

Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979

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The explosion of books and reports on violent Muslim extremism by Western “terrorologists” and security institutes over the last ten years, should be read with caution for their tendency to be ideologically and politically loaded. However, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia* represents the more impartial, rigorous end of the spectrum. Based upon the PhD of a fellow of the Norwegian Defense Research Establishment, this work stands out as a significant contribution to understanding transnational jihadist networks and their manifestation in Saudi Arabia in the mid-2000s. The book sheds light on some of the hidden dimensions of Al-Qaida’s presence in a place not usually connected with violent radicalization. It addresses questions such as: “Why Saudi Arabia has apparently produced so many militants?” “Has its government supported violent groups?” “How strong a foothold do they have in the kingdom?” “And why didn’t Bin Laden launch a campaign there before 2003?”

The more well-known modern history of violent militancy in the kingdom is associated with isolated incidents such as the siege of the Grand Mosque in 1979, the Riyadh bombings of 1995, and the 1996 attacks on US airforce barracks in Khobar. Each occasion was a surprise to both residents and observers and vanished into a mist of secrecy and speculation. This study goes into great detail to examine the conditions that allowed for such events to occur by examining the social, religious, and political climate that enabled violent jihadists to emerge in a self-proclaimed Islamic state. Among the strengths of this study are nuances in the choice of terms and concepts applied to the subject matter. While the author uses the term *Islamism*, he recognizes its immensely diverse expressions. Similarly,

opting for a social-movement-theory approach to analyzing the political behavior and the priorities of actors involved, it offers a different methodological approach to explaining political preferences – which acknowledges theological descriptors such as *salafi*, *wahabbi*, *jihadi*, and *takfiri* where necessary. This more meaningful strategy also avoids making popular casual links between Wahabbism and militancy; here, the author points out that Wahabbism is not a political doctrine but a living theological tradition, interpreted and contested by successive generations of scholars (5).

The principle theoretical contribution of this volume is the claim that the jihadist network in Saudi Arabia is distinct from others in the region due to it being primarily motivated by extreme pan-Islamism and not socio-revolutionary ideology (1) – or, as he puts it, “a macro-nationalism, centred on the imagined community of the umma (global community of Muslims) (8).” This challenges the view that these radicals are solely motivated by theology or even hatred of the West. The extraterritorial influence is explained as resulting from the relative lack of socioeconomic grievances and the development of a unique political culture, which supported the symbols of Muslim suffering abroad and enabled a large degree of political legitimacy at home. Furthermore, the sustained sporadic violence witnessed between 2003 and 2006 is a historical anomaly – undertaken by an extreme offshoot of a Saudi jihadist movement, which became radicalized in Afghanistan, but failed domestically due to a lack of popular support.

Structured into ten chapters, the first three analyze the emergence of the classical jihadist movement between 1979 and 1995. In the period between the late 1970s and the 1980s, Saudi Arabia was able to capitalize on growing international Islamic solidarity, which enabled ideologues such as Abdullah Azzam to argue that it was a *fard’ayn* (mandatory individual duty) for Muslims to resist the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Interestingly, Safar al-Hawali and other figureheads of the *Sahwa* (awakening) movement of the 1990s, initially expressed scepticism about Saudi’s nationals going to fight in Afghanistan. There was a mood change in the later part of the 1980s with the overt backing of the state’s most senior scholars—and, of course, this reached a critical point after Saddam Hussein’s incursion into Kuwait. The subsequent American military presence in the peninsula made the *Sahwa* movement challenge the government and helped lay the foundations for antistate militancy during the 1990s.

The next three chapters provide context to the recruitment and mobilization of Saudis to join Al-Qaida from 1996 to 2001 by examining the relationships with agents of global jihadist networks. This era was characterized by the convergence of returning mujahideen from oth-

er theaters of conflict such as Bosnia, Tajikistan, and Chechnya – and Bin Laden’s call for an international alliance against “Jews and Crusaders” and the crackdown against those opposing the kingdom’s legitimacy. With many of the *Sahwa* scholars imprisoned at the time, the more radical elements engaged in an increasing bitter cycle of contention against the government and this caused further radicalization.

The final chapters explore the appearance of the QAP (Al-Qaida in the Arab Peninsula) between 2002 and 2003, by looking at the macro-, meso- and micro-level aspects of the group’s formation, activities, and demise. The rise and dynamics of the so called “al-Shu’aybi school” during this period illustrate the changes within the Saudi religious establishment and the absence of the moderating effect of the *Sahwa* scholars. A theological power vacuum was created with the passing of its three most senior scholars – Abd al-Aziz bin Baz, Nasir al-Din-Albani, and Muhammad bin Uthaymin – and the imprisonment and later co-option of the leading Islamist figures, Salman al-Awada and al-Hawali. *Jihad in Saudi Arabia* concludes that revolutionary Islamism and global jihadism has never been able to take root in the kingdom and that the wave of attacks from 2003 onwards was largely due to the return of nomadic mujahideen from the Afghanistan war.

The author has deliberately left out of this analysis the history of Shiite Islamist militancy is because it is considered a separate political phenomena; however, its inclusion would have provided a more complete picture of violent militancy in the country. This text is an impressive dense piece of research and is likely to become a standard reference work on the subject and a welcome alternative to the less informed material currently available.

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