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Post-Salafism: Religious Revisionism in Contemporary Saudi Arabia

Besnik Sinani

Center for Islamic Theology, Tübingen University, 72074 Tübingen, Germany; besnik.sinani@uni-tuebingen.de

Abstract: This article seeks to identify the driving factors, features, and significance of the transformation of Salafism in contemporary Muslim societies, a development labeled 'post-Salafism'. Throughout the 20th century, Salafism grew into a global religious movement, with distinctive local characteristics. Its post-Salafi transformations have likewise been diverse and reflect local conditions. 'Post-Salafism' is a term employed congruently to point at the fragmentation of Salafi religious authority; the emergence of Salafi alliances with other Muslim groups, which challenge Salafi conceptions of doctrinal superiority; in Salafi softening of sectarian rhetoric as a way of distancing from militant groups; in Salafi "indigenization"; and in social and political transformations that overlap with post-Islamism. Post-Salafism refers additionally to debates within Salafi circles, reflective of emerging internal doctrinal contradictions. Since the founding of Saudi Arabia in 1932, the kingdom has played a unique role in promoting, financing, and building the institutional network of global Salafism. The transformation of Saudi Salafism, therefore, resulting from changes in government policy, public pressure, and internal revisionism, will effect Salafism globally, pointing at a transformative moment in Muslim religious thought and authority structures.

Keywords: post-Salafism; post-Islamism; Saudi Arabia; Hatim al-ʿAwni

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1. Introduction

The label 'post-Salafism' is related to what preceded its emergence, namely Salafism. What explains the transformation of Salafism, what factors led to it, and what are its features? What is the potential impact and what are the limitations of post-Salafism, particularly in a country such as Saudi Arabia, where Salafism has shaped the kingdom's political and national identity? Post-Salafism, it will be argued, is indicative of changes in state religious policy, reflective of a recent history of political volatility, constituting a reaction to the Islamic Awakening Movement (*Sahwa*) and to the emergence of religious militancy. The Sahwa emerged out of the amalgamation of Salafi theology and Islamist ideas on politics and society. Saudi post-Salafism refers additionally to reactions from within Saudi society to the Sahwa attempts to dominate the public sphere. Saudi post-Salafism, therefore, is intrinsically reflective of post-Islamism. As Asef Bayat has argued, post-Islamism represents a condition in which, following the first stage of experimentation, Islamism "becomes compelled, both by its internal contradictions and by societal pressures to re-invent itself, but it does so at the coast of a tremendous qualitative shift." (Bayat 2005, 2013). Islamism is linked primarily to the political worldview of the Muslim Brotherhood. Global Islamism has been an umbrella for movements that hold a variety of theological views. In the case of Saudi Arabia, however, the emergence of Islamism was firmly grounded in Salafi theology (Lacroix 2011; Bu Hilal 2014). Indeed, Saudi Islamism became a vehicle for the spread of Salafism. In the 1980s and 1990s, the Sahwa grew into an opposition force to the Royal Family, resulting in the imprisonment of its leading activists. The government pressure on the Sahwa forced the movement to later rethink its strategy, avoid the collusion course, and even accept forms of cooptation. As the Sahwa had come to dominate the religious field, its transformation affected likewise its theological foundations, namely Salafism (Lacroix 2004).

Additionally, post-Salafism is indicative of internal Salafi revisionism and challenges to Salafi authority structures (Salem and Bassyuni 2015; Qadhi 2018; Razavian 2018). The emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), in particular, with its claim of representing true Salafism, mounted a major doctrinal challenge to the religious authorities of Saudi Salafism (Bunzel 2016). This challenge took place as the leading Salafi scholars had already passed away. This climate of theological and political volatility and an authoritative void coincided with a public fatigue, at least in some areas of the Middle East, including in Saudi Arabia, with the Awakening Movement. The movement was increasingly perceived as a conflict-inducing, socially-suffocating, regressive religious worldview. At the same time, the opposition from historical theological foes of Salafism, such as the neo-traditionalists, began to take advantage of Salafism's political predicament (Farouq 2021). Neo-traditionalists, also referred to in contemporary scholarship as 'late Sunni traditionalists' (Brown 2014), are scholars committed to the pre-modern Sunni scholarly traditions and institutions and oppose modern reformist Islamic movements such as Salafism. Prominent scholars from Syria, Egypt, Yemen, and elsewhere have called for a return to traditional Islam, an orientation articulated in opposition to Salafism. These ideas have also reached Saudis searching for alternative religious interpretations.

In Saudi Arabia, these developments created the conditions for dissenting voices from within the Saudi religious institutions to openly criticize key tenets of Salafi thought and action. This article seeks to locate post-Salafism in Saudi Arabia at the intersection of the transformation of Saudi state religious policy, relevant shifts in public perceptions towards Islamism, and the emergence of internal Salafi revisionism. In so doing, it seeks to contribute to an understanding of potential future directions in contemporary Muslim thought.

2. Salafism: An Overview

Salafism claims to represent an understanding of Islam that is based on the foundational texts of the Quran and the Prophetic Teachings (*sunna*), as these sources were understood by the generations of the early Muslims, known as the 'pious ancestors', or al-*salaf al-salih*. This definition is only partly helpful, given that Salafis are hardly the only Muslims that claim to anchor their understanding of religion in the foundational sources and early predecessors. It is helpful to think of Salafism as a *counterreligion* (Mouline 2014; Bunzel 2018), given that it points to Salafism's opposition to the Sunni pre-modern dominant schools of theology (*kalam*) of Ashʿarism and Maturidism, to the authority of the four canonical schools of Sunni Jurisprudence, and to Sufism (Haykel 2009; Griffel 2015; Lauziere 2016). Thinking of Salafism as a *counterreligion* draws attention, additionally, to some of the movement's identifying features that arguably drive the need for the current revisionism: its salvific exclusivism and its refusal to compromise in its dealings with other Muslim groups.

