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## Political Economy of Religion: Maintaining State Legitimacy through Religious Discourse in the Arab Gulf

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

POLITICAL ECONOMY OF RELIGION:  
MAINTAINING STATE LEGITIMACY THROUGH RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE IN  
THE ARAB GULF

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

by

Lana Shehadeh

2021

To: Dean John F. Stack, Jr.  
Green School of International and Public Affairs

This dissertation, written by Lana Shehadeh, and entitled Political Economy of Religion: Maintaining State Legitimacy through Religious Discourse in the Arab Gulf, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this dissertation and recommend that it be approved.

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Ronald Cox

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Eric Lob, Major Professor

Date of Defense: October 8, 2021

The dissertation of Lana Shehadeh is approved.

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Dean John F. Stack, Jr.  
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Andrés G. Gil  
Vice President for Research and Economic Development  
and Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2021

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## DEDICATION

To my beloved parents, Nadera and Lutfi Shehadeh, for their relentless love, prayers, and support.

A special thank you to Dr. Nancy Shehadeh, my sister and best friend, who encouraged me to take on this program and challenge myself. Thank you to my brother and partner in crime Jalal Jay Shehadeh who pushed me during my darkest and most difficult times. A thank you to my niece and fellow doctoral student, Layaly Shihadeh, who has listened to my complaints and encouraged me throughout the journey.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION  
POLITICAL ECONOMY OF RELIGION:  
MAINTAINING STATE LEGITIMACY THROUGH RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE IN  
THE ARAB GULF

by

Lana Shehadeh

Florida International University, 2021

Miami, Florida

Professor Eric Lob, Major Professor

Contrary to the popular belief in IR that religion has no place within the political sphere, religion has been an integral part of the political and social fabric of the Middle East since the advent of Islam. States in the Arab Gulf, more specifically, have used religion and the religious establishment (Ulama) to proactively encourage support from the public when trying to permit or prohibit policies that would benefit or undermine state interests and objectives. For these states, religious discourse has become an essential tool to legitimate their authority and policies. By exploring this trend more closely, my dissertation fills a lacuna in the extant literature on the state-sponsored religious establishment in the Middle East and Arab Gulf by focusing on the role of religious elites or clerics in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and their attempt to use religion to influence public opinion toward the state domestically and regionally. In many cases, but not all, the ulama have become state-sponsored agents and have contributed to the dynamics of politics in the region being intertwined with interpretations of Islam and vice versa. Using a mixed-methods approach, I explore and

compare the historical development of each state and the role of the religious establishment within the political sphere. I also use content analysis to examine religious sermons delivered by Saudi clerics sponsored by the Al-Saud as well as transnational ones sponsored by the UAE. These sermons illustrate the rhetoric and efforts of the religious establishment to appease political elites and galvanize the population in their favor. Finally, in the case of Saudi Arabia, I quantitatively correlate religious and sectarian discourse with public opinion data surrounding trust in government and perceptions of policies.

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## INTRODUCTION

For nearly four centuries, in the heart of the Ottoman lands, the Caliph and his sultans embodied the inherent existence of political and religious legitimacy. In the empire, there were good sultans and bad ones, some of whom were corrupt and others who were not; however, there was functional unanimity, even among the largely self-governed minority, that the sultan had the right to govern (Hoffman, 2015; Linaz & Chehabi, 1998). Although the empire unraveled for various reasons, parts of the region are still governed, a century later, by monarchs who have been in power for exceptionally long periods (Salamey, 2009; Bellin, 2005; Linaz & Chehabi, 1998; Huntington S. P., 1991). Among these monarchs are the leadership of both Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (herein “UAE”), who have maintained their rule and established strong economies in the region since as early as the establishment of each state.<sup>1</sup> Given their unique longevity of rule and the religious role they play in the region, notably the Saudi Kingdom as the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, the leadership of both states is the epitome of exceptional monarchs who have capitalized on state-constructed religious “soft power”<sup>2</sup> politics in an attempt to attract the masses domestically and regionally (Mandaville & Hamid, 2018; Gause II & Yom, 2012). Both states have sought to maximize the appeal of religion in the region and have, thus, sponsored *Ulama*<sup>3</sup> (religious clerics) to use their platforms to improve public opinion and increase state legitimacy.

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<sup>1</sup> Saudi Arabia became independent in 1932, while the UAE in 1971.

<sup>2</sup> Soft Power is a persuasive approach within IR used to describe a state’s cultural or economic influence as opposed to hard power, which alludes to military might (Nye Jr, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Ulama: علماء Is an Arabic word to describe scholar, its literal translation is "the learned one." In most instances, it references the religious scholars and guardians of Islamic Jurisprudence and knowledge. They are considered the learned ones responsible for transmitting religious knowledge to the public.

While previous literature (Parsons, 1974; Weber, 1993; Hurd, 2009; Casanova, 2011) contends that religion has had a limited and obscure role in the state, what explains its prevalence in the region, and how does the state use its resources to sponsor it?

To address this question, I will examine, through a constructivist lens, the use of religion and religious discourse among Ulama as a source of domestic and regional legitimacy during times of both political (e.g., Arab Spring) and economic prosperity and adversity. This ideational policy and discourse became increasingly sectarian in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia after 1979 when the Kingdom faced domestic challenges by Saudi Islamists (Mecca Mosque seizure) and regional challenges by establishing the Islamic Republic of Iran. After the Arab Spring, for both UAE and Saudi Arabia, the discourse concentrated on obedience and the importance of keeping the public peace to challenge political Islam. While existing as early as 1928, if not before, with the founding of the Muslim Brotherhood, political Islam remained popular and made electoral gains during and after the Arab Spring uprisings or revolutions of 2010-11. Furthermore, both states used the platform of the religious establishment to emphasize the normalization of relations with Israel as a move to accommodate regional peace and benefit the elites on both sides. These critical junctures have shaped the sociopolitical rhetoric of state-sponsored ulama during times of political transformation and economic fluctuation.

In this dissertation, I explore the historical development of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and the religious discourse adopted by each state through its Ulama. A significant divergence in each state's approach to the religious establishment is the degree of orthodoxy. The Saudis have sponsored traditionalist or orthodox, local Ulama in an attempt to maintain their support and domestic legitimacy. The latter, at times, extends

regionally due to the transnationality of many Saudi Ulama through their connection to Mecca and Medina – the two holiest sites of Islam. The UAE, on the other hand, has maintained support for Ulama that have Sufi transnational tendencies. This approach reflects the state’s eagerness to gain and maintain legitimacy on a broader scale beyond Sunnis in the Middle East and Muslim world. For the Emiratis, the Sufi element aids in their approach to redefining the meaning of Islam with a significant emphasis on tolerance and moderation.

## **I. Research Question**

In this dissertation, I debunk the popular belief in IR that religion has no place within the political sphere of the state – a point discussed in greater detail in the scholarly contribution of this chapter and in chapter 1 of the dissertation. In the Middle East, and as early as the advent of Islam in the region, religion has been a fabric of every aspect of society, including the political. Religious discourse, thus, becomes an essential tool in legitimizing authority and state policies depending on the context. Most of the literature on the religious establishment has failed to examine the actual religious discourse used to attempt to legitimize the state (see the section below and chapter 1 for more details). As a result, this study seeks to fill the lacuna by challenging and complementing the long-standing theory of rentierism, secularization, and modernization theory, as well as the modern Middle East scholarly literature addressing legitimacy. In this dissertation, I examine the role of the religious establishment and *Ulama* within the Gulf, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, more specifically, through the religious discourse transmitted regionally and globally in their attempt to use their platform to affect public opinion toward the state. In many cases, but not all, the ulama become state-sponsored agents in which the

dynamics of politics within the region become intertwined with the interpretation of Islam or vice versa.

Here I use a mixed-methods approach to examine this trend. First, I use content analysis to explore religious sermons delivered by clerics in Saudi Arabia and the UAE and their use of religious discourse to attempt to affect change. I analyze such discourse to examine patterns of communication in a non-invasive systematic manner. Instead of using surveys and in-depth interviews pushing interviewees to answer questions that may serve as prompts, content analysis allows me to examine such patterns as they are. To do so, I use qualitative software known as Atlas TI which assists in coding and annotating primary data to evaluate patterns and themes within the religious discourse used by Ulama. Moreover, I quantitatively examine public opinion data around trust in government and perceptions of policies in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (due to the lack of public opinion data available in the UAE). The main question I explore is: During times of political transformations and economic fluctuations, what role has religion and religious discourse played in legitimizing authority in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates?

Using discourse analysis, a qualitative methodology, I take on a constructivist approach to emphasize the predominance of religion, its discourse, and the *Ulama* in regional politics and the continued role religion has played in the sociopolitical sphere of the Middle East. As its name reveals or implies, constructivism is an IR school of thought that frames the world through a socially constructed reality. Hence, a constructivist would argue that the Ulama, who are sponsored by the state, use their platform as a mode of influence or at least attempt to influence. In understanding Ulama's role as a mode of

influence, I explore their role as an essential ideational pillar of power within a state, as prescribed by the constructivist school of thought and, more specifically, social constructivism. I also explore how Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia and the UAE use the Ulama as a soft power tool or mechanism to project power in the region and beyond. After exploring the historical development of each state's use of religion as a tool of the state, I explore actual sermons given by *Ulama* in each state, illustrating the discourse used in an attempt to legitimate state authority.

However, it is crucial to understand that religion within the Middle East and elsewhere is a dynamic phenomenon that evolves and can be instrumentalized by religiopolitical elites in an attempt to affect change. This assertion complicates the essentialist understanding that religion is static and is timeless within the region and beyond. It does not contest the fact that Islam is a belief system and the Ulama do, at times, approach it with a sincere longing for spiritual connection for themselves and their followers. Thus, religiopolitical elites may be engaging with Islam not just for the sake of political pragmatism but also as a belief system that conforms with their personal values and worldview.

The factors I address in this study are ideational and constructivist and rely significantly on identity elements. Here, I use a constructivist approach to investigate primarily the role of religion and its use as a tool to appeal to the masses. The primary dependent variable observed would be the question of legitimacy (Dependent Variable herein 'DV') with independent variables observed as factors contributing to the legitimacy such as religiosity and the role of the state as the "Custodian of the Holy Sites" used as a means of appeal, sectarian politics, and the securitization of the Shia (Independent

Variable herein 'IV'), while examining economic prosperity and austerity as intervening variables. The economic outcome (Interaction Variable herein 'IIV'), as an intervening variable, will be measured through the fluctuations in the economy and how it may impact religious identity politics and sectarianism in the Kingdom.

## **II. Scholarly Contribution**

Although religion, as a factor in world politics, has had a limited role in IR theory due to the emphasis put on science, rationality, and secularism (Van der Veer, 1994); Constructivist IR literature provides fertile grounds for its development because of the importance placed on identity, norms, ideas, and culture. Alexander Wendt's state-centric approach to understanding IR can be applied to accommodate the role of religion by tracing the impact of religious norms, state policies, identities, and state policies and language used (Wendt, 1999). However, it is essential to note that religion's role in establishing state legitimation, both domestically and regionally, is complex. For Nexon (2009), religion works as a complex discursive field in which political claims play out in a process that involves religious conviction and strategic calculation in a shifting configuration of transnational allegiances (Nexon, 2009). Here, religion is instrumentalized and utilized by the state and its religious establishment. This draws attention to the importance of religious-based norms and their use in establishing and strengthening transnational advocacy networks instead of their analogous secular norms, specifically in the context of the Middle East. More importantly, however, it draws attention to the importance of language and discourse in establishing religious norms, traditions, and beliefs. Hence, if a specific state-sponsored religious cleric uses his or her platform to establish the ruler's authenticity and legitimacy in place through both

religious texts and traditions, it becomes a religiously prohibited act to oppose such a ruler. Some Ulama, who hold high positions in the religious and political establishments, use sharia to make legally binding claims that provide ideational support and cover to state or government policies.

In this study, I show how religion has always been a significant force in international relations, more specifically in the international relations of the Middle East. I illustrate its role as a means in establishing and strengthening domestic and transnational alliances and legitimation and the state's use of religious clerics to strengthen that conviction. Through the historical narrative of the state's development in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, I do so through the real-life sermons given by Ulama and television preachers sponsored by either state. These sermons have never been empirically analyzed to understand the attempt they make at affecting public opinion in favor of the state.

Scholars like Nevo (1998) and Al-Rasheed (1996) contend that religion has played a transformational role in the politics of the Arabian Gulf and, more specifically, for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, for which religion represents a source of legitimacy. Both scholars recognize the strong tensions created by a self-proclaimed religious state that has modernized in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (Nevo, 1998; Al-Rasheed, 1996). Similarly, Mabon (2013) recognizes the religious legitimacy of the Saudi state and the changes in its ideology and discourse after certain political events in the state's history, such as the Iranian revolution (Mabon, 2013).<sup>4</sup> Okruhlik (2002) echoes similar

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<sup>4</sup> Although tension existed between the two states before the revolution, state rhetoric and fear of an exported Shi'a revolution by the Iranian state increased significantly after 1979 (Mabon, 2013).

views but highlights the weakening position of the Ulama.<sup>5</sup> (Okruhlik, 2002). Okruhlik's (2002) argument conforms to or is consistent with modernization theory, which assumes and predicts a diminished role of religion in states and modernizing societies (Bernstein, 1971; Dibua, 2017). Zaman (2002), on the other hand, thoroughly examines the role of the Middle Eastern Ulama in politics and society and finds evidence to support an important, though shifting role for the Ulama even in more modern times (Zaman, 2010). This shifting role does not only exist in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, but according to al-Azami (2019), the UAE has also made a significant effort to sponsor scholars and affect public opinion at home and in the region. According to al-Azami, the Arab Spring was a significant transitional juncture in the active use of religious discourse to influence the populace domestically and regionally. This specifically took place as the UAE felt the need to fend off the threat of political Islam, challenging the existence of monarchs regionally (al-Azami, 2019). None of these scholars, however, trace the economic fluctuations -busts and booms- of a state and its correlation to a state-constructed use of religion for domestic and regional legitimation, nor do they contrast the role of religion as a domestic and foreign policy instrument during political junctures of the state's history. To complement the literature, my dissertation adds to or builds upon the literature that examines the role of religion in Middle East politics, IR, and state-society relations (Feuer, 2014; Helfont, 2018). In this dissertation, I further contribute to this literature by analyzing the publicly available sermons of ulama that have been broadcasted on Middle Eastern satellite channels and how the state uses these sermons to legitimate itself and its policies.

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<sup>5</sup> Ulama (علماء) translates into the learned ones and usually refers to religious scholars (Bligh, 1985).

### **III. Research Tools and Methodology**

To ensure reliability and internal consistency, I employ a mixed-methods approach. First, to grasp the extent to which the government uses religion as a tool of appeal to its populace and regional religious sentiment, I historically narrate the formation of each state and its use of religion (IV) as a tool to advance its legitimacy (DV). The analysis explores the historical development of each state while concentrating on crucial political junctures. For the Saudi state, the oil embargo (1973), the Iranian revolution (1979), the Arab Spring (2011), and the recent move toward normalization with Israel (2020) have all served as crucial junctures contributing to the development of religious discourse in support of state policies. For the UAE, however, the critical political junctures have been the establishment of political Islam in the region and the state's redefinition of Islam (pre-2011), the Arab Spring (2011), and the bold move by the UAE to sign the Abraham Accords normalizing relations with Israel (2020). I will discuss the political economy of the state and trace its linkages to the use of religion by the state as a soft power mechanism to appeal to national and regional populations.

Secondly, to properly examine the religious discourse used by state-sponsored preachers, I collect a sample of sermons from Saudi clerics and a sample from UAE-sponsored clerics, all of which use their platform to affect the public opinion around a specific state policy. Although Saudi Arabia relies primarily on local clerics with high-ranking positions within the state's religious establishment, such clerics have transnational influence due to their positions concerning the holiest sites in Islam. Many are traditional orthodox clerics with somewhat of a rigid outlook on Islam. The UAE, on the other hand, sponsors transnational, mostly Sufi and traditional global Ulama who emphasize, through their sermons, the importance of tolerance, peace, and understanding.

Both states have strategically selected their star clerics to sway public opinion toward the state and its policies.

The sermons were available publicly through YouTube in the Arabic language. These sermons were selected based on topic availability and popularity of the sermon. After collecting the relevant sermons, I transcribed and then translated all the sermons and subsequently entered them into a qualitative analysis software known as Atlas TI. The software connected excerpts from the sermons based on the relevant themes explored. The excerpts, along with the sermons in their totality, were analyzed to connect themes to the political junctures established in the historical development of each state. These themes also helped analyze the religious actors and discourse/rhetoric used by the states to promote their policies and the direction in which their foreign policy was trending.

Third, using data from the oil-rich state of Saudi Arabia, I concentrated on a snapshot of public opinion through data collected by the fourth wave of the Arab Barometer (Tessler et al., 2011). To my knowledge, this is the only publicly accessible opinion data available to date from Saudi Arabia. Unfortunately, similar quality data from the UAE was not available and thus left a significant gap in the analysis of the UAE. I used a multivariate linear regression model to explore the relationship between the independent variable "sectarianism" toward Shi'a Saudi citizens (IV, religious component or identity politics), a composite variable created by merging two variables measuring intolerance toward Shi'a populations in Saudi Arabia, the dependent variable "trust in government," used to replicate the concept of the legitimacy of authority in the Kingdom (DV). An interaction variable measuring "economic perceptions," which measures

current economic perceptions and future economic perceptions(IIIV). Sectarianism becomes essential to address due to its relevance in the history of the development of the Saudi state. It would be challenging to avoid such a hot topic in Saudi politics and religiopolitical propaganda. Finally, interviews were conducted with experts throughout the region to understand and gauge their opinions regarding each state and the political junctures of that given state. These interviews filled any gaps in the data and information collected.

#### **IV. Chapter Outline**

This dissertation is divided into six chapters, as well as an introduction and conclusion. Chapter 1, "Religion and the Political Economy of State," explores the role of religion in IR and specifically its role in the Middle Eastern region. It explores the specific use of religious discourse in the region through a constructivist lens. This theme and scholarly contribution of my dissertation will be discussed at length. Chapter 2, "Formation of the Saudi State: Leader of the Muslim World," provides a brief historical overview of the case study used, Saudi Arabia, and its relevance to this study. In this chapter, I explore the different political junctures within the Kingdom as it applies to the use of religious discourse to affect change. In this chapter, I specifically ask to what extent the Saudi state affects public opinion through the sponsorship of Ulama? I address this question by performing a content analysis of clerical sermons and a quantitative analysis of public opinion data in Saudi Arabia. In chapter 3, "Saudi State Sponsorship of Religious Discourse," I analyze the actual sermons of Saudi clerics and show how they have used their platforms in an attempt to affect change among the general Muslim populace as well as the domestic Saudi populace. In chapter 3, I specifically explore how

clerics within the Kingdom use their platform and discourse to influence public opinion among their followers. Then, in chapter 4, "Sectarianism and the Kingdom," I examine the use of sectarianism as a tactic by the Saudi state through public opinion data collected during the fourth wave of the Arab Barometer. I, thus, examine sectarianism as a state-policy trend. This chapter complements the literature on sectarianism by establishing actual trends based on public opinion data and empirical evidence. In chapter 5, "Emirati State Development and Formation," I readjust my concentration to examining the religious establishment in the United Arab Emirates. I examine the historical development of the state and the political and economic transformation of the UAE from a tribal state to a regional power. Throughout its development, I argue that the UAE has concentrated on advancing its own political and economic influence and agenda in the region. I explore how the Emirate government attempts to use its religious establishment to soften its image regionally and globally while also appealing to the populace as a legitimate monarchy. In chapter 6, "Clerical Discourse and the Emirati State," I analyze the sermons delivered by state-sponsored clerics and preachers in the UAE, decipher the thematic patterns of these sermons, and connect them to the political junctures established and described in the historical development chapter (chapter 5). I specifically explore how religious clerics in the UAE use their platform and discourse to influence public opinion domestically and regionally. Lastly, in conclusion, I present my final thoughts on the research conducted throughout this dissertation. This study illustrates the striking difference in both states' attempts to use religious discourse to affect change among the populace. For the Al-Sauds, there has been a concentration on local state-sponsored Ulama who promote the concepts of obedience to the state, orthodox

religiosity, and the importance of Sunni Islam as a righteous path to God. By contrast, the Emirate leadership relies more on transnational Ulama, who advocate the importance of tolerance, peace, and apolitical religiosity. Both states, however, use such methods to gain legitimacy and support from the populace and maintain the leadership's status quo while also using religion to justify new policies and deal with change and adversity.

## CHAPTER 1 RELIGION AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF STATE

"Those who believe that politics and religion do not mix, understand neither"

- Albert Einstein

Although it is perceived that religion and the state have retained separate spheres throughout the modern history of nation-states. The general contention involves an ongoing examination of whether religion has a role to play in public life and the extent of that role. In the Middle East, its role has been prominent and has been utilized by state elites as a tool to advance their own political and economic interests. It has been a fabric of society since as early as the introduction of Islam in the region. Even countries with claims to democratic tendencies are inheritors of the Ottoman system of governing and are, thus, structured in ways making religion the grammar of politics. For the Middle East, and more specifically the Gulf region, states have used religion and religious clerics *Ulama* to proactively permit or prohibit acts that would benefit or damage the objectives of the state. Religious discourse, thus, becomes an essential tool in legitimizing authority and state policies depending on the context. In many cases, but not all, the *ulama* become state-sponsored agents in which the dynamics of politics within the region become intertwined with the interpretation of Islam or vice versa. Hence, religion becomes closely linked to the understanding of the wider political landscape of the region. That does not mean that politics, ultimately and conclusively, determines religious interpretation and Islamic jurisprudence. However, it can be said that both mutually impact one another to different gradations depending on the relative power of each within the historical context.

In this chapter, I emphasize the predominance of religion, its discourse, and the *Ulama* in regional politics and the continued role religion has played in the sociopolitical sphere of the Middle East. In understanding the ulama's role as a mode of influence, I explore their role as a substantial ideational power within a state as prescribed by the constructivist school of thought, and more specifically social constructivism. I also explore how Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia and the UAE use the ulama as a soft power tool to project power in the region and beyond. In many instances, these Ulama are not automatous from the state, rather they have become agents of the state in their effort to influence the public opinion of the masses and gain popular legitimacy for the monarch. Through this exploration, I establish that political elites use the ulama and support them financially to gain influence and legitimacy nationally and regionally. This, in most instances, is done through the assistance of Islamic religious scholars and their interpretation of religion, thus, affecting political influence regionally and transnationally. Before delving into the role of religion and *Ulama* within the Gulf region, specifically Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates which are the two case studies observed in this study; I explore the effect religion has on state formation, legitimation, and the advancement of the state's political and economic interests in a more general sense. Here, religion is treated as an independent variable and one explanation, among many others such as financial capital, tribal lineage, and western support, in understanding state legitimation and formation in the region (Al-Rasheed & Al-Rasheed, 1996; Cooper, 2012; Maisel, 2014; Samin, 2019). I then examine the role played by the *Ulama* in their use of religious discourse and their influence within the state along with their connection to the political and financial elites of the state. The main contribution of this project is

that it builds upon the scholarship on legitimacy by focusing more specifically on religion and the role of the Ulama in influencing public opinion toward the monarch. Throughout this study I use historical narratives through the method of process tracing, quantitative and qualitative data and empirical evidence in establishing the role of the Ulama, and their use of religious discourse, to legitimate the monarch or attempt to do so. In my analysis, I specifically ask how religion, and more specifically religious discourse and the *Ulama*, is used as an instrument in the effort of legitimating authority in the Middle East and Gulf region? I also ask how state petrodollars are specifically used within this endeavor?

This chapter is split into several sections, first I will discuss the role of religion within world politics and its place within traditional IR theory. Then, I will establish its ever-present role in Middle East politics, more specifically, and its role within governments. And finally, I will discuss its role using state-sponsored religious clerics in the Gulf region and how such agents use their platforms to influence state legitimation and power projection.

## **I. Religion and IR Theory**

Although religion has had a limited role in IR theory due to the emphasis put on science, rationality, and secularism (Van der Veer, 1994); Constructivist IR literature provides fertile grounds for its development due to the importance placed on ideational factors such as shared identity, norms, beliefs, ideas, and culture (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001; Jung, 2019). Accordingly, the importance and added value of constructivism in the study of IR lies particularly in its emphasis on both the “ontological reality of intersubjective knowledge” and the “epistemological and methodological implications of

this reality.” In sum, constructivists firmly believe that IR is made up of social constructs, which can exist only by human agreement (Adler, 1997). It is essential, however, to note that religion's role in establishing state legitimation, both domestically and regionally, is complex. For Nexon (2009), religion works as a complex discursive field in which political claims play out in a process that involves religious conviction and strategic calculation in a shifting configuration of transnational allegiances (Nexon, 2009).

Constructivism, and more specifically social constructivism, offers a significant lens in observing the relationship between religion and politics in the Middle East. Social constructivism, according to Sterling-Folker (2006), establishes that interests and identities depend on the context, whether it be social or political, in which they exist. Thus, identities can be socially constructed through tunnels of language or culture within a society's environment or nation-state. These tunnels establish a collective identity that is embedded over time so that alternative explanations become unimaginable. This established shared identity and allegiance form an actor's social context, and notions of right and wrong, feasibility, and legitimacy become ideas within an actor's conscious (Sterling-Folker, 2006).

The shared collective identity of Muslim Arabs in the Middle East consists of their attachment to religion (Islam), ethnicity (Arab-ness), and nationality (pre-Westphalia nation-state notions of tribalism and kindship). Many states in the Gulf region, more specifically, have used these components as persuasive tools in establishing and controlling the narrative and thus transforming it into a legitimizing tool within both domestic and foreign policy. In Saudi Arabia, for example, religion has played a significant, and at times primary, role in shaping the collective identity of the society

while consolidating sociopolitical norms and practices forced, to some extent, by the state apparatus (Nevo, 1998). Religious faith and loyalty to the authority and ruling family become primary ingredients to the establishment of a collective national identity.

In fact, since as early as the spread of Islam and the establishment of Islamic jurisprudence in the Muslim world; there has been the concept of Bay'ah (بَيْعَة). It translates into "Pledge of allegiance." It is a concept that prescribes an oath of allegiance to the leader of the ruling authority in place. It has been known to have been practiced by the Islamic prophet as well as the Caliphate to follow him. In some instances, Bay'ah can come in the form of a written contract or pact given on behalf of leading members within a specific tribe in which a mutual understanding is an exchange. The leader protects his constituents in exchange for allegiance to his authority. It is a concept still practiced in parts of the Muslim world such as Saudi Arabia, Morocco, and Sudan (Lesch, 2001).

In such states, the bond between the religious and the political become intertwined dictating the key role religious clerics hold within the state. This bond establishes the national identity and consistently serves to legitimize the place of the ruling authority. Although states in the Middle East are not always capable of fully controlling the religious narrative within the region, it nonetheless has a form of control over the salience of culture, religion, and ideas within the context of the emerging nation-state. In Muslim-majority countries, understanding the complex dynamics within Islam is closely linked to an understanding of the wider political context of the region. It is known that religious Islamic scholars adopt different interpretations of Islam whether it be through a political activist lens or the quietest lens. While in terms of schools of thought and traditions, there are scholars who are traditionalists, Salafists, or even progressivists.

Although scholars adopt different interpretations of Islam, the political authority also adopts a certain interpretation and, thus, sponsors scholars that agree both ideologically and politically with the state. It goes without stating that not all religious networks or scholars are sponsored by a given state, however, it must be noted that there are state-sponsored clerics that adopt religious discourse that agrees with the state. These scholars benefit politically and financially and are in return constrained by the state with their religious and scholarly discourse as it disseminates to the Muslim public located domestically, regionally, and internationally (Amasha, 2020).

In the mainstream Muslim society, at large, these scholars' roles increased in importance with the democratization of information and the ease in access due to social media networks and the like. Scholars used these platforms to explain complex religious concepts transforming their discourse into a powerful political ideational force benefitting the state.

Hence, for states, Islam as a religion represents a significant ideational power that can be used in the form of soft power politics as coined by Nye (2004). According to Nye (2004), religion in international relations is a persuasive form of power that can also be a double-edged sword for those who use it. For the Wahhabis, it may have served certain purposes in relation to the state, however, in the long run, it caused significant issues for the role of the Al-Sauds within the international community, specifically after the events of 9/11 (Nye, 1990).<sup>6</sup> Within the region, more specifically, being the Custodians of the Two Holy Sites places a significant amount of responsibility upon the state in being a pious political entity representing the morals of Islam and leading the Islamic Ummah.

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<sup>6</sup> For the Al-Sauds, 9/11 was a traumatic event not only due to its effect on the international community at large, however, but fifteen of the nineteen attackers were also Saudi nationals.

This status can be a liability in the event that the state, or in the case of the Al-Sauds, do not meet the Ummah's expectations, they are perceived as deviating from the pious principles which ultimately leads to accusations of hypocrisy and heresy. Soft power is the capability of a nation-state or entity to influence mass populations through persuasion and has recently become relevant to religion and the use of religion as a tool of persuasion (Haynes J., 2008; 2009). In association with the use of religion and religious discourse as a form of soft power, its ideational power and the importance established within speech and language become essential in understanding its role for the nation-state in the Middle East, both domestically and transnationally.

## **II. Legitimacy Due to Religion**

Although religion is not the only influence on politics in the region, its primary effect can be felt in the establishment of legitimacy within the state and the authority within the ruling class. It serves to lend legitimacy to governments presenting their reign over a population as the correct authority that should ultimately be obeyed (Fox, 2009). Traditionally in the Middle East, one of the primary sources of legitimacy is religion. It is in most instances the source of "macro-loyalty" as it generates the widest bond of commonly held values in the region (Razi, 1990; 75). Once that loyalty is felt within a community, legitimacy can easily be established for governments and authority. For Ian Hurd (1999), legitimacy is the "normative belief by an actor that a rule or institution ought to be obeyed (Hurd, 1999: 381). This obedience is defined by a social perception by the actor perceiving that specific authority in place is appropriately there and should be obeyed. According to Suchman (1995) "Legitimacy is a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some

socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). Hence, legitimacy contributes to the obedience of rules and the lack of obedience in the event that laws or rules conflict with that specific religious conviction (Hurd, 1999). Thus for governments, legitimation becomes the active creation of a feeling of correctness among its constituents to ensure proper adherence to laws and rules. As such, according to Jonathan Fox (2018), it is “one of the key reasons people obey rules and consider governments worthy of the ruling” (Fox, 2018: 59). According to Robert Dahl (1971) legitimacy is an essential element of government, without which said governments would likely collapse. This is even the case among autocratic regimes, in which force is the primary means of rule since such governments maintain legitimacy among the elites who assist in holding power among society. Even dictators need to legitimate their power to avoid military coups or public uprisings (Dahl, 1971). Hence, legitimacy’s active role is within the perception toward authority and the collective beliefs of a population. Legitimacy, however, does differ from national identity as it specifically connects the right for a group to rule in the eyes of their constituents; while national identity is a shared cohesive identity of a nation as represented by distinct traditions, language, and culture. Legitimacy is how people perceive a certain situation and how they, ultimately, evaluate the legitimacy or lack thereof a government in power. If citizens of a country think that a certain government, leader, policy, or even institution is legitimate, they will then choose to follow it. Legitimacy is one of the most powerful and efficient methods for governments to maintain power within a country (Fox, 2018; Nevo, 1998; Tallberg & Dellmuth, 2020).

Religion, for governments, justifies certain acts that may not necessarily have clear moral reasoning. In fact, in most instances, religion serves as subservience to the state and its ruling wishes. The Safavid empire, in what is known as modern-day Iran, for example, was able to make religion subservient to the empire's ends. Thus, it was used as an effective tool in centralizing power and building a strong and reliable economy with Shiism as the official religion of the state (Abrahamian, 1982; Arjomand, 1984; Platteau, 2008; Zaman & Hefner, 2007). Even nationalistic presidents in the Middle East, classified by many as a-religious, used religious cleric, and their mosques as a path to legitimacy and control. For Jamal Abdul Nasser, a pan-Arab leader known for a secular view of the region, Al-Azhar<sup>7</sup> and its scholars represented a central institution that would capture the hearts and minds of the populace. Thus, he attempted to solicit, amid his governments battle with the Muslim Brotherhood<sup>8</sup>, fatwas justifying his reign and his political policies within the state. His most famous effort to solicit a legitimizing fatwa from the clerics of Al-Azhar was the fatwa commanding the readmission of Shia Muslims, Alawis, and Druze into mainstream Islam. They had been, for years preceding this fatwa, considered heretics. Nasser attempted to put an end to such divisiveness to appeal to a wider populace in the Middle East and the Arab world at large, which in turn would establish his legitimacy. This effort also assisted in legitimizing the reign of the Alawis in Syria under the Asad regime (Aburish, 2004; Bayat, 1998).

