Saudi Arabia's Raison D'etre: A Challenge to the Authority of the House of Saud

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Niblock, T. *State, Society and Economy in Saudi Arabia.* New York: Routledge, 2015.

Helms, C. M. *The Cohesion of Saudi Arabia.* New York: Routledge, 2015.

In 2015, Routledge, in pursuit of its enduring cause of publishing quality academic works in the humanities and social sciences, reprinted two of its greatest works on Saudi Arabia, both of which first appeared in print in the 1980s. Tim Niblock's *State, Society and Economy in Saudi Arabia* (1982), New York: Routledge, 2015 and Christine Moss Helms' *The Cohesion of Saudi Arabia* (1981) New York: Routledge, 2015 are two excellent examples of scholarship whose contribution to the discipline is undeniable. These two books have appeared in numerous curricula since their publication, and have been cited numerous times in other academic works. The fact that Routledge has decided to reprint these two works, after nearly 35 years, speaks volumes about the quality of these two pieces of scholarship. These two books have been subject to many book reviews since their first publication in the 1980s; therefore, the review undertaken here will not be a traditional review of the content of the texts. The present review instead seeks to follow a thread that problematizes the implications of the way Saudi Arabia as a state came into existence for the idea of Saudi Arabia as a state[1]. As such, the focus of the present review will be on those chapters in both books which better serve this purpose.

Before the emergence of contemporary boundaries in the Arabian Peninsula, this terrain was divided into four distinct regions: Najd[2] also known as Central Arabia, Hijaz[3] also called Western Arabia, Southern Arabia and Eastern Arabia. Najd was home to the initial developments that led to the establishment of Saudi Arabia in 1932. Helms (Chapter 1) in a fascinating historical account of life in Central Arabia, analyzes the highly diverse social environment of this region. Using strong argumentation and ample evidence, Helms convincingly demonstrates how, for centuries, the fluid social context of Central Arabia prevented the establishment of any authority beyond the parochial traditional intra-tribal and inter-tribal hierarchies. Despite this fluidity, Abdul-Aziz's[4] understanding of tribal networks and dynamics, Helms argues, enabled him to effectively use the message of Islam in order to establish his authority across tribal lines. Christine Helms points out some of the novelties in Abdul-Aziz's approach to establishing *Al-Saud* authority, which are especially impressive if considered within a context in which the survival of individuals and groups relied heavily on the careful replication of centuries-old practices of their ancestors. Within such a forbidding context, Helms argues, Abdul-Aziz used a religious narrative to cut across tribal *assabiyah[5]*, in a land where no *sheikh* or *amir[6]* had ever claimed authority on the basis of religion (p.58); he revamped the traditional patterns of authority within and between tribes by eliminating the traditional elements that would put in place and maintain the authority of *sheikhs* over their tribes, and the authority of one tribe over another (p.60); he boastfully claimed the noble pedigree of *Al-Saud* as a basis of his rule (p.60), which was an uncommon practice among *amirs* in Najd, who intentionally sought neutrality from tribal rivalries for effective ruling; and he unapologetically established the hereditary rule (p. 59) of his sons in spite of oppositions both within Najd and the *Al-Saud* family.

The religious narrative upon which Abdul-Aziz justified his authority in Najd, was the Wahhabi[7] *Dawa*[8]. Helms (Chapter 2) and Derek Hopwood (Chapter 2 in Niblock) provide an interesting account of the 18th century revival of essentialist Islam led by Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab[9], who called for a return to the orthodox practices of early Islam. Helms asserts that Abdul-Aziz capitalized on the popular Wahhabi message in order to establish his rule in Arabia, where authority had for centuries been a function of continuously "shifting balances" (to quote from Helm's 1st chapter title). Having realized that only through religion could one overcome the difficulty of controlling a society as segmented as that of the Arabian Peninsula (p.78), Abdul-Aziz, in his quest for authority over tribal and urban leaders in Central Arabia, Helms argues, stressed that the *Al-Saud* would represent "a lawful Islamic government." This assertion resonated with the people of the peninsula. Such a claim was of course substantiated by the alliance of the families of *Al-Saud* and *Al-Wahhab*, dating back to the 1744 meeting of Muhammad Ibn Saud and Muhammad Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab, when Abd Al-Wahhab found protection in Diriya[10], ruled at the time by Muhammad Ibn Saud. In this chapter, Helms masterfully provides the theological/intellectual lineage of Wahhabism but fails to demonstrate how a religious doctrine effectively turned into a successful revivalist movement.

