

### Center for Democracy and Human Rights in Saudi Arabia, CDHR, Washington DC

July 2, 2015

#### Saudi-Wahhabi Schisms, King's Promises and Freedom of Expression, Elites and Public Well-being

##### CDHR's Commentaries and Analysis

##### The Foreseeable Extinction of The Saudi/Wahhabi Alliance

**CDHR's Analysis:** More than at any time in its history, the Saudi ruling family is facing domestic and external [challenges](#) and threats that can result in domestic strife which the autocratic system cannot handle even with external support, including military intervention from the region or the West. Despite the Saudi rulers' and their beneficiaries' assertions to the contrary, the most looming threat to the Saudi oligarchy is not external, but springs from the regime's source of [legitimacy and power base](#), its rigidly indoctrinated Wahhabis, without whose ferocious services, the Saudi royals could not have been able to survive as they have.

While the Saudi/Wahhabi partnership has not always been easy or peaceful, as exemplified by Ibn Saud's slaughter of rebellious [Ikhwan in 1929](#), by King Faisal's 1964 deadly confrontation with religious zealots when he introduced girls' education (a move that resulted in his assassination in 1975) and by anti-monarchy zealots' takeover of Mecca's Grand Mosque in 1979 (which almost brought down the House of Saud if it weren't for [French commandos](#) from the Groupe d'Intervention de la Gendarmerie Nationale), it has endured for many decades. However, overt defiant criticism by and insubordination of prominent popular clerics, schisms within the religious establishment and steadily escalating differences between the royals and their zealot supporters over social, political and educational issues represent serious and irreconcilable divisions that could presage the coming end of the Saudi/Wahhabi alliance.

The centuries old Saudi/Wahhabi power-sharing is based on convenient, albeit duplicitous, promises made by two men, a nomadic chief (the forefather of the House of Saud, Mohammed Ibn Saud) and another nomadic zealot (the founder of the rigid Wahhabi dogma) Mohammed Ibn Abdul Wahhab in 1744 in Dir-e-yah. The latter is a small wasteland village which the current ultraconservative Saudi King Salman is [intensely reviving](#) in the hope of reassuring the descendants of Abdul Wahhab of his family's commitment to upholding the original Saudi/Wahhabi partnership, which his predecessor challenged over educational and social issues.

King Salman's predecessor, King Abdullah was prompted by well-known members of the royal family like his reform-minded half-brother Prince Talal and Abdullah's intellectual nephew, Prince Khalid Al-Faisal, as well as some of King Abdallah's offspring, namely Princes Miteb and Mishal and Princesses Adela and Setta, to undertake some "reforms" to respond to public demands and to give people hope for a better future.

Abdallah removed a number of prominent zealots, [appointed women](#) to government agencies, tried to relax restrictions on Shi'a religious rituals and allowed the government's controlled media to discuss sensitive issues, as long as the royals could only be exalted. These cosmetic but psychologically important initiatives created positive reactions among many Saudis, but increased suspicion among many clerics about the royals' motives, conduct and commitment to the anti-reform Wahhabi ideology.

Granted, the Saudi/Wahhabi partnership has served its creators, users and beneficiaries well domestically and externally for centuries. However, the alliance seems to be developing serious differences over its [domestic](#) and [regional](#) objectives and policies. This is due to changing variables, new players, shifting alliances, unprecedented regional mass revolutions, increasing domestic demands for reforms and rising public intolerance of a repressive system that continues to operate as if the earth is flat, time is standing still and human evolution is delusional. The most obvious example of this mummified mindset is the ruling Saudi/Wahhabi elite's attitude toward and treatment of women as [t](#)

[his video](#)

and

[this](#)

article demonstrate.

Divisions have been developing between those clerics who oppose any change in the status

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quo, like the Mufti and his circle of intransigent clerics, and clerics who call for moderate reforms, like Dr. Salman Al-Awdah, who has 2.4 million social media followers. Additionally, other clerics, like Mohsen Al-Awaji, [call for](#) a constitutional monarchy, question gender segregation, the ban on women driving and women's dress code and call for an end to the regime's rampant corruption.

Cleric Dr. Salman Al-Awdah painted a grim picture of the public mood which he attributed to '...a lack of housing, unemployment, poverty, corruption, weak health and education systems, the plight of the detainees and the absence of any prospect of [political reform](#).' Dr. Al-Awdah went on to warn the Saudi regime of severe repercussions if it continues its repressive practices and usurpation of people's rights: 'Like people around the world, the Saudi people will not always be silent about forfeiting all or part of their rights... When someone [loses hope](#), you should expect anything from him.'