Both Mouline and Bunzel have used the concept of *counterreligion* in their works on the Saudi brand of Salafism, known as Wahhabism. The term 'Wahhabism' is used by scholars in order to distinguish the Saudi brand of Salafism from others. However, with few exceptions, Saudi scholars consider 'Wahhabism' a term used by their ideological opponents, and identify themselves as 'Salafis' (Commins 2015). Bunzel has also argued that the term *counterreligion* applies more accurately to the early stage of Wahhabism in the 18th century, all the way to early 20th century. Afterwards, the movement was required to moderate its positions, following the demands that came with its role as the kingdom's 'state religion'. As Bunzel (2016) has shown elsewhere, the emergence of groups such as ISIS has seen a renewed application of some of the most exclusivist notions of early Wahhabism. The emergence of ISIS has forced Saudi scholars to address controversial aspects of their theology. It should be noted that in late 19th–early 20th century, Salafi scholars emerged in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Morocco (Lauziere 2015). The emergence of Wahhabism in the central lands of Arabia in the 18th century, however, has undoubtedly been the most consequential development in the history of Salafism.

The message of the movement's founder, Muhammad Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab (d. 1792), faced opposition and hostility from the vast majority of Muslim scholars at the time, as well as from local rulers in the surrounding localities (Commins 2006; Crawford 2014; Bunzel 2018). Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab managed to secure the support of a local chieftain of the Al-Saud clan, resulting in a historical partnership between the Al Saud and the Wahhabi movement, which has endured until today. This development turned Salafism into the state religion of a modern nation state, with the power to enforce its dogma and punish what it considers heretics (Mouline 2014). As Saudi Arabia later became one of the world's major oil producers, that provided Saudi Salafism with financial resources that built the institutional network to spread its teachings globally. Saudi Arabia became the patron of most Salafi movements around the world, and its universities, particularly the University of Medina, became the movement's leading learning institutions, which also led to a Saudization of global Salafism (Farquhar 2016). By the second half of the 20th century, Salafism—particularly its Saudi brand—had been transformed from a movement that was previously considered almost unanimously as deviant by the majority of Sunni scholars (Bunzel 2018) into part of the Sunni mainstream. The history of Salafism is testimony to the remarkable transformation of modern Muslim thought. By the end of the 20th century, the former Mufti of Saudi Arabia, ʿAbd al-ʿAziz Bin Baz (d. 1999), had arguably achieved a quasi-papal role (Lacroix 2011).

The defining marker of Salafism is its understanding of theology, formulated in a doctrine known as "the tripartite division of monotheism" (Haykel 2009). To Salafis, monotheism is divided into monotheism of Lordship, or the belief that God is Lord, Creator, and Sustainer of the universe (*tawhid al-rububiyya*); monotheism of Godship, which implies that God alone is worthy of worship (*tawhid al-uluhiyya*); and the belief in the unique Names and Attributes of God (*tawhid al-asma wa sifat*). The implication of this creedal formulation is that it negates the faith of large segments of the Muslim community. According to Salafis, someone who professes to be a Muslim, believes that God is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, and fulfills the obligations of religion, such as the five daily prayers, fasting, alms-giving, and pilgrimage, might still be considered a disbeliever if that Muslim seeks, perhaps, the intercession of the prophets and saints. To Salafis, this person might have fulfilled the conditions of *tawhid al-rububiyya*, but they are not a monotheist according to *tawhid al-uluhiyya*. At the core of this Salafi creedal formulation is a particular understanding of what constitutes worship (*ʿibada*). The act of visiting the resting places of prophets and saints represents in Salafi understanding an act of worshiping someone other than God, and therefore as idolatry. Wahhabis have argued that a person who visits and seeks the intercession of the prophets and saints resembles the pagans of Mecca at the time of revelation, meaning that they are to be considered disbelievers (Qadhi 2018). No other aspect of Wahhabi teaching has drawn as much criticism as this key precept of its creed. It results in the excommunication (*takfir*) of large segments of the global Muslim community, as well as in feeding sectarianism and potential violence (Adang et al. 2015).

This creedal formulation played an important role in mobilizing tribal communities of the Arabian Peninsula, which supported the emergence of the Saudi kingdom in the first decades of the 20th century. It motivated the massacres of Shiʿi communities in the Eastern part of the Peninsula, and of Sunnis in cities such as Taif, near Mecca (Vasiliev 1998; Al-Rasheed 2002). This creedal formulation is not necessarily new. It is primarily attributed to a controversial medieval theologian, Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328). Since the emergence of the Wahhabi movement, Muslim scholars have debated to what extent Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab represented accurately the teachings of Ibn Taymiyya (Bunzel 2018). Be that as it may, later Wahhabi theology, especially in the second half of the 20th century, was largely based upon the edited publications of the works of Ibn Taymiyya. Critics have pointed at several occasions when contemporary Wahhabi publications of Ibn Taymiyya's works omit parts that contradict Wahhabi teachings. Those omissions notwithstanding, the foundational role of the works of Ibn Taymiyya in the modern formation of Salafism cannot be overstated (Ahmed and Yosef 2010).

A key aspect of the legacy of Ibn Taymiyya is his opposition to the two dominant schools of Sunni theology (*kalam*), Asha'rism and Maturidism. These schools of theology have emphasized the importance of affirming God's ultimate transcendence. They have refrained from a literalist reading of texts that would suggest an anthropomorphic vision of God, or have interpreted those texts metaphorically. As a result, based on Taymiyyan theology, Wahhabis accuse the majority of the world's Muslims, adherents of Ash'arism and Maturidism, of negating some of the attributes of God (*ta'til*), resulting in failure to understand God's true nature and worship him accordingly (Nahouza 2018). Even in cases when Salafis do not employ excommunication of other Muslims, they restrict their definition of Sunnism, claiming that Salafis alone represent Sunni Islam. This results in branding non-Salafi Muslims as deviants (*mubtadi'a*)