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<sup>7</sup> Al-Azhar is one of the most prominent university in Egypt and specializes in theology. It is associated with the Al-Azhar mosque in Cairo.

<sup>8</sup> Nasser and the Muslim Brotherhood: Although the Muslim Brotherhood played a significant role in the revolution giving way to the Free Officer's Leadership in Egypt, however that relationship quickly soured after Nasser took office.

In religious societies, where religion is held with higher esteem and significance within the state and the public sphere, the typical task of religious elites is elevated to include the creation, modification, and maintenance of the religious symbolic realm within society. In most cases, they have significant control over the education system, socio-political gatherings, and family issues dealing with marriage, death, and inheritance. Studies observing the religious elite in the US during the 1960s found that clergy had a very important role in their communities and displayed active political leadership supporting or opposing political stances on certain issues. Their work invariably implied and continues to imply privilege and various degrees of political power (Gill & Keshavarzian, 1999; Kowalewski & Greil, 1990). Religion can therefore impart legitimacy to fundamental standards and practices within a society, by providing a shared framework and identity for a populace (May, Wilson, & Baumgart-Oc, 2014).

### **III. Government's Use of Religious Discourse and Beyond**

Religious discourse, however, can be a double-edged tool used by both governments and opposition groups. It is, thus, in the interest of the state to ensure proper adherence to religion. In most cases, this is done through early socialization which includes education, legislation, and even state-sponsored clerics featured on state television stations in the Middle East, more specifically. This early socialization includes proper adherence to the state's approved version of Islam and a strong grasp of a national identity. These television stations feature religious shows with preachers answering questions pertaining to religion, morality, and society. Those who closely observe the answers of the preachers, which will be illustrated in chapters 3 and 5 of this study, can easily detect direct and indirect messages praising the king or the government in place

and illustrating why, as devout Muslims, the society should respect and obey its authority. These messages are also seen in schoolbooks in topics such as geography and history in which the ruling family is portrayed as saviors and warriors who protect the rights of their constituents and who have ensured freedom for members of the society who otherwise would have never seen independence. There is, therefore, an essential role for religious elites in a social contract of what may be perceived as mutual support with political leaders in the state. This contract, however, is not necessarily equally mutual as explained by Zaman (2007) that in most instances, the state will thus use religious elites as tokens to push forward their interests ( Zaman & Hefner, 2007). State-sponsored religious elites are, thus, used to contribute to the development and dissemination of information using religion to legitimize authority in all avenues of society. Religious clerics contesting the state, however, tend to push back on the state-sponsored fatwas as well as policies associated with the theology in the state. Such clerics have been deemed enemies of the state, at times, and persecuted and repressed by its security apparatus as a result. Among them are two very prominent Saudi clerics, Salman al-Awda and Awad Al-Qarni, both of whom were members of the Al-Sahwa movement.<sup>9</sup> Both clerics were accused of inciting violence, however, others have stated that they were both critical of the current Saudi government and as a result were imprisoned on charges of incitement. According to reports, both clerics failed to sufficiently back the kingdom in its policies, including the isolation of Qatar (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

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<sup>9</sup> Al-Sahwa Movement was a politically active subgroup of the larger Saudi Salafi groups. It was initially involved in peaceful political reform. They were considered a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood and strongly opposed US presence in the Saudi Kingdom (Lacroix, 2014).

On a domestic level, more precisely, they cultivate a central role in the development and implementation of religious education. This is the case since the general education system is among the foremost means for reproducing and expanding religious culture and national identity within a state. It is also a significant means in the continuation of such influence on the socialization of citizens in the state. In Iran, for example, the 1979 Islamic revolution politically empowered political-religious elites significantly, specifically revolutionary clerics, although they had already held some form of sociopolitical power in a pre-revolutionary Iran (Künkler, 2009). Their role within the state increased significantly from the ability to veto any legislation within parliament that may be deemed un-Islamic to shaping Islamic education within the school curriculum. Consequently, their role expanded and eventually led to the establishment of a stronger political role within the state. They are not only responsible for the interpretation of legislation regarding civil and familial issues but are also significantly effective in the development and the proper establishment of the importance of religion and the state within the education system and its curriculum (Arjomand, 2004).

Similarly, the religious elites in Malaysia also held a significant role within the countryside social life. Their roles as teachers, scholars, and reinforcement of their role through marriage alliances; made them into significant elites within the state. Even with the rapid urbanization and modernization experienced by the state and the participation of youth within the government, religious elites are playing a key political role by expanding their influence in the state and readjusting religious customs and traditions to accommodate modernization (Nagata, 1982). The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is also seen as a prime example of religious elites with active roles in the socialization of citizens

from as early as their elementary education. Since even before the establishment of the Kingdom in 1932, it has developed, through the leadership of the religious elites, an imposed monolithic religious discourse (Wahhabism after the alliance between Al-Saud and Ibn Abd al-Wahhab). This discourse has been established not only in the education system but has also found its place in the legislation, entertainment, and civil law (Moaddel, 2006).

#### **IV. Transnational Religious Discourse**

The integration of religious ideology into the public sphere is also felt on a transnational level. Although many religious elites may begin by using religion as a belief system for legitimation domestically; it has quickly been transformed into a means for influence on a larger scale. Its influence has been used transnationally with the dissemination of religious ideas and knowledge through various networks. Through wide networks of influence, religious actors have worked on creating a web of their influential networks on a global scale. These networks assist in the dissemination of knowledge which is thus supported and funded by powers, governments, and financial elites, at play. These funds are used to support religious institutions and educational facilities in which dissemination occurs. Wuthnow & Offutt (2008) assert that these “transnational religious connections consist of ... flows of people, goods, services, and information across national boundaries” facilitated by “transnational organizations and border trends” within the global political economy (Wuthnow & Offutt, 2008, 209). Unlike economic transactions, however, religious networks and the impact they have cannot be summarized in numeric form. Rather, its impact is qualitative, difficult to measure in concrete numbers, and, in many instances, far greater than many observers assume. A key

feature in the significant influence religion has across borders is the shared identity provided by religion. Some scholars term this shared identity as a "transnational identity" in which people can identify as global citizens as opposed to members of a tightly knitted community (Wuthnow & Offutt, 2008).

This transnational identity exists among members of a community with a shared belief system (religion), a shared culture or history (Arabian Peninsula), or even a shared economic condition (global south). Using this shared identity groups, organizations or even religious elites can take advantage by moving across national boundaries to influence, send over resources transnationally, and develop local organizations on a global scale administered with similar policies and beliefs. Flows of people significantly contribute to the transnational export of religion such as religious workers and volunteers. Their work solidifies the existence of a shared identity increasing the ability to influence people across borders based on this shared identity (Wuthnow & Offutt, 2008).

In the Middle East, however, a strong sense of shared identity has existed since the spread of Islam as a global religion. Since as early as the seventh and eighth centuries, Islam and its shared identifying features have served as a common thread for communities across the region. Religious actors have crossed borders in the Middle East using identity to attract communities together. In most cases, this identifying feature served the interest of a distinct group. These actors were always part of a larger group using religion to infiltrate borders regionally and transnationally. Feeding off of their transnational networks of religious actors and aided by money and power, these blocs can cross borders to affect influence regionally and transnationally. They become blocs of power whose main priority becomes the well-being, advancement, and influence within

their transnational religious community. For Lipschultz (1992) this group is known as a civil society that comprises groups and organizations in different states that work together to create cross-border communities that pursue common goals. These goals can be societal, political, or economic depending on the interest group funding the networks bringing communities together (Lipschutz, 1992; Shani, 2009). For Haynes (2001) the transnationality of civil societies holds a significant amount of strength within the realm of religion. This is found in transnational religious communities such as Christendom or the Islamic Ummah. Even after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, Islam continued to be a religious, social, and cultural system, that ultimately grew to become a global transnational religion via the growth of its transnational religious community (Haynes, 2001). Haynes (2001) limits his analysis to the spread of religious appeal through transnational religious civil societies and the commonality brought about between them. In his analysis of the Islamic Ummah, he emphasizes that the shared belief system, culture, sentiments, and identity, link Muslims together. However, the existence of sectarianism (the schism between Sunnis and Shias), poor government, growing unemployment, and general social issues encourage the more radical following of Islam and easier linkages between Muslims across borders as a form of grievance with one another. Taking advantage of the feelings of desperation among Muslims in the region, major countries and interest groups use such weaknesses to their benefit. This, in and of itself, contributes to the effective influence of rivals in the region well known for their own need to gain power and leverage in the region through a shared Islamic identity (Haynes, 2001).

As a powerful element in establishing an effective transnational network, religion has played a significant role in the politics of the Middle East, specifically in the societal, political, and economic sectors of the Saudi Kingdom. It has played a role in all walks of life and is constantly referred to when justifying or prohibiting certain actions. As such, it serves, among other Middle Eastern states, as a prime example of a state using religion to advance its own state's political economy and influential standing on both a regional and transnational level. Religion has proven to be an effective and significant source of legitimacy for authority. Governments, in the Middle East, for example, have managed to use religion as an influential transnational network through their financial networks and wealth. Their wealth, more particularly, has contributed to the successful advancement of their interest through religious influence and religious teachings in the region. Due to its financial capital, the Saudi government has been an effective source for the spread of religious knowledge in the region wrapped in its propaganda and political interests (Nevo, 1998; Al-Rasheed, 1996).

## **V. The Financial Support to Religious Legitimacy**

This class has generally used its financial power to build and maintain influential networks through religious missionary work and transnational religious networks. They have built madrassas<sup>10</sup>, funded mosques and guaranteed the existence of a significant amount of religious advocates working on their behalf internationally. This trend accelerated during times of prominent wars in the region. Before and leading up to the Afghan war against the Soviet Union, for example, Muslim jihadi networks were heavily funded and supported, not only by the American government but also by Islamic religious

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<sup>10</sup> Madrassa: It is the Arabic word for school. However, it has been used to educate Muslim populations globally on religion and at times used to promote religious extremism.

governments using Islam as a factor in their pursuit of transnational influence. Arabs from all around the region and beyond (see Li's book above among others) viewed the war in Afghanistan as a window to their religious journey and obligation to fight against what they perceive as Christian and communist encroachment of Muslim lands. Muslim fighters were used by the US and Muslim powers like Pakistan and Saudi Arabia as proxies to fight the Soviet Union. Muslims on a global level were convinced that these Jihadis were fulfilling their religious obligation to perform Jihad<sup>11</sup> against occupying powers. Muslim countries matched American dollars in funding the jihadi groups in Afghanistan but also used this opportunity to create new mosques and seminaries in the region while also creating their proxies to assist in the war efforts and ensure a push back to any Shia advances within Sunni regions. Well-known preachers such as Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, a resistance leader and preacher of Wahabism, were funded and instructed to actively recruit followers in the region under Saudi guidance. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan provided Sunni powers, like Saudi Arabia, a clear opportunity to support religiopolitical parties financially, while also creating political parties and socio-religious networks that would spread Sunni teachings and counter the spread of Iranian Shia influence (Gul, 2010). The Afghan-Soviet war is one example of a battlefield transformed into an imperative tool using religious transnational influence as a source for legitimacy and continued impact regionally supported and funded by the financial means of a state. Many Middle Eastern scholars contend that religion has played a transformational role in the politics of the Arabian Gulf and, more specifically, for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia,

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<sup>11</sup> Jihad: is an Arabic word that can be literally translated into effort. However, it has been used to describe religious movements' desire to fight against groups or states they consider infidels on Islamic land (Lacroix, 2014).

for which religion represents a source of legitimacy for the authority in place and has done so since the establishment of the state (Nevo, 1998; Al-Rasheed, 1996). Mabon (2013) recognizes and emphasizes the religious legitimacy sought by the Saudi state on a regional level and the changes in its ideology and discourse specifically after the Iranian revolution. He finds a clear Islamic message of commonality within the region painting the Kingdom as the leader of the Islamic world, until the Iranian revolution of 1979. The revolution transformed the discourse into a sectarian one promoting the Kingdom as the rightful leader of the Sunni Islamic world. The Saudi government also contributed to the use of sectarianism and religion as a defining element within the identity politics of the region (Mabon, 2013).<sup>12</sup> Although this project does complement the existing literature on the Saudi state and the United Arab Emirates, it contributes further by illustrating the clear relationship between the state and its religious clerics and the power given to them in establishing the domestic, regional, and transnational policy practiced by the state. Through this project, I explore the relationship between the state apparatus and the religious establishment in both Gulf countries. I do so in the upcoming chapters by examining the historical development of the state and its relationship with the religious establishment followed by the examination of state speeches and religious discourse disseminated to the public through public broadcasting services.

## **VI. Islam and Politics**

Islam, more so than other religions, has had a continuous history of finding a place within the public sphere influencing political attitudes on matters of identity, justice, legitimacy of political systems, and the obligation of the ruler and the ruled

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<sup>12</sup> Although tension existed between the two states before the revolution, state rhetoric and fear of an exported Shi'a revolution by the Iranian state increased significantly after 1979 (Mabon, 2013).

among other things. In fact, among the lower and lower-middle strata of the population and less westernized members of society, religion begins to matter more and affects the attitudes of members in that strata even further. As suggested by numerous sociology scholars and quantitative studies based on the correlation between low social status and high religiosity levels (Flere & Klanjšek, 2009). As a result, for certain members, religion dictates the view toward authority, policies, and what is right or wrong in both the public and private spheres of their lives (Razi, 1990). For Muslims, their religion created a spiritual and state identity concurrently. It has given those who are perceived as legitimate political rulers the conviction among Muslims that will ultimately evoke total devotion and supreme sacrifice as the source for authority comes from God. Political leaders, receiving support from their population due to religious legitimacy, tend to profess and sponsor religion regardless of the depth of their belief or conviction. They aim, instead, to converge the establishment's version of Islam as the popular one and the one which the masses should follow to ensure greater devotion to the state by the population. The premise that political authority is founded on religion has led Sunnis to glorify the Caliphs that ruled over the Muslim Ummah following the death of the prophet in 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabia (modern-day Saudi Arabia). To reconcile the religious ideal with the cruel nature of historical reality, most Sunni religious clerics and scholars have since upheld the importance of obeying political leaders as long as they profess Islam as the religion of the state and manage to maintain order. This concept is established in the religion and historical establishment of the Ummah through what is known as Al-Bay'ah, which is an oath given by members of society to the leader (al-Baghdadi, 1919; Moussalli, 2001). This inherent association of the religious clerics of the state with the

political elite has created a lack of independence among the religious institutions in the state and even within local mosques. On the other hand, popular Islam, or political Islam, developed through political activism warning against blind obedience to the state ( Razi, 1990).<sup>13</sup>

Thus, religion, in its various forms, can serve to promote the interests and policies of governments and the elites within a given country regardless of government type, whether it be democratic, theocratic, or a tyrannical power of some sort. And in turn, religion can just as easily undermine those same regimes. The link between religion and legitimacy of the state is not a one size fits all, rather it is a complicated establishment of networks and connections to the state-funded, for the most part, by political, religious, and economic elites of the state. Within the context of the state, religion serves as an accumulation of many diverse beliefs, actors, and traditions and thus exercises a diverse set of influences within a political context. It, then, can serve as a helpful aid to the legitimacy of the state or a dangerous one establishing revolutionary fervor, reformist demands, and unsettling political conditions within the state. (Esposito & Voll, 1996; Goddard, 2002).

Political and theological conditions influence how religion interacts with politics, and in particular, the role it plays in building or undermining legitimacy. The same religion can be the foundation for authoritarian rule or that of a democratic one. Political factors and economic conditions, consequently, play a stronger role in determining how actors will use religion in a particular context. Religion becomes an effective tool during

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<sup>13</sup> Al- Sahwa Movement which translates into the Awakening movement which is also known as the Islamic Awakening –Sahwa Al-Islamiyya is a politically active group developed through a Salafi Saudi movement. It has been involved in peaceful political reform but has also contributed to political instability in the Kingdom such as the seizure of the Grand Mosque in 1979.

times of political unrest or threats to the stability of the monarchy as well as economic hardship mitigating backlash from the populace toward authority. It is important to emphasize the role religion plays within authoritarian and non-democratic regimes, more specifically in the Middle East.

## **VII. Religion in the Gulf Region**

In parts of the Middle East, more specifically the Gulf region, religious clerics have close ties to not just with political elites, but also economic ones (sometimes one and the same) who are involved in the political affairs of the state. The scholars and analysts who have observed the elite class in the Middle East have found that the families of major merchants are in turn part of the establishment of the state. Thus, the dominant commercial life in the Middle East is responsible for as many political and economic changes in the state as the government itself. The elite merchant class within the gulf, for example, is among the most valued constituents of the ruling families (Field, 1984), creating a close-knit tie between the state, religious clerics, and the economic elites in the region. Religion and education being controlled by the state is a commonality for most countries in the Gulf. Certain members of the ruling families are designated as ministers who control both religion and education concurrently to ensure proper religious socialization within the state (Crystal, 1995). This close integration between religion, economics and the state does not necessarily mean greater freedoms on an individual and domestic level given the free-market economics many elites and politicians are engaged in. Instead, members of the political, financial, and religious elite in the Middle East have been linked to a larger transnational class composed of actors worldwide who derive their wealth and power from ownership of production and capital on a global scale. They have

been integrated into a global class that has a disproportionate amount of power and control within the international arena and are closely tied to a structure of accumulation that assists in the maintenance of a repressive state apparatus in the country and region. Thus, political coercion and authoritarianism in the region are closely linked to the global capitalist profits and the social structure of production on a global scale. This means that for the Middle East, economic liberalization does not necessarily equate to the liberalization of political rights. Rather, in most cases, it is the complete opposite. Greater integration of the global Middle Eastern elite into the global international economy has in turn solidified and stabilized authoritarian regimes in the region (Mirtaheri, 2016).

This establishment is in part due to the historical development of nation-states in the Arabian peninsula. The mere establishment of the Saudi state in the region was done through tribal and religious connections developed through family ties, as seen with the relationship between the Al-Sauds and the Ash Sheikh family who were the descendants of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab. These ties were solidified and legitimated through religious rulings establishing their authority as rulers. This, according to many scholars, contributed to the development of a merchant, or elite, class with close connections to the ruling family and legitimate religious authority in the region as a whole. Unlike other monarchies who came to power by controlling pre-existing states and their public institutions, ruling families in the Gulf themselves created the institutions comprising of the states over which they govern (Potter, 2009).

Hence, ruling families and elites together in association with religious scholars developed state institutions creating a strong political bond between them. This has contributed to the accumulation of wealth in the country and the increased socio-political

power of transnational elites in the Middle East. The elites in the region, almost all of whom come from politically influential and financially wealthy families, are among the most important agents in the political economy of the region many of whom have also used religion to advance their financial and political influence (Mirtaheri, 2016). Many of them gained their wealth and status within the state through what is known as “segmented clientelism,” in which a segment of the population develops a close relationship with the state. The state, then, develops a fiscal obligation toward this segment in return for loyalty (Hertog, 2011).

In the Middle East, however, their transnational influence is a direct result of Islam and its establishment of a global community between its adherents. While Muslims in the Middle East and North Africa were familiar with the concept of the Westphalian-like nation-state due to the region’s proximity to Europe and their experience with colonialism, the concept of a nation-state imposed on the Middle East by the Western order was in dissension with Islam since it preaches unity among its adherents on a global level, even if that is not necessarily seen in practice (Rubin, 2019).”

In most instances, since Sunni<sup>14</sup> Islam lacks a consensus religious hierarchy, religious populism has become an increasing problem for the state and its allies (e.g., the US) as non-violent and violent reformists and radicals (lay Islamist leaders and activists), with no proper credentials earned through years of studying and understanding Islamic law, and conservative religious leaders, who may not necessarily be violent, can unify the

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<sup>14</sup> Sunni Islam: Islam is known to be split into two sects. The history of this split will be discussed in chapters to follow. Sunni Islam is the largest denomination of Islam. It is followed by 87–90% of the world's Muslims. Its name comes from the word Sunnah, referring to the exemplary behavior of Muhammad. The other major sect within Islam is Shia Islam (Esposito, 2014).

masses around certain ideas and beliefs. This is one among other reasons why radical groups like the so-called "Islamic State" received religious legitimacy and a significant following. The fact that Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi bragged about his organization being responsible for erasing the borders of the post-Sykes Picot era, was “enough to underscore the idea, at least in his followers’ minds, that modern nation-states and borders lacked the legitimacy that the traditional notion of the caliphate embodied (Rubin, 2019, p.18).” There remains, however, significant tension between reformist Islamist lay leaders and activists, on one side, and conservative state-affiliated clerics, on the other. To ensure a significant amount of state control over the religious narrative and discourse, the state supports its clerics and uses their platforms to ensure visibility to the public.

Religious clerics, in the Gulf region more specifically, use their power to permit and prohibit certain laws within society and ultimately use their influence on society to legitimate power both political and financial. Since most countries in the Gulf are rentier states with a significant amount of financial stability due to the availability of oil revenue when prices are high, on the domestic level the state can use oil revenue and religion to promote legitimacy. Although rentierism<sup>15</sup> has been an effective tool for maintaining legitimacy, its limitations lie in two arenas: first its benefits only reflect on the actual citizens of the state, hence, the Al-Saud legitimacy reflect on the citizens of the Kingdom

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<sup>15</sup> Observing the rents accrued by the governments of Gulf States, the allure of implementing Rentier State Theory (RST) in explaining their politics is easy to comprehend. Defining rents as effortlessly accrued income streams, rentier states can be seen as those whose economies are dependent on substantial external rent for state revenues (Schwarz, 2012:121). They incorporate only a fraction of society in the production of rents, whilst, with the government acting as the principal recipient of the wealth, the majority engage in its distribution and utilization (Beblawi, 1987:385). Rentier economies then become “allocation” states, distributing the rents they accrue, uninhibited by the need for taxation levied on productive economic sectors (Luciani, 1990; Hvidt, 2011:89).

as they benefit from the welfare of the state while ignoring the legitimacy needed on a regional level. And secondly, it is only effective as long as the state possesses these natural resources at a high profit price, the population is content with the state welfare provided as opposed to a demand for political participation which ultimately means that it is not an effective long-term tactic for political sustainability of the monarch. for not necessarily sustain the monarch long term.

However, the use of religion as a form of legitimacy becomes a transnational tool as it can be supported by financial means and a unifying common thread on a regional and transnational level. For these states, religion brings the *Ummah* together under one leadership. Religion and its networks, religious clerics, are financed by the state crossing borders to influence public opinion around religion and politics in the region. Here Petrodollars become the fuel financing the networks to cross borders as they gather influence and persuade public opinion. This is seen across the Middle East in the form of mosques, religious television preachers, social media networks, school curriculum within the education sector, and more.

### **VIII. Conclusion**

In the case of Saudi Arabia, more specifically, religion has been a source of legitimacy since as early as the development of the Saudi state. It is a state in which religion is a fabric of the Saudi society, citizenry, elite class, and ruling authority. In its history and throughout its existence as a kingdom within the Muslim world, it has used religion as a significant source of legitimacy and power domestically and regionally. The United Arab Emirates has also used religion and religious scholars as a means to justifying state led policies and political stances within the region. Religion became an

effective justifying tool for such policies, which in many cases were controversial. In this study, I will explore the use of religion and religious clerics as a source of legitimacy throughout the development of the state within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and, more recently, the UAE, after their decision to normalize with Israel. Both case studies serve as examples of states that have used religion and religious discourse to advance the objectives of the state depending on the historical and regional context.

Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE, during different historical periods, have used state-sponsored clerics to attempt to control the narrative transmitted to the public in an effort to legitimize the monarchy. For the Saudi kingdom, this strategy has existed since as early as the development of the state in the early 1930s. While in the case of the UAE, this tactic, whether effective or not, has existed after its controversial move to normalize relations with Israel.

## CHAPTER 2 FORMATION OF THE SAUDI STATE: LEADER OF THE MUSLIM WORLD

"I am but one of you; whatever troubles you, troubles me; whatever pleases you, pleases me"

- King Fahd of Saudi Arabia Al Saud

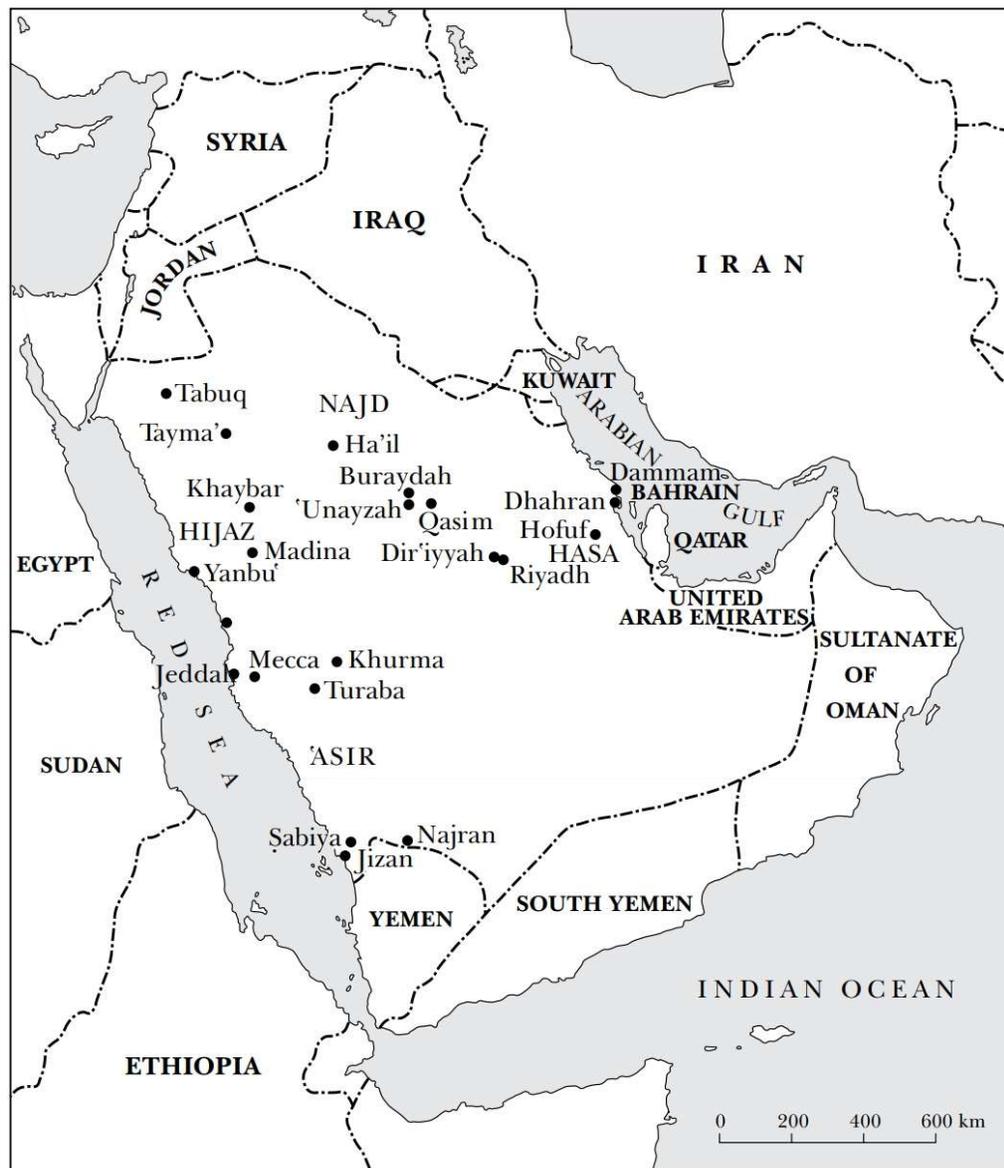


Figure 1: Map of modern-day Saudi Arabia.

Historically the Arabian Peninsula, modern-day Saudi Arabia, is the birthplace of Islam and its prophet Mohammad and grew to become a significant player in the socio-religious and political life of the Middle East. This chapter focuses on the historical development of the Saudi state from a tribal region that previously served as the birthplace of Islam, to the political Wahhabi state as it stands today in the post-Westphalian region of the Middle East. In examining the historical development of the Saudi State, I will chronologically narrate the establishment of Islam in the Hijaz region, the sectarian division of Muslims (what came to be known as the Sunni-Shia divide), the subsequent alignment of the Al-Sauds with Mohammad Bin Abdul Wahhab, and the establishment of the state under the rule of the Al-Saud family.

As I narrate these phases within the development of the Saudi state, I will, more specifically, examine how the state has strategically sponsored, financially and politically, a network of religious scholars (Ulama) and their scholarly discourse as it is disseminated domestically, regionally, and transnationally to legitimize the state and its authority and policies. This close examination will ultimately explain the rationale behind its religious and political influence regionally and its legitimation domestically. The Saudi state, since its initiation as a nation-state, has used material and ideational power to legitimize its place within the regional and international system. Its history will contribute to understanding how the Saudi state has invested its petrodollars and other state resources to promote a state-sponsored religious narrative domestically, regionally, and internationally through religious institutions, mosques, seminaries, and media sources both traditional and non-traditional. I will also explore how the Kingdom has gained from these investments both politically and economically and how they have contributed to the

national and transnational legitimation of the House of Saud as a ruling body in the kingdom and a leader in the region as well as a strategic player within the international system.

In this chapter, I will first examine the history of the Arabian Peninsula before the establishment of the Al-Sauds as the ruling body in the Arabian Peninsula by tracing the development of Islam in Mecca and Medina as well as the Islamic Ummah's expansion beyond the lands of Arabia after the death of Prophet Mohammad. In this section, I will also address the history of what is known to be the Sunni-Shia divide and its origins. Then, I will examine the development of the new Saudi state and the Al-Saud / Wahhabi unity. I will trace the state's commencement of oil production and its use of petrodollars to support the domestic and foreign policy of the state. The chapter will be split into three specific junctures in the state's history and its specific use of the *Ulama* (religious clerics) to legitimate the authority and the geopolitical interests and policies of the state. The first juncture is the development of the state until 1979, the Iranian revolution. I will examine the change in the discourse of the Saudi state from a purely Islamic dialogue encouraging the leadership of the Muslim world to a sectarian discourse used by the state and its religious clerics promoting the state's ideology. The second juncture being 2011 and the Arab Spring, pushing another shift in the Kingdom's religious and state discourse becoming more sectarian. And lastly, 2020 the year in which Arab states, more specifically the United Arab Emirates, would normalize relations with Israel not only through a symbolic peace process, as in the case of Egypt and Jordan in 1979 and 1994 respectively, but rather an active normalization of relations economically, socially, and politically. These junctures will identify the shift in the discourse of the state and its

religious Ulama over time. Through religious discourse and the Ulama, the Saudi state uses Islam as a “religious soft power”, both domestically and regionally, in the service of its geopolitical interests.

### **I. Arabia Before the Al-Saud**

Shortly before the advent of Islam, apart from the busy urban trading centers and cities in the peninsula, such as Mecca and Medina, what was to become the Saudi Kingdom was predominantly populated by nomadic and semi-nomadic rural tribes. The two most prominent cities were Mecca and Medina. Medina, during and before the 7<sup>th</sup> century, was a large flourishing agricultural settlement, while Mecca was a crucial financial center for many tribes in surrounding areas. During that period, within Al-Hijaz, communal life was essential to survival. Tribal affiliation, whether based on kinship or alliances, was seen as a significant source of social cohesion (Gordon, 2005). This social inclusion played into the historic development of the Saudi state and played into the importance of kinship and tribal ties. By 571 common era (herein “CE”), the Prophet Mohammad was born. Shortly after he received the message of Islam and spread the religion throughout the region, the prophet was able to unite various tribes from all around the Arabian Peninsula into one single religious society, state, or even Ummah. Following his death in 632, however, his followers expanded their territory to include lands far beyond that of Arabia. In a matter of decades, the Muslim Ummah spread to unprecedented swathes of land spanning from the Iberian Peninsula to what is known as modern-day Pakistan (Gordon, 2005; Commins, 2012).

