

MERIA

TO PERPETUATE THEIR DICTATORSHIPS, ARAB RULERS RESORT TO THE ISLAMIC CREED

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The compatibility between Islam and democracy has been a controversial topic. While empirical studies since 2000¹ confirm the prevailing notion that Muslim majority states offer fewer political rights than non-Muslim countries, the question as to why such a phenomenon exists remains unsatisfactorily answered. One key element is how the interpretation of Islam itself has been so effectively used by Arab regimes to indoctrinate subjects into believing that blind obedience to their absolute rule is a form of Islamic piety. This article will also argue that Islam, combined with the security forces and the poverty of the masses render the majority of Arabs politically quietist.

KORANIC INSPIRATION FOR THE MODERATE, ISLAMIST, AND JIHADIST

The Koran often provides Muslims with contradictory inspirations on subjects of political or social relevance. On Muslim relations with Christians and Jews, for example, a moderate Muslim would focus on peaceful and tolerant verses such as 29:46: “Do not argue with the People of the Book [Christians and Jews] unless in a fair way.” Similar injunctions are found in, among others, 2:62, 2:136, 2:256, and the second part of 5:82, though the first part of the passage is more belligerent. A moderate would point out that Islam reveres Christian and Jewish prophets and messengers and that the Koran dedicates Chapter 14 with its 52 verses to Abraham and Chapter 12 with its 111 verses to Joseph. To Mary, the mother of Jesus, the Koran dedicates Chapter 19 with its 98 verses. The Koran refers to Islam in 2:135 as the “Religion of Abraham.”

At the same time, Islamists also find support for their arguments in the Koran, choosing intolerant verses, such as 5:78: “Curses were pronounced on those among the children of Israel who rejected faith, by the tongue of David and of Jesus....” Intolerance is also found in, for example, 2:65, 2:120,

5:51, 5:60, and the first part of 5:82. In addition, some key writings support rebellion against the ruler, though these clearly are not emphasized by the regimes if the government is not or is insufficiently pious. Even more verses mandate fighting non-Muslims. In 2:191, 2:193, 8:60, 9:5, and 9:29, violence against non-Muslims is ordered. In 9:29: “Fight those who believe not in God nor the Last Day, nor hold that forbidden which has been forbidden by God and his Messenger, nor acknowledge the religion of truth, even if they are of the People of the Book, until they pay the protective tax (*jizya*) with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued.”

A key to the Islamist and jihadist positions is the justification for rebellion in principal Islamic texts, such as: “Whoever of you sees an evil action, let him change it with his hand; and if he is not able to do so, then with his tongue; and if he is not able to do so, then with his heart.”²

Violent verses, combined with verses exalting the eternal bliss awaiting the martyrs in paradise, like 2:82, 18:31, 44:52, 44:53, 44:54, and 61:12, inspire suicide bombers and those who indoctrinate them. The combination of the Islamist, jihadist, and martyr-inducing enables charismatic Islamist politicians to claim the high religious ground, accuse others

of heresy, and energize their followers to commit acts of violence.

Since September 11, 2001, Muslim clerics, scholars, and state officials have invested considerable resources in polishing Islam's image in the West, including *fatwas* (religious edicts)³ and condemnations⁴ against the destruction of innocent lives, letters to Pope Benedict XVI and other Christian leaders urging greater understanding between Islam and Christianity,⁵ as well as conferences to condemn terrorism⁶ and promote dialogue on religion and culture.⁷ Such events, however, will remain apologists' public relations efforts until research into the historicity of the Koran and the *Sunna* (body of Islamic law) is allowed freely in Muslim--particularly Arab--countries and the intolerant and violent verses are pacified.

Most important, is the battle over how to interpret Islam and its texts. While Islamists versus nationalists or conservative traditionalists compose one element in this struggle, the dice are loaded against moderates and reformers, since regimes oppose them as much as they do the Islamists.

The problem is that almost all Arab kings or presidents benefit from a dominant interpretation of Islam commanding Muslims to obey the Muslim ruler blindly, just as Islamists profit from interpretations that are easily used to justify their ideas and actions.