The second defining aspect of Salafism is its opposition to the four traditional schools of Sunni Jurisprudence (*madhhab*s). Establishment Wahhabi scholars in Saudi Arabia do not share, at least formally, this opposition to the *madhhab*s. Officially, they subscribe to one of them, the Hanbali school (Mouline 2014). Nevertheless, the influence of other Salafi trends on the Saudi religious field popularized anti-*madhhab*ism in the kingdom. Salafis have worked throughout the 20th century to dismantle the centuries-old structure of legal reasoning and precedent that has informed Sunni legal thought, religious practice, and norms of social interaction (Hamdeh 2021). The implications of anti-*madhhab*ism have been wide-ranging. It challenged the role of traditional scholars as sources of religious authority, encouraging Muslims to read the primary sources for themselves, and ignore the compendiums of commentaries written through the centuries (Al-Buti 2017). On the one hand, Salafis propagated the abandonment of the obligation of lay Muslims to follow qualified scholars (*taqlid*). On the other hand, however, they presented themselves as the reliable scholars Muslims should turn to. The difference, Salafis claimed, is that they would not cite the opinions of the schools, but the words of the Prophet. Their opinions, they claimed, were based on undisputed textual evidence (*dalil*). One of the distinctive characteristics of Salafi criticism has been anchored on the claim that the *madhhab*s are not based on sound reports of the statements of the Prophet (*hadith*s), but on unreliable, weak traditions. To Salafis such as Nasir al-Din al-Albani (d. 1999), this explains the existence of multiple religious opinions on a single matter (Al-Albani 2006). Consequently, Salafism challenged the pluralism of the pre-modern Sunni legal tradition. The claim that the religious practices of the Muslims have been for centuries based on weak hadiths encouraged a search for religious authenticity. This search was taking place at the time of the emergence in the Middle East of parallel ideological projects. The political failure of Arab nationalism, and by extension of leftist forms of mobilization, led to a search for an intellectual paradigm, and a political imagination that was free of ideological borrowings from the East or the West. Islam was not only meant to serve as a teaching for living a life pleasing to God, but also as a marker of an authentic cultural identity (Hamidaddin 2019).

In religious practice, this tendency was manifested in opposition to *bid'a*, or innovation, which referred to practices and concepts that are not based on texts that Salafis consider authentic. Opposition to heretical innovations, as the former Mufti of the Kingdom, Shaykh Bin Baz (d. 1999) wrote, is an inseparable part of the commitment to following the prophetic *sunna*. Salafis are instructed to show animosity towards the people of innovation, and prevent the employment of innovators to fulfill religious duties (Bin Baz n.d.). The purge of innovations was directed at particular practices and entire traditions of Islam, including at times prayer motions as taught by the *madhhabs*, celebrations of the birthday of Prophet Muhammad, or the entire tradition of Sufism, which was condemned as a bundle of innovations borrowed from Hinduism, Christianity, Buddhism and other religions (Ernst 2002). It encouraged, likewise, the emergence of distinctive forms of sociability, noted in practices such as growing long beards for men, which aimed at distinguishing Salafis from other Muslims, and "as a noble announcement to introduce society to what it means to be a sunni" (Rock-Singer 2019). Salafism, therefore, is both a negative theological articulation of

what it is not—expressed in opposition to classical Islam—and a project of rediscovery of true Islam.

The third and final category used by Haykel to define Salafis is what they often refer to as *manhaj*, or methodology. *Manhaj* speaks to overall conceptions of how to apply Salafi theological teachings. As such, *manhaj* refers also to political thought and action. Most Salafis are self-declared political quietists and believe in the obligation to obey a Muslim ruler, regardless of the ruler's level of piety. Certainly, this does not exclude political activism; it only defines it. For example, one of the most notorious apolitical Salafi movements in the contemporary world is comprised of the follower of a Saudi scholar, Rabiʿ Madkhali, who are hence known as *madkhalis*. The apolitical stance of the *madkhalis* does not prevent them from being one of the armed groups operating currently in Libya or being staunch monarchists in Morocco (Wehrey and Boukhars 2019). In Saudi Arabia they are opposed to Islamist groups that have propagated political reform (Lacroix 2011). There have been significant exceptions to Salafi political quietism. The group behind the Siege of Mecca in 1979, led by Juhayman al-ʿUtaybi (d. 1980), belonged to a Salafi organization, arguably inspired in its early stages by the teachings of al-Albani (Lacroix 2011). Additionally, since the 1970s, several generations of Saudi Salafis have been influenced by various trends of Islamism. In the context of the Cold War, King Faysal (d. 1975) of Saudi Arabia initiated a number of policies that sought to oppose the spread of Soviet-backed, left-leaning ideologies such as Nasserism, Bathism and Marxism (Bsheer 2018). The founding of the Islamic University of Medina, an institution that played a key role in the promotion of Salafism around the world, was founded in this political context (Farquhar 2016). King Faysal welcomed religious activists that had faced persecution in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere, and many of them took teaching positions in the kingdom's universities (Lacroix 2011). These activists became ideological warriors in King Faysal's war against the spread of socialism.

The amalgamation of Salafism and Islamism in Saudi educational institutions resulted in the emergence of the Sahwa. The role of the Sahwa in the Wahhabization of the Saudi population cannot be overstated. Its control over educational institutions, as well as its use of Brotherhood activity methods that involved the organization of youth camps, after-school programs, week-end retreats, and so on, gave the movement the kind of access that establishment Wahhabism had never enjoyed before (Menoret 2020). The Sahwa inculcated in large segments of Saudi youth the teachings of Wahhabism and a distinctive form of socialization. In time, this new generation became increasingly critical of several aspects of Saudi social and political life, which were not in accordance with their vision of a true Muslim society. Initially, Islamists challenged the legitimacy of the post-colonial nation-states everywhere in the Muslim world, except for Saudi Arabia. That would later change, especially after the kingdom hosted American troops following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990. The Sahwa became the main opposition force to the Royal Family. The Sahwa, it should be noted, was not only seeking political reform. It aimed primarily at transforming society according to a Salafi pietistic vision. If Saudi Arabia identified itself as a Muslim country, it argued, than it should be so comprehensively, including in areas the government had kept away from religious control, such as foreign policy and the economy. A key conceptual term of the movement became *shumuliyya*, or comprehensiveness. Were Saudi Arabia to fail in its proper implementation of Islam, a leading Sahwa scholar, Salman al-Ouda, argued, it would lose its reason for existing (Alshamsi 2011).