The death of the prophet did not only unleash a series of battles resulting in larger masses of lands for the Ummah, but it also created Fitna<sup>16</sup> among his followers. The most obvious is the split of Muslims who followed Ali. This split would later be referred to as the Shia-Sunni divide which came as a response to Mohammad's death and his subsequent succession. His followers subsequently built an empire that stretched from Central Asia to Spain. His succession split the community. Some argued that the leadership of the Muslim Ummah should be awarded to a qualified legitimate leader from the Prophet's bloodline, while a group of early followers elected, through the opinion of the community, Abu Bakir Al-Sadiq, one of the closest companion's to the Prophet and his father-in-law. In the succession debate, those who favored Ali Bin Abi-Talib, the cousin and son-in-law of the prophet, were called Shia. Shia is a term that comes from shi'atu Ali, Arabic for "partisans of Ali," who believe that Ali and his descendants are part of divine order. Sunnis, meaning followers of the sunna, or "way," is derived from "Ahl Al-Sunnah", or "People of the Tradition." In this case, however, tradition is referred to as practices based on the teachings and habits of the Prophet Mohammad which is the *Sunnah* of the prophet. *Hadith*, on the other hand, are the sayings of the prophet which many Muslims view as important to follow as the Quran. Sunnis, generally, accept that the caliphs that succeeded the Prophet Mohammad were individuals decided upon based on the consensus or *ijma* of the Muslim community. The Shia, on the other hand, claimed that Ali was the rightful successor to the Prophet Mohammad as the leader of the Muslim

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<sup>16</sup> Fitna: is an Arabic word used to describe the act of luring to separate the good from the bad. The term itself has various meanings, mostly referring to a feeling of disorder or unrest specifically in the Muslim community. The term can also be used to describe individuals or communities giving in to the "whispers" of Satan and falling into sin thus creating a split within the community or Ummah. Fitna is an issue discussed frequently in the sermons of both Saudi and Emirati Ulama. There is a constant mention of the maintenance of obedience and keeping the public peace.

world due to his blood relations to the Prophet. Ali eventually became the caliph in 656 and ruled until his assassination only five years later. The caliphate, based in the Arabian Peninsula, was passed to the Umayyad dynasty in Damascus and later the Abbasids in Baghdad. The Shia community rejected the authority of these rulers. In 680, soldiers of the second Umayyad caliph Yazid bin Mu'awiyah killed Ali's son, Husayn, and many of his close companions in the battle of Karbala, located in modern-day Iraq. The battle became a significant event in the memory and moral story of Shias. In fact, at the time, the Caliphs worried that the Shia Imams, the descendants of Husayn who were seen as the legitimate leaders of the Muslim Ummah, would use this massacre to capture the hearts of the community to eventually topple monarchs. Even as Sunnis triumphed politically in the Muslim world, Shias continued to look to the Imams—the blood descendants of Ali and Husayn—as their legitimate political and religious leaders. There exist three main branches of Shia Islam – Zaidi Shia, Ismailis, and Ithna Asharis, which are also known as the Twelvers or Imamis (Dogra 2017).

Twelvers Shia make up the largest group of Shia Muslims (Madelung, 1981, 1997). They ultimately believe that Prophet Mohammad's leadership, both spiritual authority and divine guidance, were passed on to 12 of his descendants starting with Imam Ali, followed by his two sons Hassan and Hussein, and others that follow through the bloodline. The twelfth imam, Mohammad Al-Mahdi, is said to have disappeared from a cave near a mosque in 878, but never died. They, hence, believe in occultation in which he will return at the end of time to restore justice on earth. Zaydi Shias, on the other hand, broke off from the majority Shia community at the fifth Imam. They are mostly located in modern-day Yemen. Centered mostly in South Asia and other parts of the world, Ismaili

Shias broke off at the seventh Imam. Most Ismailis revere the Aga Khan as the living representative of their Imam (Dogra, 2017; Walker, 1976).

With the exception of the Shia Fatimid Dynasty, Sunni rulers dominated the leadership of the Muslim Ummah for the first nine centuries until the Persian Safavid dynasty was established in 1501. Shia Islam became the state religion during the Safavid era. As the Safavids and their Ottoman counterpart faded, their disagreements settled into the political and religious realities existent within modern-day Iran and Turkey while their legacies resulted in the demographic distribution of the current Islamic sects. Shias made a significant majority within Iran, Iraq, Azerbaijan, and Bahrain, and a plurality in Lebanon and a significant minority in countries like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar, while Sunnis make up the majority of more than forty countries from Morocco to Indonesia (Council On Foreign Relations, 2014).

In Saudi Arabia, more specifically, the Shia make up roughly 15% of the Saudi population. They form a large portion of the Saudi residents in the eastern province of Hasa, where much of the Saudi petroleum industry is based. (Nasr, 2006).

## **II. The Wahhabi - Al-Saud Union**

Although the Saudi Shia occupy a significant part of the eastern province, the kingdom is ultimately made up of a majority Sunni population. The authority of the Saudi state lies in the hands of a Sunni leadership that received much of its legitimacy through an alliance with the descendants of Mohammad Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab as well as the adherents to the Wahhabi religious path.<sup>17</sup> Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab was born to a family of

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<sup>17</sup> Wahhabism: is an ideology of individuals who follow the same guidelines established by the well-known Mohammad Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab. Its devotees contend that 'Wahhabism' is an inaccurate description of their aggressive efforts to revive what they believe to be the "correct" form of Islam. They, thus, prefer to

jurists and was ultimately educated through a curriculum of orthodox jurisprudence in line with the Hanbali School of Islamic Sharia law.<sup>18</sup> With time, Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab gradually became opposed to many of the most popular Sunni practices which in turn increased his opposition. Family members, including his father and brother, as well as notable Sunni scholars found his teachings to be too radical. He encouraged his followers to demolish any statues and shrines that were revered by the community and take down trees or shrines that were held in high esteem for fear of the interpretation of idolatry. He and his followers believed that they had a religious obligation to spread the correct message of Islam and restore it to its pure monotheistic version. He knew that any political alliance he can make with a local ruler would thus assist in implementing his version of Islam (Commins, 2005; Obaid, 1999; Yamani, 2009). Wahhabis should not be confused with Salafis, although a Wahhabi can be a Salafi, a Salafi is not necessarily a Wahhabi. Wahhabis are those who follow the teachings of Ibn al-Wahhab. Salafis, on the other hand, are individuals who follow the Salaf. Salafis are Muslims who advocate the literal interpretation of the teachings of Islam as practiced by the Prophet Mohammad and his pious predecessors who are known as "Al-Salaf Al-Salah." Hence, Salafis are following the acts of the Salaf, explaining their name as "Salafis" (Blanchard, 2008).

After his expulsion from his home city of Uyyayna, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's reputation preceded him and was known among the tribes of the Arabian Peninsula. Muhammad bin Saud, the ruler of Diriyah, at the time, knew that an alliance with a

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be labeled as Salafi or someone who follows the ways of the "Salaf Al-Saleh" the companions and followers of the correct path (Commins, 2005).

<sup>18</sup> Hanbali School of Thought is one of the four traditional Sunni schools of Islamic jurisprudence. It is named after its founder, an Iraqi scholar named Ahmad ibn Hanbal. The Hanbali School of Thought or Madhab is the smallest of four major Sunni schools. Its followers are referred to as Ahl al-Hadith, the people of the Hadith or the sayings of the prophet Mohammad (Mack, 2012).

religious leader would grant him a level of legitimacy needed to unite the tribes of the peninsula together under one centralized authority. He, thus, invited Ibn Abd al-Wahhab to settle in Diriyah by its ruler Muhammad bin Saud. After some time in Diriyah, Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab was able to secure an agreement with the ruler, Ibn Saud. The agreement lied in the oath to bring the Arabs of the peninsula back to the true nature of Islam (Al-Rasheed, 2010; Bowen, 2014). It is said that Ibn-Saud told Ibn Abd al-Wahhab: “This oasis is yours, do not fear your enemies. By the name of God, if all Nejd was summoned to throw you out, we will never agree to expel you.” While ibn Abd al-Wahhab responded: “You are the settlement's chief and wise man. I want you to grant me an oath that you will perform jihad against the unbelievers. In return, you will be imam, leader of the Muslim community and I will be a leader in religious matters” (Al-Rasheed, 2010, p.16).

Mohammad Ibn-Saud made sure to strengthen that alliance by marrying the daughter of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab. This trend continued in which different kings who followed Mohammad Ibn-Saud married members of the Al ash-Sheikh family, the descendants of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (Cordesman, 2003). For Mohammad Ibn-Saud, Ibn Abd al-Wahhan represented the ideational currency needed to unite the tribes of the Arabian peninsula and ensure his own legitimacy, and the legitimacy of his family, to reign over the holiest cities in Islam. The religiopolitical legitimacy provided by the religious authority, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, and his descendants, symbolized religious soft power politics used to maintain the legitimacy and existence of the state, both domestically and regionally.

The emergence of what was to become the well-known Al-Saud Saudi royal family began in Nejd, central Arabia, in 1744 when Mohammad Bin Al-Saud, the founder of the Al-Saud dynasty, joined forces with Mohammad Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab. This alliance provided an ideological incentive for Saudi expansion. Their alliance provided the military and political acumen (ibn-Saud) and the ideological and legitimizing glue (ibn Abd al-Wahhab) to unify the tribes. Both leaders entered a pact of mutual protection for one another ending in Mohammad bin Al-Saud vowing protection to Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab within the Nejd region and beyond (Commins, 2005, 2012; Faksh, 1997). The initial sight of a "Saudi state" took place in 1744 around Riyadh when the territory expanded to include Karbala and Mecca. This dream of a state was quickly tarnished by the Ottoman viceroy at the time, Mohammad Ali Pasha who mobilized his military from Egypt to defeat ibn-Saud in his territory. Another Saudi state was re-established in 1824 around the area of Nejd. Throughout the remaining part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the control of these lands became a contested issue between the two ruling families of Al-Saud and Al-Rashid until 1891 when the Al-Sauds were driven to Kuwait in exile by the Ottomans (Al-Rasheed, 2010; Lees, 2006; Unger, 2004).

By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Ottoman empire had seized control over the majority of the Arabian Peninsula. Thus, Arabia was ruled by tribal rulers with the Sharif of Mecca, Sharif Hussein bin Ali, having a reputation as the default ruler of the Hejaz region (Mecca and Medina). In the battles to capture land, Sharif of Mecca had the backing of the British with the commander TE Lawrence or Lawrence of Arabia (Kennedy, 1994). By 1902, as the demise of the Ottoman empire was coming close,

Abdul Aziz bin Abdul Rahman Al Saud<sup>19</sup>, supported by the British explorer Captain William Shakespeare, recaptured control over Riyadh from the Rashid family, who were supported by the Germans, bringing the Al-Sauds back to the Nejd region creating what was to eventually become the monarchy of Saudi Arabia (Hennessey, 2018). To eventually capture the areas of Hejaz under the control of Sharif of Mecca, the Asir region in the south, and the Hasa (in Arabic Al-Ahsa) region in the east, Ibn Saud worked on gaining the support of a tribal army known as the Ikhwan (brothers) inspired by Wahhabism. With their support and the support of the family of Al ash-Sheikh, the descendants of Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab, Ibn Saud was able to capture Al-Hasa from the Turks in 1913, adding it to the Al-Saud kingdom. By 1921, with the Sharif of Mecca busy leading a revolt against the Ottoman empire with British backing, Ibn Saud continued to fight the Al-Rashid family to ensure the Al-Saud's complete control of the Nejd region taking over the title Sultan of Nejd. With the help of the Ikhwan and Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, by 1925 the Hejaz region was also captured allowing Ibn Saud to declare himself the king of Hejaz (Hourani, 2013; Wynbrandt, 2010).

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<sup>19</sup> Abdulaziz bin Abdul Rahman bin Faisal bin Turki bin Abdullah bin Muhammad Al Saud who is known as Ibn Saud and the first monarch of the Saudi state, which was the third Saudi state. He ruled the kingdom from 1932 until he died in 1953 (Al-Rasheed, 2010).



Figure 2: Map of Saudi Arabia with a clear distinction between the Hejaz and Nejd regions.

The Wahhabi leadership, however, after the expansion wanted to go beyond the borders of the Hejaz, Nejd, and Hasa regions to include Transjordan, Iraq, and Kuwait. The Ikhwan's ambitions were met with Ibn Saud's opposition, as he recognized the danger in coming into direct contact with the British<sup>20</sup> army on the battlefield. Simultaneously the Ikhwan were becoming dissatisfied with some of Ibn-Saud's domestic policies as he began to favor modernization and the welcoming of more non-

<sup>20</sup> Transjordan and Iraq were both considered British protectorates with a significant number of British soldiers occupying their lands. Any forces coming from the Hejaz region would ultimately be met with these forces on the battlefield (Mansfield, 2019). Although Kuwait was not necessarily a British protectorate, it did house a significant number of British soldiers as it prepared for independence from the Ottoman empire with the help of the British forces at the time (Casey, 2007).

Muslim foreigners into the newly established kingdom. Although the pact with the Wahhabi movement was still alive and well, Ibn-Saud battled the Ikhwan specifically in the Battle of Sabilla in 1929. This ended in their defeat and potential integration into the Saudi security forces, while the direct descendants of Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab were included within the government as leading religious scholars of the state, members of the Al ash-Sheikh family. The cementing of relations between the two major families, the political being the Al-Sauds and the religious being the Al ash-Sheikh, undoubtedly contributed to the beneficial treatment of the Ulama in the kingdom. Prior to the establishment of the independent kingdom, the Ulama were sent, as part of their pact with the state, to educate the rural Saudis in areas where Bedouins populated the lands. This was intentionally done to indoctrinate members of the surrounding tribes and residents of the rural periphery. By the early 1930s, Ibn-Saud was able to announce the newly established Saudi Arabian kingdom on the lands of the Hejaz and Nejd regions on September 23, 1932 – which until this very day is considered the Saudi National Day (Al-Rasheed, 2010; Bowen, 2014; Vassiliev, 2013; Wynbrandt, 2010).

### **III. The Religio-Political Structure in a Post-Independence Saudi State (1932 – 1970)**

The newly established post-independence Saudi kingdom was reliant on the revenues coming from the pilgrimage, Hajj.<sup>21</sup> However, due to the economic depression experienced worldwide and the expenses accrued due to the wars and battles fought against the Ikhwan which put the monarchy in debt, Ibn Saud was desperate to increase

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<sup>21</sup> Hajj: is the annual Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, in the heart of the Saudi kingdom. It is known as the holiest city for Muslims. Hajj is mandatory for Muslims who are physically and financially capable to do it at least once in their lifetime. It is one of the five pillars of Islam (Nigosian, 2004).

state revenues. He eventually met with Charles Crane, a well-connected Chicago philanthropist, and former ambassador. Crane was initially invited to the kingdom by the Sharif of Mecca in the early 1920s to assist with revising state budgets. However, after Ibn Saud OR the Al Saud took over the kingdom, plans changed. Ibn Saud and Crane eventually met in the spring of 1932, after Crane's prolonged stay in the Arabian Peninsula and his curiosity with Islam. They agreed that Crane would seek assistance from Karl S Twitchell, an American geologist, and mining engineer, to search for any water or sources of the wealth beneath the kingdom's sand (Al-Rasheed, 2010; Bowen, 2014). In 1938, they eventually found vast reserves of oil in the Al-Ahsa region along the coast of the Gulf. Full-scale development of the oil field began under the US-controlled Arabian American Oil Company (herein 'Aramco'). The development of the oil field provided the kingdom with economic prosperity, political leverage, and a significant position in the international arena at large. This meant that the kingdom was open to the global community welcoming large numbers of non-Muslims on its lands ( El Ghonem, 1998). To adjust to this major change and appease his population and religious clerics in the kingdom, Ibn Saud, with the help of his religious advisors, found justification in the Quran (Wynbrandt, 2010). "Say O ye that rejects faith. I worship not that which he worships, nor will ye worship that which I worship. And I will not worship that which ye have been wont to worship, nor will ye worship that which I worship. To you be your way and to me mine" (Quran 109: 1–6). This verse is often used to explicate the level of tolerance promoted within the Quran and Islam as a religion. It emphasizes the idea that your faith cannot affect mine and, thus, you shall worship what you prefer while I worship what I choose.

Ibn Saud surrounded himself with close acquaintances who eventually became his associates, creating a close-knit system of patrimonialism. This hindered the proper development of an effective and official administrative structure for the state. These associates came from merchant families and individuals within the small circle of the king forming an elite class of Saudis with close ties to leadership (Wynbrandt, 2010).

With the introduction of oil, cultural life rapidly developed in the peninsula. The government received a significant amount of revenues, allowing for increasingly wasteful extravagant spending as well as vast infrastructural development throughout the kingdom. As such the Kingdom's economy, although possesses a strong private sector, has become increasingly dependent on state public funds while also pushing an elite class to increase business development and capital (Al-Rasheed, 2010; Hertog, 2010). The kingdom became the hub of Islamic religiosity in the Arab world as well as the center of oil production and oil revenues, creating the merger of religion and capital on a regional scale. Max Weber's (2009) work on protestant work ethic and its tie to capitalism feeds well into the religious and economic alliance in the kingdom and the assistance both gave to the development of the kingdom into a global economic competitor in the international arena. According to Weber (2009), in his analysis of protestant Christians, the work ethic encouraged within Protestantism contributes to the wealth accumulation and business planning that slowly contributes to a strong capitalist state (Weber, 2009). Weber (2009) explains that "the power of the religious movements, not alone but above all other factors," played a large part in encouraging the spirit of capital accumulation and financial advancement in the west (Weber, 2009, p. 96). Weber emphasizes that religion is one of the most important factors in the legitimation of power relations. Although in

his work, Beblawi (1990) downplays the role of religion in the legitimation of the power OR authority and social welfare of the state (Beblawi, 1990). Other scholars like Jawad (2009) argue that the social welfare developed by the state is not the only route to legitimation. Jawad also finds that religion and religious movements that provide social services have played a role in legitimating political parties and state authority while at times have filled the void created by the state depending on the context.

Toward the end of the 1940s, more oil was discovered in the kingdom as oil demand surged globally due to the switch from coal to liquid fuel. By the end of the 1960s, oil consumption in the US alone rose approximately 250% while its usage globally, due to modernization, increased significantly as well. The Kingdom, more specifically its rulers and elite class, grew wealthier because of oil profits, although a significant majority of them were taken by the Americans and foreign investors. Aramco, on the other hand, was also becoming a very powerful entity in the Kingdom taking on more responsibilities for public projects, including waterworks, water wells, and railroads. It was also responsible for the training and employment of the bulk of the kingdom's first generation of educated Saudi professionals. Aramco did experience significant criticism for its treatment of its workers as well as the low wages and poor treatment. In his work, Vitalis (2002) explores the migration of Jim Crow laws by Americans who came to work and develop the oil fields in the kingdom. With these Americans and their laws came norms of discrimination, segregation, and inequality (Vitalis, 2002). The first strike took place in 1945 with little to no response from the company or the kingdom's government. Both Aramco and Saudi Arabia remained aggressively opposed to labor activism. Strikes continued to take place due to poor

treatment. It was not until the mid-1950s and a strike that gained sympathy from the Saudis in the Eastern province as well as neighboring Arab countries that resulted in it some favorable results and policies. These strikes, however, created strong religious and class tensions between the Saudi state and its Eastern province inhabitants, most of whom are comprised of the minority Shi'a Saudi population (Wynbrandt, 2010). Tensions with the Shi'a population in the kingdom have always been present, specifically due to the pressures put forth by the Wahhabi-inspired Saudi Ulama.

Between 1953 and 1964, the kingdom experienced the death of Ibn Saud, his succession by his son Saud and followed by the deposition of Saud in favor of his half-brother Faisal due to significant doubts of Saud's ability to rule. During Faisal's reign, the kingdom experienced a significant amount of economic and political growth as well as a significant shift in the role of the Ulama, and members of the Al ash-Sheikh family, within the Kingdom. Members of the Al ash-Sheikh family as well as other religious scholars within the ranks of the Ulama held positions like religious judges, lawyers, seminary teachers, and imams (prayer leaders) at local mosques throughout the kingdom. The Ulama made up between seven to ten thousand individuals. However, only the Ulama holding the highest and most significant positions were able to truly exercise significant political influence on the Saudi ruling family. By 1971, Faisal bin Saud decided to create an official body for the Ulama within the state calling it the Council of Senior Ulama. The purpose of the Ulama was to serve as *Shura* (consultation) between the ruling family, or even the king, and the religious establishment, creating a tradition of consistent meetings, at times weekly ones, with senior Ulama in the kingdom (Bligh, 1985; Nevo, 1998).

The Saudi state was built on the presumption that Islam and its Sharia (law) will guide the kingdom. In fact, the kingdom is one of the few, but not only, Arab countries in which the Ulama constitute such an influential and significant political force. Although it is well known that in Islam there is no actual priesthood within the religion as a result of the interpretation that there lie no intermediaries between an individual believer and God, there does remain a group of individuals trained in Islamic theory and ready to transmit it to sustain the religiosity of society. Within the Islamic Ummah, this group is known as the Ulama or religious clerics. *Ulama* is the Arabic word for: those who know. In most Muslim societies they are seen as the officers who uphold Sharia (Islamic law) as judges and legal experts, the teachers who ensure the transmission of Islamic teachings, and religious scholars. They are the guardians of the high scholarly Islamic tradition, the contrivers of Islamic principles, the organizers of Islamic Sharia, and the spreaders of religious Islamic knowledge. In return for official recognition of their special religious authority and influence on the state, the leading Ulama provide it (the state) tacit approval, and when asked, public sanctions and fatwas to support potentially controversial policies. Of course, due to the legitimacy provided by religion to the king and other ruling elites as the custodians of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, the support of the Ulama has been critical to their existence, both domestically and regionally. The relationship between the Al-Sauds and the Ulama symbolized a Saudi Arabian social contract with multiple implicit pacts made by the state with the religious authorities as well as other members of the royal family and business elite (Kinninmont, 2017). This contract created a tripartite agreement between the state, the Ulama, and the financial elites to support each other and ensure that they remain powerful.

In a top-down fashion, the state initiates, dictates, and sets the boundaries of the religious establishment's involvement in the domestic affairs of the kingdom. Aside from their strong support of the state-sponsored Ulama, the Al-Sauds also embraced Muslim Brotherhood members who had initially taken refuge in Saudi Arabia from the repression they experienced from their countries during Nasserism<sup>22</sup> in the early 1950 and 1960s. The Brotherhood's influence was felt from the grassroots level to the king, as King Faisal's advisor and informal ambassador to the African nations was a prominent Iraqi Muslim Brother, Muhammad Mahmud al-Sawwaf (Ménoret, 2020). During the Nasser era, however, political Islam became rampant and the idea of religiosity on a grassroots level popularized throughout the region with the help of the Muslim Brotherhood. For the Al-Sauds, the Brotherhood represented a strategic asset in their attempt to counter Nasser and the Soviet Union influence he brought to the region. His pan-Arab thoughts were detrimental to the concept of monarchies and the control they exerted over their populace. Hence, an alliance with the Brotherhood, for the Al-Sauds, advanced their regional interests in an effort to spread Saudi religious thought. Although their interpretation of Islam and their ideological stance were not necessarily compatible; their alliance, however, became a strategic asset for both in their battle against Nasserism. The Brotherhood became one network, among others, spreading throughout the region establishing the importance of religion during an era in which nationalism and pan-Arabism took center stage.

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<sup>22</sup> Nasserism is a term that explicates the effects of the Nasser era on the region, which brought about pan-Arab nationalistic thoughts and repressed religious-based movements like the Muslim Brotherhood. Jamal Abdul Nasser was the president of Egypt from 1954 until he died in 1970.

#### **IV. Oil Embargo and the Question of Palestine (1973 – 1978)**

The religious establishment, although the highest religious authority in the kingdom and responsible for interpreting Islam, is not politically more influential than the King regardless of how Islamic or religious the kingdom may appear to be. Rather, the King is currently and always has been, the head of the Unitarian movement within the kingdom and, thus, holds much more political power than any religious scholar could. Even the highest standing ulama, responsible for leading the Islamic ummah theologically, is not held in equal ranks to the King (Bligh, 1985).

The Ulama do, however, have the power to permit or prohibit, using Islamic jurisprudence, what the king may request. This prohibition of a king's command rarely actually happens in practice. Hence, language and the use of Fatwas<sup>23</sup> become key in the ideational power possessed by both the religious establishment and the ruling authority. Fatwas and religious discourse transmitted through sermons or religious programs become effective tools in attempting to influence the greater populace within a nation. Thus, political leaders and religious elites in the kingdom become significant, effective, and influential actors locally, regionally, and internationally. They create, through their shared religious identity, a socially constructed community with influence transnationally. Muslims throughout the world look to Saudi Arabia and its clergy to lead the Islamic ummah, regardless of their criticism and reservations regarding the morality of the ruling family. It goes without saying, however, that Saudi Arabia's power is not ideational alone. Its oil industry created significant material power to support the stance of the kingdom globally. Its ideational power, on the other hand, serves its position

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<sup>23</sup> Fatwa: A ruling made by religious clerics on a point of contention within Islamic law.

regionally and transnationally in a more effective manner at times. Using religion serves the Saudi ruling power by establishing a powerful soft power policy in transmitting messages around supporting the ruler. The religious establishment has also attempted to use its platform to both permit and prohibit policies that the ruling family intends on endorsing such as the push toward sectarianism after the Iranian Revolution and/or Arab Spring, inclusiveness toward people of the book when countries in the region normalized relations with Israel, and, of course, obedience to the king regardless of the circumstances. For the Saudis, religious permission and prohibition are designed to respectively appease and constrain the Saudi populace at home and the Muslim Ummah at large.

The Kingdom's Ulama included religious scholars, judges, lawyers, teachers, and prayer leaders of mosques. Although in number they may seem to be significant, only a few hold highly influential positions as senior scholars with exercised ability to exert political influence within the authority. These prominent scholars make up what is known as the Council of Senior Ulama, an official governmental body formed by king Faisal Bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud, who was king of Saudi Arabia from November of 1964 until his assassination in March of 1975. Faisal's objective in creating a formal clerical body within the kingdom was to ensure regular communication between the monarch and the religious establishment (Aba-Namay, 1993). Aside from creating a Council of Senior Ulama, King Faisal was also active in leading other initiatives throughout the Muslim world. In 1963, he established the kingdom's first television station implementing religious programming and regular Islamic sermons, which later became available and broadcasted throughout the Middle Eastern region and beyond. He was an enormous help

in establishing the Muslim World League, a worldwide charity to which the Al-Sauds have since donated millions of dollars. Shortly after, in December of 1965, Faisal embarked on a nine-nation tour through Muslim countries to ensure continued solidarity between Muslim nations and the Ummah as well as his country's involvement in the establishment of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in 1969 (Bronson, 2005). On the one hand, this was to increase strength within the shared Islamic identity but was also a strategic soft power means in combating the increased popularity of the pan-Arab movement led by Egypt and supported significantly by the Soviet Union. The kingdom's religious leadership in the region not only contributed to its own regional and international Islamic leadership, but it also became a significant factor in the American fight against communism spread globally.

Faisal was also monumental in his pan-Islamic and Pro-Palestinian policies leading to one of the most important junctures in Arab-Israeli relations, the 1973 oil embargo. The embargo began in October of 1973 after members of the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC)<sup>24</sup> called for an oil embargo against nations supporting the state of Israel during the Yom Kippur War in which Arab nations attacked Israel during the Yum Kippur holy day.<sup>25</sup> The initial nations targeted in the embargo were Canada, Japan, the Netherlands, the UK, and the US. Later, however, the embargo also extended to include Portugal, Rhodesia, and South Africa. By the end of March 1974, the price of oil rose from 3 US dollars per barrel to nearly 12 US dollars per barrel globally.

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<sup>24</sup> Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries is a unifying organization for five founding oil-rich countries, Venezuela, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Kuwait. The organization was founded in Baghdad at a conference in September of 1960 (Rose, 2004).

<sup>25</sup> Yum Kippur War: was fought in October of 1973. It was a preemptive attack by Egypt and Syria against Israel (Herzog, 1998).

The embargo caused what scholars termed an “oil shock” extending its effect both short-term and long-term (Painter, 2014). Although Saudi Arabia was initially apprehensive about the oil embargo, after Nixon’s administration promised \$2.2 billion in military aid to Israel, Saudi Arabia consented and became the leading power behind the embargo. The oil embargo, as well as the state’s increased shares in Aramco, were major defining moments in King Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al Saud’s reign and according to some scholars were some of the reasons, among others<sup>26</sup>, behind his assassination on March 24, 1975. His murder was at the hands of his nephew, Prince Faisal bin Musaid, who shot the king during a *Majlis*<sup>27</sup> gathering in which the king made himself available to listen to the concerns of his constituents (AbuKhalil, 2004; Vassiliev, 2012).

King Faisal, in comparison to his brethren, represented an individual who took advantage of a strategic role the kingdom could play in the international political economy. It was well known that the world, at the time, was dependent on oil. The embargo was an "opportunity for the Saudis to assert that kind of role" in the region and international arena. "It gave the Saudis the kind of control in the market that they did not previously have. They illustrated that oil was a fundamental tool to manipulating the market and giving the Saudis leverage over the price of oil." For King Faisal, however, his own "personal convictions pushed his decision. He took a stand in support of other

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<sup>26</sup> Some theories allude to Prince Faisal bin Musaid's murder of King Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud as revenge for the death of Prince Faisal's brother. His brother was killed in an altercation between conservative OR reactionary Saudi clerics, who opposed the new reforms imposed by King Faisal, and the police. During the altercation, his brother Khalid bin Musaid [COMPLETE THE SENTENCE] (Commings, 2012).

<sup>27</sup> Majlis: It is known as the Consultative Assembly of Saudi Arabia which is translated from its Arabic name: Majlis Al-Shura Al-Saudia | مجلس الشورى السعودي. It resembles the traditional Islamic Majlis Al-Shura in which the elders and more respected members of the society meet with the ruler to discuss important state or Ummah matters (Dekmejian, 1998).

Arab countries, which ultimately paved a way for the legacy he left behind" (Shikaki, 2021). This symbolized a significant pan-Arab moment for the kingdom.

The embargo lasted from October 1973 to March 1974. Interestingly, however, Israel did not withdraw its forces nor did the countries, targeted in the embargo, change their policies. This led many scholars to assume the failure of the embargo. The power of the embargo was to force industrialized nations, who were dependent on oil, to change their policies and support within the Arab-Israeli conflict. As a weapon, if the embargo worked it would have changed political history in the Middle East. On other hand, the embargo did lead to changes within the international economy, specifically about oil policies in the West and the increased initiatives in pushing for alternative energy, energy conservation, and more strict monetary policies to push back on inflation in those countries. The embargo was not sustainable, as it created significant economic shocks to the price of oil and, thus, affected the demand on a global scale (Graf, 2012).

The 1973 oil embargo was not the only oil embargo imposed on the international community by oil-rich Arab countries. Rather, Arab oil-producing countries attempted to use oil as leverage for political influence in the Middle East during two prior occasions, the 1956 Suez Canal Crisis<sup>28</sup> and the Six-Day War in 1967 (Daoudi & Dajani, 1984; Frankel, 1958).<sup>29</sup> Both embargos failed without any actual political results achieved for the countries that imposed them. Interestingly, however, the embargoes helped solidify

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<sup>28</sup> 1956 Suez Crisis: After Jamal Abdul Nasser nationalized the Egyptian Suez Canal, the French and British joined Israel in a surprise attack in an attempt to remove the Egyptian president. However, with the help of the US and the Soviet Union, enough pressure was put on these countries to withdraw their armed forces. Nationalizing the canal created a bit of an oil embargo due to the fact that the majority of traffic on the canal as a result of oil exports and imports (Frankel, 1958; Yergin, 1991).

<sup>29</sup> Six-day War in 1967: The war is also known as the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. It was fought between Israel and its neighboring Arab countries: Syria, Jordan, and Egypt.

the need for alternative energy sources and established the leverage oil-rich countries had, at the time, over the price of oil.

#### **V. 1979, the Ikhwan and the Sectarian Debate**

The religious influence brought about by the Muslim Brotherhood in the Kingdom established a reverse effect on the Al-Sauds. Their influence and teachings, coupled with the increased conservatism of parts of Saudi Arabia, began to collide with the increasingly liberal royal family. The wealth generated by the oil revenue, as a result of the oil prices following the 1973 oil embargo, was unevenly distributed leaving many communities in parts of the Al-Nejd region behind. Among the Nejdīs was Juhayman al-Otaibi, an inhabitant from Al-Sajid. Al-Sajid was a settlement established by King Abdulaziz to house members of Ikhwan who had fought for him. Members of al-Otaibi's family were active in the movement that revolted against the king, although they were not technically connected to the actual Muslim Brotherhood. For Al-Otaibi, the king's actions or policies represented a betrayal and a breach of the kingdom's religious obligation to Islam. This idea became central to his teachings in the late 1970s. By 1978, when he published his book, the Saudi authorities released a warrant for his arrest. He evaded the arrest but a group of his followers was arrested. Overwhelmed by his teachings and the imagination that Al-Mahdi<sup>30</sup> had returned, his followers began to gather themselves and train for the seizure of the Grand Mosque of Mecca (al-Saif, 2014; Berger, 2015). His followers called for the overthrow of the House of Saud and declared the Mahdi has arrived in the form of their leader. For nearly two weeks, Saudi Special Forces in

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<sup>30</sup> Mahdi: can be translated into the guided one. But it refers to the imam in Shi'a Islam that will return to guide the Muslim Ummah.

association with three French commandos, who had to convert to Islam to be part of the mission, fought to reclaim control over the mosque. Reclaiming control came at a hefty price of hundreds of deaths and a loss of face for the Saudi rulers (Illahi, 2018). The seizure not only stood as a challenge to the legitimacy of the Al-Sauds as the rightful custodians of the Two Holy Mosques of Islam, but also deprived the state of pilgrimage revenues.