THE USE OF ISLAM IN SUSTAINING INCUMBENT REGIMES AND THE SOCIAL STATUS QUO

In 4:59, the Koran orders: "Obey God and obey God's messenger and obey those of authority among you." This verse contributes to the culture of obedience to hierarchical authority in Arab societies--the male over the female, the father over the wife (or wives) and children, the teacher over the student, the employer over the employee, the ruler over the ruled, the *ulama* (religious scholars) over the faithful, and so forth, with every authoritarian party in each group augmenting the influence of the others.

Sunna traditions amplify the Koran. The answer as to how a Muslim should react to a ruler who does not follow the true guidance that Muhammad is reported to have said, according to *Sahih Muslim*, the *hadith* (sayings or deeds of Muhammad) collection of Muslim Bin al-Hajjaj (d. 875): "He who obeys me obeys God; he who disobeys me, disobeys God. He who obeys the ruler, obeys me; he who disobeys the ruler, disobeys me."⁸ Such wording or its equivalent occurs two dozen times in *Sahih Muslim*. The *hadith* collections of Abi Da'ud (d. 888) and Ibn Maja (d. 886) quote Muhammad as imploring Muslims to hear and obey their Muslim ruler, even if he were an Ethiopian slave.⁹ Al-Bukhari (d. 870) quotes similar wording.¹⁰

It should be noted that in the medieval battle between more liberal and more restrictive theologians, the fact that the latter tended to support obedience to existing regimes gave the rulers a strong incentive to support the more "hardline" interpreters who gained the victory. The consequences for these societies were devastating, blocking their progress and ensuring they underwent no equivalent of the Western Enlightenment, which succeeded due to the fact that the battle there ended with the victory of the more liberal theologians.

Though today used by Islamists seeking to overthrow the incumbent government, at the time, the victorious strict-constructionists greatly benefited the rulers. For example, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058-1111) taught that any ruler was better than chaos, no matter what the origin of his power.¹¹ Badr al-Din Bin Jama'a (1241-1333) promoted the view that the ruler is the shadow of God on the Earth; that he can either be chosen or can impose himself by his own power, and in either case, he must be obeyed; that if he is deposed by another, the other must equally be obeyed; and that "we are with whoever conquers".¹²

Taki al-Din Bin Taymiyya (1263-1328) believed that the essence of government was the power of coercion and that the ruler could demand obedience from his subjects, for even

an unjust ruler was better than strife and dissolution of society.¹³

Notwithstanding that the opinions of these scholars were a product of the political turmoil of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Arab rulers today invoke these opinions all the same. Ironically, Islamists favor the same theologians but stress that obedience is due only to a properly pious government, that is, an Islamist rather than a traditionalist or nationalist one.

The Arab peoples' embrace of Islam is tight. Arabs feel that they are the guardians of an Arabic religion. The Koran describes the Arabs as the "best race evolved to mankind" (3:110). Muhammad, his Companions, the Koran, and the Muslim holy places are located in Arabic-speaking areas. Political frustrations at home and from abroad since the mid-twentieth century have also drawn most Arabs closer to Islam.

Finally, the belief in predestination, a core belief in the Islamic creed, attributes all good and bad to the will of God. Bad rulers are accepted as if they were ordained by God's will.

Given Islam's continuing power and popular enthusiasm for it, Arab kings and presidents would want to nurture the Islamic fabric of their societies, build a psychological defense against rebellion, and declare Western democracy as alien to Islamic teaching.¹⁴ In recent years, they have had to deal with the danger posed by the fact that this strategy could strengthen their Islamist rivals, but this has brought only minor adjustments to the overall approach of exalting Islam as a basis for these societies and as a perceived source of political stability.

Consequently, Islam is enshrined as the religion of the state in the constitution of every Arab kingdom and republic. The sole exceptions are Djibouti, which is silent on state religion, and Syria, which makes Islam the religion of the president, though it has generally promoted Islamic piety, especially since just after 2000. In Saudi Arabia, the Koran and the Sunna are the constitution. In other Arab countries, Islam is either a major or the main source of legislation.

Up until around the 1980s, when it became a tool of Islamist opposition movements, Islam--along with internal security forces, privileges for selected groups, poverty, illiteracy, and ill health of the masses--rendered the majority of the Arab people politically quietist. This explains why, for example, no regime has been overthrown in any Arab state since 1970 except for those in Sudan and Yemen.