While the Sahwa called for political reform, other groups emerged from this amalgamation of Salafism and Islamism, which participated in the fight against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Their camps would soon become centers for the promotion of armed struggle against what they saw as corrupt governments in Muslim countries, including in Saudi Arabia. That was the context in which al-Qaeda was born. In 2003, al-Qaeda initiated violent attacks inside the kingdom, targeting compounds housing foreigners and the security forces (Hegghammer 2010). The exclusivist theology of Salafism, which had legitimized the Saudi expansion raids against the people of the Peninsula in early 20th century, had

turned into a powerful oppositional force that threatened the political order of Saudi Arabia and its neighboring countries. The Salafi proclivity towards excommunication of Muslims following other theological schools was turned against the political systems of the Muslim world (Nedza 2015). According to a key tenet of Salafi exclusivist theology, known as *al-wala' wa-l-bara'*, believers are commanded to show allegiance to fellow believers and show enmity towards disbelievers (Bunzel 2018). The Saudi alliance with the United States, at the time when the latter was engaged in a war against a Muslim country—such as in Iraq—or supporting Israel against the Palestinians implied that the Saudi state had given its allegiance to the disbelievers, and shown enmity towards fellow Muslims. Whereas the Sahwa sought political reform and never challenged the legitimacy of the Saudi Royal Family, al-Qaeda militants believed in armed struggle. The imprisonment in the mid-1990s of the leading Sahwa activists led some of their followers to believe that the mobilizing methods of the Sahwa had failed, and that violent insurrection was the only way to bring political change.

The later emergence of ISIS, following the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the Civil War in Syria following the Arab Spring, only accentuated the mobilizing potential of Salafi-inspired militant groups (Bunzel 2016). The majority of modern-day Salafis have employed theological reasoning that limits the application of excommunication embedded in their understanding of monotheism, usually by presuming justifying ignorance (*al-ʿudhr bi-l-jahl*). Additionally, the religious establishment of Saudi Arabia has maintained its support for the government. However, the emergence of ISIS returned the spotlight to Wahhabi inclination towards *takfir* of Muslims they disagree with and the use of *takfir* to legitimize violence. The divisions within the Salafis have only exasperated the internal contradictions and have resulted in the further fragmentation of the movement. These tensions started taking place after the death of the three leading Salafi scholars of the late 20th century, the Saudis Bin Baz and Ibn ʿUthaymin (d. 2001) and the Albanian al-Albani (d. 1999). Salafism has failed to produce scholars of equal charisma and authority. Bin Baz was replaced as Mufti of Saudi Arabia by Shaykh ʿAbd al-ʿAziz Al al-Shaykh (b. 1943), a descendant of the founder of Wahhabism, Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab, who lacks the scholarly reputation of his predecessor. Post-Salafism refers partly to this later development when the Salafi movement lacks unifying authority figures, resulting in its fragmentation. During the Syrian civil war, the shared Salafi theology did not prevent militant organizations such as ISIS, al-Qaeda, or Ahrar al-Sham from fighting against each other, all while they claimed to represent true Salafism (Salem and Bassyuni 2015). The proliferation of internal Salafi disputes only serves to highlight in the eyes of their followers the movement's contradictions. After all, one of the leading claims of Salafism has been that commitment to a singular interpretation of theology, to hadith, and to the methodology of the ancestors would bring an end to Muslim disunity. The actual Salafi fragmentation and fierce internal infights have belied one of their leading rhetorical claims.

3. Saudi Post-Wahhabism as Post-Islamism

As stated earlier, post-Salafism in Saudi Arabia refers to changes in state policy, in society, and within the Islamist movement. The Saudi government responded to the Islamist protests in the 1990s by imprisoning several of its leaders (Lacroix 2011). Congruently, the government initiated a process of institution-building and narrative-construction which sought to "de-center religion" from its historical role as the cornerstone of the Kingdom's national identity. A key component of this policy was the promotion of nationalism, and the emergence of a historical narrative that increasingly placed the focus on the secular history of the Al-Saud clan while downplaying the role of the Wahhabi reformist movement (Bsheer 2020; Al-Rasheed 2021). Not only has the once-banned celebration of the National Day become more grandiose, and increasingly devoid of religious symbolism, but in 2022 the kingdom announced a new holiday: the Founding Day. The rationale behind the Founding Day has been presented as a historical correction, pin pointing the beginnings of the kingdom not in 1932, the year of the founding of the Kingdom, or in 1744, the

year marking the founding of the First Saudi State as a result of the Saudi—Wahhabi alliance, but in 1727. According to Saudi newspapers, the Founding Day corrects "the myth" perpetuated by some historians and religious extremists who have established the year 1744 as the beginning of the First Saudi State. The importance of this new "reappraisal" lies in the fact that it ceases to portray the founding of the Saudi state as the outcome of the alliance between the two leaders. Instead, it portrays the founding of the state as a project that preceded the Wahhabi movement (Alamer 2022). Whereas this manifestation of post-Salafism is commonly attributed to the rise of Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman (MBS), following his father's coronation in 2015 (Blin 2021), in reality the shift has been taking place for over three decades.

Congruently with the shift towards nationalism, the Saudi government has over the years established stronger control over the religious field, closing a number of websites dedicated to issuing religious opinions (*fatwa*s), while targeting religious discourse that was considered extremist. In 2010, former King ʿAbdullah issued a Royal Decree making the state-sponsored Council of Senior Scholars the only body authorized to issue fatwas (Aloudh 2018). Starting from the mid 1990s, the government extended support for Salafi groups that are loyal to the government and oppose the Islamist movement, such as the *madkhalis*, and granted limited toleration to historically marginalized religious minorities, such as Sufis and Shiʿis considered loyal to the state (Lacroix 2011). Furthermore, a policy of *infitah* or opening was initiated. It offered the promise of easing certain social restrictions and more space for what are considered in the Saudi context liberal voices (or secularists—according to their Islamist opponents). In addition, it introduced educational and artistic projects that challenged Wahhabi norms (Meijer 2010).

In the context of the aftermath of the September 11 attacks and the emergence of sectarian violence that followed the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Saudi government committed both domestically and internationally to combating extremism and promoting religious moderation. King ʿAbdullah was one of the signatories of the Amman Declaration in 2004), which identified excommunication and salvific exclusivism as the root cause of political violence in the region. He would later host the Mecca Declaration in 2006, conveying a similar message. Critics have noted that these initiatives seek to put the blame for the spread of political violence on religion in order to shift blame from authoritarianism (Sheline 2019). Relevant to the emergence of post-Salafism, this critical focus on religious doctrine, that directly targeted Salafi tenets of theology, forced Salafi scholars to moderate their discourse. By way of example, a religious scholar like Shaykh Salih Al al-Shaykh, the longest serving Saudi Minister of Religious Affairs (till 2018), and a direct descendant of the founder of Wahhabism, is known for authoring religious texts in the 1980s where he passionately advocated for excommunicating Muslims he considered to be heretics (Al al-Shaykh 1987). Throughout the first decade of the 21st century, however, as one can see in his personal website, he has been equally passionate in condemning the use of *takfir*.