In response, the Al-Sauds handed more authority to the *Ulama*. The religious establishment, in a swift response, signed a fatwa sanctioning the use of force to subdue armed dissidents who barged into the Grand Mosque of Mecca, Islam's holiest site, and seized it. The fatwa also established the importance of loyalty to the ruler. Through *ijma*<sup>31</sup> (*consensus*), over 30 *Ulama* gathered to observe both the Quran and hadith to establish the legality of fighting armed dissidents within a holy site like the Grand Mosque (Kechichian, 1986). The kingdom's religious establishment played a crucial role in deterring more Muslim Saudis from joining and supporting this initiative by establishing that going against authority (that cares about or for its citizens), as the Al-Sauds ostensibly do, and going against the *maslaha* (*public interest or greater good*)<sup>32</sup> was haram (prohibited).<sup>33</sup>

During the same year, the Al-Sauds also experienced the establishment of a significant regional threat to their role as leaders of the Muslim world. Although demonstrations against the Shah, leader of the 2-500-year-old Persian monarchy,

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<sup>31</sup> The consensus among several religious scholars.

<sup>32</sup> Maslaha means the greater good of the public.

<sup>33</sup> Haram, what is not permitted in Islam.

commenced as early as October of 1977. It was not until December of 1979 that Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, a leader of one of the factions in the revolt, became ruler of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Although some scholars have established that the Shah of Iran and the Al-Saud dynasty were close and cordial for years before the revolution (Amiri, Ku Samsu, & Fereidouni, 2011), others have found evidence that Iranian-Saudi relations were always somewhat tense even before the Iranian Revolution of 1979 (Bakhash, 2001). After the revolution, however, the two countries became at odds holding significant rivalries to one another within the Muslim world. Saudi Arabia's image as the leader of the Muslim world was undermined with the rise of the newly established Shia Islamic theocratic country of Iran. Its ruler, Ayatollah Khomeini, challenged the legitimacy of the Al-Saud dynasty and questioned its authority as the Custodians of the Two Holy Mosques. The Saudi king at the time, King Khalid bin Abdulaziz Al Saud<sup>34</sup>, initially congratulated the country and expressed "Islamic solidarity" with the newly established state (Amiri, Ku Samsu, & Fereidouni, 2011, p.678). However, relations between the two entities worsened over the decades to follow creating what is now known as the Middle East Cold War. For the Al-Sauds, the fall of the Shah and the rise of Shia Imam Khomeini created a significant regional and domestic threat. On the domestic level, Iran's Shia influence could potentially threaten Saudi Arabia's territorial integrity by appealing to the disenfranchised minority Shi'a population in the Eastern province. While on the regional and international level, their Islamic leadership is threatened as a

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<sup>34</sup> Khalid bin Abdulaziz Al Saud was the fourth king of Saudi Arabia and ruled, between 1975-1982, after the assassination of his brother Faisal.

new actor arrived on the scene appealing to revolutionary and religious fervor throughout the region.

The Sectarian divide had no real place within the political landscape of the region until the Iranian revolution and the fear of the spread of Shia revolutionary fervor in areas like the Eastern province of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, and many more. Even groups like the Muslim Brotherhood undermined the existence of an actual sectarian divide until the revolution. After the revolution, they made a joint effort with the Al-Sauds to spread strong Sunni sentiments throughout the, already Sunni dominant, region (Shikaki, 2021).<sup>35</sup> Although the state consistently promotes the idea that such Shi'a movements are mere extensions of the Iranian state, scholars have refuted such claims by illustrating the local actors and grievances that drive these movements (something like that). In fact, many of these movements have developed close ties to Iraq and the center of Shi'a power in Najaf or what is known as An-Najaf al-Ashraf, a city in Northern Iraq (Louër, 2008).

To regroup and reaffirm its control in the region and throughout the Muslim world, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was the perfect battleground for the Saudi Islamic leadership to regain its role in the region. In December of 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan after the overthrow of the Afghan leader Nur Muhammad Taraki. Afghanistan became a battleground for the US-Soviet Cold war and a chance for the Saudis to interject and display their leadership by protecting Muslim lands. It ultimately became a conflict with mujahideen, funded and supported by the Saudis and Americans, fighting the Soviets resulting in over fifteen thousand Soviet troops killed and over a

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<sup>35</sup> Some scholars argue the Muslim Brotherhood was inspired by the Iranian revolution; the possibility Islamists could come to power even if Sunni Brotherhood activists differed from Iran's Shia revolutionary clerics.

million Afghans and mujahideen killed. The Soviets withdrew their forces and the victory of the Afghans and mujahideen became the first chapter in the radicalization of certain Muslim Jihadi groups, such as Al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

The alliance between the Saudis and their Western counterparts was a relationship that constantly received justification from the religious establishment. Their fight alongside the Americans in Afghanistan was, according to the Ulama, not in favor of US interests but rather to protect Muslim lands invaded by infidels. Similarly, in 1990 after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the Saudi invitation of US military personnel into the kingdom's holy land, Saudi clerics responded to the outcry of alarmed Saudi Muslims who believed that the presence of so many non-Muslims would, thus, violate the Islamic sanctity of the kingdom (Bowen, 2014). Religious activists were ready to come out and protest, however, many feared repercussions and awaited a green light from the highest levels of the Saudi religious establishment (Ménoret, 2020). In response, King Fahd bin Abdelaziz Al-Saud defused the tension by requesting permission and a religious decree allowing the presence of the US military on Saudi soil. The American presence in the kingdom created a significant amount of backlash and criticism among the conservative members of society. However, the religious establishment confirmed the permissibility of such a presence, mitigating any religious activism and violence against foreign troops on the holy land. This permission created significant tension with the Muslim Brotherhood, along with other religious-based political organizations that saw any western presence in the countries they considered Islamic as forbidden, according to Sharia (Ménoret, 2020).

## **VI. Counterterrorism in the Kingdom (Post – 2000)**

The involvement of the kingdom in the financial support and backing of the mujahideen in Afghanistan led to significant strength within the ranks of both Al-Qaeda, led by Osama Bin Laden, and the Taliban, led by Mullah Omar. A strong alliance was formed between the two groups, specifically after the Soviets left Afghanistan. The Taliban took control of the majority of the country giving them and Al-Qaeda significant leverage in using Afghanistan as a training camp for their troops (Morgan, 2009). Since as early as 1996, plans for a major attack against the US existed. By 1999, they had already decided on a plan and the recruits that would assist in carrying it out. By 2000, the recruits began traveling to the US, preparing for their blow. By August of 2001, US intelligence had received information alluding to the fact that Bin Laden was planning an attack on US soil. However, there was no indication of the magnitude or timing of the attack. By September 11, 2001, the attacks take place shocking the entire world (Sander & Putnam, 2010).

The 9/11 attacks reaffirmed the need for Saudi Arabia to use its religious establishment in trying to fight terrorism and extremism inside and outside of its borders since fifteen out of the nineteen hijackers were Saudi nationals. The government condemned the attacks in all their forms and insisted on the prohibition of such attacks within Islam. They submitted reports to the Security Council Committee emphasizing Quranic verses condemning terrorism and the killing of innocent civilians (Saliba, 2015). During the next few months following the attacks, the state began to detain civilians with any suspicious links to Osama bin Laden's network and ensured that imams in mosques refrain from any negative messages against the West. The Kingdom was also quick to

make arrests based on connections to the terrorist attacks that took place on its own soil. To demonstrate its loyalty to the state, the religious establishment remained quiet, addressing only the prohibition of terrorist attacks in Islam (Saliba, 2015).

## **VII. The Arab Spring and Domestic Threats (2000-2015)**

After the self-immolation of Tunisian street vendor, Tarek el-Tayeb Mohamed Bouazizi who set himself on fire on December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2010, protests spread throughout the region unleashing what has been known to be the “Arab Spring.” Protests in Tunisia were the strongest, while Egypt and Syria quickly followed (Goodwin, 2011). On January 21, 2011, protests started in Saudi Arabia after the self-immolation of a 65-year-old man in Samtah, Jizan followed by a few hundred people protesting in Jeddah (Khosrokhavar, 2012). Protests grew in strength reaching most of the provinces of the kingdom with a significant concentration in cities like Qatif, al-Awamiyah, Riyadh, and Hofuf. A “Day of Rage” was planned for March 11. Organizers throughout the kingdom communicated through social media groups, most of which were suspected to have been monitored by the authorities. Protests in Qatif, Hofuf, and al-Awamiyah had hundreds of protesters facing authorities fearlessly, while Al-Riyadh had a significant police presence and only one protester by the name of Khaled al-Johani, a teacher of religious education in Riyadh who was imprisoned shortly afterward. Protestors held slogans against the House of Saud and Anti-Shia sentiment they experienced officially and unofficially throughout the kingdom (Kamrava, 2012).

Deliberately framed by the state as such, the protests generated fear among the public of rising Iranian influence on the soil of the Kingdom. Hence, the Al-Sauds sent troops to help their Bahraini allies put an end to the protests in Bahrain. By doing so, the

Saudi leadership widened the region's sectarian divide and signaled its determination to take the lead in preventing the Arab Spring's disruptive ripple effects throughout the region (Kamrava, 2012). For the Al-Sauds, the revolutionary fervor throughout the region represented a significant threat coming from Iran. This real or perceived threat pushed the kingdom to portray itself as a defender of an authentic group identity, the true version of Islam, under threat from outsiders, the Shia. As a "mechanism of social and political control," the Saudis moved to securitize their Shia population, framing them as a community in close association with the Iranian fifth column (Mabon, 2018: 42).

Sectarian exclusion and the scapegoating of the Shi'a minority within the kingdom increased significantly after the outbreak of the Arab Spring. The fear among Gulf leaders was that such mobilization could potentially affect their authority within their states and hurt their political legitimacy (Hammond 2012; Shehadeh & Lai, 2020). Trust in government was not limited to sectarianism and sectarianization of the minority Shi'a population; rather other mechanisms have been in place to protect authority. The Gulf has traditionally used mechanisms like rentierism, social welfare trust, and the strong state apparatus (Al Dhafiry, 2003; Beblawi, 1990; Bellin, 2004; Bellin, 2012; Mahdavy H., 1970).<sup>36</sup> Sectarianism, however, has been a mechanism used throughout the Gulf since as early as the development of the Saudi state and was not necessarily a new phenomenon that resulted from the Arab Spring.

Sectarian discourse relevant to the minority Shi'a population in the kingdom has been perpetuated by the Saudi state on a domestic and regional level for quite some time, even before the sectarian issues brought about by the Arab Spring. In doing so, the

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<sup>36</sup> Rentier theory as it applies to the Gulf will be discussed at length in section III d.

kingdom has made an effort to protect the relevant political Sunni-Islamic system in place, to support its status as a regional power, and to contain the influence of its arch-enemy, Iran. These efforts have pushed the Saudi royals closer to the Wahhabi establishment, which has gained more support for the religious legitimacy it provides. Regional Sunni groups have received “large funds and administrative support” from the Saudi leadership to advance their strategic policies against Iran and suppress the role of the Muslim Brotherhood regionally (Neo, 2020; p. 209). Financial support of Sunni groups began as early as the US-Saudi funds. Others have claimed that the Saudis have funded Salafis to regionally promote Wahhabism while simultaneously fighting soviet influence in the region (Saleh & Kraetzschmar, 2015). Shortly after the successful defeat of the soviets, the Saudi monarchy spent millions of dollars recruiting students to mosques, Muslim centers, Islamic colleges, and madrassas. “The goal seems to be that of ensuring Sunni groups loyal to Wahhabism and allied to Saudi Arabia will control both those nations as well as neighbors wracked by unrest like Pakistan and Syria” (Choksy & Choksy, 2015; 29).

(The role of sectarianism and its quantitative effect on Saudi public opinion will be discussed in Chapter 4 in more detail).

### **VIII. Normalization and Beyond (2018 – Present)**

As the region entered its post-Arab Spring era and the dust of the revolutionary fervor has settled, the Kingdom and its regional allies have entered a new era in its relations with Israel. Since 1979, however, Israel had only signed official peace treaties with two Arab countries, Egypt and Jordan. Yet, in light of the region’s political economy, the Gulf countries stand high in demand and possess a significant appeal in allying with Israel. Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE not only possess strong economies

but also have similar enemies as Israel, Iran and Hezbollah. Although both countries have allied with Israel, Riyadh, however, has various internal and external constraints. The price of normalization for the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques is greater OR more backlash from the Arab public toward the Kingdom within the region (Beck, 2019).

In 2016, however, a real effort on the part of both Egypt and Saudi Arabia became apparent as both states worked closely with Israel to break the deadlock within the Palestinian-Israeli peace negotiations. By July of 2016, Saudi academics and businessmen were invited to visit Israel on a diplomatic mission with the permission of the king. These efforts complement OR reveal the significant interest displayed by several Sunni Arab countries (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Jordan, and Egypt) in developing a peace process with Israel and normalizing relations with it to benefit these countries' security and economic wellbeing (Winter, 2017). Although these countries have extended clear olive branches to Israel, it is still the position of the Arab League that "normalization with Israel is contingent upon an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement," regardless of how little of an effect the Arab League's position may have (Guzansky & Neubauer, 2014).

Regardless, Saudi Arabia has recently actively maintained ties with the Jewish nation and has used its religious establishment in normalizing it. In September of 2020, Abdulrahman al-Sudais, imam of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, pled with worshippers to avoid passionate anger toward Jews as a result of the normalization deal achieved between Israel and the UAE. Some worshippers viewed the sermon as a simple display of the teachings of Islam, while others viewed it as signaling the Saudis' intent to begin the normalization process (Abu Toameh, 2020).

## **IX. Conclusion**

Since as early as its development as a state, the kingdom of Saudi Arabia has used its religious establishment as a backbone to establish and maintain legitimacy domestically and regionally. Now, and with the rise of Mohammad Bin Salman, the Kingdom's political establishment is no different. Its ties to the religious establishment are just as strong. As the Kingdom finds itself in the midst of a long war in Yemen and engulfed in backlash throughout the region due to the possibility of a peace treaty with Israel, the religious establishment is ever so important in the state's attempts to gain and maintain legitimacy.

In this chapter, I illustrated the historical development of the state and the role Islam and religion have played since day one. In doing so, I narrated the significant junctures in the history of the kingdom and the significant role played by the Ulama in helping the state overcome any political and economic adversity it faced. In the next chapter, I will highlight specific religious discourse adopted by Saudi imams in an attempt or effort to manipulate public opinion and strengthen the legitimacy of the Al-Sauds.

### CHAPTER 3 SAUDI STATE SPONSORSHIP OF RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE

“Almost any .... religion will  
legislate its creed into law if it  
acquires the political power to do so.”  
-Robert A. Heinlein

Since as early as the development of the Saudi state, Islamic clerics and Ulama have had a partnership in controlling the affairs of the kingdom. Through the alliance created by Mohammed Bin Saud and his influential cleric Mohammed bin Abdul Wahhab, the Ulama have effectively maintained their role within the ranks of the leadership affecting the trajectory of policies within the state and influencing public opinion around such policies. Although, clerical influence has been traditionally concentrated in the judiciary and educational systems within the state along with the social and familial spheres of society; with time the Ulama developed a stronger and more influential role supporting and legitimizing the policies adopted by the state. Many Ulama are state-sponsored or observed closely by the state, thus, use their platform to support state invoked policies. Hence, as policies of the state change, religious discourse transmitted by such ulama also changes. Such discourse heard at Friday sermons or on religious programs through public TV channels change as well, supporting whatever policy the state puts forth. Although the Ulama do not make significant effective changes to policy decisions, they do serve as consultants to the political leadership through the Council of Senior Scholars. This is displayed clearly even through the sermons and religious broadcasting disseminated regionally and transnationally. To explore this trend more closely in this chapter, I specifically explore how religious clerics within the

kingdom use their platform (religious discourse) to influence public opinion among their religious followings.

I, specifically, explore the nature of the religious establishment within the kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the ties of the main religious Ulama, who enjoy a significant amount of public opinion influence, to the state. I, then, explore religious sermons and religious TV broadcasted programs by well-known state-sponsored imams, such as the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia among others, and trace the development of religious discourse based on policies adopted by the state. The discourse concentrates on specific political junctures as explored in chapter 1 and illustrate how the Ulama use such discourse to affect public opinion around a certain topic whether it be the legitimacy of authority, sectarianism in the kingdom, the Islamic prohibition of revolutionary fervor against the state or the recent warming up to the idea of normalizing relations with the Israeli state.

To adequately explore the Ulama's religious discourse disseminated to the public, I collected a representative sample<sup>37</sup> of seven religious sermons and TV programs given in Arabic. I, then, transcribed the sermons and translated the transcription to English. Once all the sermons and religious TV programs were translated and transcribed, I created themes based on the political junctures observed within this study. The themes concentrated on topics discussed within the sermons such as loyalty and allegiance to the ruler, the so-called belief that Shi'a Islam is a heretic following, and lastly the relationship with non-Muslims specifically Jews in anticipation of the UAE's normalization with Israel. I then used a qualitative content analysis software known as

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<sup>37</sup> The Sample of Sermons is taken from different sermons by well-known clerics in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia. These sermons are all publicly available through YouTube.

Atlas TI to explore the patterns between these themes and the extent to which these sermons and TV programs captured the attention of their viewers and at times may have successfully swayed opinions. Using Atlas TI, I populate word clouds for every grouping of sermons separated by topic (section). These word clouds illustrate the important themes extracted from the excerpts analyzed from the sermons. I, then, extract excerpts illustrated as significant content within the sermons based on the themes analyzed. Links to all of the sermons analyzed are available in Appendix I of this dissertation.

Through this analysis, the main outcome is the consistency in portraying the Saudi government as the rightful leaders of the Muslim world and protectors of the Holy Cities, followed by their role as the leaders of the Sunni Muslim world and the problematic role played by the Shi'a and more importantly the Islamic Republic of Iran regionally, and lastly the importance of treating all members of religions equally specifically those of the Jewish faith who were previously observed negatively in the kingdom in anticipation of possible normalization with Israel as done by the neighboring UAE.

### **I. The Saudi Ulama**

Traditionally the religious establishment's influence has been concentrated in the judiciary, educational and social spheres of the Saudi Arabian kingdom; while the political establishment dealt with all economic, political, and security spheres. It is important to note that a traditional clerical hierarchy is not something in line with Sunni Islam as in the case within the Shi'a traditions. In the kingdom, however, there does exist a clerical hierarchy appointed by the state. Saudi Arabia's traditional hierarchal religious establishment includes the state-sponsored grand mufti, who is the most influential and

senior authority within the Muslim religious establishment in the kingdom. The Grand Mufti is usually appointed by the king and heads the General Presidency of Scholarly Research and Ifta. Many of the senior Ulama within the Kingdom come from the Al-Sheikh family, descendants of Mohammed bin Abdul Wahhab, and have held a particularly privileged position within the religious establishment. Many such clerics preached submission to the political will of the ruler and obedience citing religion as the motivation to keeping oneself pure and away from the realm of politics for fear of creating chaos, conflict, or any form of social division (fitna) (Mouline 2014). This, of course, has been an extremely useful tactic to the political establishment in the kingdom helping to not only legitimize the monarchy but also delegitimize any form of opposition or protest.

The official religious clerisy in the kingdom is looked at with suspicion by the public and thus may not necessarily serve the interests of the state. As such the state has made significant efforts to co-opt clerics who are not part of the official religious establishment. In fact, King Abdullah took it upon himself to expand the council of senior ulama, which traditionally only included members who followed the Hanbali school of thought, to include the other four schools of Sunni Islamic thought except for Shi'a members (Yamani 2008). Clerics used their appeal to influence public opinion on a grassroots level, not only through religious sermons at local mosques but also through programs featured on state channels or public broadcasting networks.

These programs are crucial to the state as the messages transmitted to the public assist in affirming the preservation of religious Islamic traditions. For the state, religious discourse transmitted by imams and ulama to the general public serves as the language

and messages used to socially construct society into its religious national identity. As illustrated by Alexander Wendt, “structures of human association are determined primarily by shared ideas rather than material force” (Wendt 1999, p.1). For the Al-Sauds, establishing a shared identity enforced through indirect messages transmitted through religious discourse by well-liked and influential ulama creates a strong sense of a “structure of the human association.” Wendt further posits that identities are, thus, constructed by “these shared ideas rather than given by nature” (Wendt 1999, p.1).

Based on the influential discourse establishing that the Al-Sauds are religiously mandated as the rulers of the kingdom and reflected through the formal title given by themselves to the current king “Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques;” the political establishment can perpetuate the understanding that the current status quo is not only done so by material force and resources but also by a shared belief of religious legitimacy to rule. These notions are exaggerated based on the region or district within the kingdom as certain parts of the kingdom are more rigid and set in their social and cultural traditions as opposed to merely religious beliefs. For example, parts of the Najdi region in the Kingdom are much more conservative than others. Due to the rigidity in their beliefs, the political establishment is protected in that region, and the legitimacy of the Al-Sauds in the Najdi region is at an all-time high (Wrampelmeier 2003).

For the Saudis, the ulama fill the place of what Max Weber labeled “technicians of the routine cults” (Weber 1965, p. 66-67) generally responsible for the dispensing of good and forbidding of evil within the kingdom of what is known as the religious police (Mutaween مطَّوِّع). They performed duties relating to the interpretation of the Quran by illustrating Islamic beliefs, the image of God and heaven, and what is considered

appropriate socioreligious behaviors within society. The ulama used their almost daily contact with the general populace to their advantage to spread the faith through prayer, predication, public sermons, and theological consultations via public broadcasting and other media outlets. Through this constant contact, they were able to impose their vision of the world onto the population and their followers both domestically and transnationally. This also gave them a significant amount of control over the social promotion of norms and shared identity. These messages were done in coordination with the policies of the state and any break away from it resulted in state reprimands to the clerics in dissent. To take full control over the official religious narrative, the ulama had proper order in place by the political authority. Both establishments, the political and the religious, formed what can be known as an accommodating relationship. One in which the ulama supported the political establishment and demonstrated in the religious discourse transmitted to the public, in exchange for a religious monopoly on worship and a significant amount of control over the social sphere of society (Mouline 2014).

Interestingly, however, the political establishment consistently presents its social and religious policies as a reflection of the desires, practices, and identity of its own populace. In fact, at times it takes it even further by presenting such policies as a required safety precaution in the interest of society. Although not all ulama are state-sponsored a significant majority of them are and many others ensure that they remain verbally supportive of the state policies to ensure their own safety. When scholars express dissent in the kingdom, arrests and the like are quickly carried out. Shortly after Mohammad Bin Salman (MBS) became the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia in June of 2017; a campaign to crackdown against clerical dissent began. This campaign has intensified during Bin

Salman's leadership. Popular scholars such as Salman Al-Awda and Awad Al-Qarni were imprisoned for criticizing the Saudi government on several occasions including their encouragement of democracy and tolerance during the Arab Spring protests. They were both subsequently accused of disrupting public order and inciting terrorism (Watch 2017).

Sheikh Omar al Muqbil, a well-known Saudi scholar, was also recently arrested after openly criticizing the Saudi government for allowing concerts openly held in the kingdom. He believed that the country was erasing the identity and traditions of society by allowing foreign artists and actors to enter the holy soil of the kingdom (Arab 2019). Aisha Al-Muhajiri is another well-known Saudi Islamic leader. Her detention came as a result of her preaching and giving Quran lessons in her private home. Along with her, other women present in the Quran lessons were arrested as well (Monitor 2021). Another prominent Saudi cleric, Aaidh Al Qarni, appeared on national television to apologize to the Saudi people for his hardline stance on the recent modernization of the kingdom in wake of the Crown Prince's leadership. Al-Qarni was seen apologizing for his hardline stance and his radical fatwas that, according to him, went against the true teachings of Islam. His apology went even further to include his regret for his support of Qatar in the past, during the GCC blockade of Qatar, which for the kingdom was viewed as a conspiracy against the Saudi state (Gulf 2019).

## **II. Leadership Does No Wrong**

Since the sermons were grouped by topic, the patterns that emerged illustrated a trend among the ulama and the religious discourse they transmit to the public. The timeframe of most of the sermons analyzed in this chapter was between 2016-2019. Most

of these sermons took place after the Arab Spring leading up to an important development in the Middle East, normalization with Israel. One of the most common characteristics of the sermons is the reiteration of the need to follow the political leadership and honor it. In many of the sermons, scholars and ulama talk about the concept of the Bay'ah, which in Arabic is بَيْعَةٌ and translates into allegiance. This is an Islamic terminology that illustrates an oath of allegiance to the leader of the country. This concept is still practiced in countries like the kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Sudan among others (Lesch 2001). This can be seen in the word clouds developed through the transcribed sermons entered into Atlas TI. The most common terms in the first batch of sermons analyzed were: stability, love of the ruler, peace, persevere, the public good ... etc. There is a common theme illustrating the need to be loyal and obedient to the ruler. This concept goes back to the tradition of Bay'ah. The tradition can be traced back to the time of the prophet Mohammad. Anyone who wanted to join the Muslim community at the time would express the oneness of God and the prophethood of Mohammad and show their willingness to follow the prophet. The prophet in exchange also took an oath to protect members of his community. Although the oath contains similar expressions to that of the Shahada, شَهَادَةٌ; it is obviously different as it is limited to the concept of allegiance as opposed to submission to the oneness of God (Bravmann, 2009).

When observing all of the sermons (seven sermons in total) the phrase “preservation of public good” appeared about five times while the phrase that “God chose the Al-Sauds” as the rightful rulers of the kingdom appeared four times. The word “stability”, when referencing the need to persevere the public good and peace within the kingdom of the political establishment, appeared a total of three times. Although I will

discuss public opinion data in the kingdom more closely in chapter 4 of this manuscript, it is important to state that even the public opinion data reveals a domestic populace in the kingdom that is loyal to its leadership. Concerning a specific variable, Trust in Government, most participants in the data set indicated OR expressed a strong sense of trust within government. There was a minimal number of participants that had any critical feelings toward their government. Ofcourse it is important to mention the concept of preference falsification as seen within authoritarian countries. Coined by Timur Kuran (1997), the concept illustrates the pressure individuals may face when stating their preferences publically. Such preferences may be falsified when stated in public within an authoritarian regime, such as the kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Kuran 1997). Many participants may have indicated strong trust in government in an effort to stay clear of any political issues with the government.

One of the sermons that addressed loyalty to the leadership was conducted by Walid Seedan. Sheikh Walid Saeedan is a well-known Saudi scholar who has used his platform continuously to advocate for allegiance to the Saudi state. In one of his sermons delivered in May of 2019 with over two million views on YouTube, he continuously emphasized the need to obey the leadership. This sermon occurred during MBS' leadership and his policies granting more leniency to activities that were considered taboo such as clubbing and female and male mixing at gatherings and musical concerts. Here Seedan explained, when referring to the rulers of the kingdom:

“Its rulers and scholars are a red line and cannot be criticized. Because it is the land of the Two Holy Mosques, you see the preservation of its leader is a Muslim obligation.”  
(Interview 3)

Using religion to support his advice to the worshipers present, Sheikh Saeedan explains that the criticism of the Saudi religious and political establishment is considered prohibited within Islam. He goes further to explain that as Muslims, there is an obligation to obey and preserve the political establishment in the land of the Two Holy Mosques. He goes further to explain this obligation for Muslims is extended not only to refrain from criticizing the political authority but to also defend it at all costs as it is the job of God, not mankind, to hold leaders accountable. Throughout their sermons, Saudi clerics use concepts like “listen to the ruler” as well as “obey” the political leadership. The concept of allegiance to the political establishment and the obligation of citizens and Muslims to obey the leadership is consistently used within sermons to the public.

“We have to be united with our rulers and scholars to preserve the leadership and to ensure that no enemies enter our borders. Even if the ruler wronged us or did not preserve our rights, we must only allow God to hold him accountable.” (Interview 3)

“Listen to the ruler and obey him even if he hurts you physically and takes your money, that is it. If the ruler is in the right, then he is just” (Interview3)

Most clerics openly advocate for the complete and unequivocal support and obedience toward the leadership irrespective of the policies, however, according to Sheikh Waleed Saeedan he also advocates for the active defending of the leadership and asking his followers to pray for the Saudi leadership to better their position. He was specifically of the opinion that patience and prayer should be their ultimate practice in cases whereby rulers do not abide by the tenants of justice within Islam. He explains that revolutions and protests against the leadership will not bring about justice or change, rather, it would result in the spread of more evil and pain for the society. As such among the tenants of being a good Muslim is protecting society and understanding that the

greater good of society (greater good: Maslaha Ama) supersedes that of individual interest. Hence, revolutions become, thus, prohibited in Islam, according to some Saudi scholars, due to the disruption of peace it causes within society. This of course serves the interest of the monarch immensely as it attempts to persuade Saudi nationals to refrain from revolting regardless of how ruthless and tyrannical a specific monarch may be.

Sheikh Othman bin Mohammed Al-Khamis is another well-known Ulama who is of Kuwaiti origin but was often featured on Saudi public broadcasting channels. His sermons have been seen as problematic in the past and have gotten a significant amount of attention due to the radical level of his sermons. In one of his sermons broadcasted in July of 2018 on Saudi public television and over three hundred and thirty seven thousand views on YouTube he was asked the extent to which the prophet encouraged the obedience to the ruler even if the ruler in one's respective country hurts the citizens and takes away their rights. The Sheikh is seen defending the prophet's saying that it should have read:

“It states that you must listen to the ruler and obey him even if he hurts you physically and takes your money, that is it. If the ruler is in the right, then he is just. However, if the ruler does this and is in the wrong then you as a worshipper of God must be patient and pray to God. You cannot revolt against him because revolting will result in more evil and more pain for the society as a whole” (Interview 2).

“The idea is that rationality tells us to be careful and stay loyal to our leaders to ensure safety, peace, and security for Muslims.” (Interview 2)

Most scholars within the kingdom and on the kingdom's public broadcasting channels consistently prohibit the concept of revolting against the ruler. In the sermons observed, the concept of obedience to the political establishment becomes a significant

trend. In fact, among the sermons analyzed in this specific segment of the study, 57% of all sermons (7 sermons) consistently mention the religious importance of obeying the political leadership within the country. They also insist on the need to obey the ruler to ensure the public good and keep the public peace. Many scholars take the position of trying to encourage the populace to obey the leader and ignore any opposition that may encourage revolts.

Obedience to the ruler goes even further with the description of proper obedience by the Saudi cleric, Sheikh Al Barez Abdulaziz Alrees. In a sermon displayed on YouTube with over one hundred and thirty-three thousand views, Alrees explains to his listeners that proper obedience to the ruler is not limited to the lack of revolting or protesting the leadership but also extends to what an obedient populace sees and remains quiet about. In his sermon broadcasted in August of 2018, shortly after MBS's rise to leadership, Alrees explains that even if a citizen witnesses his leader fornicating or drinking alcohol in person or even broadcasted on national television, he or she should deny what they have seen and obey the leadership regardless. He goes even further to permit, Islamically, for a leader to fornicate on national television as a form of stress relief from his stressful job. In his sermon he specifically states that if a believer witnesses a leader fornicating on public television, he or she should:

“You must deny that you saw that to ensure the preservation of the public good of the society at hand. This is because it is your duty to allow people to love the leader and not encourage people to revolt against the leader even if he is fornicating on TV for 30 minutes.” (Interview 1)

“you obey and listen to your ruler even if he were to hurt your back and take your money. This is because for the greater good we must protect the stability in the country” (Interview 1)



companions, and satan, among others. The word Shi'a, for example, was mentioned seven times while the word sectarianism was only mentioned once. However, the word Muslim was mentioned twelve times within all seven sermons, illustrating the desire to keep a unified front creating a sense of similarity with the totality of the Muslim Ummah. Interestingly, many of these sermons take place after the Arab Spring and throughout the involvement of the Iranians in Syria. During this time (Post 2011 – Pre 2019), both the political and religious establishment in the kingdom concentrated on fighting back against Shi'a influence within its territory.

Sheikh Badr Almeshari, for example, is a very well-known Saudi Arabian cleric with a significant following both in and outside of the kingdom. He is an Imam in a mosque in Riyadh but also hosts several religious television programs in which he preaches to his followers about faith, the afterlife, and ethics. However, his programs do address political current events and at times have been ruthless in his description of a specific group viewed as the enemy of the state. In a sermon broadcast on Saudi Arabia public television with over two hundred and twenty-one thousand views on YouTube, he addresses Iran as a sinful entity in the Middle East and describes Iran and Hezbollah as agents of the Jews. Here Jews are used interchangeably to describe the government of Israel.

“Iran the country that carries the dog Hassan Nasrallah, they are the devils and agents of the Jews.” (Interview 5)

In this same sermon, he goes even further to use names of well-known historic scholars of Islam, such as Ibn Taymiyyah, to support his own negative descriptions of Iran and their so-called ties to Israel. He uses negative descriptions and name-calling to

illustrate their negative effect on the Ummah and claims that they are responsible for a significant amount of fitna within the Ummah as well.