In contrast, the Iranian monarchy, Yugoslavia, and the Soviet Union collapsed, while many other countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America have seen coups, revolutions, the peaceful transfer of power, or more than one of these types of change.

When the presidents of Egypt and Yemen allowed contested presidential elections on September 7, 2005, and September 20, 2006, respectively, the former incumbent gained a fifth term with 88.6 percent of the votes cast--hardly different from his four previous referendums--and the latter won a 77.2 percent majority after 28 years of absolute rule. Even if the regimes had falsified a big proportion of the election ballots, there was still impressive support for the incumbents, as well as no upheaval when the results were announced.

Again, in contrast, in Islamist Iran, when the 2009 election results were manipulated by the regime, massive unrest resulted, a factor showing that Islam alone is not responsible for political passivity, or at least that when traditionalist Islamic interpretations are disrupted and the religion politicised, a very different situation can arise.

The above is not intended to imply, however, that Arabic-speaking states are free of domestic opponents. Small liberal-minded and large Islamist groups are present in every country. One reason why the Islamists are many times more successful than the liberals is that they use their interpretation of Islam--which in many ways is not so different from the regime version--to build a large base of support.

The Role of the Ulama in Sustaining Arab Rule

To fortify their rule, Arab monarchs and presidents turn to their client ulama for help. In mosque sermons, on television and radio programs, in classrooms, newspapers, magazines, and the internet, the palace ulama threaten Muslims with God's wrath if they fail to obey their Muslim ruler (*waliy al-amr*). In return, the ulama enjoy rewarding careers. How has the ulama class become so prominent in Muslim life? A brief account of the development of the Sunna and the important role it plays in Muslims' daily life are helpful in understanding this.

Around 900, two centuries after Muhammad's death, the ulama laid down the foundation that helped them control Muslim life. They succeeded in enshrining the Sunna as a source of law equal to the Koran, although the Koran never made the Sunna a source of law--since the Koran was said to contain everything mankind needs to know (6:38, 16:89). The argument that Muhammad's actions and words reflected the general provisions of the Koran and that the Sunna gave guidance in matters on which the Koran was silent helped this development.¹⁵ Equating the Sunna with the Koran made Islam's founder, "The divinely certified exemplar, whose practice itself had a revelatory status."¹⁶

That he had reportedly said, "the learned are the heirs of the prophets,"¹⁷ enabled the ulama class to become the providers of guidance on the details of the proper way of daily life. Equating the Sunna with the Koran also expanded the narrow coverage of Koranic law--of the 6,236 verses in the Koran, "no more than approximately eighty verses deal with legal topics in the strictest sense of the term."¹⁸

As teachers, preachers, muftis, judges, and court officials, the ulama became the guides on all matters from personal hygiene, diet, and healthy living to good manners, family affairs, and rituals. This development wrapped Islamic law and dogma tightly around the body of Muslims, handing wealth, political influence, social standing, and lucrative careers to the ulama class.

Following the Mongols' destruction of Baghdad in 1258, the ulama of the Ottoman Empire (1280-1918) took over. After the First World War, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk (1881-1938) blamed Islam's rigidity during the age of European Reformation, Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution for the demise of the Turkish Empire. The Ottoman ulama objected to modernization. They cited such sayings from Muhammad as, "Beware of innovation, for every innovation is heresy, and every heresy leads to the wrong path,"¹⁹ and "The most evil of all matters are those that get modernized."²⁰ It is noteworthy that the introduction of the printing press, for example, into the life of the Ottomans was delayed for three centuries after its invention in Europe.

While the Turks blamed Islam for their decline, the Arab ulama proclaimed that Islam would be their path to greatness. As the Turks were busy separating Islam from their state, the Muslim Brotherhood organization was founded in Egypt (1928) and Wahhabism declared as the way of life in Saudi Arabia (1932).

The ulama today guard their status zealously. Muslims are constantly threatened with God's damnation if they fail to seek and heed their guidance. Religious advice sections abound in newspapers, magazines, Islamic internet sites, television, and radio; they cover such issues as whether or not it is permissible to have a tattoo, color one's hair, for a woman to thin or darken her eyebrows, wear a silk tie or a silk garment, wear a gold ring, how to greet a guest, what to say to a person who sneezes, what to eat, how to eat, etc.