The most significant domestic event in the string of these government-sponsored initiatives is the National Dialogue in Mecca in 2003. It was organized by the Crown Prince (later King) ʿAbdullah. For the first time, Sufi and Shiʿa scholars were publicly recognized and invited to contribute to the national conversation about extremism. The National Dialogue has been criticized for raising minority expectations and failing to deliver (Matthiesen 2015). It should be noted, however, that a high-profile event, organized by the government, became a forum where the teachings of Wahhabism and their social and political manifestations were publicly criticized. A number of attendees identified key tenets of the Wahhabi creed as the root causes of extremism. Among them was a Meccan Sufi scholar, Muhammad ʿAlawi al-Maliki (d. 2004), who throughout the 1980s had faced persecution, forced exile, and even threats to his life. He presented a paper in which he identified the doctrine of the tripartite division of monotheism as the ideological pillar of extremism (*ghuluww*) (Al-Maliki 2004). The event was significant not only because it targeted Salafi theology, but also because it portrayed the government as standing above affiliation with one particular brand of Islam (Lacroix 2005).

In 2017, MBS identified the "return to moderation" as a hallmark of the kingdom's political orientation (Sheline 2017). This was projected as a reversal of the religious and political culture that emerged in the kingdom after the Siege of Mecca and the Iranian Revolution in 1979. The return to moderation implied a "war against extremism", which targeted primarily former Sahwa affiliated, reformist preachers. Saudi television channels and newspapers have reminded the public of the Siege of Mecca, of young activists breaking musical instruments through the 1980s, and of Sahwa scholars giving incendiary speeches during the First Gulf War. Islamist reformist preachers were collectively targeted, imprisoned, and blamed for preaching extremism, regardless of the distinctive characteristics of their views, activism, or later transformations. A defining characteristic of this promotion of moderation is its equating of political activism seeking political reform and participation with violence and extremism. As part of the "return to moderation", the government has created social spaces outside the control of religious norms, limiting religious control over public morality, education, and the legal system, which signals a shrinking of the religious field and of Salafi authority in society. (Mouline 2018; Sinani 2019).

It should be noted that the government pressure on Salafi scholars to shift their discourse towards state-sponsored moderation has diminished their status in the eyes of their supporters. The reforms of MBS have openly opposed Wahhabi norms. Establishment scholars have been obliged to either issue statements and religious opinions in support of the government that contradict their previous views or simply remain silent. The promotion of entertainment projects, the opening of movie theaters, the lifting of social restrictions, and gender segregation rules are the most obvious cases. Critics have argued that these are not real reforms, and that the kingdom has failed to address the problematic teachings of Salafism (Hellyer 2018). These reforms, however, constitute a major shrinking of the role of religion and the power of Saudi Salafi scholars, and in so doing MBS is "touching nothing, but changing everything" (Farouk and Brown 2021). These reforms have paralyzed and disabled a key institution of Wahhabi social presence, the Council for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Evil (Mouline 2014). Like the "de-centering" of Wahhabism from the founding narrative of the nation, this step constitutes a significant indication of the diminishing power of Saudi Salafism.

Recently, in a televised interview, MBS was asked about the meaning and application of 'moderation'. He reiterated that he is committed to following the Quran and the Sunna. However, he added that he is not required to follow the interpretative school of Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab and that he intends to follow only the most reliable statements of the Prophet, which have been transmitted from several chains of transmission, such that Muslim scholars consider their fabrication impossible (*mutawatir*). Such hadiths, however, are very few in number, indicating a substantial reduction in the number of hadiths the Prince considers worthy of referring to. Additionally, in these statements he challenges once again the historical Saudi-Wahhabi labor division, where religious expertise was entrusted to the scholars. The Prince appeared to symbolically occupy both roles (Al-Saud 2021).

The post-Islamist and post-Wahhabi shift in Saudi Arabia goes beyond government policy, referring additionally to shifts in public perceptions regarding the role of Salafism in the Saudi public sphere. A few signposts should serve to illustrate this change. In 2002, 15 school-girls died in a fire in Mecca. Allegedly, firefighters were prevented from entering the building, and the girls were trapped inside by the religious police, since they had not been properly covered. Media articles targeted the religious culture of the kingdom, and criticism did not spare even Ibn Taymiyya (Ahmed and Yosef 2010). The notion that there was something wrong with the religious culture of the kingdom was being openly debated. In 2003, al-Qaeda affiliated groups launched a number of terrorist attacks in the kingdom. Former Saudi fighters of the Afghan war, who were once hailed as heroes, lost their credibility and support once they brought their jihad back home (Hegghammer 2010). Meanwhile, the religious norms imposed on society had turned 'boredom' into a marker of youth culture (Menoret 2014). It was certainly more so for women in the kingdom (Alsanea 2008). Throughout the rule of King ʿAbdullah, over one hundred thousand Saudis were

granted scholarships to study in the U.S., Europe, Australia, and elsewhere around the world. Increasingly, the social vision of Wahhabism stood in opposition to the values, lifestyles, and aspirations of growing numbers of Saudis. The search for moderation, therefore, was not simply a government policy; it spoke to the concerns and aspirations of various segments of society.