Derek Hopwood, in a chapter containing notable theoretical rigor, comes to the rescue. He proposes a multi-layered theoretical framework for the study of revivalist movements which recommends that any investigator take into consideration the social, political and economic context of such movements, leaders' character and background; the prevailing cultural, intellectual and religious climate of the time; the mechanism through which the movement is started, developed and sustained, and the nature of the message the movement conveys (p.23). Using this framework, Hopwood provides a persuasive account of Abd Al-Wahhab's dissatisfaction with the existing political system in the 18th century. Hopwood builds upon some strong psychological premises to demonstrate the kind of mental and emotional crises Abd Al-Wahhab underwent before emerging as the leader of Wahhabi movement. Hopwood demonstrates how the union of politics and religion went a long way for Abdul-Aziz as within two centuries (from 1744 to the beginning of the 20th century), a majority of the Central Arabia's settled populations had identified themselves as Wahhabis. Abdul-Aziz, benefiting from the two-centuries-old alliance with the Al-Wahhab family and invoking the message of the Wahhabi religious movement, presented his rule not as a secular one but as a divine one that was representative of God and His Divine law. It was this message that permitted him (and later Saudi rulers) to transcend parochial tribal and urban loyalties.

Abdul-Aziz's claim to Islamic leadership required that he abolish some aspects of traditional tribal customary law in order to weaken the position of the tribal sheikhs. Christine Helms (Chapter 4) touches upon one of the most fascinating maneuvers of Abdul-Aziz in this pursuit. Helms explicates Abdul-Aziz's maneuver to revoke *khuwa*[11] and replace it with *zakat*, a compulsory "religious tax," money that could only be collected by the Islamic leader. Beyond being a source of revenue for the burgeoning Kingdom, Helms contends that *zakat* played a more important normative role in reinforcing the legitimacy of Abdul-Aziz's rule on Islamic grounds.

By 1912, Najd was brought under Al-Saud's control. With the beginning of the First World War in 1914, the British began intervening into Western and Central Arabia, the fringes of the Ottoman Empire. The British, through treaties, imposed protectorates on Najd and its rival Hijaz. However, the British gradually leaned towards Al-Saud as their potentially main reliable ally in Arabia, and as a result supported Al-Saud's successful bid over Al-Rashid amirate in 1921, the most formidable enemy of the Al-Saud in Najd. This move was the precursor to the British eventual support of Abd Al-Aziz's procession to Mecca and Jeddah to end the rule of the

Hashemite dynasty in Hijaz. By the Treaty of Jeddah in 1927, the British recognized the independence of Abd Al-Aziz's rule as the Kingdom of Hijaz and Najd. The conquest of Hijaz and later expansion of Saudi rule over Arabia was indebted to the *Ikhwan*'s daunting warfare skills. The *Ikhwan*'s militarist prowess, their mobility and stamina within the constraining features of desert life, and their religious zeal had made such formidable force, loyal to Abd Al-Aziz, feared all over Arabia. Helms (chapter 3) provides an in-depth analysis of *Ikhwan*; its contribution, as Abdul-Aziz's religious militia, to the emergence of Saudi Arabia; its evolution through the time; and its eventual destiny.