Arab Rulers' Use of Islam

Egypt, Syria, and Saudi Arabia will be examined as follows as case studies of how Arab rulers use Islam in order to perpetuate their absolute rule. The republics--except Lebanon--generally reflect the Egyptian and Syrian models, whereas monarchies generally reflect the Saudi model.

The contrasts between the state agendas of Arab republics and monarchies are profound. The monarchs generally claim divine right to

rule (some add tribal rights and descent from Muhammad's line as well). The presidents generally adopt Arab nationalism and socialism and propagate an image of modernity. However, the presidents are also keen to project an image of Islamic piety in order to take advantage of the Islamic injunction to obey the Muslim ruler.

Egypt

Article 2 of the 1971 constitution,²¹ as amended in 1980, 2005, and 2007, makes Islam the religion of the Egyptian state. Article 2, makes Shari'a laws the principal source of legislation. In the 1980 amendment, Shari'a became the principal source of legislation in Egypt for the first time since the country's first modern constitution was promulgated in 1923. Accordingly, no law in Egypt may be enacted if it contravenes Shari'a rules. At the same time, Article 5 of the constitution prohibits the formation of religious political parties. Religion must remain the political monopoly of the regime.

The contradiction between Articles 2 and 5 keeps the Muslim Brotherhood organization under control. The Brotherhood proclaims Islam as its "creed and state, book and sword, and a way of life."²² The Brotherhood's theme is "Allah is our objective. The messenger is our leader. Koran is our law. Jihad is our way. Dying in the way of Allah is our highest hope."²³ While Article 5 denies the Brotherhood the right to become a legitimate political party--thus precluding it from openly fielding candidates in Egyptian elections--Article 2 allows the Mubarak government to claim the high Islamic ground.

Cairo is home to the al-Azhar Mosque and al-Azhar University. Founded in 970 by the Fatimids, al-Azhar is the oldest and most famous Sunni learning institution. Al-Azhar helps cement Egypt's Islamic identity. Al-Azhar has grown in recent decades from strength to strength. Under the three supposedly "modern" military presidents since the 1953 revolution--Nasser, Sadat, and Mubarak--al-Azhar has grown from three colleges in 1950 to 72 today.²⁴ Together with

the 115-year-old Fatwa Council for Islamic Interpretations of Laws in Islam and the Ministry of Religious Affairs, al-Azhar Mosque and University constitute Egypt's official Islamic establishment. The leaderships of the Fatwa Council and al-Azhar are government appointees. The Ministry of Religious Affairs controls the mosques and supervises their staff. If a cleric deviates from the official line, the ministry and the security forces ensure that he does not repeat the mistake.

The government's Islamic credentials are also bolstered by personal status laws based on Shari'a law. Seventh century Shari'a law, as it has been almost always interpreted, is the antithesis of the liberal laws of the modern age. It denies women their basic human rights and reduces their status to that of chattel. A Muslim man can marry four wives, divorce any one of them without giving reason, and two women equal one man in inheritance, legal testimony, or as witnesses.

The general increase in Islamic observance is demonstrated by the fact that the office of the Grand Mufti of Egypt, head of the Fatwa Council for Islamic Interpretations of Laws in Islam,²⁵ has experienced a great increase in demand for fatwas, to 5,000 *per* week. President Mubarak's regime, though it opposes Islamist rivals, is keen to observe Islamic rituals as a way of building popular support and keeping the tool of religion in its own hands. Religious events are celebrated as national holidays, and Ramadan customs are officially enforced. More mosques, greater numbers of worshippers, more bearded men, and more heavily veiled women than ever before have become common sights in Egypt.