“They are Iran, the donkeys that are ignorant of everything, they were named by the Sheikh of Islam, Ibn Taymiyyah, they are the donkeys of the Jews that are carried by them everywhere they go. The Jews ride them every time they try to create fitna (issues) or wrongdoing for the Muslims.” (Interview 5)

He goes further to describe the Shi’a of Arab descent, more specifically the Shi’a of Saudi Arabia, as being deceived and lied to by Iran. He states that if the Arab Shi’a were smart, they would know that they are being used by Iran and Hezbollah. The purpose of his statements is to discourage Muslim Shi’a in the Arab world from protesting their political leaders.

“If the Arab Shia were smart, they would know that they have no value by the Shia of Persia, they are worthless to them. They are dogs. The major dog is Hasan Nasrallah who allows for participation in the war against the people of Syria. May God curse (the Iranian leader) Sistani, May God curse Al-Sader (of Iraq) and May God curse Hasan warrior of Satan (Nasrallah of Hezbollah in Lebanon). And May God Curse Khamenei and May God curse everyone whoever is with them.” (Interview 5)

He concludes by affirming his intention is not of a sectarian nature, but rather to encourage leaders of the Muslim world to recall that living within the parameters of the Muslim Ummah is a just option for all Muslims.

“This is not an issue of sectarianism. Whenever it is an issue of justice, the Muslim Ummah is the most just. Living under the Muslim Ummah is the most just for all among the just Muslim leaders.” (Interview 5)

Another message that is consistently conveyed is the message that the Shi’a sect is not a correct version of Islam and the following of its teachings or even assisting Shi’a in any political objective would result in sin for a Sunni Muslim. Some Saudi clerics have gone so far as to state that if you fight alongside a Shi’a as a Sunni Muslim, your political

fight against injustice is considered a sin. This message, while wrapped in sectarian discourse, is purely geopolitical with the hopes of affecting opinion toward Saudi Arabia's rival power in the region, Iran.

In a sermon, with one thousand one hundred and eighty-one views on YouTube, by the highest level of clerics, the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia Sheikh Abdul Aziz Al-Asheikh, he is asked by a caller whether the caller's fight against the Israeli state in the Lebanese Israeli war in 2006 alongside Hezbollah will be considered a sin. The cleric quickly asked the caller to make proper repentance to God or will otherwise be unaccepted by God and will be thus considered a sin. The Sheikh asks whether the caller made repentance from fighting alongside the Shi'a, as the cleric illustrates that it is a sin. Interestingly, however, the cleric makes no mention or explanation regarding Israel in this context, rather he concentrates on the Shi'a power, Hezbollah. He claims in his answer, that the caller has made sin by fighting alongside heretics against an innocent party but does not elaborate further. He then continues to explain:

“If his actions were based on his own ignorance, then we hope that he can repent to God. It is not permissible to assist those who are not Muslims in their fight. We hope that he can repent to God for assisting them in their fights.” (Interview 7)

Other than the popular sermons on national Saudi TV stations and the perception that Shi'a Muslims are not real Muslims but rather heretics, Shi'a Muslims in Saudi Arabia are consistently treated as second-class citizens. As discussed in the following chapter (chapter 4), the Shi'a population has experienced discrimination in the kingdom since as early as the establishment of the Saudi state, however, this discrimination increased two folds following the Iranian revolution and leading up to the Arab Spring.



Figure 4: Word cloud for The Iranian and Saudi Arabia Islamic cleric system and their people

#### IV. Normalization – A New Era

Leading up to the normalization deal between the UAE and Israel, lots of political speculation took place around the possibility of the Al-Sauds taking the step to normalize with Israel. The concept of normalization with Israel refers to the peace efforts and treaties taken place between members of the Arab League and Israel. Over the years, since the creation of the state of Israel, several Arab states have decided to sign peace treaties with Israel. This began with Egypt in 1979, Jordan in 1994, and more recently the United Arab Emirates, Sudan, and Morocco in 2020. While other states established informal relations with Israel such as Oman and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Hitman and Zwilling 2021). Although the start of the nonofficial efforts between Saudi Arabia and Israel is unclear; some reports have indicated that the relationship began as early as 2005. However, not until 2016 did we see clear efforts and a change in the official language of both the political and religious establishments in the kingdom (Podeh 2018).

Since these efforts have begun, the kingdom has been changing its attitude toward normalizing relations with the Jewish state. The Al-Sauds began to lay the groundwork for normalization through economic and unofficial political relations. Normalization for the Al-Sauds is problematic and creates significant sensitivities domestically and regionally. Being the rulers of a major hegemonic power in the Middle East and the Custodians of the Two Holy Cities, the Al-Sauds have been very careful in managing their relations with Israel leading up to any possible peace accords (Guzansky 2020). Some of the terms that emerged through the word cloud in figure 5 for the analysis of the sermons related to normalization are Jewish, relations, Muslims, public good, favor faith over violence, peace, prophet's sayings. All of these terms emphasize peaceful relations with one's neighbor, with a concentration on Jewish neighbors or the state of Israel.

Among such preparations are sermons conducted by major clerics in the kingdom such as Abdulrahman Al-Sudais. Al-Sudais, whose full name is Abdul Rahman Ibn Abdul Aziz al-Sudais, is the imam of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, Saudi Arabia as well as the president of the General Committee for the Affairs of the Two Holy Mosques. Al-Sudais is well known internationally for his recitation of the Quran and has, as a result, received many awards and acclaims due to it. In the past, he was criticized for slanderous statements toward non-Muslims and more specifically the Jewish population for its affiliation with the state of Israel. However, Sudaisi has also been known to use his sermons to encourage his followers toward or against certain policies. In the past, Al-Sudais has denounced the treatment of Palestinians by both the Israeli government and settlers many times (Elhadj 2007; Rahman 2018). And he has been known to denounce

the Shi'a of Iran and has called for war against Iran. In a sermon on the relationship with the Shi'a of Iran, he was quoted saying:

“Our war with Iran, say that out loud, is a war between Sunnis and Shiites. Our war with Iran...is truly sectarian. If it was not sectarian, we will make it sectarian” (Mohammed 2015)

However, as the policies of the kingdom toward certain countries, such as Israel, have changed, change in the religious discourse of clerics in the kingdom has also changed. Leading up to 2019 and 2020, as states in the Gulf were beginning to explore OR consider normalization with Israel, the Kingdom also warmed up to the concept and religious discourse mirrored this sentiment to affect public opinion. In a sermon, with over two hundred and five thousand views on YouTube, at the Grand Mosque in Mecca, Al-Sudais talked about the Jewish population and their closeness to Muslims. He also talked about the importance of Muslims treating their neighbors, i.e. non-Muslims, with the utmost respect. This sermon interestingly coincided with the decision of the UAE to normalize relations with Israel. Al-Sudais received a significant amount of public backlash from Muslims worldwide calling him a sell-out and a puppet to the political leadership in the kingdom.

“It is useful to alert people in matters of faith in which many lack an understanding. We must come in to correct any confusion within belief. It is important to be human and have good relations with all humans. It is important to be kind to everyone even those who are not Muslim with the hopes that they will enter this religion” (Interview 6).

In his, Sermon Sudais went even further to encourage Muslims to have an open mind when dealing with non-Muslims. He used the example of the prophet as a method of encouraging respect for Jews. He asks that the followers of Islam be kind to the people of the book, to mitigate and avoid any possible disturbances, unrest, or fitna. As the



## V. Conclusion

In this chapter, I aimed to explore how religious clerics within the kingdom use their platform (religious discourse) to attempt to influence public opinion among their religious followings. In doing so, I explored sermons conducted by Saudi religious clerics in which they address certain topics in relation to their importance politically and legislatively. These sermons all took place between 2016-2019 after the appointment of the new crown prince MBS and during his ascendancy as a key powerbroker. The sermons coincide with specific political junctures in an attempt to affect public opinion around specific policies important to the leadership. The first batch of sermons consistently discusses the idea of obedience to the leadership following the rise of revolutions throughout the Arab World. The sermons also emphasize obedience and loyalty to the political leadership during a time in which the political leadership began to express OR grant leniency toward many activities that would have been otherwise controversial in terms of religion. The second batch of sermons concentrates specifically on sectarianism, a topic that has plagued the kingdom for some time but has become a major point of discussion following the Arab Spring revolutions in 2011. These sermons made an effort to emphasize the Iranian government's attempt at interfering in the politics of the region and more specifically the kingdom.

These perceptions are mirrored in the public opinion data analyzed in the next chapter. In that chapter, I analyze and find evidence of high levels of sectarian attitudes among the kingdom's populace. These attitudes indicate that the efforts of the political and religious establishment to influence or shape public opinion regarding sectarianism have been successful. And lastly, the final batch of sermons included an important one

delivered by Al-Sudais, the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, discussing the need to treat neighbors of other religions better. Such sermons specifically referred to the Israeli state, as the Kingdom and other Arab countries in the Gulf and wider region contemplated and/or moved forward with normalizing relations with it.

## CHAPTER 4 SECTARIANISM & THE KINGDOM

“True religion is not talk, or doctrines,  
or theories, nor is it sectarianism.  
It is the relation between soul and God.”  
- Swami Vivekananda

Throughout its history, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has dealt with political insecurities depending on the developments both locally and internationally. As this study argues, the religious establishment has assisted the state with mitigating its insecurities by using religious and sectarian discourse to legitimate the political establishment and its policies. Throughout the Kingdom, political and religious elites have developed and disseminated sectarian discourse to cow it's the population into fearing an internal Shi'a minority, and external Iranian, enemy with the aim of increasing trust and legitimacy in the monarchy (Jamal 2007; Matthiesen 2013; Hashemi and Postel 2017).

As discussed in earlier chapters, sectarianism in the Kingdom has increased significantly and played a larger role OR featured more prominently in the development of the state since the Iranian revolution. While the Al-Sauds have predominantly relied on the traditional rentier model or financial munificence from oil export revenues to gain and maintain popular legitimacy and support, sectarianism has become a complementary mode of preserving the status quo and increasing legitimacy and influence at home and in the region. The state has cultivated and instrumentalized sectarianism as a counter-revolutionary tactic to exaggerate religious differences within its citizenry. Through religious discourse and practices, the Saudi state has relied on sectarianism as a carefully crafted policy to politicize religious differences and create a rift between the majority Sunni and the minority Shi'a populations in the Kingdom. This tactic began after the

Iranian revolution and continued with even more intensity after the Arab Spring. Some scholars have blamed the Suni-Shi'a divide on a century-old religious rift after the death of the prophet Mohammad and the death of his son in law Ali (Huntington 1996), while others have found evidence linking sectarianism to the state in which it has been used as a tool to incite fear of a securitized minority (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998) and, thus, distract the majority from any political mobilization (Al-Rasheed, 2011; Hashemi 2015). This tactic becomes even more apparent as it is well known that Sunnis and Shia have coexisted peacefully during times of political stability. In this chapter, I highlight this argument by illustrating actual trends through public opinion data. In illustrating sectarianism as a state-policy trend, I attempt to complement the literature on sectarianism by establishing actual trends based on public opinion data and empirical evidence.

Few scholars have concentrated their research on the state policies of sectarianism in the kingdom and even fewer have examined it from the context of empirical data. In this chapter, I fill the lacuna in the literature by examining the extent to which the state's policies have affected the sentiments of the population in Saudi Arabia by perpetuating incitement of sectarianism, creating feelings of intolerance. I further measure whether such sentiments are heightened during times of perceived economic downturn. This is done through a linear regression model used to examine data from Saudi Arabia, an understudied example of sectarianism, with a population consisting primarily of Sunni Muslims and a minority of Shi'a Muslims. To understand whether sectarianism is a state motivated or religiously driven; the model tests, both, the role of religiosity in forming intolerant sentiments among the majority population as well as the mechanism of state-

led incitement of intolerance. Using data from the oil-rich state of Saudi Arabia, I concentrate on a snapshot in time during the onset of the socio-political upheaval brought by the Arab Spring through data collected by the fourth wave of the Arab Barometer (Jamal et al. 2011). To my knowledge, this is the only public opinion data available, to date, from the kingdom.

### **I. Religion and Political Tolerance**

Some orientalist scholars have blamed sectarianism on a century-old rift between Sunnis and Shi'as insisting that the instability is a result of the struggle between both groups in deciding who would maintain leadership after the death of the prophet Mohammed in seventh century Arabia (Huntington 1996; Masters 2001). Contemporary scholars tend to point to a lack of evidence in support of such orientalist arguments. For example, Armstrong (2000) argued that Sunnis and Shi'a lived peacefully for centuries making it common for members of both the sects to pray at the same mosques, marry among each other, and live-in neighboring quarters (Armstrong 2000; Chen 2017). Others regard the rift to be a modern phenomenon associated with the building of the modern state in the Middle East. More specifically scholars such as Makdisi (2000), who studied the development of sectarian identity in Lebanon, finds that sectarianism, or sectarian exclusion, is a modern development. The understanding that religion may push forth intolerant sentiment within a society has been a common understanding within traditional scholarship on religion and political tolerance (Erskine and Siegel 1975; Filsinger 1976; Nunn, Crockett, and Williams 1978; Corbett 1982; Smidt and Penning 1982; Beatty and Walter 1984).

Religion has a significant role in the worldview and “eternal” membership of a group. According to some scholars, religious group membership provides a shared ontological experience that may provide positive promotion of well-being as well as equally negative sentiments when the religious identity itself is threatened in a society (Ysseldyk, Matheson, and Ani 2010). With respect to religion and intolerance, modern scholarship, however, establishes the contrary. Eisenstein (2006), in a study measuring religiosity and political tolerance in the United States, finds an insignificant relationship between religion and political intolerance (Eisenstein 2006). In fact, according to Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) any possible conflict between two religious’ groups, if any, reduces significantly when the groups have any minor interaction within a social setting (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). Ciftci, Nawaz, and Sydiq (2016) also find that contact between groups has a positive impact on tolerance levels, not only in a domestic context but also in a global one (Ciftci, Nawaz, and Sydiq 2016). Similar trends were found by Thomsen and Rafiqi (2017) when they measured intergroup contact among Danish populations and their effect on tolerance levels (Thomsen and Rafiqi 2017).

Within the context of the Gulf, more specifically, most modern scholarship indicates a strong connection between sectarianism and modern political developments as opposed to religiously motivated intolerance between the two sects. Potter (2014) suggested the Sunni-Shi’a rift developed after World War I, with the signing of the Sikes-Picot agreement that placed minorities and diverse ethnic groups in newly established states (Potter 2014, 6). Gengler (2014) observed that there is a distinctive lack of political institutions throughout the Gulf and that this is the foundation of class-based politics. In more detail, the rentier economy and strong tribal and familial ties make sectarian

identity among the most viable bases for political organization. Hence, the emergence of sectarian identity politics in Saudi Arabia can be attributed to the Gulf's political-institutional characteristics (Gengler 2014; Samin 2015).

## **II. Saudi Historical Context**

The establishment of sectarianism began with the rise of the Al-Saud family, with the help of western powers and the influence of Muhammed Ibn Abd al-Wahab, in centralizing and legitimatizing their power in the kingdom. As discussed in chapter 2, Al-Wahab's influence provided the Al-Saud's with the religious legitimacy to rule over the holy place of Islam and assisted in the unification of the kingdom under the strict Islamic interpretation of Wahhabism (House 2012). This process occurred while western powers, mainly the United Kingdom, assisted in locating oil and extracting it for sale. The Wahabi influence on the kingdom provided the establishment of a religious Sunni Muslim society that spread anti-Shi'a sentiment throughout the kingdom. The religious clerics' main role was to regulate public morality and design religious education. However, their role expanded radically, allowing for the dissemination of strong anti-Shi'a rhetoric which grew even more with the rise of Iran as both an Islamic republic and a regional power following the revolution in 1979. Shi'ism became a feared ideology among Sunnis, and tensions rose in the Gulf with regard to any Shi'a minorities. Henceforth, the kingdom viewed Iran as a major threat to its influence in the region; as Iran's influence grew, so did the kingdom's propagation of sectarian exclusion (Louër 2008; Chen 2017).

Although sectarianism took center stage after the Iranian revolution, it increased even more aggressively after the outbreak of the Arab Spring and the beginning of

political mass mobilizations by Arab youth, women, and other citizens throughout the region. Gulf leaders were fearful of any political mobilization or demands for reform and became very active in maintaining their own legitimacy. For many leaders, the easiest road to legitimacy was to place blame on the obvious internal threat deeming it an enemy of the state (Hammond 2012). Trust in government and allegiance to authority was not limited to sectarianism and sectarianization of the minority Shi'a population; rather other mechanisms have been in place to protect authority. Hazem Beblawi's work has been well known for the development of rentier theory in the Gulf which depicts that revenue from oil production is shared with the population restricting dissent and purchasing the loyalty of society (Mahdavy 1970; Beblawi 1990).<sup>38</sup> Social trust is another factor established by scholars as a mechanism used by the authorities to quiet dissent. Jamal (2007) establishes that trust in government within nondemocratic states is a way to ensure the longevity of rule and the maintenance of the status quo in nondemocratic regimes (Jamal 2007). Sectarianism, however, has been a mechanism used throughout the Gulf. In more recent years, it has been used significantly and has caused a significant amount of violence throughout the region.

The use of sectarianism as a political tool in times of insecurity and fear of illegitimacy or a loss of trust in government was discussed by Matthiesen (2013) extensively. He establishes that Gulf leaders believed in strengthening sectarianism to prevent a cross-sectarian opposition front from joining the revolting Arabs in demanding democracy. Matthiesen's argument lies in the premise that the Saudis responded to the challenge of political legitimacy by manipulating and ensuring the spread of propaganda

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<sup>38</sup> Rentier theory as it applies to the Gulf will be discussed at length in the Section "Saudi Arabia's Economy".

to prevent any mass opposition from rising. In Bahrain, for example, the elites, who were the minority Sunni authority ruling a majority Shi'a population, were horrified by slogans emerging from the Pearl Roundabout in Manama, declaring the removal of any sectarian labels and the insistence of purely Bahraini identification. The Bahraini elites sought assistance from their royal Saudi brethren in defeating the protests. The Saudi government intervened and cracked down on the dissent. As a result, the crackdown resulted in a large number of arrests and mass killings of Shi'a. The kingdom then diverted its efforts to the Shi'a in Saudi Arabia by severely repressing them and carrying out a large number of arrests throughout the kingdom. Their attention was also shifted to Yemen, They have also engaged in a bloody proxy war in Yemen under the premise of engaging in a war against the evil Iranian-influenced Shi'a population that revolted against its government. The war in Yemen still persists until this day and has resulted in an astonishing number of killings, mass migration of refugees, and starvation of the general public (Matthiesen 2013).

Although Matthiesen (2013) depicts the sectarianism in the Gulf as a policy response to the Arab Spring, he ignores the consistent success of such policies before and after the Arab Spring, especially in the midst of an economy that is suffering. Other scholars have responded to the recent political events in the Middle East around sectarianism and the scholarship developed around it to introduce new theories. For example, Hashemi and Postel (2017) introduce the term sectarianization to define the use of sectarianism and the incitement of fear around sectarianism in the Gulf as a tool used by non-democratic regimes to distract the masses from political mobilization. The theme of political authoritarian-ism is central to the sectarianization thesis.

According to Hashemi and Postel (2017), the sectarianization theory is shaped by authoritarianism and the direct manipulation of sectarian identity as a strategy to deflect the demands for political change and democracy in the region. In fact, they establish that sectarianization is a tool used by insecure governments in the Muslim and Arab world and seems to be unique to the region. Although Hashemi and Postel (2017) present a thorough thesis on the use of sectarianization, whether it be in Saudi Arabia specifically, in the Gulf or in the Middle East region as a whole (Hashemi and Postel 2017). Similar to Matthiesen (2013), they do not demonstrate the importance of the economic factor in the process of sectarianization specifically in times of economic hardship nor do they emphasize the concept of economic scapegoating within the region. They fail to address the fact that Saudi Arabia is still able to maintain legitimacy and sectarianism in its country, amid economic hardship, and severe cuts to the traditional financial incentives received by the majority of the Sunni population. They do not address how these governments have successfully scapegoated their minority populations for so long even amid unpopular financial reforms. Saudi Arabia's economy has faced major destitution in recent times. In recent years, the kingdom witnessed major budget cuts due to slashes in the price of oil internationally. As an oil-dependent economy, the kingdom has been trying to find alternative means of economic prosperity, specifically to maintain its control and influence in the region.

### **III. Saudi Arabia's Economy**

In terms of its economy, the importance of Saudi Arabia surpasses that of any other Gulf country in the region. As the second-largest state in the Middle East, with the strongest economy in the region, it is home to the largest Gulf population in the region

and the largest minority Shi'a population in the Persian Gulf (Molchanov 2003). While the population is growing quickly, the oil reserves are not in unemployment of approximately 13%, with an even higher percentage for Saudi citizens under the age of 29 (Bronk and Tikk-Ringas 2013).

Saudi Arabia, along with other Gulf states, emerged as new oil states and resuscitated the concept of the rentier economy. The Arab rentier economy has grown to be known as one of unprecedented wealth attained in a very short period, through its oil resources. Obviously, in the traditional sense, a rentier economy is one in which rent is the predominant source of revenue for the economy, and more specifically, it relies substantially on external rent (Mahdavy 1970). Of course, only a few, generally the government or ruling elites, are engaged in generating and controlling the wealth while the majority are only involved in utilization of it after its distribution, allowing for the creation of a welfare state in which taxing citizens is eliminated. For the Gulf, it has created a citizen base that is far less demanding in terms of political participation (Beblawi, 1990). In fact, the general lack of political participation witnessed in the Gulf is a well-known feature of the rentier state and the citizenry of the rentier state; however, studies have shown that Muslims in the Middle East do prefer democracy and states in which political participation and dissent is welcomed. In his study, Tessler (2002) found that Muslims throughout the Middle East prefer democracy and find that their religion, Islam, is compatible with it (Tessler 2002). In the context of the current political framework of the region, dissent is not welcomed, in fact, in most cases, the state is able to persuade and manipulate public opinion. Hence, when intolerance is incited by the government, the population tends to be submissive to such provocations. Contrary to

what modernist, as well as postmaterialist theories, suggest that liberal values and social tolerance result from modernization and economic development; similar shifts are not seen in the gulf (Anderson and Fetner 2008).<sup>39</sup>

Rather, minorities in the Gulf, specifically in Saudi Arabia, face a significant level of backlash. A backlash witnessed even further during times of economic hardship. For Saudi Arabia, although 2011 projected to bring about a huge boom in revenue from oil prices, such rise did not change the reality of an increase in unemployment rates and an even higher rate among female Saudi professionals. According to reports from the Saudi Central Department of Statistics and Information (CDSI) unemployment exceeded 12%, projecting approximately 603,000 Saudis to be unemployed (Aluwaisheg 2013). Other reports projected a whopping one million Saudis out of work and receiving unemployment benefits, a number that increased after the events of the Arab Spring, in which elites tried to appease any feelings of discontent among the majority Sunni population (McDowell 2012; Meteb 2017).

To address these concerns and the fear of a public backlash against the government, the Al-Saud took to their sectarianism and scapegoating tactics to mitigate its economic problems. To use the Shi'a minority in this way was rather simple, as the Wahhabi state had already set the building blocks for maligning this highly feared group in the kingdom. Shortly after announcing unpopular economic reforms and concerning unemployment projections, the Saudi government decided to execute the Shi'a rebel Sheikh Nimr Baqir Al-Nimr, a leader in the uprising that took place in the eastern

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<sup>39</sup> It is established that prosperity of modern societies allows for members of the society to shift from material concerns to "post-materialist" concerns which revolve around the idea of social issues, self-expression, identity, and attitudes; hence prosperity and economic development result in greater social tolerance.

provinces of Saudi Arabia in 2011. A total of 46 individuals, alongside the cleric, were also executed, all labeled as terrorists threatening the stability and security of the kingdom. The executions came as a shock to the international community since they took place over 5 years after the arrests. Many Saudi citizens welcomed the executions as a justified punishment for heretics while the international community saw it as an inhumane act and a clear violation of human rights. The announcement of unpopular economic reforms restricting the traditional tax cuts and financial incentives enjoyed by the Sunni population just a week prior to the executions drew significant international attention (Gengler and Lambert 2016).<sup>40</sup>

#### **IV. Research Hypotheses**

To understand the incitement of sectarianism in Saudi Arabia, the conceptual framework used considers both religious and state influences. In particular, this study further proposes to test for economic scapegoating as a concrete mechanism of the state-based sectarian exclusion.

Traditionally, literature found that religion pushes forth intolerant sentiment within a society (Erskine and Siegel 1975; Filsinger 1976; Nunn, Crockett, and Williams 1978; Corbett 1982; Smidt and Penning 1982; Beatty and Walter 1984), which implies that Sunni Muslims with stronger religious beliefs are more intolerant of Shi'a Muslims. Nonetheless, more recent scholarship argues that religiosity in the Middle East, and more specifically in Saudi Arabia, cannot be assumed to directly contribute to sectarian intolerance (Eisenstein 2006; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006; Ysseldyk, Matheson, and Ani

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<sup>40</sup> Traditionally, and as part of the rentier model, Gulf citizens enjoyed social and economic benefits provided by the government, such as tax break, subsidies of water, electricity along with other goods. Such incentives were assisted in maintaining legitimacy in country that have been traditionally undemocratic. Yet amid the economic hardship the Saudi kingdom faced, such financial benefits were reduced.

2010; Ciftci, Nawaz, and Sydiq 2016; Thomsen and Rafiqi 2017). As such, my research hypothesizes that more religious Sunni Muslims in Saudi Arabia hold stronger intolerant views against the Shi'a community, but the pattern needs to be scrutinized for more empirical nuances.

In addition to religion, the literature also identifies the state as an important ideational source of sectarianism. Hence, this paper argues that Sunni Muslims under greater state influences in Saudi Arabia are more likely to endorse social exclusions against the Shi'a minority. With regard to this state-based sectarian intolerance, I further propose that the fear of a bad economy plays a critical role. As reviewed above, negative economic conditions and pessimistic economic prospect have been frequently attributed to the Shi'a minorities in Saudi Arabia's public discourse. Therefore, I posit that the trust in government exposes the Sunni public to ideas of sectarian exclusion, and such ideas are further amplified by the government's economic scapegoating targeting the Shi'a communities.

Therefore, this study uses a national sample of Sunni Muslims in the 2011 Saudi Arabia to evaluate three empirical hypotheses: (1) Strength of religious faith increases Sunni Muslims' sectarian intolerance; (2) Trust in Saudi government leads to stronger intolerance; (3) Fear of bad economy amplifies the state-based sectarianism—the influence due to trust in government is even stronger among those who are more pessimistic about economic conditions. In the following, I refer to the hypotheses as religion-based intolerance, state-based intolerance, and economic scapegoating, respectively.

## V. Data and Methods

### a. Data

My analysis uses the second wave of the Arab Barometer survey conducted between 2010 and 2011.<sup>41</sup> Comparable questionnaires were distributed in multiple Arab countries to collect individual-level public opinions on general social and political topics. With a repeated cross-sectional design, the survey maintains thematic consistency across different waves of studies, but it also allows researchers to introduce special-interest questions in different years and countries. The 2011 questionnaire used in Saudi Arabia contains the key items to test my hypotheses. The survey provides a probability sample of 1,404 respondents that is representative of the Saudi adult population in 2011. To suit my research questions, I restricted the analysis to the 1,345 Sunni respondents, excluding those self-identified Shi'a Muslims and members of other sects. After deleting cases with invalid information on the variables to be used in my analysis, the final analytic sample size reduces to 1,172. While my analysis is restricted to Saudi Arabia, other countries in the Arab Gulf with minority Shi'a such as Kuwait and Oman were under similar institutional circumstances (Jamal et al. 2011). Had data been available, it would have been useful to test our hypotheses in those countries for a robustness check. Unfortunately, those comparable countries were only included in the Arab Barometer study in other years and the key questions were not asked again.

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<sup>41</sup> The Arab Barometer is a nonpartisan research network that provides data on social, political, and economic attitudes of ordinary citizens across the Arab world. It has conducted waves from 2006 through 2017 in different parts of the Arab world. The survey is conducted by researchers in Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tunisia, Qatar, and Yemen; with the principal investigators based in the United States.

## b. Key Variables

My dependent variable, Sectarian Exclusion Index, consists of the respondents' residential and marital preferences. During the survey, respondents were asked "To what extent do you consider the following factors obstacles to accepting your son/daughter/sister/brother's marriage? To a member of a different religious denomination." They were also asked "members of which of the following groups would you not like to have as neighbors? Followers of other religions (in Saudi Arabia was interpreted as denominations)." I harmonized the two variables on a four-point scale and calculated the two-item average for each respondent. The resulting variable, termed "Sectarian Exclusion Index," is used to indicate the social distance that Sunni respondents wish to keep from the minority Shi'a. The index is so constructed that greater scores mean higher levels of sectarian intolerance.

My conceptual framework identifies religion and government as two major sources of sectarian exclusion. First, the Strength of Faith Index is created by taking the average of six four-point integer-coded indicators measuring the frequency of the following religious behaviors: (1) attend religious lessons in mosques, (2) pray daily, (3) fast during Ramadan, (4) watch or listen to religious programs on media, (5) read religious books, and (6) listen to or read the Quran. Respondents were asked to choose from "always", "most of the time," "sometimes," and "rarely." Higher frequency was coded with greater values to indicate stronger religious belief.<sup>42</sup> For the second key independent variable, trust in government, the survey offers a straightforward question "I would like you to tell me to what extent you trust the government." The variable uses a

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<sup>42</sup> Although the survey asked a question on whether respondents attend Friday Sermon (Jummah Prayer), I decided to exclude it from the index since that is a gender-specific activity in most parts of the Middle East.

Likert scale measuring attitudes from “I do not trust it at all,” “I do not trust it,” “I trust it” to “I trust it to a great extent.”

Furthermore, I am particularly interested in testing if the state had contributed to the sectarian intolerance of Shi‘a by blaming them for economic downturns. If scapegoating was used by the government as an effective means to provoke intolerance, the state influence should be stronger among those with more negative views of the economy. In other words, the third hypothesis implies that fear of economic conditions further adds to the state-based sectarian exclusion. To enable the test, an “Economic Fear Index” was constructed as the simple average of two dichotomous items: “how would you evaluate the current economic situation in your country?” and “how would you evaluate the economic situation in the next five years?” The resulting index was scaled between 0 and 1.

### c. Analytic Methods

I use linear regression models to test the effects of Strength of Faith Index and trust in government on the Sectarian Exclusion Index. If statistically significant and positive, I gain evidence of support for the religion-based and state-based intolerance. This means those who follow Sunni teachings, as dictated by the madhabs<sup>43</sup> followed in the kingdom, and state policies are more intolerant toward the Shi‘a minority.

To pin down the government’s scapegoating effect, I create an interaction term between trust in government and the Economic Fear Index. If the Saudi government had promoted inter-sectarian intolerance by attributing the actual or potential economic

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<sup>43</sup> A madhhab is a school of thought within Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence). Within each sect of Islam, there are multiple madhabs named after major religious clerics in which principles of what is permissible and not are established.

downturn to the Shi'a minority, I expect to see a statistically significant positive coefficient on the interaction term. This speaks directly to rentier theory, due to an economic downturn identity politics increases as the state turned to an alternative mechanism to maintain legitimacy among its populace. If instead, I see a neutral interaction effect, allowing for the safe conclusion that the economic fear did not play a role in state-based intolerance, which implies the absence or ineffectiveness of the scapegoating discourse in the Saudi kingdom.

To net out the demographic, socioeconomic, and regional effects, my full model controls for age, gender, marital status, years of education, and province of residence. In addition, my full model also controls for social trust, as it is known to have a significant impact on sectarianism in the literature (Jamal 2007). The variable is based on the binary item "Generally speaking, do you think most people are trustworthy or not?" Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the analytic sample, including the component items of the three indices. Table 2 presents the conditional means of the sectarian exclusion variables by various items measuring the strength of belief and trust in government. These descriptive bivariate results based on sample data allow us to determine if linear models are properly motivated. Finally, I formally test the three hypotheses using linear models with interaction terms. The model results are summarized in Table 3 and Figure 6.