4. Internal Revisionism of Salafism

Government critique of religious zealotry, especially in the form of armed militancy, created the conditions for a critique of various tenets of the creed and practices of Salafism from within the Sahwa movement, and even from within Salafi centers of learning. The concern over extremism was not limited to government officials alone. Leading Islamist thinkers and intellectuals of the Awakening Movement, such as the Qatar-based Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi (b. 1926)—among others—recognized the presence of excessive zealotry in the Movement (Al-Qaradawi 1986). After the imprisonments of Sahwa activists in the mid-1990s, most Sahwa scholars abandoned the earlier collision course with the state, and became active in condemning militant groups such as al-Qaeda. Indeed, several thinkers, preachers, and activists in this period emerged as critics of certain aspects of the kingdom's religious culture (Alshamsi 2011; Lacroix 2019). A leading Sahwa scholar, Shaykh Salman al-Ouda, having come out of prison in 1999, famously rode to the National Dialogue in 2003 with a Shiʿa scholar. He became one of the first high-profile Salafi scholars to attend a Sufi gathering in 2005, calling for a recognition of Muslim theological diversity (Ambah 2006). Al-Ouda promoted a vision of the renewal of Islamic legal and political thought, reflective of the influence on his writings of non-Salafi scholars such as al-Qaradawi and Abdullah Bin Bayyah (b. 1935). A scholar with global following, al-Ouda emerged as a leading voice of internal Salafi revisionism (Al-Ouda 2012; Razavian 2018). He could have been a natural proponent of a government turn towards moderation had it not been for his support for the Arab Spring. His support for political reform led to his second imprisonment in 2017. He is kept in solitary confinement and it is feared that he might face the death penalty. The irony perhaps is in the fact that the Saudi government has presented the imprisonment of scholars such as al-Ouda as part of its promotion of moderation. To the Saudi government, moderation has meant first and foremost obedience to the state. In the context of the Arab Spring, Islamists represented a threat to the political order of the Middle East, which the Saudi government has been determined to preserve (Lacroix 2017).

Following the imprisonment of the leading Sahwa activists in mid 1990s, offshoots of the movement appeared that self-identified as 'Islamo-liberals'. These activists extended invitations of cooperation to representatives of religious minorities, such as the Shiʿis, challenging Wahhabi uncompromising animosity towards them. These Islamo-liberals also argued that social and political reform requires addressing critically core aspects of Wahhabi theology. Even exiled political activists, some of whom come from prominent Wahhabi families, such as Muhammad b. ʿAbdullah al-Masʿari, wrote texts that criticized the Wahhabi understanding of monotheism (Al-Masʿari 2019). Despite the fact that the Islamo-liberals failed to gain mass support, they contributed to the public critique of Wahhabism, constituting one of the manifestations of post-Salafism among Islamist activists (Lacroix 2004). The emergence of ISIS created the conditions for increased internal critique from within Salafi circles. A well-known Saudi preacher and former Imam of the Grand Mosque of Mecca, ʿAdil al-Kalbani (b. 1959), declared in a televised interview that groups such as ISIS share the teachings of Saudi Salafism (Al-Kalbani 2016). In later years he has retracted his previous excommunication of Shiʿis and has criticized Salafi rigidity regarding gender segregation. Visiting a Sufi gathering attended by this author in the city of Jeddah, Saudi Arabia in 2013, al-Kalbani stated that Sufis and Salafis are brothers, a far cry from the established Salafi excommunication of Sufis.

No other Saudi scholar, however, has critiqued Salafism from within Salafi institutions of learning to the extent and depth of Dr. Sharif Hatim al-ʿAwni. Born in Taif in 1966, a city in the western part of Saudi Arabia, al-ʿAwni hails from a family of descendants of the

Prophet Muhammad, which ruled Mecca prior to the founding of the Kingdom. In the early stage of his religious studies, he was inspired by the teachings of al-Albani. By his own admission, he listened to hundreds of Albani's recorded tapes. He studied at Um al-Qurra University in Mecca, where he received his doctoral degree, and where he is currently a professor at the Department of Quranic and Prophetic Sunna Studies. A former member of the Saudi Consultative Council, a prolific author of several works in hadith, jurisprudence, and other fields of Islamic learning, he has been active in media platforms, social media, and conferences. He has been recognized as one of the most influential Muslim scholars in the world by the *500 Most Influential Muslims* report published by the Royal Institute of Jordan.

The work of al-ʿAwni has attracted the attention of several observers, who have portrayed his work at times as a form of Salafi reclamation of its teachings from groups such as ISIS, while others have emphasized his departure from Salafism (Razavian 2018; Ismail 2019). Salafism, and particularly its Wahhabi branch, is often depicted as espousing a strict and rigid articulation of Islamic dogma, giving the impression of Salafi uncompromising commitment to orthodoxy. Al-ʿAwni, however, has made the case that the problem he identifies with Salafi dogma is its erroneous understanding of creedal concepts and its departure from established Sunni doctrines. Many of the arguments al-ʿAwni presents in his constant and developing critique of Salafism are not particularly new, and indeed many of them have been repeated by many Muslim scholars since the emergence of Wahhabism. The real novelty in al-ʿAwni's critique is that it is coming from a high-profile Saudi scholar and a professor in an elite Salafi religious institution of learning. Al-ʿAwni's critique of Salafism has given rise to angry reactions from several Salafi scholars, including senior figures of the Saudi religious establishment such as Salih al-Fawzan (b. 1935). Al-ʿAwni, it can be argued, has brought a series of critical Sunni concerns regarding Salafism to the center of Salafi circles and to the forefront of Saudi public debate. This stand seems to contradict the claim that al-ʿAwni represents a Salafi reclamation of its teachings from groups such as ISIS. Indeed, al-ʿAwni has argued that the emergence of ISIS has brought a sense of urgency in addressing problematic features of Salafism. The second and equally important aspect of al-ʿAwni's critique, as it will be briefly illustrated in this article, is that it has been articulated through the works of scholars, texts, and methodologies of the classical period that are largely accepted and respected by Salafis. In this regard, despite the Salafi denunciations of al-ʿAwni, his critique is reflective of Salafi epistemology. One might even argue that al-ʿAwni's critique of Salafi-honored scholars such as Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) is in itself an expression of the Salafi-inspired iconoclastic inclination. If Salafism teaches that Muslims should not blindly follow any single scholar, and should follow instead the textual evidence, al-ʿAwni has extended this same principle to scholars revered by Salafis, such as Ibn Taymiyya. Therefore, al-ʿAwni cannot be fully described as having departed from Salafism. Al-ʿAwni has criticized the sacralization of the legacy of Ibn Taymiyya in contemporary Salafi thought, and has called for a revival (*tajdid*) of Salafi discourse. He has relativized Salafi claims to truth, writing that "Salafism and Wahhabism are not infallible", and yet at the same time he has stated that his critique comes from love, and not hatred for Salafism, calling for a renewal of Salafi discourse, not for banning it (Al-ʿAwni 2014a, 2017).

