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Saudi Arabia embraces Salafism: Countering the Arab uprising?

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

Saudi Arabia has openly embraced Salafism as its official ideology to shield itself and its fellow conservative Gulf monarchies from the wave of anti-government revolts sweeping the Middle East and North Africa. This counter-revolutionary strategy is a gamble with wider repercussions beyond the kingdom.

Commentary

SAUDI ARABIA has long been seen as the main backer of Salafis across the globe. It has always, however, shied away from officially endorsing the Muslim trend that until recently preached a politically quietist return to the way of life at the time of Islam's first 7th century Caliphs.

If Saudi support and funding of Salafi communities in the past constituted a key but discreet element of its soft power strategy aimed at countering Iran's perceived revolutionary Islamic appeal, today it serves to counter Islamist forces who trace their roots to the Muslim Brotherhood. It also seeks to curtail the revolutionary zeal of protesters that are clamouring for true democracy rather than cosmetic change. At the same time, it counters idiosyncratic foreign and domestic policies of forward-looking and long-time Saudi rival Qatar - the only other Arab-Muslim nation whose theological origins hark back to the Wahhabi founders of Saudi Arabia.

Qatar is home to Sheikh Yusuf Qaradawi, an influential Egyptian Muslim brother, and one of the world's most respected yet controversial Islamic thinkers critical of Saudi Arabia's puritanic concepts. The Gulf state has further emerged as a champion of revolts in several Arab countries with Bahrain as the notable exception, a media powerhouse thanks to Al Jazeera, and a key US interlocutor in the region.

Turning on the Brotherhood

The change in Saudi tactics highlights the rupture in relations between the kingdom and the Brotherhood more than a decade ago when Interior Minister Prince Nayef bin Abdul Aziz denounced his erstwhile allies in the wake of the September 11, 2001 Al Qaeda attacks on New York and Washington.

Saudi Arabia welcomed the Muslim Brothers in the 1950s and 1960s as they fled a crackdown in Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt. Many became teachers in their newly found refuge where their political interpretation of Islam cross-fertilised with the ideas of the 18th century cleric-warrior Mohammed Abdul Wahhab whose puritanic views shaped modern Saudi Arabia and inspired Salafism.

It took Prince Nayef, widely viewed as a hard line conservative, months to acknowledge in 2001 that 15 of the 19 perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks had hailed from Saudi Arabia. But once he did, he turned his wrath on the Brotherhood, which decades ago had abandoned violence except in the case of the Palestinian struggle against Israel, but has been the starting point of numerous first generation jihadists.

In an interview with a Kuwaiti newspaper, Prince Nayef charged at the time that the Brotherhood was responsible “for most of the problems in the Arab world” and had “done great damage to Saudi Arabia”. The prince acknowledged that whenever they got into difficulty or found their freedom restricted in their own countries, Brotherhood activists found refuge in Saudi Arabia, “which protected their lives” but said that they had “later turned against the kingdom”.

A full-fledged school of thought

Ten years later, Crown Prince Nayef is leading the kingdom’s embrace of Salafism when it has discarded its non-involvement in politics and has emerged in Egypt’s first post-revolt elections as the country’s second largest political force with a quarter of the votes. Egyptian state-controlled media, citing unnamed Justice Ministry sources, reported that Saudi Arabia had financed the Salafis to the tune of \$63 million last year.

Last month Prince Nayef and the kingdom’s mufti and advisor on religious affairs, Sheikh Abdulaziz Al al-Shaikh, a descendant of Mohammed Abdul Wahhab, gave keynote speeches at a conference convened under the title, Salafism: Legal Path, National Demand. The conference constituted a rare occasion on which the kingdom acknowledged Salafism as a full-fledged school of thought within Sunni Islam, though Saudi political and religious discourse had often referred to al-salaf-al-saleh, Prophet Mohammed’s immediate successors who are revered for their piety.

“My brothers, you know that true Salafism is the path whose rules derive from the book of God and the path of the Prophet...This blessed state (Saudi Arabia) has been established along correct Salafi lines since its inception by Imam Mohammed bin Saud and his pact with Imam Mohammed ibn Abdul Wahhab. Saudi Arabia will continue on the upright Salafi path and not flinch from it or back down,” Prince Nayef told the conference participants.

In an apparent response to criticism of Wahhabi and Salafi discrimination of Shiite Muslims, intolerance towards non-Muslims and harsh restrictions of women’s rights, the prince described Salafism as “authentic and contemporary” and an ideology that promotes progress and “peaceful coexistence with others and respect for their rights”.

In a similar vein, Sheikh Abdulaziz said Salafism was “a comprehensive godly path based on moderation and the middle way; it is based on unitarianism and forsakes innovation, superstitions and erroneous things”.

A shot across the bow

The kingdom’s embracing of Salafism follows the sentencing of Mokhtar al-Hashemi to 30 years in prison on charges of funding terrorism and plotting a coup in cooperation with Al Qaeda in seeking to create an Islamist political party in the kingdom based on Brotherhood thinking.

The question is not whether the Arab revolt will reach the kingdom but how it will progress in Saudi Arabia, which last year witnessed several protests in the predominantly Shiite, oil-rich Eastern Province. In fact in November 2010, a month before the eruption in Tunisia, it had been the scene of anti-corruption demonstrations. The vote for Salafists in Egypt was more a vote against established politics than opting for a Saudi-style system.

Demonstrations last month by groups of activists not only in Shiite Qatif but also in the capital, Riyadh and the Wahhabi stronghold of Buraida, constitute a shot across the bow of the House of Saud. Saudi rulers, by embracing Salafism and adopting the ways and mores of the righteous Caliphs, hope to shield themselves from the regional and global uprising against repressive and failed regimes. It is a gamble whose outcome could have repercussions far beyond the kingdom.

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