## **VI. Results**

### **a. Sample Description**

As shown in Table 1, my analytic sample contains 1,172 Sunni respondents. Sectarianism toward the Shi'a minority is rather strong. Nearly half of the sample, 45%,

would not accept neighbors from other religious sects, leading to an average score of 2.40 on a four-point scale. In terms of inter-sectarian marriage, 80% of the respondents objected and approximately 70% strongly objected, yielding a much higher average of 3.41. Taken together and weighted equally, they contribute to a composite average of 2.91 for the Sectarian Exclusion Index.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics

	Mean/%	SD	Min	Max	N
Sectarian Exclusion Index (1–4)	2.91	0.71	1.25	4	1,172
Item 1: Residential exclusion	2.40	1.00	1.5	3.5	1,148
Item 2: Marital exclusion	3.41	0.98	1	4	1,162
Trust in government (1–4)	3.41	0.78	1	4	1,172
Strength of Faith Index (1–4)	2.90	0.56	1	4	1,172
Item 1: Pray daily	3.87	0.38	1	4	1,171
Item 2: Attend religious lessons in Mosques	1.93	0.97	1	4	1,118
Item 3: Fast during Ramadan	3.91	0.34	1	4	1,171
Item 4: Watch or listen to religious programs on media	2.46	1.01	1	4	1,163
Item 5: Read religious books	2.03	0.97	1	4	1,069
Item 6: Listen to or read the Quran	3.01	0.95	1	4	1,158
Economic Fear Index (0–1)	0.23	0.35	0	1	1,172
Item 1: Negative views on current economy (%)	28.7		0	1	1,163
Item 2: Negative views on future economy (%)	15.5		0	1	1,109
Age	37.2	12.45	18	75	1,172
% female	49.5		0	1	1,172
Years of education	12.6	5.23	0	19	1,172
% working	52.9		0	1	1,172
Marital status					
Single	24.4		0	1	1,172
Married	72.7		0	1	1,172
Widowed	0.7		0	1	1,172
Other	2.2		0	1	1,172
Social distrust (%)	75.6		0	1	1,172
Province of residence					
Riyadh	28.7		0	1	1,172
Mecca	29.3		0	1	1,172
Jazan	5.5		0	1	1,172
Eastern Region	14.1		0	1	1,172
al Houf	8.4		0	1	1,172
Asser	14.1		0	1	1,172

**Note:** All items of the Strength of Belief Index are based on a four-point scale measuring behavioral frequency (1-rarely, 2-sometimes, 3-most of the time, 4-always).

**Source:** Arab Barometer 2011 (Saudi Arabia, analytic  $N = 1,172$ ).

Overall, the Sunni respondents show a high level of trust in the Saudi government (3.41) and fairly strong religious belief (2.9). More concretely, we see that 85% of the sample trust the government while 56% trust the government very much. The strength of faith is revealed by frequencies of six behavioral indicators, among which fasting (3.91) and daily prayer (3.87) appear to be the most practiced items.

Table 2: Sectarian exclusion indicators by strength of faith and political trust

	Residential exclusion		Marital exclusion	
	Mean	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>N</i>
Do you pray daily?				
Rarely	1.50	2	4.00	2
Sometimes	1.63	15	2.87	15
Most of the time	2.20	112	3.21	111
Always	2.44	1,018	3.44	1,033
Do you attend religious lessons in mosques?				
Rarely	2.22	450	3.35	458
Sometimes	2.37	378	3.39	379
Most of the time	2.70	167	3.29	168
Always	2.78	103	3.72	104
Do you fast during Ramadan?				
Rarely	1.50	2	4.00	2
Sometimes	2.59	11	2.36	11
Most of the time	2.62	82	2.41	82
Always	2.38	1,052	3.49	1,066
Do you watch or listen to religious programs on media?				
Rarely	2.14	241	3.07	245
Sometimes	2.39	328	3.32	335
Most of the time	2.43	379	3.53	381
Always	2.66	192	3.74	192
Do you read religious books?				
Rarely	2.25	387	3.18	392
Sometimes	2.51	334	3.34	335
Most of the time	2.28	241	3.72	244
Always	2.46	90	3.50	92
Do you listen to or read the Quran?				
Rarely	1.70	112	2.90	112
Sometimes	2.27	179	3.15	180
Most of the time	2.54	438	3.33	436
Always	2.48	409	3.72	420
Trust in government				
Not at all	2.07	21	3.52	21
A limited extent	1.97	153	2.81	153
A medium extent	2.46	320	3.04	325
A great extent	2.48	654	3.72	663

**Notes:** Both exclusion indicators are coded on a four-point-scale with integer-scoring. Sample size varies across different bivariate contingencies in this table, but the valid *N* for the composite indices based on these variables is consistently 1,172.

**Source:** Arab Barometer 2011 (Saudi Arabia).

The equally weighted composite index sits at a moderately high average level on the four-point scale, 2.9, and houses rich gradational variations. Though it is not the study's primary concern to investigate how people's economic views influence sectarianism, we need the Economic Fear Index to construct the interaction term. As illustrated in Table 1, 28.7% of the respondents held negative views toward current economic conditions while 15.5% were pessimistic regarding the future economy. The average of these two items yields a moderately low level of overall economic fear, 0.23, on a range between 0 and 1. Thus constructed, the index provides more internal variation with stronger identification power. Table 1 also describes the control variables. After data restrictions, the remaining 1,172 respondents in the analytic sample provide a reasonable collective Sunni adult profile in Saudi Arabia. The sample is gender-balanced, 49.5% female. The average age is 37.2 years old and the majority of respondents, 72.7%, are married. The mean years of schooling is 12.6 years, yielding an average education level of high school graduates. Over half of the sample, 52.9%, primarily men, participated in the labor force.

## VII. Sectarian Intolerance by Religiosity and Trust in Government

Table 2: Sectarian exclusion indicators by strength of faith and political trust

	Residential exclusion		Marital exclusion	
	Mean	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>N</i>
Do you pray daily?				
Rarely	1.50	2	4.00	2
Sometimes	1.63	15	2.87	15
Most of the time	2.20	112	3.21	111
Always	2.44	1,018	3.44	1,033
Do you attend religious lessons in mosques?				
Rarely	2.22	450	3.35	458
Sometimes	2.37	378	3.39	379
Most of the time	2.70	167	3.29	168
Always	2.78	103	3.72	104
Do you fast during Ramadan?				
Rarely	1.50	2	4.00	2
Sometimes	2.59	11	2.36	11
Most of the time	2.62	82	2.41	82
Always	2.38	1,052	3.49	1,066
Do you watch or listen to religious programs on media?				
Rarely	2.14	241	3.07	245
Sometimes	2.39	328	3.32	335
Most of the time	2.43	379	3.53	381
Always	2.66	192	3.74	192
Do you read religious books?				
Rarely	2.25	387	3.18	392
Sometimes	2.51	334	3.34	335
Most of the time	2.28	241	3.72	244
Always	2.46	90	3.50	92
Do you listen to or read the Quran?				
Rarely	1.70	112	2.90	112
Sometimes	2.27	179	3.15	180
Most of the time	2.54	438	3.33	436
Always	2.48	409	3.72	420
Trust in government				
Not at all	2.07	21	3.52	21
A limited extent	1.97	153	2.81	153
A medium extent	2.46	320	3.04	325
A great extent	2.48	654	3.72	663

**Notes:** Both exclusion indicators are coded on a four-point-scale with integer-scoring. Sample size varies across different bivariate contingencies in this table, but the valid *N* for the composite indices based on these variables is consistently 1,172.

**Source:** Arab Barometer 2011 (Saudi Arabia).

In Table 2 we present the conditional means of residential and marital exclusions (component items of the outcome index) by all six religiosity items and the trust in government. Based on the research hypotheses, we expect to observe higher means of the exclusion variables for those who are more religious as well as those who hold stronger trust in government. First, we examine the contingencies between the exclusion sentiments and the strength of faith. As shown in Table 2, the mean of residential exclusion rises steadily from 1.50 for those who rarely pray daily to 2.44 for those who always pray daily. Marital exclusion shows similar dependency on the prayer variable—the highest mean (4.00) for the category “rarely” is a result of random disturbance due to the extremely small group size. It then increases, from 2.87 to 3.44, as the prayer frequency goes up. Such a pattern of positive association is consistent across all six forms of religious behavior. It is clear that as the respondents show stronger religious beliefs, their residential and marital exclusion sentiments tend to increase. The second hypothesis identifies the state as an independent source of sectarian intolerance. If that is true, those who trust the government more would display stronger sentiments of exclusion. According to the sample results, the residential exclusion rises from 2.07 to 2.48 as trust in government increases. Similarly, the marital exclusion also increases from 2.81 to 3.72 across “limited” to “great” trust in government. We acknowledge that the two exclusion variables are not at their lowest levels among those who do not trust the government at all, but that could be a random error because there are only 21 individuals in that category.

In sum, these findings illustrate the validity of the first and second hypotheses—that sectarian intolerance is attributable to both religion and the state. Nevertheless, Table

2 provides only suggestive evidence as all the bivariate contingencies are based on sample data without statistical inferences. To test the hypotheses for the Sunni adult population in Saudi Arabia, we now continue to regression models.

### VIII. Regression Models

Table 3: OLS regression models predicting the Sectarian Exclusion Index

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Coef.	SE	Coef.	SE	Coef.	SE
Trust in government	0.22***	0.03	0.14***	0.04	0.10**	0.04
Strength of Faith Index	0.30***	0.04	0.31***	0.04	0.36***	0.04
Economic Fear Index			-0.64*	0.32	-0.05	0.32
Economic Fear Index × Trust in government			0.23**	0.07	0.21**	0.07
Economic Fear Index × Strength of Faith Index			-0.06	0.11	-0.20	0.11
Age					0.00	0.00
Female (ref. = male)					0.10*	0.04
Years of education					-0.01	0.00
Social distrust (ref. = “most people are trustworthy”)					0.12**	0.04
Work status (ref. = not working)					-0.01	0.05
Marital status (ref. = single)						
Married					-0.04	0.06
Widowed					-0.15	0.14
Other					-0.16	0.24
Province of residence (ref. = Riyadh)						
Mecca					-0.31***	0.06
Jazan					0.18*	0.09
Eastern Region					-0.02	0.06
al Houf					-0.04	0.07
Asser					-0.28***	0.06
Intercept	1.2/***	0.11	1.8/***	0.16	1.56***	0.21
$R^2$			0.1715		0.2269	

**Note:** \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$  (based on two-tail  $t$ -tests).

**Source:** Arab Barometer 2011 (Saudi Arabia, analytic  $N = 1,172$ ).

Table 3 summaries the results of three regression models. The models are constructed in a progressive sequence. Model 1 estimates the observed effects due to religion and government. Model 2 further includes economic fear and its interactions with the two main effects. Model 3 is the full model that also controls for all other

covariates. Model 1 clearly shows the two independent sources of sectarianism— religion and government. The coefficients for the trust in government and Strength of Faith Index are both positive and statistically significant at 0.001 level. Specifically, as one’s trust in government increases by one unit, his/her Sectarian Exclusion Index score is expected to increase by 0.22. Independent of that, a one-point increase in the Strength of Faith Index score will on average raise one’s Sectarian Exclusion Index by 0.30. Taken together, they explain 16.36% of the variation in the outcome.

Model 1, however, does not represent the argument in full. I have proposed a concrete mechanism of the state-based intolerance—economic scapegoating. If the economic scapegoating has been at work, those respondents with more negative views on the economy are expected to respond more strongly to the government’s incitement of sectarian intolerance. In statistical language, this means that the marginal effect of trust in government is not constant as in the additive Model 1. Rather, it depends on the perception of the economy.

Accordingly, Model 2 further considers the role of economic fear in an interactive manner. I created its interactions with both trust in government and Strength of Faith Index. As expected, the former interaction term bears a positive coefficient, 0.23, which is statistically significant at 0.01 level. This means that the state-based intolerance is indeed strengthened by fears of a bad economy. Meanwhile, Model 2 also tells us that the economic scapegoating is a political but not religious mechanism, as the interaction between Economic Fear Index and the Strength of Faith Index does not yield significant coefficient. Though not a focal finding, this is consistent with the literature and my conceptualization. Collectively, these variables account for 17.15% of the outcome

variation. Compared to Model 1, there is a modest increase in model fit (0.79%), yet an F-test shows that this is a significant improvement (at 0.05 level) at the expense of three degrees of freedom.

So far, I have gained some tentative evidence for all three of the hypotheses. To access the net effects, I continue to estimate the full model controlling for all the covariates. As shown by Model 3, the key findings are independent of the influences due to demographic composition, socioeconomic conditions, social distrust, and regional differences. The main effects of religiosity and the government are both positive and significant, and so is the interaction effect between trust in government and economic fear.

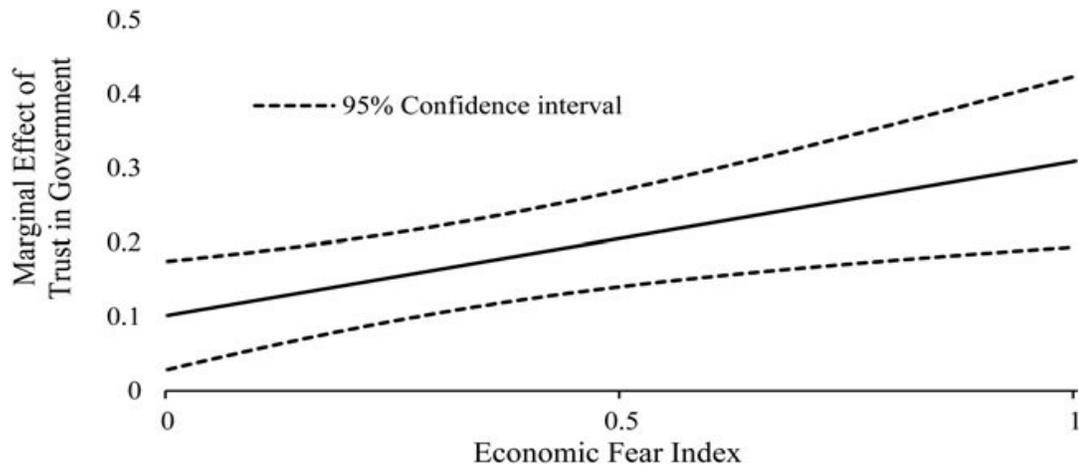


Figure 6: The marginal effect of trust in government on Sectarian Exclusion Index.

The interactive model requires careful interpretation of the marginal effect of the trust in government. The main effect coefficient (0.1) and its standard error (0.04) are valid only when the conditioning variable is 0—or substantively when there is no economic fear. The positive interaction effect (0.21) means that the marginal effect of

trust in government increases as the economic fear goes up. The question is, will the increasing marginal effect continue to be significantly different from zero? In Figure 6, I plot out the marginal effect of trust in government over the entire span of Economic Fear Index. It is clear that the effect rises from 0.1 to approximately 0.3 across the span, and its lower bound of the 95% confidence interval is consistently above zero. These results provide strong support for the state-based intolerance and the economic scapegoating hypotheses.

## **IX. Conclusion**

Religious sectarianism has deep roots in the Middle East. In lieu of the long historical wounds, its revival inflicted renewed pain in the turmoil following the Arab Spring. To better understand sectarian sentiments in the Middle East, I propose a more thorough examination of its ideational sources. This chapter argues that religious sectarianism is not just a function of religiosity or religious teachings within the Saudi religious establishment,<sup>44</sup> rather it is politically motivated. In particular, I argue that the state often capitalizes on people's fear of economic adversities to incite sectarianism. This blame game is commonly used as a strategy to reinforce regime legitimacy among many Saudis by creating a diversion from political mobilization and popular demands for political changes. Hence, it serves as a counter-revolution tactic for the state during times of economic insecurity.

With survey data from the Arab Barometer, I examined such political psychology in Saudi Arabia in 2011, at the onset of the Arab Spring. The empirical analysis yields favorable evidence for all the hypotheses. First, Sunni Muslim sentiments of sectarianism

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<sup>44</sup> Sunni teachings within the context of Sunni Madhabs in the Saudi context.

were indeed associated with religiosity. Second, in addition to religiosity, the Saudi government had independently provoked Sunni sectarianism. Finally, state-based sectarianism was in part incited by the blame game in which the government scapegoated the Shi'a communities for bad economic conditions and potential economic downturns.

Theoretically, this chapter makes distinct contributions to the literature on the political psychology of Islamic sectarianism. Most importantly, I highlighted the analytical distinction between the religious and political sources of sectarian sentiments. This establishes that within the Saudi context, sectarianism does not serve merely as attitudes among the population, rather it is a result of state policies invoked to encourage and increase such sentiments. The previous empirical studies that seek to account for religious sectarianism have focused chiefly on the micro-level explanations pertaining to one's religious life. This reinforces the impression that sectarianism is primarily baggage from one's religious past. This view needs to be balanced. As I have shown, sectarianism also finds its source in political institutions. Therefore, a macro-level mechanism is also at work where the state seeks to engineer a political prospect. In fact, my models indicate that the state-based sectarianism is even greater in magnitude than that based on religiosity.

**CHAPTER 5**  
**EMIRATI STATE DEVELOPMENT AND FORMATION**

“Being truly religious means fulfilling the true message of your own faith by leading a moral and good life that brings joy, comfort and peace to those around you.”  
-Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan (1918-2004)

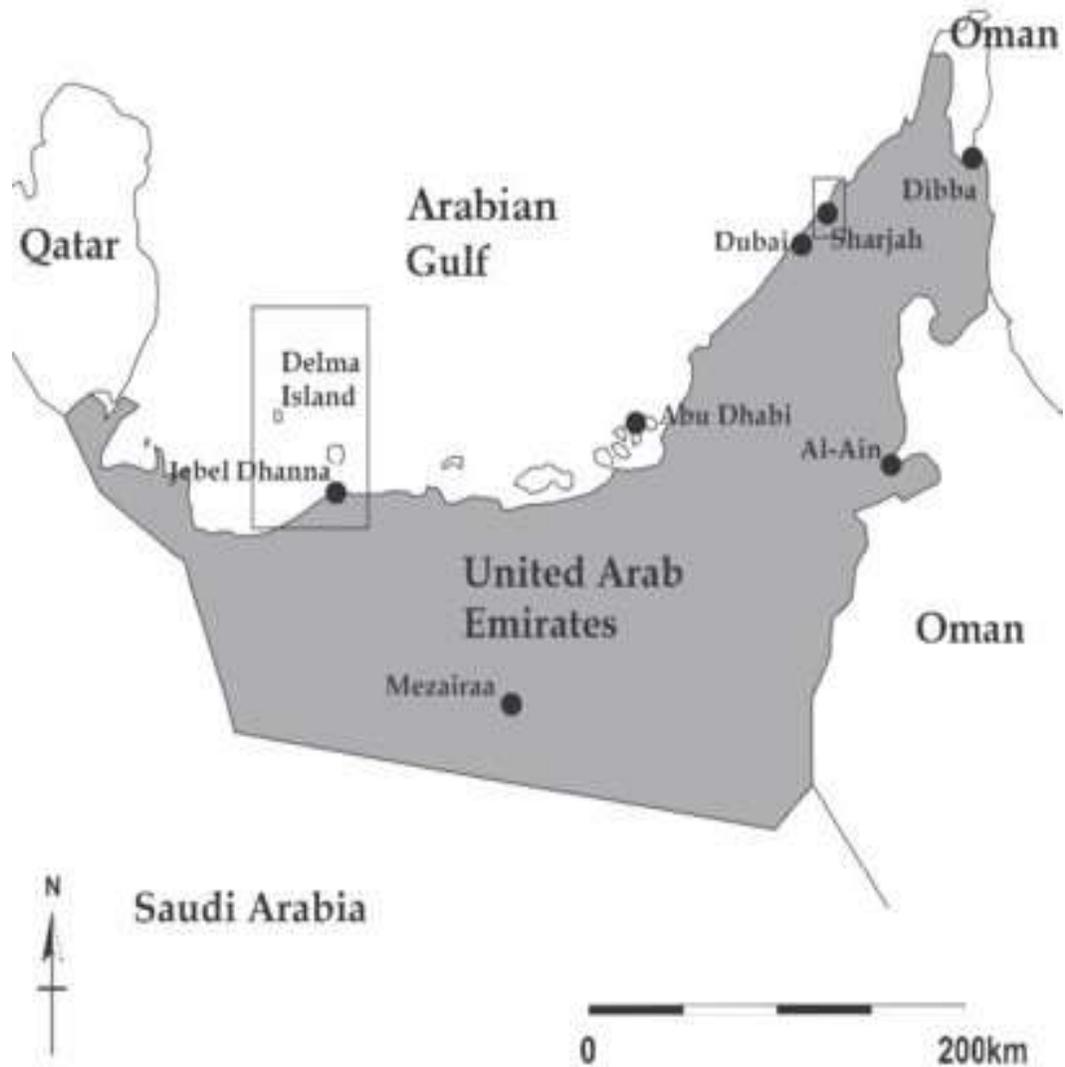


Figure 7: Map of the UAE (Blue, Strutt, Sheehan, Jackson, & Beech, 2013)

The August 2020 announcement by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to normalize relations with Israel led to a significant backlash among Arabs and Muslims worldwide. While the public denounced the UAE's unilateral move toward normalization, the religious establishment within the Emirates endorsed it and used their platform to support this move by the state. Their support comes as part of a broader Emirati strategy to utilize religious institutions and their discourse in swaying public opinion on controversial domestic and regional policies. Unlike their Saudi neighbors who have used religious discourse as a strategic tool in establishing and maintaining legitimacy domestically and regionally, it was not until the early twenty first century that the Emiratis have begun to use the religious establishment to affect change and attempt to receive support among their populace domestically and within the region at large through such channels. Prior to the recent phase in the Emirati state discourse, the major concentration of the state was on developing the economic sector through oil revenue and foreign investments. However, more recently, in an attempt to capture public opinion, the religious establishment has become a key player in attempting to ensure the advancement and the following of major state policies, that have been viewed as controversial at times, such as that of normalization with Israel. In this chapter, I argue that the UAE throughout its development has concentrated on advancing its own political and economic progression in the region. I explore the manner in which the UAE government attempts to use its religious establishment to soften its image regionally and globally while also appealing to the populace as a legitimate monarchy.

In this chapter, I seek to explore the relationship between the political and religious establishment in the UAE through the historical development of the Emirati

state and the advancement of the separate emirates and the royal families that have risen to power. I will examine, in-depth, how the Emirati state rose to power both politically and economically and the role of different agencies within the state. The first section of this chapter will narrate the establishment of the state through its advancement from Trucial states<sup>45</sup> in the Gulf region, the development of oil production and export, through its independence and its rise as a major economic power in the Middle East. I will, then, examine the role of the religious establishment in the more recent political developments within the state, such as the bold move to normalize. This chapter illustrates the extent to which the UAE goes to gain popular legitimacy and political support from its citizens and ensure a level of tolerance in its domestic and foreign policies, making the country an appealing financial destination for foreign investors and labor.

### **I. The Split of the Emirates and the Rise of the Royal Families**

Prior to understanding the more recent role of the religious establishment in attempting to capture public opinion, it is important to understand how the UAE rose as a major economic power in the region. Prior to its independence in 1971, the different tribes making up the UAE established what had become known as Trucial States. These states were made up of tribes with a ruler that spoke on behalf of the tribe, specifically in dealing with the foreign powers like the British. The British empire played an important role in establishing the economy of the Emirates by ensuring that concessions for fishing and pearl, both major industries in the early twentieth century, would not be given to any regional player without prior discussions with the British Political Resident forces (Potts, 2012). With the rise of the pearl industry, the economy of coastal communities

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<sup>45</sup> Trucial states were states that signed protective treaties with the United Kingdom between 1820 and 1892.

throughout the Eastern Arabian Peninsula became heavily reliant on its revenue. In fact, by 1907, over four thousand pearling boats were operating throughout the Gulf port. However, due to the start of production of the Japanese cultured pearls in 1920, the pearl industry in Arabia was heavily affected changing the economic landscape of the region. The Japanese cultured pearls brought about an influx of cheaper pearls produced and distributed in commercial quantities devastating the Gulf pearl markets (Almezzaini, 2013; Shihab, 2001).

Although the economic sector of the Trucial States profited and would profit further with the discovery of oil, their political status remained unknown. Their independence had been under discussion since as early as 1937. The leader of Bahrain had initially proposed for the unification of the Emirates, Qatar, and Bahrain with coordination and possible unification of their education, judicial and legislative systems. The idea of unification was favored by many, however, after the start of World War II the idea was not taken any further. Throughout the 1940s and well into the 1950s, the British made their mark on the Gulf. This took place during and after the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the beginning of European colonialism in the Middle East. The British influenced the Gulf by intervening in security matters and assigning British Political Officers throughout the different emirates. This move, on the part of the British empire, was done deliberately to control defense and diplomacy and prevent regional and local governments and militaries from creating alliances and rising up against it. They began to provide some assistance in matters related to health, education, and other social services. In 1952, the tribes within the UAE formed what became known as the Trucial States Council in which all seven Emirati rulers met regularly on an informal basis with a

British Political Agent as the chair of the Council. A five-year plan was drafted in 1956 and, considering events elsewhere in the Arab world, including the Suez crisis in Egypt, the work of the Council became increasingly serious. Similar to other countries in the region, the fate of the nomadic peoples of the Emirates was being discussed in the international organization of the United Nations. As a result, the British grew more concerned with assisting the Trucial States in developing and improving the living standards of their people and preparing them for a post-oil production phase (Heard-Bey, 1997).

After the decline of the pearl industry and the possibility of oil discovery in the Gulf, the British made further economic demands that they would not confer oil to any state or company without the permission of the British government. Just prior to the outbreak of the second world war, the British government began to approve explorations for oil searches throughout the Emirati Trucial States' territory. By 1962, such explorations led to further British concessions and the start of oil production and export (Butt, 2001; Potts, 2012). The biggest deposits of oil in the UAE are predominantly found in Abu Dhabi where the emirate controls "more than 85 per cent of the UAE's oil output capacity and more than 90 per cent of its reserves" (Butt, 2001, p.231). The oil exports began, out of Abu Dhabi, during the late 1950s and was largely underdeveloped as the state was inhabited by nomadic tribes, pearl divers, and various fishermen. To help develop the oil industry in the UAE, and more specifically in the Abu Dhabi emirate, expat workers were flown in from various parts of the Gulf region. The Emirates began establishing the Emirati oil industry further. In 1953, the British D'Arcy Oil Company acquired offshore concessions for Abu Dhabi's oil fields and subsequently passed on the

concessions to the Abu Dhabi Marine Areas (ADMA) which in 1958 became the company to discover oil in commercial quantities. By 1962, Abu Dhabi joined the countries that exported oil in large quantities which rapidly transformed the emirate in its entirety. According to business reports, in the first year of oil production (1962) Abu Dhabi produced over fourteen thousand barrels of oil per day, followed by a two hundred and thirty percent increase the following year (Butt, 2001).

By early 1968, the emirs (Princes) of the Trucial States, along with those of Qatar and Bahrain, all informed the British government of their intention to end the protective treaty by the close of 1971 granting all emirates as well as Qatar and Bahrain independence from Great Britain. However, only a few months later the British government announced its withdrawal from the Suez Canal which would in turn mean a complete withdrawal from the Gulf region as well. This sudden decision took the emirs of the Trucial States by surprise, pushing some of them to prefer British control over complete autonomy. As a result, some of the tribal leaders were motivated to expand cooperation between the rulers of the Trucial States Council. Among them was Sheikh Zayed bin Al Nahyan of Abu Dhabi who promptly recognized the importance of discussing the future relationship with his fellow countrymen. More specifically, Sheikh Zayed of Abu Dhabi (1918 –2004) and Sheikh Rashid bin Maktoum of Dubai (1912 – 1990), the rulers of the two wealthiest emirates in the area, met to discuss the future of the up-and-coming state. Initially the two planned to create a bi-emirate union, in which the two emirates cooperate on foreign affairs, security, immigration and social affairs while both judicial and internal affairs remain the responsibility of each respective emirate. By February of 1968, the seven emirates along with Qatar and Bahrain met to

sign what would be known as the “Federation of the Arab Emirates.” However, the agreement to the federation was short lived due to technicalities in the unanimity of the vote and possible rivalries among the member emirates. Shortly after the signing of the agreement both Qatar and Bahrain withdrew their membership, and each became subsequently independent. Meanwhile, the remaining six emirates (Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm Al Quwain, and Fujairah) unified in September of 1971. One year later the last emirate, Ras al Khaimah, joined (Butt, 2001).

In term of size, Abu Dhabi was the largest of the nine emirates, but it was also considered the wealthiest due to the rapid production of oil in its reserves and possessed a ruler, Sheikh Zayed, who had already formed alliances with the rulers of the other emirates. His relationships made him the ruler who was most likely to rise as the leader of the Emirates. Being the ruler, his emirate, Abu Dhabi, was to become the capital of the Emirati state. Sheikh Zayed of Abu Dhabi was then elected as the first president of the UAE followed by Sheikh Rashid as his vice president. As seen in the history of the Federation’s relationship prior to the actual declaration of independence, Sheikh Zayed was a shrewd ruler who insisted on his emirate’s oil holding up the remaining emirates, illustrating the need for him and his emirate to have a center stage in the development of the state (Butt, 2001).

The UAE, thus, is an elective monarchy and federation of currently seven emirates with Abu Dhabi as the capital followed by Ajman, Dubai, Fujairah, Ras Al Khaimah, Sharjah and Umm Al Quwain. Each emirate is seen as a mini state governed by a Sheikh who is considered the prince of the individual emirate. All of the Sheikhs, together, form what is known as the “Federal Supreme Council” one of which serves as

the president of the country (Hussainey & Aljifri , 2012). The Al-Nahyans took control of Abu Dhabi with the ruler Sheikh Zayed as the founding president and ruler followed by his son, Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, who took over after Sheikh Zayed Al Nahyan's death in 2004. The current crown prince is the brother of Khalifa, Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. The Al-Maktoums took over Dubai ruled by Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum, who is also the vice president of the UAE. Due to the economic ambitions of Sheikh Mohammad bin Rashid, it has been deemed an international destination for tourism and foreign economic investment. The emirate of Sharjah, ruled by the Al-Qasimi family, has taken a more conservative role in the running of its emirate. It lacks many of the luxuries and nightlife activity and contains less of a western expat presence. Its current ruler is Dr Sheikh Sultan bin Mohammed Al Qasimi. Ajman, the smallest emirate in the UAE, is ruled by the Al Nuaimi family with Sheikh Humaid bin Rashid Al Nuaimi as its ruler. Just Southeast of Sharjah is Umm Al Quwain ruled by the Al Mualla family and its ruler Sheikh Saud bin Rashid Al Mu'alla. Ras Al Khaimah is ruled by the Al Qasimi family with its head Sheikh Saud bin Saqr Al Qasimi. And lastly, Fujairah is located in the Gulf of Oman and is ruled by the Al Sharqi family with its head Sheikh Hamad bin Mohammed Al Sharqi (Ulrichsen, 2016).

The Federal National Council serves as the country's parliament and consists of forty members. They are split as follows: twenty are indirectly elected by a hand picked group of Emirati citizens (12%) who possess voting rights through what is known as the electoral college while the other twenty members are appointed by the rulers of each emirate. Each of the individual emirates are assigned a certain number of members that

can be appointed to represent that specific emirate. This amount of members is based on the population and size of each individual emirate (Herb, 2009).

## **II. Religion and the State**

Religion was an issue that was not dealt with from day one, in contrast to the case of the Saudi state. Although Islam was recognized in the constitution as the official religion of the state, the law states that freedom to practice religion is also guaranteed. According to Article 32 of the UAE constitution: “freedom to exercise religious worship shall be guaranteed . . . provided it does not disturb public peace or violate public morals” (Butt, 2001, p.152). Any discrimination based on religion is considered against the law. In its foreign policy dealings, the UAE has made it clear that “lifestyles and approaches” of all people in the UAE are accepted as long as they “do not threaten the basic values of the country and its people” (Hellyer, 2001, p.165). In fact, since the development of the state, the founding President, Sheikh Zayed bin Al-Nahyan of Abu Dhabi, consistently preached the tolerance of Islam as a religion and the extent to which it welcomes other belief systems as valid. He is until this day renowned as the founder of the Emirates and his policies of tolerance are preached (Hellyer, 2001). There is, in essence, a long historical presence of the Islamic tradition within the UAE since before its independence. However, based on the recommendations and traditions placed by the founders of the state, religion has been tamed to a tolerant level to ensure a healthy social environment for a foreign presence and investment.<sup>46</sup> This more tolerant interpretation of religion was due in part to the economic vision of the founders of the Emirati state as opposed to their

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<sup>46</sup> According to sources, Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in the UAE rose by around 44% which amounts to approximately \$19.88 billion, while FDI in Saudi Arabia increased by \$1,795 million in the first quarter of 2021 (Reuters, 2021; Trading Economics, 2021).

Saudi counterparts who generally concentrated on the religio-political alliance. However, similar to Saudi Arabia, the UAE did remain in control of most of its religious institutions. In fact, since the beginning of the union, “approval for topics suitable for preaching are handed down by the Federal Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs and strictly enforced” (Christie, 2010, p. 209). These sermons are also printed in local newspapers covering mostly social topics. The state keeps OR maintains a close eye on the religious establishment and its imams, most of whom are state employees, to ensure that extremism is contained within the country (Freer 2018).