Helms's third chapter focuses on the *badu*[12] answer to the Wahhabi *dawa*. In the 20th century, the peninsula's urban areas had come under *Al-Saud*'s single political authority but it was not the case with the *badu*. The author writes that Abdul-Aziz realized that the only way he could bring the *badu* under his rule was through settling them in "agriculturally oriented colonies called *hijra*[13]" (p.130). As the traditionally nomadic *badu* gradually settled, embraced the Islamic message of equality of all men, and recognized Abdul-Aziz as the Imam of a lawful Islamic *Imamate*, they branded themselves the *Ikhwan,* meaning "the brethren," and formed a self-appointed Wahhabi religious militia that ultimately played an important role in helping Abdul-Aziz establish himself as the ruler of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The way Helms writes about this transition and establishes causality among these events that might nominally look unrelated makes this chapter one of the strongest in the book. However, the *Ikhwan,* who had themselves received the basic tenets of Wahhabism through *mutawwiun*[14]*,* sent out to them by Abdul-Aziz, took the Wahhabi message to another level and ultimately became so radical in their practice and *dawa* that after a while, they became critical of Abdul-Aziz for religious laxity. The *Ikhwan* later rebelled against the Al-Saud's rule and its policies in 1929. The rebellion, under the leadership of Sultan bin Bajad Al-Otaibi and Faisal al-Duwaish, was triggered when Abd Al-Aziz curbed the expansionist zeal of the *Ikhwan* into the British protectorates of Transjordan, Iraq and Kuwait. *Ikhwan*'s leaders charged Abd Al-Aziz for "dealings with infidels." Helms (Chapter 8) documents the 1929 *Ikhwan'*s rebellion and their ultimate defeat in the Battle of Sibila, where Saudi forces, with the help of the British, crushed the *Ikhwan* mercilessly in 1930. This victory paved the way for Abd Al-Aziz to continue Saudi conquest of the peninsula.

One of the key factors in Abdul-Aziz's success was his understanding of the role that foreign powers could play in support or against his bid for authority over Arabia. Peter Sluglett and Marion Farouk-Sluglett (Chapter 3 in Niblock) demonstrate the role of Britain in the establishment of the Kingdom of Hijaz and Najd, a dual monarchy ruled by Abdul-Aziz following his victory over the Hashemite Kingdom of Hijaz in 1925. The two kingdoms unified as Saudi Arabia in 1932. The authors contextualize the important role that Britain played in consolidating Abdul-Aziz's rule in early years of the kingdom by illustrating many of the difficulties that he faced in those crucial years. Drawing upon extensive research and well-substantiated arguments, the authors argue that Abdul-Aziz had to resolve four major issues impeding the consolidation of his power: (1) recalcitrant *Ikhwan*, (2) inhabitants of Hijaz who would not easily surrender to an authority from Najd, (3) the financial difficulties of the kingdom, and (4) international recognition for his rule and the newly formed state. The authors successfully establish how a rapport with Britain resolved all these issues, securing Abdul-Aziz's authority, credibility and power. The authors further claim that such a rapport with Saudi Arabia was beneficial also to Britain, as a strong ruler in Hijaz and Najd could bring peace to Central Arabia and stability to the regions bordering the British protectorates[15].

The Cohesion of Saudi Arabia by Christine Moss Helms and *State, Society and Economy in Saudi Arabia* by Tim Niblock are two great pieces of scholarship that, if read together, offer valuable insights on the foundational difficulties in the political and social structure of Saudi Arabia with crucial impacts on the country's (in)security. As documented extensively in both books, the natural impositions of Arabia's geography, for centuries, forced the inhabitants of the region to structure their social life in a way that was not hospitable to the formation of any central authority. In an environment where man had to be on a constant move for his survival, and where tribal structure and traditional customary values would preclude the formation of allegiance to any other source of authority, the natural course of events would likely not have culminated in the emergence of any state, in a bottom-up process as it did, for example, in Japan.

The establishment of Saudi Arabia is indebted to the brilliance and talent of a political entrepreneur, Abdul-Aziz. Abdul-Aziz realized the imperative of the top-down process of forming a "state-nation" (Buzan, 2009. p.76), in which the state fosters an encompassing identity that individuals and groups can identify with beyond other allegiances. Abdul-Aziz used the powerful message of Islam to construct a new reality for *arab* and *hadar*[16] of mixed tribal populations, a reality that would supersede customary tribal laws and values.

This brief historical account on the formation of the modern Saudi state demonstrates that the idea of Saudi state cannot yet be strong. The concept of nation in Saudi Arabia is underdeveloped to the extent that the real meaning of being a 'Saudi national' is still subject to public debate. The weakness in the idea of the state in Saudi Arabia might be due to the fact that Saudi Arabia as a modern state has been around for slightly more than eighty years. Identification with the higher sources of identity by individuals and groups does not happen instantaneously, rather it takes quite a long time for groups forming a community to go through identical historical experiences that would bound them through the creation of the same actual or mythical narratives. These narratives get passed on to next generations who would help, on their parts, strengthen the national imagining.

