

COMPARISON OF THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN THE POLITICAL SYSTEMS OF IRAN AND SAUDI ARABIA

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Religion is the paramount source of legitimacy in Arab countries. It has played a decisive role in influencing the political systems of several West Asian States, particularly those of Saudi Arabia and Iran, two of the most dominant antagonistic powers in the region, with two ideologically opposing sects of Islam: Sunni and Shiism.

In Saudi Arabia, the religious elite and the politicians have worked together to establish and safeguard the Saudi state since the founding of Wahabism in the country. The Saudi state recognises Mohammad Bin Abdul Wahhab's school, Wahhabism, as the only sect from which the state draws its religious discourses. However, the Saudi state is by no means a theocracy. It is a monarchy with a strong influence of Sunni Wahhabism, which was a driving force in the creation of the Saudi political system. Wahhabism is not considered a distinct Islamic sect, and Saudi Arabia has been able to export its influence to other societies as well.

Historical Foundation of Saudi Arabia and Iran as Politico-Religious Entities

The Wahhabiyya movement, a Muslim fundamentalist movement, emerged in the Najd region of the Arabian Peninsula in the 18th century as the brainchild of Muhammad Ibn Abdal-Wahhab, a Hanbali theologian. As part of his ideology, Muhammad Ibn Abdal-Wahhab believed in absolute monotheism or oneness with Allah regarding one's personality, character, and action (*Tawheed*). Wahhabism's beliefs are also derived from the views of the theologian Ibn Taymiyyah, according to whom any Muslim could become a *kafir* or infidel if they do not practice their religious obligations or duties, such as praying five times a day, fasting, pilgrimage, alms-giving, et cetera, due to laziness or apathy. He also declared war on certain standard practices in the Arabian Peninsula.

Firstly, he detested and forbade any Muslim to pray in a tomb or *Dargah* of any saint, because the core of Wahhabism is the belief that Islam only permits monotheism, and therefore, praying to any other associate of Allah, especially Sufi saints, is considered haram. An example of how his views translated to Saudi society was when the tomb of Zayd Ibn al-Khattab was destroyed by followers of Wahhabism in the village of Uyaynah to deter Muslims from visiting his grave, resulting in the Wahabis being termed as 'temple and tomb destroyers' in Western literature. Secondly, the Wahabis also frowned upon *hurafah* or superstitions such as wearing amulets, sorcery, visiting fortune tellers, adorning mosques and shrines, et cetera, as they consider these practices as going against the Islamic creed. Abdal-Wahhab was also adamant in interpreting the Hadith based on elucidating the first three generations of the Muslim community, or Salaf, and did not adhere to any other interpretations made

by later clerics or scholars. Thus, for Wahabis, any reform or re-interpretation of Islam is unacceptable and often considered blasphemous.

The ulema (religious clerics and the descendants of Abdul-Wahhab and his disciples) have been propagating the Wahhabi doctrine under the tutelage of Mohammed Bin Saud, who founded the first Saudi state in the 18th century and ruled a small town called Diriyah in the Najd region. In order to extend his rule over the entire Bedouin tribes of the Arabian Peninsula and to notice the growing influence of Wahhabism in the Saudi Peninsula, Mohammed Bin Saud entered into a pact with Abdal-Wahhab. Under this pact, power was divided into two realms - the political power would remain in the hands of the House of Saud, whilst the religious power would remain in the hands of Abdul-Wahhab and his disciples. Such an arrangement has made sure that Saudi Arabia will not turn into a theocratic state.

The impact of this pact made sure that the existing Bedouin tribes of the Arabian Peninsula were now forced to follow a foreign leader and were subjected to the control of an outside Imam (Muslim community leader) rather than being able to follow their own religious beliefs. The tribal leaders, in exchange for bringing their tribes within this dual-fold of Bin Saud and Abdul-Wahhab, gained material and status-raising benefits from the former. Mohammed Bin Saud furthered his powers by using the Bedouin tribes of the Najd region under the religious legitimacy provided by Wahhabism as part of his expansionist wars across Saudi Arabia. Abdal-Wahhab also played his part by issuing a fatwa against any practice that differed from Wahhabism and prohibiting any opposition to the current political rulers by declaring that it was forbidden by Islam.

As the state continued to grow under the partnership of the House of Saud and Abdul-Wahhab, it slowly replaced the spoils of war with taxes to be paid by their subjects, and Mohammed Bin Saud's successors grew from mere tribal leaders to the leaders of a religious-political entity that shaped the current Saudi elite known as Najdi-Wahhabis. The elite Islamic clerics have continued to use Wahhabism to impose their religious views on the people of Saudi Arabia since these views act as a way to protect their status, power, and interests in a society where religion is still considered the highest legitimate power. For instance, in Saudi Arabia, the only way any Muslim would be considered a good and pure Muslim and not a heretic, irrespective of their sect or ethnicity, is once they adopt and follow only the "true interpretation of Islam," that is, Wahhabism. This, in turn, requires their complete loyalty to the political rulers, who are the guardians of the faith, and prohibits any opposition to the political authority since enmity towards the rulers is considered enmity towards Allah. Thus, Wahhabism succeeded in turning the positions of both the political head of the state and the religious head into extremely powerful religious institutions that can never be defied because defiance of these entities directly translated to defiance against the religion (Alrebh, 2017).