The government's Islamic credentials are also seen in the educational curriculum.²⁶ So widespread the wearing of the *niqab* (veil covering all but the eyes) has grown, that on October 8, 2009, Cairo University was reported to have put into effect a Ministry of Higher Education directive to ban *niqab* students from dormitories.²⁷ A few days earlier, Shaykh Muhammad Tantawi, head of al-Azhar University, caused an uproar after he reportedly made a schoolgirl remove her *niqab*

during a tour of an al-Azhar affiliated school for girls, insisting that the niqab was a tradition and had nothing to do with Islam.²⁸

The effect of Egypt's Islamic agenda may be evidenced from the results of an international survey conducted by Gallup International for the BBC World Service program in September 2005, *Who Runs Your World*. The survey found that in Egypt 87 percent of Muslims considered their religion their most important defining characteristic, giving Egypt the most robust religious identity of any of the 68 countries surveyed.²⁹

On public issues, Egyptian ulama have issued a bewildering array of fatwas. In October 2008, the Fatwa Council for Islamic Interpretations of Laws in Islam ruled: "The Will of a deceased Muslim towards building a Church is a sin against God, just as if the deceased left his inheritance towards building a nightclub, a gambling casino, or building a barn for rearing pigs, cats or dogs."³⁰

In May 2007, al-Azhar's dean of the Hadith Faculty relied on certain hadiths, presumably those reported in *Sahih Muslim* and *Sunan Abi Da'ud*, to opine that as a way to avoid breaking the rule that forbids the genders from being alone together, a woman may breastfeed her male coworker a total of five times. In Islamic tradition, breast-feeding of a woman's non-biological child establishes a maternal relation that allows the woman to show her face and hair in the presence of the child when he reaches adulthood.³¹

In February 2007, following a five-minute session, a court sentenced an internet blogger, Abd al-Karim Suliman, to four years in prison: three years for allegedly insulting Islam compared to just one year for calling President Mubarak a dictator.³²

In January 2006, a former dean of the Shari'a Faculty at al-Azhar, issued a fatwa declaring that being completely naked during the act of coitus annuls the marriage.³³

In 1993, Islamist lawyers asked the courts to rule that Cairo University professor Nasr Abu Zayd was an apostate because of his interpretations of the Koran, and he should thus be forced to divorce his Muslim wife. In August 1995, Egypt's highest court of appeal

found that he should be forced to divorce his wife. The couple fled Egypt.³⁴

Thus, the government, courts, and other institutions enforce what are perceived as Islamic norms. This fulfills two functions: The government becomes the source of proper Islam, while Islam reinforces the regime's authority.

Saudi Arabia

Restoring Islam to its "true" tenets was the battle cry of the 1805 and 1902 rebellions by the alliance of the al-Saud and Abd al-Wahhab clans against their Ottoman Hanafite Muslim rulers. "True" Islam meant making Arabia's way of life more austere, more rigid, and more extreme, in line with the teaching of Ahmad Bin Hanbal (d. 855), founder of the Hanbalite School of Sunni jurisprudence.

For example, to accord with the Islamic belief in monotheism, tombs in Wahhabi graveyards must be unmarked so that no tomb can become a shrine. Similarly, mosques must be made austere and human representation in statues and paintings banned. Theaters and movies are distraction from the worship of Allah and must not exist.

Combining "true" Islam with the sword (plus British assistance) created in 1932 the kingdom that bears the al-Saud family name, notwithstanding the Koran's critical view of monarchies (27:34). The al-Saud claim to legitimacy does not derive from belonging to Muhammad's family or tribe; rather, from the opinions of scholars like Ibn Taymiyya (see above) who advocated the view that seizing power by force was sufficient to legitimize the authority of the Islamic ruler.

To maintain the al-Saud legitimacy, the palace ulama indoctrinate the populace with the belief that religion is the only source of life's true happiness, that Islam is the perfect religion, that Wahhabism is the "true" Islam, and that the al-Sauds are the most pious and devoted promoters of Wahhabism at home and abroad. The location of Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia is helpful here.

The partnership between Saudi politicians and the Wahhabi palace ulama is one of

convenience. In this partnership, the men of God are the junior partners--the royal family controls the country's resources and the armed forces. In 1928, Abd al-Aziz al-Saud obtained a fatwa from his palace ulama before destroying his loyal shock troops, the Ikhwan who greatly helped establish his realm.