It is important to understand the classification of the UAE in two folds: as an economic rentier state benefitting its population financially, and as a traditional security based monarchy where order is taken very seriously. This, in turn, causes the state to put order over justice and freedom. Although Max Weber’s Modernization Theory illustrates that economic development leads to democratic progress (Holton & Turner, 2010), the UAE’s model of governance emulates the State-Centered Thesis as developed by Hecló (1974). The Thesis stipulates that economic development and welfare policy are not the only indicators of governance, but rather governance is state-centered (Esping-Andersen, 2001; Hecló, 1974; Skocpol, 1992). Similar to other Gulf states, the UAE is a traditional monarchy that puts a significant amount of emphasis on state security and protection of state policies. Rather than providing a level of political participation to the UAE populace, the emirs instead emphasize central state control, allowing for economic participation within the free market without foregoing the traditional state supremacy (Christie, 2010).

Religion is no different as it falls within the control of the Emirate state, similar to its Saudi counterpart. However, for the Emiratis, Islam has been redefined with a significant emphasis on tolerance and understanding, as opposed to the traditional Saudi Salafi interpretation. Since the development of the state, the concept of tolerance has been preached and attempted to be practiced. As such, the state ensures that mosques and religious groups within the state remain within the parameters of what they deem appropriate. All sermons and religious gatherings should preach similar messages of tolerance and understanding. For the UAE, Islam is seen through the lens of pragmatism as opposed to conservatism in any sense. Even religious scholars and clerics that have been renounced by the state have been seen as tolerant voices within the religious establishment – an expected outcome of state policy. The moment such scholars are not seen as tolerant, they are dismissed from the circle of the state. For the UAE, the state has been clear that it has “embraced secular economic globalisation” (Christie, 2010, p. 210). As such, this has resulted in a weakening of Islamic tradition within the state in favor of a strong preferred push toward economic success and globalization (Christie, 2010). For the UAE, this push toward secular globalisation and economic opulence coincides with the state’s ability to reinvent their own version of Islam, making way for a parsimonious existence of a form of religion and the state. It also allows the state to use its own re-interpretation of Islamic identity in an attempt to gain legitimacy and maintain the status quo among the local populace.

For the UAE it remains critical that aside from the state’s emphasis on economic prosperity and opening the market to more investments, it remains active in the avenue of religion and traditions to ensure some hold on the populace. The state’s insistence on

participation in the religious sphere comes as a response to the need for acceptance among the populace. Hence, despite the level of modernization and liberalization, Emirati leaders make a significant effort to appear supportive of religion and traditional Islam. This, in turn, becomes a tool in influencing legitimacy (Freer, 2018.).

The state, due to its international economic activity, is home to a significant amount of expats serving as laborers, investors and other roles within the state. According to population data from the WorldBank, the UAE has a population of approximately 9.89 million as of 2020. Among those, approximately 88% are non-Emirati nationals located in the country for work, investment or other purposes. The majority of expatriots come from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Phillipines, Iran, Egypt, Nepal, Sri Lanka, China and others (World Bank, 2021). Such a diverse populace brings with it a variety of ideas, attitudes, norms and identity structures threatening the identity attempted to be imposed by the state. Hence, the state uses religion and a definition of religion that is compatible with the state's objectives in an attempt to control the populace, whether it be Emirati nationals or Muslim expats on its soil with limited rights. Regardless of the challenges that accompanied the expansion of the economic power of the state, the UAE, since its founding in 1971, has emphasized its oil resources and potential to expand economically on a global scale, making it one of the most economically and militarily powerful states in the Gulf and the Middle East. In this sense, many would claim that the UAE is punching above its weight due to its size in relation to its military might and desire to lead within the region. In fact, according to sources, the UAE is among the most interventionist states within the region. These reports also

illustrate that, in terms of interventionism, the UAE has even surpassed Iran, earning the nickname “little sparta” among U.S. military officials (Petti & Parsi, 2021).

### **III. The Rise of Economic Domination**

Most of the country’s wealth has been, obviously, generated through the production and export of oil. This revenue has contributed to the modernization of the state in terms of infrastructure and accessibility of society to luxury, however, it has not aided in the actual development of a healthy civil society with the emergence of a powerful middle class and the advancement of political aspirations among its populace. The UAE’s political culture established strong loyalty to the state in its existing form without any steps toward actual democratization, allowing for the state to remain in constant grip of its borders, societal identity, and the population as a whole. The state has managed to sustain such control due to the ‘rentier’<sup>47</sup> state status in which its welfare system has kept its populace satisfied and submissive. This wealth, according to scholars, has “reinforced and legitimized the ruling elites” in the Gulf state and thus has created a significant “absence of any democratic framework (Christie, 2010). In turn, the state is able to reinforce its own legitimacy through multiple means: economic wealth distributed to its populace, the command and control of the populace’s identity and understanding of the official religion as seen by the state, and through the state’s own endorsement of the religious discourse available to the populace.

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<sup>47</sup> Rentier state, according to Mahdavy (1970), is a state that technically derives a significant amount of its national revenue from the rent paid by foreign individuals and laborers (Mahdavy, 1970).

Although Mahdavy (1970) coined the term of “rentier states;” the term popularized at the hands of Beblawi and Luciani, 1987 in which they expanded the term to look at the welfare system created in oil-rich states such as the Gulf countries, in which they provide their populace with a significantly affluent welfare system in exchange for legitimacy and lack of political participation. In their analysis they characterize these states as states that accrue their wealth through the rent of a natural resource and the public economic sector, in this case the state, is in possession of most of the country’s wealth. (Beblawi & Luciani, 1987).

The Emirati leadership has not limited its attempts to control of the population and maintain the status quo through wealth and religion. Rather, the leadership has also acted in its authoritative and repressive manner by imprisoning Emiratis who challenge it. Academics, human rights lawyers, activists and many others have been detained on charges restricting their rights and freedoms. Due to the vaguely worded penal code, federal laws have been used to imprison individuals who challenge the leadership. Ahmad Mansour, a human rights activist, Mohammed al Roken, a human rights lawyer and professor as well as the academic Nasser Bin Gaith are all examples of prisoners sitting in Emirati jails awaiting proper sentencing due to their outspoken criticism of the leadership (Watch, 2019).<sup>48</sup>

It is immensely critical to understand the strong relationship brought about between oil wealth and the sustainability of the monarchy. The economic success of the monarchy, in turn, allows for the advancement and funding of other social aspects of the state's existence, most importantly religion. Approximately ninety five percent of all Sunni mosques are state-owned while the remaining mosques receive significant government subsidies. In fact, most clergy are considered state employees and must carry their IDs at all times. Most are also not Emirati nationals and are threatened with the possibility of deportation in the event they go against what the state recommends for a sermon. Sermons are to be chosen from a list of state-approved topics drawn up by a specific government body (Freer, 2018.). Oil, for the Emiratis, allows for the establishment of a sustained economy without creating a strong domestic productive sector, as seen in more industrialized and established states. The lack of a productive sector contributes to a weak

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<sup>48</sup> According to the International Center for Justice and Human Rights, as of 2013, the UAE currently houses a total of 94 convicted political prisoners serving sentences of ten years or less (ICJHR, 2013).

middle class that can potentially demand political participation. Instead, through oil revenue controlled by the state and trickled down to the populace, Emiratis become less politically active and more inclined to accept the leadership at hand. The leadership, in fact, goes further to also hand feed its populace the understanding of identity, culture and most importantly religion.

The Emirati inclination to incorporate religion into the objectives of state leadership took center stage after the eruption of the Arab Spring and the subsequent opening for political Islam. The Muslim Brotherhood and similar Islamist political groups promoted the idea of popular Islam, a phenomenon that existed long before the Arab Spring. For many of the revolutionaries, popular Islam came in the form of political Islam threatening the existence of monarchies throughout the region, but more specifically in the Arab Gulf Peninsula. These developments caused monarchies, such as the UAE, to deliberately promote a state-led shift toward an emphasis on Islam, or more specifically, moderate Islam. This shift served as a tool to help consolidate state power amid the challenges of the revolutions (Athanasoulia, 2020; Roberts, 2016; Townshend, 2020). For the Emiratis, Islam had to be reinterpreted to include a focus on personal spirituality with the ability to allow for economic prosperity and success. Unfortunately, for the Emiratis the push toward a moderate Islam also took form in the newly created government in Tunisia following the revolution, illustrating the ability to link moderate Islam not to an Islamic state, but rather a democratic one. This in and of itself poses a significant threat to the existence of the Emirati state and the identity of tolerance they have promoted for so long (Townshend, 2020).

#### **IV. Sectarianism in the Gulf**

The outbreak of the Arab Spring, which took leaders in the Middle East by surprise, unleashed a significant amount of turmoil including strong sentiments of sectarianism and sectarian violence throughout the region. It not only awakened the popularity of political Islam among revolutionaries but also increased divisions among the populations at large. Although at the start of the Arab Spring revolutionaries called for more freedom, dignity and better economic conditions, it slowly began to take the form of political Islam spreading throughout the region. Like their Saudi neighbor, the Emirates adopted a clear foreign policy – which was emphasized further after the Arab Spring – in which they strongly opposed Iran and its influence in the region through regional Shia groups (Townshend, 2020).

For the UAE, sectarianism does not play a central role in its domestic politics as Emirati Shi'a are a minority consisting of approximately ten percent of the population. This scenario contrasts with Saudi Arabia, where the Shia make up between fifteen and twenty percent of the population and reside in the oil rich eastern province of the kingdom. Although Emirati Shi'a expatriates make up an estimated twenty percent of the population, their temporary residential status poses the constant threat of deportation in the event of any political activism or other illegal activities. Hence, its Shi'a population does not pose much of a threat to the existence of the monarchy (Majidiyar, 2013). Its actual Emirati Shi'a citizens enjoy guaranteed freedom to practice their religious as a right given to them through Article 32 in the UAE constitution: “freedom to exercise religious worship . . . in accordance with established - customs, provided that it does not conflict with public policy or violate public morals” (Bodies, 1971). The UAE allows its

Shi'a citizens to worship and congregate in their own mosques, something that is not allowed in the Saudi state, and Shia are able to request a certain amount of public funds toward their places of worship. Although the government appoints the Sunni imams and distributes government issued weekly sermons, Shi'a mosques have the autonomy to choose their mosque leaders and to write their own sermons. Even some Emirati politicians and public leaders try to keep good relations with the Shi'a population by attending some religious ceremonies. This alone ensures that regardless of the foreign policy and sectarian issues in the region, domestically the UAE attempts to promote harmony between the sects (Majidyar, 2013). Hence, the UAE's domestic sectarian policies are very different than those of Saudi Arabia, where the Shi'a experience greater discrimination in terms of access to resources and jobs. For the UAE, sectarianism became part of its regional and foreign policy as opposed to its domestic one since the Shi'a at home are kept in check by the constant fear deportation and imprisonment.

In terms of noncitizen Shi'a residents, the majority consists of merchants and workers from India, Pakistan and Iran. Most of them are Twelver Shi'a, similar to those in the Eastern province of Saudi Arabia and the majority sect in Iran. Most of them hold temporary residential status in the Emirates and are constantly, as any other expatriates, faced with the possibility of deportation in the event of any illegal activities. Hence, its Shi'a population does not pose much of a threat to the existence of the monarchy. In fact, many of its Iranian residents came to the Emirates through decades of immigration for business purposes. Hence, most of them tend to be merchants and businesses elites who have contributed significantly to the strong economic relationship between the two countries. As a result, in the past decade the UAE emerged as one of Iran's largest trading

partners, specifically with regards to Dubai as the leading city. Dubai alone is said to be home to an estimated four hundred thousand Iranian residents – most of whom are merchants. In most cases, Iranian business elites in the UAE have played a significant role in trading relationship between the UAE and Iran. Between 2000-2008, Iranian imports from the UAE rose almost 11 times its pre-2000 condition. Iranian access to the UAE, more specifically Dubai, has allowed Iranians to invest an upward of almost three hundred billion dollars – a trend that began to slow down considerably due to the tightening of sanctions in 2012 and the US-Saudi demand to impose such sanctions. According to a recent study carried out by the World Bank, this trading relationship has been significantly severed due to the sanctions (Beydoun & Zahawi, 2016).

With all of the benefits brought through the trade relationship with Iran and the degree of religious autonomy allotted to the Shi'a population in the UAE, there still remains a level of discrimination against Shi'a residents within the public-sector employment, specifically with regards to security and diplomatic relations. This is not unique to the Emirates, but rather a policy adopted by most Gulf countries with regards to the public sector (Majidiyar, 2013). In an interview I conducted with a high-ranking (unnamed) Emirati general, when asked why Shi'a Emiratis are not allowed to be promoted to high-ranking positions within the military or government, he answered, "It is too difficult to hire them since they will always have some form of allegiance to another country. To be a high-ranking officer in our army, you need to ensure proper allegiance and loyalty to the state. With our Shi'a population, that is never a guarantee" (Anonymous, 2019).

Given the rise of sectarianism regionally and based on the recommendations of neighboring Gulf governments, the Emirati federal authorities have begun to exercise more vigilance over its Shi'a population whether Emirati citizens or residents of Iranian and Lebanese descent. The most significant fear has been external incitement of Emirati citizens and residents against the current government in the UAE, specifically after the launch of the Saudi-led war in Yemen. In effect, after the events of the Arab Spring, UAE authorities were reported to have deported over five hundred Iranian citizens back home. The Emirates, like their Gulf neighbors, have feared the increased influence of the Iranians regionally and have participated in the Middle East Cold War in trying to tame their regional power (Majidiyar, 2013).

However, the Emirati state, similar to its Gulf Brethren in the region, has made an effort to spread influence in the region via its own brand of Sunni Islam attempting to gain power. This has been done by vilifying other states who practice different versions of Islam, specifically countries like Qatar and its push for the spread of political Islam in the region (Byman, 2014; Morton, 2016). Qatar took the Arab Spring as an opportunity to increase its own influence in the region through its support of Islamist groups rising against traditional monarchies and the encouragement of democratization throughout the region (Ulrichsen, 2014).

The Arab spring and the rise of such powers threatened the existence of monarchies throughout the region causing governments in the Middle East to adopt strategies to combat such revolutionary fervor. For the UAE, like some of its neighbors, it became paramount to exert a level of security both domestically and regionally in an attempt to ostensibly “protect” its citizens from an external threat, whether it was

ideological (political Islam) or ideological and geographical (Iran and Shi'a political Islam). This pushes the state to encourage the protection of the status quo government in place (monarchies) while also reinforcing the populace's rejection of alien ideas or actors' influence within the state's soil. This has not only "dampened popular appetite for dissent" (Gengler, 2016, p.6), but has also contributed to a rise in nationalism throughout the Gulf. Thus, by nourishing identity politics and "intercommunal distrust" based on sect and identity, the state tries to emphasize its own unique ability to provide security and stability increasing loyalty among its populace (Gengler, 2016).

This is also done through the UAE religious establishment (discussed in more detail in chapter 6). During popular religious television programs, Emirati sheikhs supported by the state use their platform in an attempt to increase admiration and love for the monarchy while also encouraging division among the populace. The most notorious UAE sheikh who has done so has been Wassim Yousef, an Emirati preacher of Jordanian descent. He began as a preacher who explained the indirect messages within dreams and got significantly popular doing so. He is now one of the most well known television preacher personalities using his platform for political purposes. Among such purposes has been his support of the UAE and Saudi armies launching attacks on the Houthi forces of Yemen (Times, 2020).

## **V. Yemen**

The war in Yemen began in late 2014 mainly between the Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi-led Yemen government and the Houthi armed rebel forces along with their allies. Both claim to represent the true Yemeni people and claim a right to rule (Eleftheriadou, 2021). In September of 2014, Houthi forces took over the capital city of Sanaa followed

by a rapid takeover of the government. By March of that year, the Houthi-led Supreme Revolutionary Committee declared mobilization to undergo a proper takeover of the state and its government while also driving into the southern provinces (Esfandiary & Tabatabai, 2016). At one point, Hadi fled the country causing a coalition led by Saudi Arabia, in addition to the UAE, to intervene and launch military operations to restore the former Yemeni government. Although there is no actual proven intervention of the Iranians in Yemen, the war is seen as a proxy war between the Saudis and the Iranians, with the addition of the Emiratis. The Arab Gulf states used this war to combat any form of Iranian influence in the region, especially against a Shi'a Zaydi or Houthi-led government in their own backyard in Yemen. The clashes have gone much further than just airstrikes for a period of time. Rather, the Saudi and Emirati armies have launched month long airstrikes against each and every target in Yemen causing massive infrastructural damage, a significant amount of loss of life and the start of one of the worlds most dangerous famines and humanitarian crisis (Juneau, 2016; Tandon & Vishwanath, 2019).

As of October 2019, according to the ACLED (The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project) over 100,000 fatalities have been reported in Yemen since 2015, with over 12,000 killed in direct attacks launched by the pro-government forces and allies (Sulz & Jones, 2019). In 2017, Yemen was named the most dangerous place on earth for children due to the constant airstrikes and sanctions (Masri, 2017). Since then, and with the added threat of the Covid-19 pandemic, the situation has not improved and may have gotten worse, even after the Emirates began to withdraw their forces and the Saudis engaged in peace talks with the Houthis since 2019.

With the increase in casualties as a result of the famine and the airstrikes, the UAE increased its aid regionally and made an effort to change its reputation on a global level. The state began to increase its social activity within the spiritual realm, taking a lead in what its founding president encouraged, tolerance. In fact, the Emirates has dedicated a national day for tolerance as prescribed by the UN General Assembly. It is celebrated throughout the nation (Ministry of Health & Prevention, 2020). The state has also taken an active role in promoting Sufi Islam<sup>49</sup>, illustrating the importance of peace, serenity, and spirituality. For some, the Emirati interpretation of Sufism is simplistic and unnuanced. The Emirates have made a significant effort to adopt this new form of Islam that is quietist and emphasizes the importance of submission to God and the authority in place, similar to the Saudis and their emphasis on obedience to the state. This has been a direct response to the Arab Spring and the backlash following the UAE's participation in the war in Yemen and its move to normalize relations with Israel. In the Palestinian territories alone, 80% of respondents to a poll conducted in the West Bank and Gaza strip believe that the agreement was a form of treason and insult to the Palestinian cause (PSR, 2020). In the Gulf, according to a poll conducted by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies between July 2019 and July 2020, only a small portion of Saudis supported the diplomatic recognition of Israel (6%), while 88% of Kuwaitis and Qataris completely rejected it (ACRPS, 2020).

To combat the negative image the Emiratis received as a result of their new peace deal, they have attempted to reclaim Islam from political movements promoting political Islam and revolutions in the region. The UAE's version of Islam concentrates mainly on

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<sup>49</sup> Sufi Islam: is mystic Islam that concentrates on values, ritual practices, and doctrine. It concentrates on this inward dimension in worship. Those who practice Sufi Islam are called Sufis.

spirituality and rituals taking a shift toward Sufi Islam, and emphasizing the movement of religion away from politics. Thus, the UAE has promoted an apolitical version of Islam that obeys rulers and justifies their actions against all odds (Al-Anani, 2020).

One of its most popular recent annual religious events is the the “Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies.” The Emirates have used this avenue to encourage well known preachers globally to deliver talks and sermons at the forum. The forum also encourages communication or dialogue between religious scholars and leaders throughout the region to promote peace and the meaning of peace within Islam (Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies, 2020). In fact, one of the more controversial comments made at the forum was an interview with Hamza Yusuf, a well known Islamic preacher and scholar, who called the UAE one of the most tolerant countries in the world (Ullah, 2018). This comment received backlash from Arabs and Muslims globally, mostly because of the UAE’s involvement in the deadly airstrikes against Yemen, led by its Gulf neighbor, Saudi Arabia. The UAE used its forum and members of the forum to portray a tolerant country genuinely concerned for peace and stability in the Muslim world. These forums were used to change the image of the UAE from a monarchy that does not tolerate dissent and is fearful of threatening influences rising in the region, such as Shi’a Islam or political Islam, to a country concerned with tolerance and peace and apolitical spirituality. The Emirati state took this strategy or approach even further by trying to push world renowned scholars to not only change its image, but to also soften the idea of peace with the Israeli state, a bold move that not many Arab countries have dared to consider or undertake. The UAE quickly associated itself with world renowned scholars like Hamza Yusuf, Abdullah Bin Bayyah, and Aisha al Adawiyah.

## **VI. Normalization and Beyond**

The move to normalize relations with Israel officially took place during the Abraham Accords Peace Agreement on August 13, 2020, making it the third Arab country to sign a peace deal with the Jewish state after Egypt (1979) and Jordan (1994) (Winter, 2020). As a result, cooperation in different aspects of the two state's security and military operations went into effect. This took place amid both countries' rising tension with Iran (Canal Forgues Alter & Janardh, 2021).

The agreement did not come out of the blue. Rather, there had been discussions between both countries leading up to the agreement. At one point in November of 2015, Israel announced that it had planned to open a diplomatic office in the Emirates to bring the concept of normalization unofficially to the forefront (Ulrichsen, 2016). In the months leading up to the actual agreement, there had been secret talks between the two countries. In fact, amid the Covid-19 pandemic, news agencies uncovered Israeli Mossad members obtaining equipment from the Gulf states. This coincided with the Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, stating that the two countries were coordinating their efforts to fight Covid-19. Reports also uncovered that the head of the Mossad, Yossi Cohen, had traveled numerous times to the UAE before the signing of the agreement. However, the UAE downplayed the reports regarding these frequent visits and the increased cooperation between both states by stating that it was only economic and was an arrangement among two private companies (Bergman & Hubbard, 2020).

This close relationship also blossomed after the Trump administration's withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal<sup>50</sup> in 2018. Both the UAE and Israel felt as though

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<sup>50</sup> The Iran Nuclear Deal is the nickname given to the JCPOA (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action), which was an agreement on the Iranian nuclear program reached between Iran, the members of the security

they shared a common enemy in Iran and thus used their influence regionally and globally to partner against it. It was also an opportunity for Israel to normalize relations with an Arab country that had much to offer through diplomatic, military, and economic cooperation. The Emiratis used the deal to compel Israel to withdraw its move to annex the West Bank as per the deal of the century agreement crafted by Israel and the Trump administration<sup>51</sup> (Unit for Political Studies, 2020).

To soften its image while considering the controversial move to normalize relations with Israel, the UAE began to use social media to promote the agreement and formal relations between both countries. Social media influencers were awarded free trips to Israel and documented their trip, while Israeli influencers were awarded trips to the UAE. These trips were used to show the appealing and relatable side of each country and to encourage the concept of normalization. However, all of the UAE's attempts failed among the populace regionally showing that the majority of Arabs in the Middle East still find the concept of normalized relations with Israel to be a controversial and unpopular move (Hitman & Zwilling , 2021).

The UAE also used its preachers to make the concept of normalization more appealing to the region, but they pushed back. Many realized the backlash they would receive from trying to promote normalization with Israel and, thus, refused to promote

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council (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Germany), and the European Union. The agreement was signed in Vienna on July 14<sup>th</sup>, 2015, establishing the roadmap to the agreement between Iran and the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency). Iran ultimately agreed to restrict its nuclear program. Unfortunately, on October 13, 2017, former President Trump withdrew from the agreement (Wolf, 2018).

<sup>51</sup> The deal of the century refers to the agreement established by the Trump administration, headed by Jared Kushner, and Israel, establishing a two-state solution and economic cooperation between both states and the international community. It also allows for annexation of parts of the Middle East (Unit for Political Studies, 2020).

the concept. The annual Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies (FPPMS) embraced the UAE's urge to promote peace globally, however, only its famous religious scholar, Abdullah bin Bayyah went along with the state's push. Other scholars, like Hamza Yusuf and Aisha al Adawiyah, publically denied ever signing any petition that supported the UAE's normalization with Israel. They both have been outspoken about the treatment of Palestinians and have been careful to distance themselves from the recent strengthening of relations between Israel and the UAE (TRT World, 2020).

## **VII. Conclusion**

Although a young state, the UAE has risen to be a regional and global economic power through its ample oil reserves and its concentration on booming economically. Even in terms of its political developments in the region, the state has always ensured economics as its most important target. In this chapter, I explored the development of the Emirati state, from a political economy perspective, starting with its introduction into the oil industry, to its rise from a Trucial state to an economic power. However, after the Arab spring and the threat against monarchies regionally, the Emirates began to utilize its religious establishment and redefine the meaning of Islam globally. As a result, the UAE became known as the tolerant state, regardless of the fact that it had been responsible for the death of thousands of Yemini citizens along with its Gulf neighbor the Saudi Kingdom, backed by the US and other Western powers.

The UAE used its religious establishment to spread a new version of Islam that encouraged passiveness and apolitical participation in the religious sphere. This also pushed the state to use the religious platform in an effort to change the perceptions of the populace around the policies of the state and grant legitimacy to the authority in power. Leading up to the controversial move to normalize relations with Israel, the UAE put its efforts into using the platform of its religious establishment to improve the image of Israel and the peace deal with it in the eyes of the populace.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **CLERICAL DISCOURSE AND THE EMIRATI STATE**

“There are many democracies in our Arab  
And Islamic countries. But unfortunately, They  
are all false democracies.”

-Yusuf Al-Qaradawi

(Placed on Gulf Countries terror list in 2011)

The clerical establishment in the Emirates like that of Saudi Arabia has made an effort to consistently support and promote the policies of the state. Since early 2010-11, this has been done in a more strategic and organized manner shortly after the monarchy felt threatened by the Arab Spring uprisings in the region. In the post-Arab Spring Middle East, the religious establishment of the UAE has been a crucial element in the development of the state’s image on a global and domestic level. It has served as an intricate part of the state’s foreign and domestic policy. The platform of the religious establishment has been used to support state policies, thus, transmitting messages in support of the political establishment and soften its policies during religious sermons and religious programming. The platforms used most frequently have been Friday sermons, which are distributed to the mosque imams by the state – a trend replicated elsewhere in the Middle East. Hence, all Friday sermons are prepared and issued by the state. Aside from Friday sermons, religious scholars also use other platforms such as religious programs through public TV channels supporting whatever policy the state puts forth. Although in the UAE clerics do not necessarily play a significant role in the creation of policy, they do play a role in the transmission of the policy and attempting to improve the state’s image. In this chapter, I specifically explore how religious clerics in the Emirates use their platform (religious discourse) to attempt to influence public opinion both domestically and regionally.

Here, I specifically explore the religious scholars who have sought to improve the public image of the UAE and the ties they have to the state. The UAE has strategically tied itself to Ulama who gained a following among Muslims and Arabs domestically, regionally, and globally, and thus, may have leverage in attempting to influence the masses. In this chapter, I explore the state's strategic selection of such international Ulama from Abdallah bin Bayyah, Hamza Yusuf, and Aisha al Adawiyah to Wassim Yousef and others. I examine the sermons and speeches by such Ulama and trace the development of their discourse as it relates to the policies of the state. The discourse corresponds to specific political junctures, hence, in this chapter, I attempt to illustrate how the Ulama use such discourse to affect public opinion around a certain topic whether it be the legitimacy of authority, the newly defined concept of tolerance and Islam, and the tie to normalization with Israel.

In order to examine this further, I will first list the different ulama who have taken on more important roles within the UAE. Then, I will examine sermons and religious programs delivered and conducted by them. To do so, I collected a representative sample<sup>52</sup> of seven religious sermons and TV programs are given in Arabic (all of the links to the sermons are available in Appendix I of this dissertation). I translated all of the sermons and programs into English and then transcribed them. Once transcribed, excerpts from the sermons and programs were coded into themes. The themes concentrated on the concept of tolerance, a new understanding of Islam, the purity of Islam, forgiveness, oneness with God, the importance of living together and refraining from waging war, the importance of obedience, and finally the need to come together with people of all

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<sup>52</sup> The sample of sermons is taken from different sermons by well-known clerics in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia (UAE?). These sermons are all publicly available through YouTube.

religions especially the people of Israel in an attempt to make the concept of normalization more appealing to the populace. The sermons took place between 2016 and 2019. I further examined all of them with a qualitative content analysis software known as Atlas TI to explore the patterns involving themes like the purity of Islam, forgiveness, and obedience, and the extent to which these sermons and TV programs captured the attention of their viewers. Using Atlas TI, I populate word clouds for every grouping of sermons separated by topic (section). Links to all of the sermons analyzed are available in Appendix I of this dissertation.

In the content of sermons and religious programming in the UAE, there is a consistency in portraying the image of tolerance and understanding as well as the importance of obedience. However, ultimately the country uses its Ulama to draw attention away from the political establishment and ensure that religion is apolitical and so is the populace.

### **I. Religion Redefined, the UAE**

The concentration on religion in the Emirates took center stage in more recent years, specifically after the Arab Spring and the threat to the existence of the monarchy on a regional level. The political establishment felt such threats, not only due to the influence of Iran in the region but also the increased popularity of political Islam and the Muslim Brotherhood's influence in the region. As a result, the political establishment made a significant effort to combat such threats through financial appeasements to the populace, popularizing the concept of a stable government as opposed to the instability felt in revolutionary states, and the religious establishment stepping up its efforts and using its platform to emphasize the tolerance of the state, the importance of obedience

and the need to concentrate on apolitical religious spirituality as the center of one's priorities.

An obvious example of the UAE's shift in its religious policy is its treatment of the well-known religious scholar, Yusuf al-Qaradawi. From the late twentieth century through the early twenty-first century, the Egyptian scholar's programs were regularly broadcasted on regional satellite channels and watched by Muslims throughout the region. He was given a platform through his live Islamic show on the Qatari state-owned channel Al-Jazeera known as "Ash-Shariah wal-Hayat (الشريعة والحياة)" which translates to "Islamic law and life." This show became one of the most popular shows among the Islamic ummah both regionally and transnationally and attracted over an estimated forty million views (Arab News, 2021). Although the show has stopped (or been discontinued), it still receives a significant amount (or number) of views through YouTube. He even received the "Islamic personality of the year" award in 2002 from the UAE. However, after the Emirates and other Gulf countries began to rely heavily on US security following 9/11 and the Iraq war, the US put a significant amount of pressure on the Gulf to fight terrorism. As a result, Qaradawi along with many other well-known religious preachers and scholars were put on the UAE terrorism list. Domestically, the UAE imposed restrictions on imams giving any politically motivated religious talks or sermons. The state also cracked down on any political movement associated with the Ikhwan al-Muslimin or Muslim Brotherhood, and this affected Qaradawi as he has always been linked to the Brotherhood. Most importantly, however, the state imposed what it redefined as a more moderate and tolerant version of Islam to appeal to the masses and attract Muslims toward an alternative version of Islam from that presented by

the popular political Islamist movements (Amasha, 2020). According to scholars, the political gains made by the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists during and after the Arab Spring were historically consistent with the efforts of political parties and actors to exploit new opportunities for electoral participation during waves of democratization or at least calls for it (Wickham 2004).

Ironically, in an effort to promote its tolerant version of Islam, the state has sponsored scholars from opposite sides of the religious spectrum, namely neo-traditionalist scholars and anti-traditionalist progressive scholars. Although both extremes tend to negate the religious authority of the other, what unifies them is their hostility toward the political Islamic activism popularized by political Islamists groups fueling much of the revolutionary fervor in the region. The UAE's religious policy, therefore, is not necessarily dedicated to any specific ideology. Rather, it uses different religious platforms to fight what has, for the past ten years, threatened the political monarchical establishment (Amasha, 2020).

The shift in the UAE's religious policy was initiated specifically to counter the ideological revolution that swept the Middle East that followed the initial protests demanding freedom and dignity. Although the Arab Spring began with protests demanding more equality and better political and socioeconomic conditions, it gradually included political Islam, as Islamists made significant political gains regionally, in an effort to appease the demands of the populace. In response, the UAE established institutions dedicated to countering the new wave of Islamists and act as a delegitimizing force to movements like the Muslim Brotherhood among others. The UAE-funded institutions focused on delegitimizing political activism, advocating for the legitimacy of

the monarchies, and promoting the importance of obedience to the ruler and the need to preserve peace in the region over justice. One of the UAE's most important institutions has been the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies (FPPMS) led by the neo-traditionalist, Abdallah Bin Bayyah. The Forum became the go-to institution for Muslims and non-Muslims discussing issues of spirituality. The discourse at the Forum, during conventions and the like, centered around the illegitimacy of the revolutions during the Arab Spring, and the importance of inward spiritual reform and political stability in the region (al-Azami, 2019).

## **II. UAE State-Sponsored Ulama**

In more recent years, the UAE has concentrated more specifically on what is known as the neo-traditionalist network of Ulama, whose discourse reflects specifically the traditional school of Islamic jurisprudence known as the Hanbali school. In their worship, they practice Sufism and generally belong to the Sunni sect of Islam. On a regional level, both al-Habib Ali al-Jifri, the Yemeni Sufi, and Abdullah bin Bayyah, a well-known Mauritanian religious scholar, have been celebrated by the Emirati state and given a well funded, popular platform (Amasha, 2020; al-Azami, 2019). Both schools of thought concentrate specifically on spirituality and the importance of shifting one's life toward the worship of and obedience to God and His commandments as opposed to the desires of man, including man's desire to disobey leadership.

