

Saudi Arabia's International Religious Activism: The Case of the Mediterranean Countries

Pierre Conesa¹

Former Senior Official
Ministry of Defence, Paris

It is always surprising to see how little even the best-informed sites and studies on Saudi Arabia discuss its religious diplomacy, as if this country were an international actor like any other, essentially concerned with its dynastic struggles and its relations with the United States. Nonetheless, since its birth as a country in 1932, the political-religious regime consists of an alliance where the Royal House of Saud and the Al ash-Sheikh religious family, descendants of Abd al-Wahhab, have been sharing power. The two parties collaborated to conquer the peninsula, the religious leaders declaring jihad against the other Arab tribes and against the Ottoman Empire, which controlled the Holy Places before the First World War. The establishment of the new State provided the opportunity to publicly proclaim their ambition of propagating Islam (the Wahhabi version, naturally) across the planet. The religious leaders, moreover, rejected the qualifier "Wahhabi" connecting them to Abd al-Wahhab, because like all the radicals, they qualify themselves as Salafists (imitators of the Prophet's companions). The Salafism we know today is a purely Saudi product. This is, moreover, the country's structural contradiction: the ruling dynasty, which signed the Quincy Agreement with Roosevelt in 1945, needs Western countries for its survival (1979, 1991, today's struggle against Daesh). The religious authorities criticize these appeals to the "infidels," denouncing them all day long on local radio and television stations, but they always find the right theological arguments to support the regime in exchange

for greater power over the society and the means for their religious diplomacy. Every crisis thus ends in "more religion," both nationally and internationally. "Reform" does not mean what Westerners think it does at all.

The young Kingdom's first difficulties came from the Mediterranean area. In the 1950s and '60s, Gamal Abdel Nasser was the great leader of the Arab world and of secular pan-Arabism. Dissension did not take long, emerging during the Yemen crisis, when in September 1962, Colonel Abdullah al-Sallal, with the support of Egypt, led a coup against Imam Muhammad al-Badr ben Ahmad Hamid ed-Din, King of (North) Yemen, who had Saudi Arabia's support. The war that broke out lasted four years. Riyadh's religious diplomacy at the time aimed to counter the influence of Arab socialism gaining ground in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Algeria. Sub-Saharan Africa was particularly targeted (the effects are still felt today in Mali, Niger, Senegal and the Central African Republic, whose religious leaders are all alumni of the Islamic University in Medina). But also, and above all, by offering asylum to Muslim Brothers oppressed by Nasser, the Kingdom gained its administrative and intellectual leaders and political themes in its power struggle with the Egyptian Head of State. The system established is a mirror of the organizations sought by Nasser: the Saudis responded to pan-Arabism with pan-Islamism – in the face of the Arab League, thoroughly under Egyptian influence, they created the World Islamic League in 1962; and they countered the Islamic University of Al Azhar, considered "too progressive," with the Islamic University in Medina (1961). The Nasser threat disappeared with the Six-Day War. The Kippur War, on the other hand, through the oil crisis, offered Riyadh the budgetary means for

¹ Author of *Docteur Saoud et Mister Djihad. La diplomatie religieuse de l'Arabie saoudite*, preface by H. Védrine, Éd. Robert Laffont, 2016.

its diplomacy. The year 1979 was pivotal for the Kingdom, shaken by the Shiite revolution in Tehran in February, the occupation of the Great Mosque by radical young students and finally, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December. The latter allowed the Kingdom to export its turbulent religious activists and lend itself greater international importance in the eyes of the Muslim world and the West. In 1989, when the defeated Red Army left Afghanistan, the former fighters, dubbed “Afghans,” returned home. The most deeply affected of the Mediterranean countries was Algeria. During the ten years of its civil war, the country experienced all the horrors that the Wahhabis/Salafists had practiced everywhere they had won, first in Saudi Arabia, then in Afghanistan with the Taliban: first of all, the takfir ideology of excommunication of “hypocrites,” according to which any Algerians not actively fighting the government could be killed with all impunity, destruction of religious sites of Malaki rite; banning of other Islamic practices and their imams; massacres of entire villages; imposition of invented Koranic rules; oppression of women and murders of young women not abiding by their rules; girls banned from education... The Armed Islamic Groups (GIA) were a prototype for today’s Daesh, as the Taliban had been before them, practicing extreme violence as a revolutionary rite of purification before the triumph of their conception of Islam. How many casualties in Algeria? from 60 to 150,000?²

Where Are We Now?

The Arab Revolutions have profoundly destabilized the region as well as the Saudi regime, which is seeing the Muslim Brotherhood triumph at the urns in Egypt, Morocco, Libya and Tunisia. Riyadh had expelled them in 1991 for having dared to criticize the royal decision to call on America to defend the “Land of the Holy Places.” The Saudi regime preferred Colonel Sisi over Mohamed Morsi, thus finding an alliance, whether witting or not, with the jihadi Salafists fighting against the regime. The latter are numerous in Tunisia, Egypt and Algeria, with Al-Qaeda in the

Islamic Maghreb and different groups, either affiliated or not with the Islamic State.

In March 2016, the Council of Arab Interior Ministers condemned Hezbollah’s “terrorist practices and acts,” which it accused of wishing to “destabilize certain Arabic countries.” The pressure exerted by the six monarchies of the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC), obsessed with Shiite Iran and the Lebanese party’s support of the Assad regime, worked. But in Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco, this communiqué provoked an outcry. In this Sunni region of the Arab world, Hezbollah, although Shiite, remains very popular since its war against the Israeli army in 2006. “It’s Daesh that should be dubbed terrorist, not Hezbollah. Its combatants are heroes!” one Internet user stated. On 11 March, the Arab League also classified Hezbollah as a “terrorist group.” The Tunisian National Bar Association, many left-wing parties, the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, and even certain personalities close to the president criticized the government, which they accused of “alignment with Saudi positions.”