In 1964, when 72 princes decided to depose King Saud in favor of his brother Faysal, 12 clerics were on hand to add their approval. In 1992 when several senior Wahhabi clerics issued a public letter criticizing King Fahd for failing to understand that the ulama had a religious duty to advise all Muslims--including the royals--of their duty to abide by God's principles, they were summarily dismissed from their official duties. When Crown Prince Abdallah, now King Abdallah, warned clerics to tone down their sermons shortly after the September 11, 2001 attacks, the minister for Islamic affairs proclaimed publicly, "Our duty to our guardians is to listen and obey properly within the limits forced upon us by God."³⁵ In October 2009, King Abdallah was reported to have removed a senior shaykh, Sa'ad al-Shithri, from his position as one of the 20 members of the Council of Senior Ulama. The decision was made after al-Shithri objected to mixed education at the recently inaugurated King Abdullah University of Science and Technology--one of the king's showcase projects--and demanded a Shari'a committee to vet the curriculum to prevent the teaching of "alien" ideologies such as evolution.³⁶

The king tailors Islam to suit the political maneuvering of the moment. In 1992, on appointing his Advisory Consultative Council, King Fahd asserted, "Elections do not fall within the sphere of the Muslim religion."³⁷ However, on October 13, 2003, a cabinet meeting chaired by King Fahd decided that municipal elections were Islamic.³⁸ In early 2005, municipal elections were held, but half of the 178 councilors were government appointees. Women were barred from running for office and from voting. When the councils were finally announced in December 2005, the government announced that the councils would have largely advisory roles on local affairs.³⁹

At the center of the Wahhabi religious establishment is the Council of Senior Ulama, headed by the grand mufti. The king appoints the grand mufti, along with the other 20 members of the council. The appointment is for four years, renewable at the king's discretion. In 1971, King Faysal created the Council of Senior Ulama. This council serves as a forum for regular consultation between the king and the religious establishment. Saudi kings have met weekly with members of the Council of Senior Ulama, to media fanfare.

Affiliated with the Council of Senior Ulama is the Permanent Committee for Research and Fatwa. The eight members of this committee are appointed by the king and are drawn from the membership of the Council of Senior Ulama. Two ministries share the responsibility of managing Islamic affairs: The Ministry for Islamic Affairs, Endowment, Daw'a (proselytizing), and Guidance, and the Ministry of Pilgrimage. Other ministries spread the Wahhabi message as well: The Ministry of Education determines the religious curriculum and the Ministry of Information manages religious programming in the media.

In day-to-day life, the religious police take center stage. The organization is as old as the Saudi state, responsible for the enforcement of Wahhabi morals. King Khalid (1975-1982) reorganized this police force as an independent agency. Its director general is a minister in the Saudi cabinet. The religious police have grown in size over time. In 2003, there were 3,400 field officers and 461 police stations.⁴⁰ By mid-2007, the number of field officers became 4,000.⁴¹ The annual cost of this force may be estimated at \$1 billion dollars, or more.

The Wahhabi way of life manifests itself in an educational curriculum⁴² focused on acclaiming the virtues of Wahhabism, denigrating other religions and Islamic sects, and on jihad.⁴³ Its justice system is in accordance to the Shari'a, and its financial system bans the taking or giving of interest--though all banks recognize the time value of money and substitute the word "commission" for "interest." While the country has more than 85,000 mosques⁴⁴--a mosque for every

300 people-- Shi'i mosques are almost impossible to build and Christian and other non-Muslim worshippers risk arrest, imprisonment, lashing, deportation, and sometimes torture for engaging in overt religious activity that attracts official attention.⁴⁵

Fusing blind obedience to the al-Saud with Islam minimizes political dissent. Male opponents are charged with deviation from "true" Islam, even apostasy--serious charges that could lead to death. As for women's opposition, the regime has devised a clever strategy to nullify the potential threat of one-half of the society. In addition to Shari'a's denial of women's basic human rights, the "male guardian" system keeps Saudi women under the direct control and responsibility of a father, husband, or brother.⁴⁶

The guardian must authorize the woman's marriage, travel, business activities, and even medical treatment. The tragedy that struck a girls' school in Mecca on March 11, 2002 encapsulates Saudi women standing in Wahhabi society: Fourteen girls died and dozens were injured in a fire at their school.⁴⁷ The religious police prevented the girls from escaping because they were not draped in the black head-to-toe covering. The police also prevented the male rescuers from entering the school because it would have violated the rule of segregation of the sexes.

Such conduct is not surprising given a Wahhabi national discourse dominated by fatwas, opinions, rhetoric, and court actions like the following.