Key to his rise to prominence is the fact that al-ʿAwni has been *allowed* to articulate his views. No Saudi scholar can appear on TV, hold public gatherings at his home, or participate in international conferences—especially one who holds controversial views that oppose establishment dogma—without the tacit or explicit permission of Saudi authorities. Al-ʿAwni (2014b) first drew public attention in 2009 with an article titled "We will call upon the Truth" (*Sanasdaʿu bi-l-haqq*). In it, he challenged some of the legal opinions (*fatwa*s) of the Council of Senior Scholars, and made critical remarks regarding the legacy of Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab. Over the years, he has addressed a number of important tenets of Wahhabi thought. He has refuted the notion that Muslims who seek the intercession of prophets and saints are guilty of idolatry in the same manner of the pagans of Mecca at the time of revelation. As mentioned earlier, this claim represents a core aspect of Wahhabi theology.

His refutation was supported by quoting the works of scholars of the classical period that are respected by Salafis, such as Ibn Kathir (d. 1373). He continues to oppose the practice of asking for the assistance and intercession of the dead, but argues that it should not be the basis for excommunication, and it should be treated rather as a matter of acceptable differences. Al-ʿAwni has argued that practices that are considered by contemporary Salafis as manifestations of idolatry, such as seeking blessing and kissing the tomb of the Prophet Muhammad, were considered acceptable by scholars that Salafis honor as eponyms of their school, such as Ahmad Ibn Hanbal (d. 855) (Al-ʿAwni 2020a). He has gone further and critiqued Ibn Taymiyya's unrestrained division of the categories of creed in the doctrine of the tripartite division of monotheism, and argued that those scholars who later followed his ideas went even further in their erroneous understanding of monotheism—a clear reference to Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab. On the basis of this faulty categorization, al-ʿAwni has argued, Ibn Taymiyya and his modern-day followers have drawn incorrect conclusions about the Ashʿari and Maturidi theologians (Al-ʿAwni 2020c).

Al-ʿAwni has further expanded his critique of Wahhabi theology by addressing its understanding of the concept of worship. As mentioned earlier, Wahhabi understanding of worship and the conviction that most Muslims do not worship God appropriately have served as the reason that motivated the birth of the movement and inform Wahhabi salvific exclusivism. To Wahhabis, non-Salafi Muslims fail to recognize God's sovereignty. In a treatise titled "Worship: Gate to Monotheism and Gate to Excommunication" (*ʿIbada: bawaba al-tawhid . . . wa bawaba al-takfir*), al-ʿAwni essentially argued that according to primary Islamic sources, Wahhabis have simply failed to grasp the Muslim understanding of monotheism, implying, therefore, that Wahhabi theological rigidity is not a sign of their principled commitment, but of their faulty reading of the sources (Al-ʿAwni n.d.). Additionally, al-ʿAwni has called for moderating Salafi understanding of Allegiance and Rupture, or *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* (Wagemakers 2008; Qadhi 2018). This doctrine is often ascribed to militant groups alone. In reality, it constitutes a central teaching of mainstream Saudi Salafism (al-Fawzan 1998). Drawing from the example of the Prophet Muhammad, al-ʿAwni has argued that enmity is justified only towards non-Muslims who are antagonistic to Muslims and their faith. Otherwise, enmity towards amicable non-Muslims is not justified by the Islamic sources. Perhaps his most important work in this context has been *Excommunication of the People of Two Testimonies* [the Muslims] (*Takfir Ahl al-Shahadatayn*), for which Yasir Qadhi (2018) has argued that it constitutes an indirect critical response to one of the main works of Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab, *The Four Principles* (*al-Qawaʾid al-arbaʿa*). In it, al-ʿAwni has challenged the Salafi bases for excommunication and has argued that unwarranted declarations of *takfir* lead to violence and corruption in society (Al-ʿAwni 2016).

As noted earlier, a key characteristic of Salafi doctrine is the accusation of other Muslims of introducing into Islam concepts, practices, and norms which are foreign to the religion, known as *bidʿa*, or innovation. In a number of texts, as in his *How to Deal with Innovators* (*al-taʿamul maʿa-l-mubtadiʿa*), al-ʿAwni has argued for a revision of the understanding of what constitutes innovation, and has appealed for a moderate methodology for treating those that are considered heretics. He has recently expanded upon this argument in a number of Zoom lectures that took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, where he cited in support of his arguments the works of medieval scholars such as al-Dhahabi (d. 1348), who are respected in Salafi circles.

In addition to doctrinal topics, al-ʿAwni has issued a number of *fatwa*s, challenging well-established Salafi normative positions. Among them, he has declared permissible the celebration of birthdays, congratulating Christians on Christmas, celebrating the National Holiday, the permissibility of listening to music, and the permissibility of celebrating the birthday of Prophet Muhammad (*mawlid*). Beyond addressing particular Salafi rulings, al-ʿAwni, especially through his social media accounts, has addressed the Salafi inclination to promote the most stringent positions found among a variety of available legal rulings. On his social media accounts, he has critiqued the Salafi promotion of a sense of alienation, which seeks to encourage among the faithful the feeling of being strangers (*ghuraba*) in

contemporary societies. In conferences and in his writings he has appealed for a broader understanding of what constitutes a Sunni Muslim, arguing both against those who seek to exclude Salafis from Sunnism and against Salafis who exclude Ashʿaris and Sufis from Sunnism or Islam. He was one of the few Saudis to participate in the Grozny Conference in Chechnya, titled "Who are the Sunnis", where he debated against the views of the Ashʿari theologian Saʿid al-Fawda, who argued that Salafis are not Sunnis. He has additionally promoted this inclusive approach in his writings, for example in his "The Understanding of "Sunna" and "Community" in the Term "The People of Sunna and Community" (*mafhum 'al-sunna' wa 'al-jamaʿa' fi laqab 'ahl al-sunna wa-l-jamaʿa'*) (Al-ʿAwni n.d.).