Iran, in comparison, is a theocracy with a Shia majority. The head of the state, the Ayatollah, is an Islamic cleric or ulema - and every decision, every action, and every legislation needs to be derived directly from the Shariah. The Shia clergy are the most significant, influential, and highest form of authority in the country, they directly propagate the teachings of Allah through the political structure

of the society. This powerful clergy emerged when the Safavid dynasty (1502-1722) made Shi'ism the official religion of the Persian Empire, and taking advantage of the subsequent turbulent Iranian history, the Shiite clerics acquired a considerable degree of independence from the state and started playing a crucial role in the country's affairs (Moazami, 2011).

Throughout the reign of the centralised, modernised, and militarised bureaucratic Pahlavi regime of the 1920s, the ulema transformed itself into a distinct force. Several practices, such as *ta'ziyyah*, or a passion play that commemorates the martyrdom of Al-Husayn and his family, as well as visiting the shrines and tombs of local Shia leaders - a practice that is considered heretic by Wahabis of Saudi Arabia, began during this period, mainly at the counsel of the Shia clerics. These activities also coincided with the escalation of debates between the Shia scholars in Iraq and Iran regarding the role of the clergy in interpreting Islamic precepts. During this debate, one group of scholars reiterated that the only legal interpretation should be based on the teachings of the twelve Imams. In contrast, the group that won the debate, called the *Uṣūliyyah*, held that despite countless fundamental sources (*usul*) that need to be consulted, the final source for any legal interpretation of the Islamic verses must remain in the reasoned judgement of a qualified Shia theologian or scholar (clergy), called the *mujtahid*.

The idea of the *mujtahid* became especially prominent after the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, wherein Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the revolution and the political and religious head of the state, was both a *mujtahid* and a *Marja* (source to follow), thereby cementing him as the ultimate source of religious wisdom and authority. This enhanced position of the Shia clergy in Iranian society also made sure that now the clergy had the power and the backing to act as representatives of the Hidden Imam (final of the twelve Imams, who require total obedience and loyalty, and it is the primary duty of every Muslim to follow him).

Incorporation of religion into the political structure of Iran and Saudi Arabia

Soon after the Islamic revolution, on April 1, Iran was declared an Islamic Republic, and a series of changes followed that differed significantly from the Reza Shah regime. The Ayatollah-led theocracy of Iran approved a new constitution based on Shiite principles, interpreted by the clergy, who named Khomeini as the de-facto religious and political head of Iran for life. The Family Protection Act of 1967, which provided rights and guarantees to women in marriage, was abrogated. As a result, women were denied equal rights as men in divorce and custody and were required to wear a veil in public mandatorily. Shariah laws were deemed ultimate in civil or political society, and often brutal punishments were reinstated.

Iran is a theocracy, which means that its complex and unorthodox political system combines elements of both modern Islamic religious hierarchies with democracy, with a vast network of elected and non-elected institutions influencing the decision-making process in the power structure. At the very top of this politico-religious system lies the Supreme Leader, i.e., the Ayatollah, who is usually chosen from among the senior members of the ulema. He is also the *de facto* leader of the executive. The Ayatollah performs a host of other functions, such as overseeing the military as well as the appointment of

military and judicial leaders, supervising the constitution, which is written and often revised per the Shariah laws, and creating all the state's policies. He also appoints the senior commanders of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards.

An eighty-six-member body comprising senior clergymen known as the Assembly of Experts elects the Supreme Leader. The assembly is charged with reviewing the work of the Supreme Leader. It can, in principle, dismiss him from office, but such an event has never happened, mainly due to the increasing powers of the Supreme Leader over the years. Due to the closed nature of the Iranian government system and the fact that all notes of the assembly's biannual meetings are confidential, it is not possible to determine how carefully the assembly monitors the activities of the Supreme Leader.

The only two bodies in Iran that are elected by the people directly through Universal Adult Franchise are the posts of the president and the majlis (parliament). The president is officially the leader of the executive, but in reality, his position is second to that of the Supreme leader. Iran's president is elected for four years, with the requirement being that he must be a Shiite Muslim. The powers of the president have varied over the years, with many observers speculating that the political whims of the Supreme leader take precedence over almost every decision of the president (Bruno, 2008). The majlis, or the parliament, is a 290-member body of deputies who represent Iran's thirty provinces. They are tasked with introducing and passing legislation. The members are elected for four-year terms, and five seats are reserved for religious minorities. However, the approval of the candidates by the Council of Guardians (the most influential body in Iran) is more important than the approval by the people (Bruno, 2008).