Bin Bayyah is probably the most renowned religious scholar sponsored by the Emirati state. His political background and exile from his home country of Mauritania in 1978, caused him to despise politics and view it as what he calls an "evil disease" (al-Azami, 2019, p.344). Bin Bayyah is an expert in Islamic jurisprudence and his belief in

the apolitical nature of religion and pushing his followers to concentrate on their spiritual apolitical happiness made him the perfect leader of this redefinition of religious policy within the Emirates. His emphasis on spirituality and mankind's need to stay away from politics makes him a shining star in the UAE's effort to emphasize apolitical religious participation by the populace.

His general residence is in Saudi Arabia, where he serves as a professor of jurisprudence at the King Abd al-Aziz University. He has also founded many transnational religious committees and councils, such as the European Council for Fatwa and Research (ECFR) and the International Union of Muslim Scholars (IUMS), in the 1990s and 2000s. Both of which he has departed from since the Arab revolutions in 2011, Bin Bayyah has left the ECFR and IUMS due to the fact they are/were headed by Yusuf Qaradawi and guided by his political ideology. The Arab revolutions sparked a sudden and rapid change within the region. Ironically, that change did not redraw the ideological lines between autocracy versus democracy; rather, it created a split regionally between Islamists with their version of democracy and the traditional autocratic monarchies, like Saudi Arabia and the UAE, that quickly began to take charge by cracking down on any uprising. For Bin Bayyah, the organizations led by Qaradawi held a very different ideology than the one Bin Bayyah promoted and attributed to him. Instead, he helped promote the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies (FPPMS), the Council of Muslim Elders (CME), and the Emirates Fatwa Council (EFC) – all of which have been based in the United Arab Emirates. Due to his emphasis on Tasawuf (تَسَوُّف)<sup>53</sup> and Sufi Islam, he encourages worshippers to concentrate on inward spirituality and submission to

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<sup>53</sup> تَسَوُّف: Is the act of worship as a Sufi would.

God to achieve the highest level of faith in Islam. In turn, he also emphasizes the apolitical connection to religion as opposed to Islamists who use religion as a form of activism (al-Azami, 2019; Yildirim, 2019).

Contrary to the Saudi kingdom's use of state-sponsored Ulama who lean toward traditional orthodox Islam, or even Wahhabism, the UAE has relied specifically on Sufi Ulama who possess a more apolitical and moderate worldview that embraces the notion of tolerance, which furthers the interests of the state as it pushes followers away from politics and closer to apolitical spirituality. Many of these Ulama, may be unaware of the exploitation taking place on the part of the state. These Ulama tend to be Sufi and transnational, capturing the attention of the Muslim populace transnationally, as opposed to just domestically or regionally. Contrary to the use of local Ulama by their Saudi counterparts (with Bin Bayyah as the exception?), the Emirates have focused on sponsoring global clerics who improve the international image of the Emirati state.

The Yemeni Sufi, Al-Habib Ali al-Jifri, on the other hand, has never delved into politics and has concentrated more specifically on spirituality and inward submission to God. He was born in Saudi Arabia and has traced his lineage back to the Prophet Mohammad, through the Prophet's grandson Al-Husayn. Lineage within Muslim society is held with high esteem and often manufactured a social hierarchy. Hence, al-Jifri's social status based on his lineage gave him a standing within the religious establishment (Samin, 2019). He is the holder of Islamic jurisprudence degrees and the founder and director of the non-prophet organization Tabah Foundation for Islamic Studies, based in Abu Dhabi (Muslim 500, 2021).

On an international level, Hamza Yusuf, the American religious scholar of the Zaytouna Institute, has taken a front seat in the tolerance campaign waged by the Emirates. Aside from his position with the Zaytouna Institute in Berkley, CA, he holds positions with the Center for Islamic Studies at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, the Global Center for Guidance and Renewal, and is the vice-president of the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies based in the UAE. He has been a popular Sufi figure among Muslim circles worldwide and has been an active speaker on behalf of the Muslim world. However, in more recent years and with his increased activity in the name of the UAE, Yusuf has received a significant amount of backlash due to his comments praising the UAE for its tolerance amid its intensified/controversial bombing campaign of Yemen (which has exacerbated the humanitarian crisis there), alongside its Gulf neighbor the Saudi kingdom (Amasha, 2020; Middle East Eye, 2019).

### **III. Religion in the Emirati State**

Scholars in the Emirates popularized the reinvented state definition of Islam as tolerant and lenient to encourage people to avoid and reject revolution and embrace and obey the monarchy. In the batch of sermons, I collected on religion in the state, some of the more popular terms that populated the word cloud in Figure 8 were forgiveness, obedience, ruler, peace, country, humankind, revolt...etc.

The first sermon I examined was delivered by Abdullah Bin Bayyah during the opening ceremony of the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies in December of 2018. The sermon is available on YouTube with over one thousand eight hundred and thirty-three views. Although the viewership of the sermon is low compared to others given by UAE-backed scholars, its importance lies in Bin Bayyah's strategic location while

giving the talk. It was given from a table at which he sat alongside Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and the International Cooperation of the United Arab Emirates. Al Nahyan is also the son of the first president and founder of the state, Zayed bin Sultan Al- Nahyan. In the sermon, Bin Bayyah insisted on the importance of political leadership and ensuring that peace and stability are preserved in the state. He starts his sermon with a public pledge of allegiance to the “country of Zayed,” which he describes as the “country of tolerance and leniency.” He goes on to draw attention to the gestures of hospitality and good treatment ignoring the political establishment as it stands in the region and along with the policies adopted both domestically and regionally.

“In This country, the country of Zayed, God rest his soul, the country of Tolerance and Leniency, Arab people use two words, Forgiveness and Samaha. Samaha means generosity. We’re seeing the demonstration of that with this great hospitality. Forgiveness is the acceptance of the other were experiencing that today as were gathered here, coming from different backgrounds, cultures, ethnicities, and religions. Muslims should encourage right and forbid evil" (Interview 1)

He goes on to emphasize the diversity brought about by the state and their acceptance of the different nationalities and races. He goes on to blame any instability on the populace claiming that it is a result of the impatience of humankind as opposed to injustice. He calls people who are causing instability, in other words revolting, as children who do not know what is best for them. Hence, alluding to the claim that the ruler and obedience to the ruler are what is best for humankind. He also implores people to pity within themselves to live in peace, going back to blaming instability on the populace as opposed to the political establishment within the state.

“...With it We produce fruits of various colors. This variety that Allah has put in the universe, humans couldn’t bear it. They

want to remove the differences by force. And if it weren't for their impatience, people would have lived together in peace. We have pity on humanity. We consider people who fight each other as children. There are children, but in the body of adults.” (Interview 1)

He goes further to push people to refrain from fighting and asks that they push for dialogue and peace. Interestingly, however, all of these requests are made toward the general public indicating that the fault lies with the people as opposed to the leadership.

“show them the right path, instead of fighting each other and waging war, to tell them that they can live together, and the way to achieve that is through dialogue with this initiative we are representing a special symbolism.” (Interview 1)

His talk then took a turn by shedding light on the threats citizens would face from countries that possessed weapons of mass destruction, excluding Israel. He insists on the danger such countries bring to the globe and the likelihood of their weapons being used incorrectly. He insists that the only way to protect the world from such dangers is through creating an alliance between the populace and leadership in ensuring peace and stability. This, in and of itself, illustrates the tactic of the state of relying on external enemies and threats to try to galvanize the people and legitimate itself.

“For the first time in history, there are weapons that could wipe out the humankind. These weapons can be out of the control of governments. If we suppose that the governments are well-guided, which is an entirely different question, but let's suppose for now that they are well-guided. Even then, the weapons can be put in the wrong hands and can therefore destroy the humankind. That's a very dangerous issue that we must solve. That's the reason why we suggested this alliance (between the populace and the state to fight disobedience) because if we don't contain technology and the scientific advances with advances in virtue and good deeds, it can get out of control and can therefore destroy and humankind.” (Interview 1)

In a sermon that concentrated on dealing with an unjust ruler; the American Islamic scholar, Hamza Yusuf, explains how being peaceful would assist people when

dealing with rulers. The sermon has received over four hundred and thirteen views on YouTube. Although the views of the actual video are not very high compared to other sermons, this particular clip received a significant amount of criticism due to Yusuf's talk of obedience and his criticism of the Arab Spring and the Syrian revolution. The sermon begins with a story on being wise. He explains that Ibn- Taymiyyah<sup>54</sup> did not discourage a group of drunk Mongols who occupied the lands of Muslims at the time. Although drinking is not allowed, a group of Muslims asked why Ibn-Taymiyyah did not stop them from drinking. He explained to keep public peace it would be best to allow them to continue to drink as opposed to disrupt them and have them respond by hurting Muslims. Here Yusuf uses this story as a metaphor for the current state of the Arab and Muslim world. His emphasis on preserving the public good resembles that of Ibn Taymiyyah. Due to Yusuf's standing among Islamic intellectuals, though, his use of such a metaphor pushes Muslim followers to believe that preserving the public good is the most important goal, in the end.

“And that's a Hikma in that people forget the wisdom. And the one had great wisdom. Even Taymiyyah passed by some tartar.<sup>55</sup> They weren't Muslim when they were ruling, you know, they had taken over. And he lived under them for a period, and they were drinking. And he was with some of his companions. And one of the companions said, why don't you stop them. They are drinking in the streets. And he said, the reason God prohibited alcohol is that it prevents people from remembering God. Here it is prohibiting them from going out and killing

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<sup>54</sup> Ibn- Taymiyyah was a Sunni Islamic Alef (scholar), theologian, judge, and philosopher. Often, he was considered a controversial thinker and political figure with controversial stances on social Islamic issues. He is viewed as a significant reference for Sunni Islamic scholars due to his advancement of Islamic Sharia Ghabadzdeh & Akbarzadeh (2015).

<sup>55</sup> The Tartars within Islamic history are descendants of the Mongols and their king Genghis Khan. Although they do claim to be Muslims of Islamic-Turkic descent. They converted to Islam as colonizers of the Muslim world and had a significant negative effect on the advancement of the Islamic Ummah at the time.

Muslims and stealing their babies. He said so just leave them to their drinking." (Interview 2)

In his sermons, Yusuf, like other scholars, has concentrated on the concept of ensuring general peace and staying away from disrupting the status quo. He seems to believe that the general public should keep the peace as opposed to demand justice. The talk took place in 2016 during a religious trip in Turkey, but the video was posted on YouTube in September 2019, he gave a talk at a religious summer program, there he addressed the revolutions that took place in the Arab world. The talk is also available on YouTube with over three thousand and sixty views. He explains that anyone who humiliates a ruler, God will humiliate him. He suggests that the Syrian people have been humiliated due to their actions. He explains that the revolution and the price paid by the Syrian people are a result of their actions. In attempting to understand the talk given by Yusuf, one would be puzzled by his partial support of the Syrian leadership given the UAE's opposition to the Assad regime (if true). However, such support, in turn, reflects his insistence that the populace should obey the leader, no matter who he is. Hence, pushing forth the idea of preserving the leadership or the status quo in Syria and elsewhere then translates into its preservation or persistence in the Emirates.

"The Syrian people will not be humiliated. Remember, whoever humiliates a ruler, God will humiliate you. they have power and you do not have power then you have humiliated yourself. That is a saying of the prophet." (Interview 3)

His words took the Muslim Ummah by surprise and truly put Yusuf in a difficult position. He was severely criticized by the Muslim international community. Many of them demanded to know why he would turn his back on Syrians who have been forced

out of their homes creating a significantly difficult refugee crisis in the region (The New Arab, 2019).

He goes even further to talk about the acts of Saddam Hussein, whom he explains he is not a fan of; however, he believes that revolting was not the answer. He uses examples of individuals he claims were supportive of the removal of Hussein but changed their minds after seeing the aftermath of his removal. He states that many are disappointed in the aftermath since as a people "we" are not ready to be civilized, a very condescending and harsh criticism of the Muslim populace specifically since the talk is given to them.

“I am no fan of Sadam. But I now know why those rulers were in place. Mohammad Al Mali who tore down that statue, is now saying he wants to put that statue back up. Zainab Al Kenzi, a Kurdish Iraqi woman said, now I see the wisdom that God had in putting that horrible man in place. Because you take him out and look what we have. Because we are not ready.” (Interview 3)

Criticism around Hamza Yusuf's statements was not limited to his remarks of the Syrian people and their attempts at revolting against their leader. Rather, he was heavily criticized due to his remarks regarding the UAE. Muslims all around the world laughed at his characterization of the UAE as being “a country committed to tolerance.” He not only praises the state but also talks about its safety. This is another statement that caught a significant amount of heat from the general public due to its lack of accuracy. Many insisted that the UAE could not be considered a tolerant state due to its active role in the bombing of Yemen. Critics began to look deeper into Yusuf's role in legitimating oppressive rulers in the Middle East, claiming he had a history of doing so (Hilal, 2019). Others dug even deeper showing links between Bin Bayyah and Yusuf and their goal of

legitimizing the status quo in a post-Arab Spring world (Parker, 2018). In doing so, there were open calls to boycott both Imams and more specifically Yusuf due to his popularity in the region and globally (Middle East Eye, 2019).

“This is a country committed to tolerance. They have a ministry of tolerance; they're committed to civil society. This is one of the safest countries on earth. So, in essence, the Emirati people are very committed to that message.” (Interview 4)

Waseem Yousef is a Jordanian Emirati preacher who gained fame as a television preacher answering questions related to Islamic jurisprudence. His show became a regionally acclaimed show with his outgoing personality and ability to connect with his audience. He received the Emirati nationality in 2014 after beginning a career as a religious interpreter of dreams.<sup>56</sup> That quickly landed him a job as a television preacher. He was then assigned a position as the imam of the Zayed Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi and was quickly a key figure in the UAE's fight against political Islam. He was very outspoken and used his platform to attack the Muslim brotherhood in any way he could. His discourse quickly changed and became more intense after the breakout of the Arab revolutions in 2011. His show became a clear avenue of propaganda used to legitimize the state and its policies domestically, regionally, and internationally.

In a talk given from his home through his social media account, Facebook, the preacher talks about the Muslim Brotherhood as a group used to encourage disruptions with their state. The clip was released on his Facebook account and republished on YouTube with over 767,961 views. He explains:

“The Muslim Brotherhood has held up firearms against members of their country and encouraged people to revolt. The Muslim Brothers do not have loyalty to their countries or their

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<sup>56</sup> Dreams, in Arab culture as well as Islam, are viewed at times as powerful messages from one's creator. In many instances people would gather with an imam or scholar to interpret such dreams.



#### **IV. Tolerance**

The concept of tolerance is reaffirmed repeatedly throughout the different sermons observed and religious conference proceedings that take place in the Emirates. In fact, throughout the dataset observed the word tolerance or tolerant appeared a total of five times, while terms like alliance and Islam appeared nine times, obey appeared over six-time, loyalty appeared three times, peace appeared six times, values appeared three-times, and lastly, the term humanity appeared once. On the contrary, the most mentioned word among all the sermons was Israel, as it was mentioned sixteen times (35%). These words are illustrated in the word cloud in figure 9.

The term Islam seems to appear and reappear to signify the true meaning of Islam. It is a tactic used by the Ulama to emphasize that the version of Islam they are prescribing is the one true Islam. The sermons also concentrate on this concept of the alliance, an alliance between the state and populace to encourage peace, tolerance, and the greater good. The idea of preserving the public interest or greater good is a theme that is constantly invoked within these sermons replicating the concept of the social contract. Throughout the sermons, scholars attempt to sway away from the concept of tribalism, something many have accused the UAE of promoting due to the nature of leadership in the UAE and Saudi Arabia. The royal families of each emirate are put in place due to their standing within an ancient tribal system. The historical context of the state establishes that even the local citizenry of the Emirates is "tribal in origin" (Heard-Bey, 1997, p. 98).

Part of the opening speech of the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies in December of 2018 by Abdullah Bin Bayyah. As explained previously, the sermon is available online through YouTube with over one thousand eight hundred and thirty-three

views. In it, he emphasizes the importance of concentrating on the positive values and virtues within society and the need to mitigate injustice and poverty.

“Alliance was based on values and virtues, and not on what alliances were usually based on at that time, like tribalism or religion. It was rather based on values, and solidarity in living. Therefore, they were against injustice, and they helped each other in living. They were also against poverty and neediness.”  
(Interview 1)

He goes further to talk about the efforts put forth by the Emiratis in terms of the Forum for Promoting Peace. He states that these efforts are the way in which a state or populace can work around differences within the populace. Bin Bayyah continues to illustrate this attempt to minimize difference as a significant part of his discourse leading up to the normalization deal with Israel.

"That is the goal of the Forum for Promoting Peace, it's so that humankind can live together with all of its differences, so that these differences will be a source of enrichment and beauty, like the differences in nature." (Interview 1)

Waseem Yousef, the popular TV preacher who is known for being bolder and more outspoken, insists on the value of the Emirati state both regionally and religiously. In a talk given during one of his popular shows, he received over twenty-seven thousand and eight hundred views on YouTube. The clip was known to be very controversial as he states that God has favored the Emirati over any other Muslim. He states that even in the Quran this is based on the dialect used within the Quran. He states that the Quranic verses are read in a certain manner, similar to the dialect in the Emirates. Yusuf's use of the uniqueness of Emirati culture and identity touches on feelings of nationalism among the populace. Here, Yusuf manipulates the emotional connection Emiratis have with their religion and the Quran, giving these individuals OR his viewers the false perception that



importance of alliances with non-Muslims. Sermons in the state concentrated on the history of Islam that favored alliances between the prophet and non-Muslims, so long as such alliances were done in good virtue. In fact, during his opening speech at the Forum, Bin Bayyah talked about such alliances being noble so long as they were based on good deeds and good virtues.

“at the same time nullify alliances after Islam, as he said “No alliances in Islam.” that, if the alliance between Muslims was based on violence, then he doesn’t approve it, and that if the pre-Islam alliance, be it between Muslims or non-Muslims, if it was based on good deeds and values, then he approves it. This is what we used to apply these teachings in the current environment.” (Interview 1)

He continues to talk about all religions being virtuous and similar in their teachings. He does so to emphasize the similarity in Judaism and Islam as part of the campaign to legitimize the move to peace with Israel. Many claim that the relationship began well before the actual Abraham agreement was signed since Israel opened a diplomatic office in the UAE as early as 2015 (Cook, 2020).

"What we are calling to is that Religions at their core all have a common virtue that we all share, taking care of the hungry, taking care of the orphan, the widow, and the needy. This is what Muslims call the High Morals. These are shared by a lot of people." (Interview 1)

In his sermon directed at the Muslim world in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, Hamza Yusuf continues to state that the widespread corruption, treatment of women, and the realities of the Muslim world put the region in a horrible state. He claims that Muslims are not ready as they do not possess a proper civil society nor are they capable of lining up for a bus. Although his sermon is not directly related to the normalization of relations with Israel, he does spend a significant amount of it bashing Muslims and

Muslim civil society – a method frequently adopted by Waseem Yusuf as well. This method degrades the lack of political and socioeconomic development in the Arab World that is then contrasted with the swift development of civil society, physical infrastructure, and economic growth in Israel. Hamza Yusuf, however, was careful not to mention Israel due to his standing within Muslim global society. The mere mention of Israel in a positive light may reflect negatively on him and thus cost him his career; something that occurred with Waseem Yusuf when he used Israel as a prime example of a civilized developed state. In fact, Waseem Yusuf’s sermons in general received, as expected, a significant amount of backlash from the Muslim and Arab worlds at large (Al Bawaba, 2021; GulfNews, 2021).

“We don’t have civil society; we cannot even wait in line for buses. It is not because Muslims are inferior to non-Muslims it is not. It is just circumstances. We have lost a lot of the wisdom we had. We have terrible treatment of our women. We do not raise our children properly. We have horrible school systems.”  
(Interview 3)

Waseem Yusuf, on the other hand, takes on a more aggressive speech by insulting Arabs and pushing many of his viewers to be critical of his sermons. His statements, specifically in relation to Israel, have sparked lots of anger in the region and caused many viewers to step away from his programs (Kasraoui, 2020). In one of his sermons, he blames Arabs and Muslims for creating dictators and giving them power. Ironically, he does not include the Emirati leadership in such claims as he asserts. He, instead, insists it is not a dictatorship and rather is a system established by the will of the people. He also claims that the region has created terrorism and goes on a rant claiming that Arabs are not honorable, but rather it is the Israelis who are more honorable.

“We have made each other infidels. We have created terrorism. We have burnt churches. We killed Qadafi, we killed Iraq. Stop with the fake slogans, you are not honorable. You are not honorable. Israel is more honorable than you.” (Interview 5)

In his rant, sermon Or discourse, Yusuf unleashes a lot of negative perceptions about the Arab World while attempting to illustrate the positivity of peace with Israel. While mentioning the failures of Arab states, he simultaneously props up the value of the Israeli one.

## **VI. Conclusion**

Religious sermons have become a tool actively used by the UAE, similar to its neighbor country Saudi Arabia. In this chapter, I attempt to explore the use of religious discourse among religious clerics in the UAE. In doing so, I explored sermons, talks, and social media videos conducted by religious clerics sponsored by the state. These sermons took place between 2016 and 2019, all of which the UAE was waging a campaign on redefining its description of Islam and introducing the idea of normalizing relations with Israel, a step that significantly challenged the state amid the revolutionary fervor that swept the region.

The first batch of sermons concentrates on the definition of Islam in the UAE and the idea of the UAE being a tolerant state accepting people of all backgrounds. They also emphasize, similar to their Saudi counterparts, the importance of obedience to the leadership and the need to ensure peace, generally keeping the public peace over any thoughts of revolting. Some of the sermons went so far as to talk of the Arab Spring sarcastically and making light of the number of refugees and the so called “humiliation” of the Syrian people as described by Hamza Yusuf. There is a general sense given that obeying the leadership would result in political stability, harmony, and keeping the public

peace. The second batch of sermons, however, emphasize tolerance and do so about people of other religions. There is a concerted effort on the part of the religious establishment to push forth the idea that more understanding and alliances with neighbors would benefit the Arab populace at large. This is the state's efforts to normalize its relations with Israel. And lastly, the sermons that concluded the analysis show dialogue adopted by UAE preachers openly calling for a preference to peace with Israel as opposed to any other Arab state.

Unfortunately, due to the limitation of public opinion data in the UAE; the qualitative data analyzed in this chapter could not be compared to quantitative data in the form of public opinion as done with the Saudi Arabian case study. Therefore, I was unable to conclusively measure the impact of such sermons and the use of religious discourse by clerics in an attempt to sway public opinion toward legitimizing the state and its policies.

## **RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE AND BEYOND A NEW ERA**

The literature on religion and religious discourse fails to explore the actual use of religious sermons to affect change in the minds and attitudes of the populace around their perception of the state and its leadership. To fill this gap and complement the existing literature on religion and the state, in this dissertation, I aimed at exploring, through a constructivist IR lens, the use and transmission of religious discourse in the form of sermons given by Ulama as an influential tool and source of domestic and regional legitimacy for the state in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). In doing so, I found that the state, in sponsoring preachers and Ulama, has attempted to affect public opinion around the legitimacy of the leadership and its policies and to normalize them among its domestic populace and regional audience. The main question examined was: during times of political adversity/change and economic fluctuations, what role has religion and religious discourse played in the legitimation of authority in Saudi Arabia and the UAE?

Using a mixed-method approach, I explored the historical development of the state in both Saudi Arabia and the UAE followed by an empirical analysis of religious sermons to understand the patterns of ideational policy adopted by the state in its attempt to affect public opinion. The sermons and historical development of each state took their unique direction. For the Saudis, there was a significant push toward obedience of the state and reminding followers of the authenticity of the message of Islam. Hence, the Saudi direction took a more fundamental Wahhabi push through the sermons and religious leadership of domestic Ulama. Such a direction contrasted with that of the

Emiratis, who emphasized apolitical religiosity and the importance of peace, tolerance, and oneness with Allah. The UAE, thus, relied on transnational Ulama to push its religious policy to be a regional and, at times, international or global one.

Both states have been close allies for some time as they both share significant threats in the region as well as state goals in economic, political, and military development. Both have developed similar views of political Islam and its role in domestic and regional politics - which has assisted in leading the propagation of state policies through multiple means including religious discourse. Their use of religious discourse, through sermons and religious talks, has been key in fighting off these organizations and political ideologies that both monarchies view as an existential threat. The Kingdom and its Gulf counterpart, the UAE, have formulated their foreign policy to reflect their view of the lethal effect of political Islam and its spread through the Muslim Brotherhood as well as the influential role of Shi'a Islam in the region. Both states have implemented policies that have resulted in the isolation and sanctioning of Qatar, as it is one of the entities viewed as a significant supporter of the spread of political Islam. However, due to its ideological nature, stopping the spread of political Islam has proven to be extremely challenging for both states regardless of the effort put forth in doing so.

For the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, this ideational policy became increasingly sectarian after the Iranian revolution and leading up to the Arab Spring. In the face of the threat of political Islam and revolutionary Shiism, it became centered around obedience and loyalty to the state as an important pillar of Islam. The main source in instilling such obedience, according to the religious establishment, was the importance of maintaining public peace. And lastly, as it prepared to follow in the footsteps of its neighboring state,

the UAE, the Kingdom also began to warm up to the idea of normalizing relations with Israel. To prepare Saudis at home and Arabs across the region, domestic and regional sermons, like the ones given by the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia at the Masjid al-Haram in Mecca, emphasized the importance of establishing good relations with one's neighbors. The sermons went on to stress the need to establish such relations regardless of the religious background of one's neighbors.

For the UAE, however, the historical development of its state took a somewhat different direction. In its attempt to appeal to the masses, the state made an effort to redefine its definition of Islam emphasizing tolerance and peace. As a result, most of the sermons and religious talks were given by state-sponsored Ulama to highlight the importance of peace, tolerance, and mutual understanding of one another. The state's religious policy also emphasized an apolitical approach to religion and the importance of concentrating on the spiritual development of a person as opposed to political activism. Some of the sermons given by popular television preachers emphasized the Islamic prohibited (haram) nature of political activism, specifically if it results in the disruption of the public peace within the state, similar to Saudi Arabia. The sermons also emphasized the good of the leadership, that its main purpose is providing protection to its populace. The state religious policy, leading up to the move to normalize relations with Israel, took a significantly different tone. It stressed the importance of good relations with neighbors and the need to concentrate on developing regional peace, regardless of what that meant. Other preachers, however, took an even more aggressive tone, pushing the idea of Israel as a much more peaceful and good neighbor compared to other aggressive

states that emphasize the disruption of public peace through revolutions both domestically and regionally.

Both countries have adopted similar strategies in recent years, as both battle the threat of the Shi'a power of Iran increasing its influence in the region, as well as the threat of political Islam spreading regionally through the Muslim Brotherhood and other groups. Since the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic in 2020 and the increased tension between both powers; this friendly power couple partnership of the Arab world has grown sour as their regional rivalry became visible. Although both have been instrumental in the efforts against regional rivals like Iran, Qatar, Turkey as well as the most prominent threat of political Islam and the Muslim Brotherhood, the pressures of the long-standing battle for leadership in Yemen has stretched the resources of both states thin as well as recent battles over oil production. As a result, both states have reassessed the balance of power created through this alliance by suddenly minimizing trade agreements and the frequency of direct flights between both states (Daragahi, 2021). For some time now, policymakers and analysts have closely monitored the recent emergence of a rift between the two states as the Kingdom is preparing for friendlier relations with different states in the region leading up to MBS<sup>57</sup> preparation to take over the kingdom. The rift began as early as the recent attacks when Emirati military planes attacked Saudi-backed militias in Yemen in late August of 2020. In addition, the Emiratis have been outspoken about their intent to withdraw from Yemen as their Saudi counterparts increase their airstrikes against the Houthis. Shortly after, reports of warm relations between Qatar

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<sup>57</sup> MBS: Mohammad Bin Salman, the new crown prince of Saudi Arabia is preparing for his takeover of the Kingdom in light of his father's illness. Leading up to his rise to the kingship, MBS has attempted to warm up relations with nation-states throughout the region.

and the Kingdom emerged without the inclusion of the Kingdom's Emirati counterparts (Bianco, 2019). And within the past year of 2021, Saudi Arabia changed its rules on imports from Gulf countries, just after an oil dispute about production occurred between the two states. The Kingdom changed its import policy to exclude goods made in free zones or with any association with Israeli products, serving as a challenge to the UAE's status as the regional trade hub for all products including Israeli ones (Daragahi, 2021). These recent moves have exposed the vulnerabilities of the Saudi-Emirati relationship. However, some reports still indicate that regardless of the recent setbacks, the Emirati-Saudi alliance will endure and strengthen (Ibish, 2021).

Many who view the alliance and its progression regionally in recent years would see the potential it had for destruction. The potential for conflict, according to some, was developing under the surface of the political alliance. Both states have made efforts to build up their weapons storage and have been among the leading purchasers of arms globally. In fact, at times, each state makes an effort to outdo the other in its military advancement as well as its warm ties to Washington (Daragahi, 2021).

In understanding the foreign policy of both states and their use of religious discourse in their attempt to influence public opinion toward their state policies, the religious establishment has played a significant role. Whether it is decreasing the Shi'a Iranian regional influence, and the warming up of relations with Israel, both states have sponsored Ulama in using their platform to encourage such policies. In this dissertation, I specifically aimed to fill the lacuna in the literature by challenging and complementing the long-standing theory of rentierism, secularization, and modernization theory as well as the modern Middle East scholarly literature addressing legitimacy.

I examined the role of the religious establishment and *Ulama* in the UAE and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia through the religious discourse transmitted locally, regionally, and globally in their attempt to affect public opinion toward the state and its policies. During OR throughout the historical development of each state, certain critical junctures shaped and shifted the sociopolitical rhetoric of the state during times of political adversity/change and economic fluctuation. Religious discourse, thus, became a key instrument in softening these junctures in the eyes of the state's populace. The Ulama became state-sponsored agents through whom the dynamics of politics within the region became intertwined with the interpretation of Islam and vice versa.

**APPENDIX**  
**LINKS TO ALL OF THE YOUTUBE VIDEOS**

**CHAPTER 3 SERMONS (SAUDI ARABIA)**

- الشيخ الذي حير المباحث السعودية يعتقل أو لا (2019, May 6). [Video]. YouTube.  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6B1-FnzSj\\_c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6B1-FnzSj_c)
- بدر المشاري يسب ويشتم شيعة علي وعلمائنا الكرام (2012, March 6). [Video]. YouTube.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JXVoweoYPLQ&feature=youtu.be>
- بشيخ وهابي يهدد بقتل و اكل الشيعة (2014, May 27). [Video]. YouTube.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cCDBs-zCyCs&feature=youtu.be>
- “لا يُخرج عن طاعة الحاكم حتى لو زنى وشرب الخمر على الهواء مباشرة” (2018, August 6). [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e9vEIV18rQU&feature=youtu.be>
- حكم الخروج على الحكام – الشيخ عثمان الخميس (2011, February 9). [Video]. YouTube.  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zd\\_Q9E4oSO8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zd_Q9E4oSO8)
- مفتي السعودية يفتي بقتال الشيعة (2018, January 3). [Video]. YouTube.  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T\\_zvGI2M3ok&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T_zvGI2M3ok&feature=youtu.be)
- خطبة السديس: هل تمثل خطبة إمام الحرم المكي “دعوة” (2020, September 8). عربي BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/inthepress-54074127>

**CHAPTER 6 SERMONS UNITED ARAB EMIRATES**

- Shaykh Abdallah bin Bayyah - Peace Forum - with English Subtitles.* (2018, December 11). [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l-eV8kz9fmk&t=46s>
- Dealing with Tyrant Rulers/Governments - Shaykh Hamza Yusuf.* (2019, November 28). [Video]. YouTube.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BhCbQX9f65M&feature=youtu.be>
- Hamza Yusuf Hurtful comments on Syrians. (2019, September 11). [Video]. YouTube.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1xDF2yW7cQg&feature=youtu.be>
- Islamic scholar Hamza Yusuf criticized for calling UAE “tolerant.” (2018, December 10). [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1MxmKTvbCfw>
- UAE Islamic Scholar: Israel Not Responsible For Sectarian Wars In Arab Countries – We Arabs Are.* (2020, September 30). [Video]. YouTube.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q362yCvsyHM>
- رأي الشيخ وسيم يوسف في نقد الحاكم على المنابر والخروج عليه (2016, June 14). [Video]. YouTube.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DQSbeZNchSo>
- ! شاهد آخر شطحات وسيم يوسف طبال أبناء زايد القرآن نزل بلهجة إماراتية (2018, January 2). [Video]. YouTube. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qjO\\_d2e2UwM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qjO_d2e2UwM)

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