The full anchorage of the idea of Saudi state has also been hindered by the structural realities of life in Arabia. The existence of strong social forces such as tribal, regional, familial and sectarian ties which never fully and willingly succumbed to the Saudi idea of social and political order is a direct challenge to the state's sovereignty within its territory. These are absolutely strong sources of identity that have to be reckoned with. When Saudis refer to the region they are from, or their tribal affiliation, they make a fully-loaded statement of their class and social standing. Looking at Hijaz, the other regional pole of the Saudi state other than Najd, reveals how the "population has never fully accommodated to Saudi and Wahhabi rule," (Riedel, 2011). The cosmopolitan people of the Hijaz look to the Red Sea, Egypt, and Syria for cultural sustenance, not to the desert of Najd with its strict Wahhabi ideology (Yamani, 2009). In Asir, on the border with Yemen, Wahhabism is accepted only sporadically and reluctantly and the region has maintained its distinct traditions (Yamani, 2009). In most regions other than Najd, the Saudi rule is perceived as an imposed concoction of Najdi rule with a distinctly myopic reading of religion (al-Rasheed, 2004. p. 195).

The idea of Saudi state, as mentioned above, is at constant competition with the tribes which are traditionally a reliable sources of identity, and often than not, have delivered their promises. The tribal sentiments characterized by *assabiyah,* even in its diluted form, "corrode the foundation of urban citizenship" (Turner, 2009) by resisting the eradication of traditional solidarities and intermediary linkages in favor of identification with and loyalty to the abstract of the state, which seems to require, more than anything, in Arab societies, a leap of faith.

On the ideational grounds, one has to look at the "organizing ideology" (Buzan, p.80) of the Saudi state which happens to be the state's *raison d'etre*. Once the idea of the state (its *raison d'etre*) is not self-referential and relies on an imposed ideology, this can turn into a host of threats to the survival of the state. Al-Saud's rule over the peninsula, began and was sustained over the years solely based on its heavy reliance on the message of Islam, particularly according to Wahhabi teachings, and the legitimacy this ideology gives to a political authority that conforms to the Divine Law and seeks to protect the Islamic *umma*[17] from disruptive forces and civil disturbance. The exclusionary nature of such strict reading alienates non-Wahhabi Muslims, and even those Wahhabis whose adherence to Wahhabism is not considered "up to par." Al-Saud family has learned from the turbulent years of the 1920s and 1930s that any retreat from their position could be highly detrimental to their rule. *Ikhwan*'s challenge to the Saudi rule in the late 1920s, the seizure of the Mecca Grand Mosque by *Juhayman Al-Oteibi*[18] in 1979, the political activities of *Safar Al-Hawali*[19] as a part of *Al-Sahwa Al-Islamiyah* movement[20], and Al-Qaeda's accusation of the Saudi ruling family are among the incidents that can be seen from this prism. In other words, Saudi rulers always face the highly destabilizing threat that the idea of the state, regardless of its deficiencies, could be appropriated by a group claiming to profess the idea better than the state does.

The weakness of the idea of Saudi state means that Saudi leaders need to continually work to reproduce the state's sovereignty and authority within its recognized domestic borders. The fact that the state has to constantly struggle for the loyalty of its citizens connotes a lack of "cultural sensitivity of sovereignty" (Giddens 1985, p.219) among Saudi nationals. This is a point of concern for Saudi officials. As Juergensmeyer puts, "attachment to the spirit of social order" is inseparable from submitting to an "ordering agent." (2011, 195) Juergensmeyer argues that the degree of submission to the social order and the ordering agent correlates with political stability.

Saudis' traditional way of dealing with the challenges to political stability has been through coopting tribes and receiving their loyalty to the King. The rapid modernization of the oil era enabled the Saudi regime to pursue this policy quite effectively as it could incorporate tribes into the political system and rent distribution networks through informal patron-client linkages. To be fair, national Saudi identity grew over the years as the result of this policy, but not on a solid and sustainable basis. Saudi nationalistic sentiments are, for the most part, a fragile function of the state's ability to handle economic crises, and provide employment, basic services and other public goods. There is no primordial, nor self-referential attachment to the state that would be on a par with the appeal and attraction of other social centrifugal forces. In other words, the attachment does not go beyond the contractual level of interaction between the state and society.