In his critique of Salafism, al-ʿAwni has provided the building blocks for a theological outlook, that could enable a restructuring of Salafism in the contemporary world. It is based on foundations selected from classical sources that are accepted in contemporary Salafi thought, while it abandons some of its most problematic features. Al-ʿAwni's post-Salafism is primarily post-sectarian. It offers a rapprochement of Salafism to the legacy of classical Sunni Islam, while it seeks to challenge the neo-traditionalist rejection of Salafism. To what extent, however, do the views of scholars such as al-ʿAwni represent a larger trend of Saudi Salafism?

5. The limits of Post-Salafism in Saudi Arabia

The trajectory of Saudi policy on religion has led observers to conclude that especially under MBS Saudi Arabia is undergoing a process of de-Wahhabisation (Blin 2021), or that perhaps as a state religion, Wahhabism "is dead" (Alamer 2022).

To a certain extent, MBS has continued the policies of the former King ʿAbdullah. There is, however, a significant shift. King ʿAbdullah encouraged a climate of limited opening, which included the recognition of religious diversity and the presence of religious minorities. The current ruler, however, has retracted the limited freedom extended to some of those minorities. The various Sufi gatherings, for example, that flourished during the rule of King ʿAbdullah, have been—with very few exceptions—shut down. Such spaces offered alternative religious expressions, which are not available anymore. As a result, the only religious spaces available to the majority of Saudis are state-mosques, which are controlled by Salafis. In other words, while the religious field in Saudi Arabia has been shrinking, Salafi control over the existing field has been consolidated. In the words of Andrew Hammond (2021), Saudi Arabia "is defanging Wahhabism, not dethroning it."

The Saudi government has allowed critical voices like that of al-ʿAwni to emerge, but such voices have remained solitary and isolated. By al-ʿAwni's own admission in conversation with this author, there are individual Saudi scholars who support a reform of Salafism according to the terms he has presented, but this has not turned into a trend or a movement. The religious institutions of learning remain under solid Salafi control, and by several accounts, al-ʿAwni is treated as a pariah in his own university department. While most outside observers are still impressed by the opening of movie theaters, the organizations of rock-concerts and film festivals, and of women driving, less attention has been paid to the continuous appearances of MBS side by side with religious scholars, kissing their heads as a sign of deference. This relationship is crucial to the legitimacy of the ruling family, especially in the eyes of millions of Saudis who attend the country's vast network of mosques. Several accounts on social media show MBS in audience with prominent Wahhabi scholars. This fulfills two important symbolic functions. It assures Salafi audiences that the scholars are privately advising the Crown Prince, fulfilling their obligation of advising the ruler, and that the Prince is seeking the advice of the scholars, fulfilling the ethical obligation of seeking their advice. When advice is offered publicly, those rare transgressors are imprisoned. The establishment scholars have remained the wall of legitimacy against political critique, which in Saudi Arabia is often articulated in religious language. The observation of some scholars about the alleged Sufi tendencies of some members of the Royal Family are for all practical purposes irrelevant (Bano 2018). Members of the Saudi Royal Family might be privately Sufi or non-religious, but they are

politically Wahhabi. Certainly, there is a long history of Saudi taming of Wahhabism, but it still remains a cornerstone of the country's legitimacy (Mouline 2018).

When, in 2018, the Saudi government opened the first movie theaters and allowed women to drive, at the very same time it closed pilgrimage sites that are considered as heretical by Salafis, such in Mount Hira, or it cut off a tree in Taif that was often visited by South Asian pilgrims. Only recently, the Saudi Minister of Religious Affairs reminded global audiences once again of Salafi sectarianism by condemning and labeling as "terrorist" the Tablighi Jama'at, a major Muslim movement. In Friday sermons, the current ruler is portrayed as a defender of Sunnism from the Shi'i threat headed by Iran. Despite the changes in government policy, Saudi Salafi scholars enjoy more social prestige, political access, and financial resources than Muslim scholars anywhere else in the region. By all accounts, they will continue to honor the Saudi-Wahhabi pact, even as the terms of the pact are being changed to their disadvantage.

Judging by these developments, state pressure on Salafism in Saudi Arabia will primarily focus on social aspects of Salafi teaching, while doctrinal aspects will probably receive less attention. It is certainly too early to tell, and yet, Salafi scholars might—as some indications from social media activities suggest—concentrate on waging their battles on purely theological grounds, where they can continue to advance their claims of doctrinal superiority. On the other hand, Saudi Salafi silence regarding state reforms that go against the teachings of Salafism will continue to diminish the global and local reputation of their scholars. Saudi Salafism, therefore, will likely have a lesser role in shaping global Salafism. Even within Saudi Arabia, the truth claims of Salafism will continue to be challenged by scholars such as al-'Awni. If anything, his loud presence is indicative that Saudi Salafism has lost the power to silence religious dissent at will. His theological project offers the potential of a religious discourse that distances itself from aspects of Salafism that have become increasingly embarrassing in the post-ISIS scene. His presence in the Saudi religious field is a clear indication of ongoing Salafi transformation. The distinctive features of that transformation, however, remain to be seen.

6. Conclusions

Post-Salafism in Saudi Arabia refers to a combination of political, social, and religious processes. It reflects government responses to Islamist activism, to societal reactions to Islamism's totalizing pietistic vision, and to the internal critique of key tenets of the Salafi creed, particularly to its salvific exclusivism. The government reforms have resulted in a shrinking of the religious field and a reformulation of the kingdom's political identity in ways that have diminished the role of religion. The government has not denounced Salafism itself or attacked the kingdom's religious establishment. However, the attacks against "extremism" have often included attacks against Salafi-championed social norms, and conceptions of religious practice have created the conditions for a wider public critique of Salafism. The establishment religious scholars have remained silent and have called for continuous support for the government, further diminishing their authority among followers in the kingdom and abroad. On the theological level, internal critics such as al-'Awni have addressed key aspects of Salafi theology, such as the understanding of worship, of monotheism, of innovation, and of 'Allegiance and Rupture'. Additionally, targets of this critique have been legal opinions that in modern times marked the Salafi tendency to disassociate from wider society. This kind of critique has been made possible in the context of government policies described above. However, Salafism remains an important component of Saudi political identity. The aim of the government has been to shape the kind of domesticated Salafism that will support its reform agenda and continue to offer legitimacy. Despite the enormous transformations outlined in this article, Salafism dominates the religious life of the kingdom, even if in a shrinking religious sphere.

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