On March 14, 2008, Shaykh Abdul-Rahman al-Barrak, a leading Saudi cleric, issued a fatwa that two Saudi writers should be tried for apostasy for their "heretical articles" and put to death if they did not repent. Barrak was responding to articles in al-Riyadh newspaper that questioned the Sunni Muslim view in Saudi Arabia that Christians and Jews should be considered unbelievers.⁴⁸ In November, 2006, the imam of Islam's holiest mosque in Mecca, Dr. A.R. al-Sudais, preached that the drought that hit Saudi Arabia in the winter of 2006 was caused by the proliferation of sin--specifically, dealing in

usury, bribery, lying, dishonesty, and violating God's rules.⁴⁹ In November 2005, a Saudi court sentenced a teacher, Mohammed al-Harbi, to be whipped and imprisoned for 40 months for promoting "dubious ideologies" and "preventing students from going to wash for prayer."⁵⁰

In addition, Wahhabi indoctrination extends to the estimated 70-80 million expatriate workers who had worked in Saudi Arabia during the past 35 years or continue to work there today. Since the mid-1980s, Wahhabi clerics have spent an estimated \$75 billion⁵¹ proselytizing and radicalizing clerics, preachers, and foot soldiers from Egypt, Lebanon, Gaza, and Somalia to Afghanistan, Indonesia, and Pakistan. The Wahhabi message is also heard worldwide through Saudi-owned or controlled satellite television stations, internet sites, newspapers, and magazines. If only a small proportion embraced Wahhabism, hundreds of thousands could be spreading the Wahhabi creed in their home countries.

Clearly, in Saudi Arabia Islam is used to enforce the political status quo and keep the regime in power, despite attempts of opponents like Usama bin Ladin to use Islam against the regime.

Syria

Syria's legitimating agenda is the promotion of Arab nationalism and socialism. The ruling Ba'th Party's constitution enshrines Arab unity, freedom, and socialism as its holy trinity. There is no reference to Islam or to any other religion in the Ba'th Party's constitution.⁵²

Presidents Hafiz al-Asad (1971-2000) and his son Bashar (2000-) belong to Syria's Alawite minority sect (about 12 percent of the population). Generally, Sunni Muslims (about 70 percent of Syria's population) regard the Alawites as non-Muslim heretics. Centuries of Sunni persecution left deep scars on the collective memory of the Alawite people.

Under such conditions, instead of wading in the muddy waters of Shari'a reform, a more rewarding strategy for the Asad family has been to uphold the influence of Islam and

appoint as many Sunnis as possible to high governmental positions--though, not in the most elite security forces. Such an approach would pacify the majority of Sunnis and prolong the Asads' hold on power.

Over the almost half century since the supposedly "secular" Ba'th Party seized power, the Asad dynasty's use of Islam has reached remarkable heights. Four main strategies manifest the regime's insincerity towards its "secular" roots.

The first strategy is to preserve the influence of Islam. The constitution of 1973, promulgated during the reign of Hafiz Asad. Article 3.2 enshrines Islam as "a main source" of legislation.⁵³ Article 3.1 makes Islam the necessary religion of the president. Having failed to abolish articles 3.1 and 3.2, and to remove a barrier to his presidency, Hafiz Asad appealed in 1973 to the imam Musa al-Sadr, an influential cleric and head of the Higher Shi'i Council in Lebanon, to issue a fatwa that the Alawites are indeed a community of Shi'i Islam, which the imam duly issued.⁵⁴

The second strategy is to safeguard the country's Shari'a laws and courts in personal status, family, and inheritance affairs (non-Muslims follow their own religious courts). In May 2009, the government made public a proposed draft new personal status law, which, like the existing law, maintains Shari'a rules--even as Syria, paradoxically, tries to propagate an image of gender equality and modernity. While Syria's first lady, Asma Asad, imparts a liberal sophisticated image and the country's well-educated and cultured Vice President, Dr. Najah al-Attar, conveys professionalism, the weight of the testimony of these two ladies in a Syrian Shari'a court of law would continue under the new proposed law to equal the weight of the testimony of one man, whoever he might be.

The third strategy is to flaunt the regime's Islamic image on religious occasions. The president is careful to attend prayer in Damascus' famous Umayyad Mosque on Islamic feasts to media fanfare. Religious events are national holidays. During the month of Ramadan, the working hours of government and private offices are reduced and altered.