This essay concludes with a memorable line found in Buchan's article in Niblock: "Formed out of *force main* and religious convictions in a forbidding land, ordered by divine law and a highly developed sense of shame, and governed by hereditary rulers strongly attached to a single of its regions, Saudi Arabia is constantly described as ripe for change" (p.106).

Notes

[1] Barry Buzan in *People, State and Fear* (2008) proposes that any state is composed of three components: the idea of the state, the physical base of the state and the institutional expression of the state. The idea of the state, Buzan argues, is what binds a nation to an abstract entity called the state. Buzan believes that the state viability is a function of the strength of the idea of the state and how widely it is held.

[2] Najd is the geographical central region of Saudi Arabia. Riyadh (the country's capital) is located in this region.

[3] Hijaz is geographically in the west of Saudi Arabia bordering the Red Sea on the west and Jordan on the north. Jeddah and the holy cities of Mecca and Medina are located in this region.

[4] Abdul-Aziz (1875-1953), usually known in the West as Ibn Saud, was the founder and first monarch of Saudi Arabia.

[5] Ibn Khaldun, the 14th century historiographer, in his *Muqaddimeh*, popularized the term. *Assabiyah*, with a negative connotation, refers to excessive group solidarity and cohesion in the context of tribalism.

[6] In Central Arabia, the *badu* (the plural form for bedouin which refers to nomadic pastoralists of the desert) chiefs were addressed by the title sheikh, but the urban leaders and *badu* sheikhs who had managed to gain control of the settled areas were known as *amirs*.

[7] Wahhabism is an ultraconservative religious movement of Sunni Islam, named after the 18th century preacher and scholar *Muhammad Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab*

[8] *Dawa*, literally means inviting, and in the religious context refers to proselytizing and preaching

[9] *Muhammad Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab* (1703- 1792) was trained from an early age in Islamic texts, and later he received further instructions in Hijaz, Basra and Al-Ahsa. Through his travels, *Abd Al-Wahhab* got struck by the distortions Islam had undergone and the decadence of people's faith. He decided to revive the true essence of Islam, according to his own reading, by returning to the original principles of Islam, purified from innovations.

[10] *Diriya* is a town located on the north-western outskirts of Saudi capital, Riyadh. This town was the original home of the Saudi royal family.

[11] *Khuwa* was the tax levied by a stronger tribe on a client tribe in exchange for military protection

[12] *Badu* is the plural form for bedouin which refers to nomadic pastoralists of the desert

[13] *Hijra*, literally, means emigration or departure, but in Wahhabi religious texts it means a departure from a sinful past to submit to Islam and God's divine law in all aspects of life. Those oases that the *badu* settled in were called *hijra* because they symbolized the *badu*'s abandonment of nomadic life in favor of membership in the Islamic brotherhood.

[14] *Muttawwiun*, literally meaning those who obey or volunteer, were the most intolerant of all Wahhabis. They served as the only authorities in direct contact with *hijras*, assigned to teach the *badu* the basic tenets of Wahhabi doctrine. They were also responsible for the collection of *Zakat*.

[15] Iraq, Kuwait and Transjordan were British protectorates in the region after the First World War.

[16] The inhabitants of Central Arabia, regardless of their tribal origin, fell into two categories of *arab* and *hadar*. The former groups lived in movable tents, but the latter were permanently settled.

[17] This term is usually used to refer to the collective community of Islamic peoples

[18] *Juhayman ibn Muhammad ibn Sayf al-Otaybi* (1936-1980) was a religious activist and militant who protested against the Saudi monarchy because, he believed, the House of Saud had lost its legitimacy through corruption and imitation of the West

[19] *Safar al-Hawali* was one of the leaders of The Committee for the Defense of Legitimate Rights (CDLR) that was a Saudi dissident group created in 1993 and was the first ever opposition organization in the Kingdom openly challenging the monarchy, accusing the government and senior *ulama* (religious leaders) of not doing enough to protect the legitimate Islamic rights of the Muslims

[20] *Sahwa* movement is a call for a greater role for clergy in governing, curbs on the royal family's privileges, greater transparency for public funds, and a more Islamic-conservative society as a defense against Western cultural influences

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