The nuances of the different Salafist movements in the Maghreb, whether quietist or jihadist, seem quite intellectual when compared with the local situation in general. The originality of Salafist preaching is that it is politico-religious and not just religious, because even if the quietists advocate obedience to the Prince (as long as he is Muslim), how his power conforms to Sharia still needs to be validated. And what about relations with the Maghrebi democracies and the local intellectuals defending them? Although they are different, all of these movements are not only opposed to the West, but also to the legitimacy of the popular vote, accused of being anti-Islamic. The Salafists likewise denounce the Muslim Brotherhood, whom they reproach for their concessions concerning Koranic references, political openness and the use of Islam in a partisan practice.

In each country, Salafist pressure can be felt in all spheres. In Tunisia, the feast of the Prophet’s birthday on 24 January (Mulud) was denounced by Salafist imams as an idolatrous celebration, including the associated food rituals. In a year, seventeen mau-

² Today no one knows precisely how many people were killed in the “dark years.” The figures range from 60,000 (at the lowest) to 150,000 (at the highest) but neither of the two figures can be given credit. Should the disappeared be included? If so, how many are there? Remember that even for the War of Independence, the Algerian Administration’s official figures range from 1.5 to 2 million dead. Historians such as Benjamin Stora speak of 800,000.

soleums were burned or pillaged. They have also occupied certain mosques to impose their prayer ritual by example. "If weekly collective prayer does not unite believers and is not a source of peace and contemplation, one may as well stay at home," says Mourad, a pharmacist who henceforth carries out the Friday ritual at his office.³

Democratic intellectuals are particularly targeted in all countries. Kamel Daoud, an Algerian journalist and novelist, was the target of a fatwa (that is, a call for his death) issued by Abdelfattah Hamadash, imam of a mosque in Oran. Algerian intellectuals already paid a heavy price from 1993 to 1998, and not just the francophone ones, considered the heritage of the French colonial presence, but also the Arab-speaking non-Islamic ones, qualified as "communists." Tunisia has also been hit. The opposition and Tunisian civil society have for months been demanding the dismantlement of the Ansar al-Sharia group led by Abu lyadh, an al-Qaeda veteran in Afghanistan already accused of having organized the September 2012 attack on the US Embassy in Tunis. The February 2013 assassination of the left-wing opponent, Chokri Belaïd, and the MP, Mohamed Brahmi, complete the sinister picture. Belaïd's assassination led to the downfall of the first Ennahdha regime, which refused to ban the group. The Tunisian authorities now accuse the jihadists of preparing some twenty plots to assassinate public personalities and attacks to complete the country's destabilization. Cultural activity has also been the object of strong-arm tactics. At the premiere of the play by Lotfi Abdeli, "*Fabriqu  en Tunisie, 100% halal*" ("Made in Tunisia, 100% Halal"), hundreds of Salafists occupied the open-air theatre where the play was to be performed, considering it blasphemous of Islam, and started praying. The performance had to be cancelled. All of the countries in the region are also now faced with citizens returning from combat in Syria and Iraq, the Tunisian contingent presently being the largest of all of these foreign fighting groups in the Daesh ranks.

³ Cited by Akram Belaid, *Le monde diplomatique*.

⁴ It should be noted that the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) is an international organization designed above all to combat the laundering of dirty, i.e. criminal, money. However, terrorist money is clean money (voluntary donations such as the Zakat) that is dirtied by the end receiver (the terrorist group). The FATF is not in the least equipped to struggle against terrorist money. This is why the Saudi initiative against Iran can be considered a publicity move.

⁵ Elisabeth Badinter, Chair of Publicis' Supervisory Board, recently called for a boycott of companies engaging in the Islamic fashion market.

⁶ A. IZAMBARD, *Comment l'Arabie Saoudite veut redorer son image en France*, www.challenges.fr/monde/moyen-orient/comment-l-arabie-saoudite-entend-redorer-son-image-en-france_13682

No one among the Maghrebi intellectuals has any doubt as to the Saudi origins of the propagation of Salafism. The money assisting the most destitute families and the implantation of Koranic schools and mosques has led these families progressively towards Salafism, here as in the rest of Africa. In October 2015, Algeria refused to join the "Sunni" coalition of 34 Muslim countries launched by Saudi Arabia to "combat terrorism with military and ideological means." In retaliation against this refusal from the only country having real anti-terrorist military experience, the Kingdom drew up a blacklist of 11 countries that were supposedly not making enough effort in the struggle against the funding of terrorism. According to the Saudi newspaper, *Mekkah*, which apparently managed to consult royal diplomatic documents, Riyadh established two categories on its blacklist: Iran and North Korea, who are not struggling against money laundering and terrorist financing, and eight other countries, among them Algeria, who do not abide by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) rules.⁴

One is therefore rather shocked at the cowardly silence of Western diplomatic circles regarding the Saudi responsibility for the Salafist risk which has already caused so many deaths. The WikiLeaks site, The Saudi Cables database, which has declassified 60,000 Saudi diplomatic documents, provides interesting information on the Kingdom's strategy regarding different countries on the North Shore.

The support of the French authorities to this Saudi-influenced policy is complete: Legion of Honour awarded to the head of Saudi diplomacy; deafening silence on the human rights flouted in Saudi Arabia; total disinterest in the massacres in Yemen until the past few months. Several months ago, the Kingdom entrusted four publicity and press relations agencies – Publicis,⁵ Image 7, Edile Consulting and another whose name was not leaked (with strong ties to Israel according to some sources) – with the mission of "improving Riyadh's image in France," revealed the monthly, *Challenges*.⁶ Money truly eases the conscience!