The president celebrates the breaking of the fast with different civic groups at the presidential palace. Special programming on government radio and television stations takes over the airwaves. More mosques, bigger congregations, and more veiled women than ever before have become the order of the day in Syrian cities and universities. The founding fathers of the strongly secular Ba'th Party must be turning in their graves.

In addition to maintaining the influence of Islam at home, the Asad regime supports the Sunni Hamas in the Gaza Strip, Shi'i Hizballah in Lebanon, and theocratic Iran. Such a strategy, not only demonstrates the regime's supposed commitment to Islamic causes, but also politicizes Islam in the domestic discourse. Wrapping Islam around Arab nationalism and the regime's regional conflicts creates a siege mentality, transforms external threats into a holy jihad, mobilizes the masses behind the Asad leadership, and justifies the retention of the state of emergency in effect since the mid-1960s.

The state of emergency allows imprisoning opponents indefinitely without trial and eliminating the advocates of genuine reforms on charges of treachery in the middle of "battle." Genuine reforms could bring down the current regime. A steady diet of exaggerated or invented victories provides the populace with psychic rewards.

These strategies help isolate Syria's Islamists, particularly the Sunni organization, the Muslim Brotherhood. Between 1977 and 1982, the Brotherhood wreaked havoc in a bid to remove the Alawite rule. In 1982, the Muslim Brotherhood was decimated in the city of Hama. For three weeks, 12,000 or more soldiers destroyed Hama practically over the heads of its inhabitants. Estimates of the number killed range between 3,000 (according to government sympathizers) and 20,000 or more (according to government critics), plus an untold number of injured.⁵⁵

The Ministry of Islamic affairs (Awqaf), together with the security forces ensure that the ulama class follows the official line. Violators risk severe penalties. Sunni palace ulama support the regime in return for

lucrative careers. The late Shaykh Ahmad Kaftaro, for example, the government-appointed grand mufti (highest Sunni religious office) found it attractive to hold this high position for more than 40 years until his death in September 2004. In a November 2004 television interview on a widely viewed Arabic satellite television program,⁵⁶ Ahmad Kaftaro's son, Shaykh Salah al-Din Kaftaro, forcefully reiterated the Islamic duty to obey the Muslim ruler.

CONCLUSION

These three and other governments in Arab countries use Islam as one of their main pillars for maintaining power. No matter what shortcomings exist in the society, no matter how slow the pace of development, no matter how low living standards, and no matter how often the government fails, the regimes remain in power.

There are, of course, risks in this use of Islam to legitimize authority by promoting a traditional interpretation of that religion. One is that the country's society is more stagnant and its progress even slower. Yet the regimes are ready to accept this cost.

The other is that the very same strategy helps legitimize Islamist movements that want to undermine and overthrow the existing government. The governments try to manage this problem by using ulama supportive of the status quo to issue definitions of Islam in line with the regime's interests. They also run campaigns to distinguish between the "proper" pro-government Islam and "mistaken" Islamist interpretations.

These efforts are not altogether effective. In sum, the regimes are riding a tiger, which provides them with more benefits than costs but which may someday turn against them and devour them.

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NOTES

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⁸ *Sahih Muslim*, traditions 4746 to 4763, pp. 1007-1008 and traditions 4782 to 4793, pp. 1009-10.

⁹ According to Abi Da'ud, *Sunan Abi Da'ud*, tradition 4607, p. 1561; and Ibn Maja, *Sunan Ibn Maja (The Six Books)*, tradition 42, p. 2479.

¹⁰ *Sahih al-Bukhari (The Six Books)*, traditions 7137 and 7142, p. 595.

¹¹ Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1789-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 14.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 15.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 19.

¹⁴ "Saudi, Egypt Reject U.S. Democracy View," *Aljazeera.net*, February 25, 2004, <http://english.aljazeera.net/archive/2004/02/2008410163552278973.html>.

¹⁵ Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), p. 67.

¹⁶ Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, Vol. 1. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 328.

¹⁷ Hourani, *History of the Arab Peoples*, p. 68.

¹⁸ N. J. Coulson, *A History of Islamic Law* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1971), p. 12.

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