10-11). The rest of the book expands on this theme, which constitutes the book’s core argument.

Apart from the introduction, *The Islamic Utopia* consists of eight chapters. The first two chapters, “The Religious Society” and “Government in the Sharia State,” respectively, focus on how the “shari’a” or rather Wahhabism, is applied in both society (chapter 1) and in government (chapter 2). Hammond points out that Wahhabism was essentially an obscure marginalized movement outside the Sunni mainstream that only made inroads into the latter due to the oil boom of the 1970s. Destructive and obscurantist, as well as devoid of any aesthetic or historical sense (p. 33), it has led local authorities to destroy places that Muslims believe that the Prophet had visited, going so far as to demolish the Prophet’s birthplace to make way for a “car park,” hotels, and high rises (p. 29). In Makkah, luxurious towers now dwarf the Grand Mosque and the Makkah Clock Royal Tower Hotel, designed à la Big Ben in London, overshadows a comparatively “dot-small” Ka’bah (p. 31). This reflects what Hammond astutely observes as one type of devotion replacing another: What Wahhabism destroys, Saudi capitalism builds (p. 29). In all of this the pilgrimage, or the manifestation of the religious community, was transformed into nothing more than a “mass event,” the ultimate purpose of which is “processing through ... as many Muslims as possible” (p. 33).

When it comes to government, Hammond points out that justice remains elusive, for Wahhabism reduces Islamic law to a caricature set of rules divorced from the methodological and epistemological process of *fiqh*, thereby rendering *fiqh* essentially “dead” (pp. 58-59). Yet it is the bearers of this thought, namely, the Wahhabi clerics, upon which the Saud family depends heavily in order to exert and maintain social control. These clerics, the presumed guardians of the moral society, continue to give the Saud family a free hand when it comes to dealing with the higher issues of state, for the latter’s alliance with the clerics grants them the legitimacy they need (p. 65).

Chapter 3, “The Warrior King and His Priests,” studies the paradoxes of Saudi religio-politics since the time of founder Abdel Aziz Al Saud (1876-1953), who used the Ikhwan movement to consolidate his power, only to crush

it with British help during the late 1920s. Earlier, in the 1870s, Wahhabi clerics had ruled that it was against Islamic law to ask the Muslim Ottomans for help, despite the latter's involvement in the internecine strife between leading members of the Saud clan. But in 1990 they proclaimed that it was legitimate to receive the assistance of "non-Muslim" Americans in response to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait (p. 68). When the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, Saudi clerics argued that jihad there was not worthwhile; yet when it became clear in 2004 that Iraq was coming under the sway of the Shi'ah, that position changed (pp. 81-82). And in response to the rise in Hizbullah's popularity after it repulsed the Israelis in 2006, Shaikh Abdullah bin Jabreen (d. 2009), a member of the country's powerful Senior Clerics Association and Permanent Committee for Islamic Research and Issuing Fatwas, ruled that it was forbidden even to pray for the organization's continued success (p. 86).

Chapter 4, "Segregated Nation," details the social, economic, and political costs of segregating men and women in society. In chapter 5, "The Illusion of Reform," Hammond argues that the proclaimed reforms since Abdullah's ascendency to the throne in 2005 are nothing but an illusion designed to keep the Saudi family and Wahhabi clerics in power so they can continue to play the same role they always have (p. 118). Chapter 6, "Foreign Policy Adventurism: Iran and Palestine," goes beyond domestic to foreign policy, as it pertains to the West, Iran, and Palestine. Regarding the West, Hammond points out that between 1965-71, the Saudi regime funneled about one-third of its revenues to Europe and Washington (p. 157). It continues to prod the United States to attack Iran and "cut the head of the snake" (p. 154). As regard Palestine, the 2006 Riyadh summit called for an end to the "violence and counter violence" between Palestinians and Israelis, a statement that qualifies the Palestinians' right to resist occupation. Thus resistance against an occupying force is no longer a natural right, but a strategy that can be justified only in response to specific Israeli military actions (pp. 171-72).

Chapter 7, "The Saudi Cordon Sanitaire in Arab Media," discusses the Saudi state's manipulation of the media by dominating the expanding airwaves with propaganda and innocuous entertainment (p. 187). Since the late 1990s, Hammond remarks, such media channels as MBC Middle East Broadcasting Centre, est. 1991), Orbit (est. 1994), and Art (Arab Radio and Television, est. 1994) "have saturated Arab viewers in Arab and Western entertainment" (p. 189). As for the political messages sent out, they have been "Washington-friendly, soft on Israel and inimical to al-Qa'ida, Hizbullah and Iran" and hostile to Syrian President Bashar Assad (p. 189), increasingly along sectarian lines.

Finally, in chapter 8, “Controlling Mecca: In the House of God,” Hammond refers to the “jewels in the crown of the Saudi-Wahhabi state,” namely, its control over Makkah and Madinah. He points out that processing the world’s Muslims through the “Saudi-Wahhabi pilgrimage” has become a vast industry and a key element of their self-legitimizing rhetoric (p. 210).

Although Hammond does not explicitly discuss whether such an order of things will continue into the future, particularly in light of the region’s current dynamics and changes, he seems to implicitly argue against such a possibility. Yet it remains to be seen whether the Saudi-Wahhabi state will be able to adapt to the changing conditions, or if it will simply weather the storm while staying the course and circumventing pressures for reform.

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