The most influential body controlling the Iranian state is the unelected yet extremely powerful Council of Guardians (CoG), which comprises twelve members - six theologians appointed directly by the Supreme Leader and six jurists approved by the majlis. They review all legislation passed by the parliament as well as candidates for election as per Islamic law, thereby overriding the powers of the Parliament and once again reiterating the supremacy of religion over the political system of Iran. Some of their interventions include - in the 1980s, the CoG forcefully intervened to prevent laws passed by the parliament regarding land reforms. In 2002, they also rejected legislation that would have limited the use of forced confessions in criminal trials.

The Supreme Court of Iran is the highest judicial body in the state. Its members are chosen by the head of the judiciary and appointed directly by the Supreme Leader. A Special Clerical Court is also explicitly established to try the clergy members for various crimes, including 'ideological offenses'. The Supreme Leader oversees it and has managed to silence many clerics who have criticised the regime's policies over the years.

In comparison, *Saudi Arabia* is a monarchy. There is a complete lack of any democratic structures within the political framework of the country (except elections at the municipality level), mainly because democratic ideals are not compatible with Wahhabism. The Kingdom had never written a constitution other than the Basic Law of the Government document, which provides guidelines for running the government and the rights and responsibilities of the citizens. Since the kingdom is a

monarchy, the king holds absolute political power and has the unrestricted right to assign and dismiss ministers and judges. The three crucial ministries of defence, interior, and foreign affairs, and the thirteen regional governorships are all held by members of the Saud family. The king is also the prime minister and the protector of the two holy mosques of Islam, namely the Al-Haram Mosque in Mecca and the Prophet's Mosque in Medina. The legislative body called the Consultative Council, established in 1991, is supposed to be the legislative branch, yet it has limited powers and only symbolic authority. It is the king who has the ultimate power to appoint or dismiss members of the government, include whoever he wants in the council meetings, and also choose the topics of discussion.

Other than the king, it is the Wahhabi ulema who exercises enormous power and influence over the political system of Saudi Arabia. The Council of Senior Scholars was established by a royal decree in 1971, is the head of the official religious establishment, and advises the king on all religious matters. The king appoints the council, and the government pays the members their salaries. Such is the power of this council that in 2010, King Abdullah declared that only the members of the council, as well as a few selected Islamic scholars, could issue a *fatwa* in Saudi Arabia. The council often provides religious support for government policies and rarely opposes them. Similar to the ulema in Iran, the Wahhabi ulema are also the ultimate interpreters of the Shariah. They also control the Ministry of Islamic Affairs Endowments, the Ministry of Justice, and the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (religious police).

The Supreme Judicial Council ranks second in the ulema hierarchy and was established in 1975. It is the main reference point for the judges of the kingdom. It addresses significant issues that ordinary courts cannot address, such as capital punishment cases, which should only be handed out per the Shariah law and can, therefore, be only interpreted by the ulema. In the third place comes the specialised religious ministries, with some of the important ones being the Ministry of Justice and the Religious Affairs ministries, as well as several independent religious bodies like the Council for Enjoining Good and Forbidding Evil, the Muslim World League, the International Islamic Jurisprudence Forum, et cetera. Other than these specialized religious bodies, all the other ministries of the Kingdom must be involved in extracurricular religious activities. For instance, the Saudi Armed Forces have a Moral Guidance Administration founded and operated by Sunni clerics, which consists mainly of graduates from religious colleges headed by the ulema. The Ministry of Education is also one of the leading employers of religious college graduates tasked with teaching religious education across the Kingdom's schools (Alsaif, 2013).

The Najdi-Wahhabis today control all the vital ministries and institutions, with the elites within the group controlling the most important positions. As of 2016, the Najdi-Wahhabis hold around 90% of the country's ministerial positions. They also enjoy a majority in the Consultative Council, thereby cementing them firmly as the second most crucial decision-making body of the state and the most important body in terms of religion. They also control other vital ministries like Municipal and Rural Affairs, Finance, Health, Education, and the Ministries of Interior, Defence, and Foreign Affairs. However, in practice, the Wahabis tend to limit their authority to religious teaching and jurisprudence and usually leave the political authority to the king and his deputies. They only intervene in

government matters if the king asks them to. Nevertheless, they form the ultimate supporting force of the Royal Family, which can be witnessed by the fact that every senior member of the royalty surrounds themselves with a group of loyal adherents from the Najdi-Wahhabi lineage. Thus, it will not be wrong to assume that although ultimate authority over the country and the government lies with the king, the ulema comes second in legitimising the government and possesses a mutually interdependent relationship.

Therefore, it has been observed that despite having completely different political systems with opposing sects, both Saudi Arabia and Iran have certain similarities that are rooted in the religion of Islam. While religion takes precedence over every matter of politics, law, and society in Iran, in Saudi Arabia, religion is an instrument that tends to be used by the political elite to keep the society under its control. While Iran does display some democratic ideas, even on paper, Saudi Arabia does not even pretend to do so since yielding away any democratic rights to the people could translate to the House of Saud losing its influence over the country.

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