Even the former chief of the ferocious religious police, Shaikh Ahmed Al-Ghamdi broke away from the religious establishment's rigid restrictions when he brought his wife to a TV studio without a [face cover](#), which he says is unnecessary according to Islam.

When prominent clerics publically warn and denounce the system they have legitimized, protected and served for generations, such loss of allegiance threatens the pillars upon which the Saudi state was founded and upon which it stands. However, the threats posed by these advocates of moderate and overdue reforms pale in comparison with the threats posed by an increasing number of extremist clerics and many of their followers who, for example, believe ISIS is a better alternative to the monarchy, which many consider corrupt and incapable of [defending their values](#).

The challenges posed by moderate and extremist clerics and their millions of followers are not only undermining the legitimacy and powerbase of the royal family, but could plunge the country into civil and sectarian war. Unlike the ongoing bloody turmoil in other Arab countries, upheaval in Saudi Arabia will have far reaching repercussion due to the country's centrality to Islam, its role in the global economy and the international reach of the [lethal Saudi dogma](#), Wahhabism.

The Saudi regime's extensive and expensive efforts to stop or reverse events in the region and to silence its domestic critics, especially pro-social justice advocates and cleric dissenters, are

indicative of its covert recognition that the diverse public discontent and regional upheavals are weighing on the regime's sense security. Developments like the Arab Spring, Western/Iranian fence mending and the rise of Sunni Muslim rivals such the Nahdah in Tunisia, the [Muslim Brotherhood](#)

and [ISIS](#)

pose unprecedented threats not only to the Saudi's self-proclaimed leadership of Sunni Islam, but to the legitimacy of the Saudi system in its current theo-autocratic form and to the political survival of its operators.

Given these realities, the Saudi monarchy has two choices. It can continue augmenting its historical self-serving relations with the zealots, thus perpetuating its current exclusive sectarian methods of ruling, thereby risking domestic and regional threats and increasing global isolation. Or it can introduce necessary non-sectarian reforms to begin the process of including the overwhelming majority of the disenfranchised Saudi population in the functions and all decision-making processes of the state. This course of action would drastically widen the schism between the monarchy and the zealots, whose loyalty is already eroding and will likely continue to erode due to the [appeal](#) and successes of like-minded groups such as ISIS.

Despite King Salman's and other members of the old guard's attachment to the past and their dependence on the Wahhabi dogma, the odds are mounting against the continuity of the alliance as it is. In addition to the growing schisms between previous monarchs and the religious establishment and the ideological regional appeal of formidable extremists, the mounting domestic resentment toward the rulers' use of religion as a tool of oppression and terrorism makes the disintegration of the alliance inevitable. Furthermore, the Wahhabi indoctrinated and inspired terrorists are creating regional and global animosity toward the monarchy, the country and Saudi society.

These well-known and undeniable factors give the Saudi rulers no option (if major strife is to be avoided), but to accept that the religious establishment is becoming a liability and is endangering the country and the monarchy itself. The ruling family's safest and most pragmatic option is to relinquish its claim of exclusive ownership of the country and share legislative powers with all citizens, thus drawing its legitimacy from the people. This transition can be achieved peacefully and will provide citizens with a sense of ownership of their country, giving them a reason to defend it from internal and external enemies.

**King Salman: "Equality and Freedom of Expression" Are Guaranteed**

**CDHR's Commentary:** During a meeting with his government's human right groups in May 2015, King Salman told his carefully selected government agencies' employees that, 'The foundation of the State is based on adherence to the Islamic Shariah, which calls for the protection of human rights. The rule of our country was established on the basis of justice, consultation and equality. The State's systems are integrated into the protection of rights, achievement of justice, guaranteeing [freedom of expression](#) , impartiality and addressing the causes and reasons of division.' The king continued to emphasize his point, 'All citizens are equal in rights and duties, and the Basic Governing Law states that the State shall protect human rights in line with the Islamic Shariah.'

This is an incredibly deceptive and exaggerated description of the autocratic Saudi monarchy's policies and practices. By any standard, the Saudi society is one of the most oppressed societies in the world and no one knows it better than the Saudis themselves, especially those who tried to express their opinion peacefully and now languish in King Salman's dungeons. For example, a group of courageous, highly educated, pro-democracy and social justice citizens formed a peaceful and inclusive non-governmental organization, the "Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association," led by two visionary professors, Mohammed Fahd al-Qahtani and Abdullah Hamad, who were accused of treason and sentenced, along with their colleagues, to [lengthy imprisonments in 2013](#)

Contrary to King Salman's claims, many Saudi men and women free thinkers, equality seekers, liberals, human rights and social justice advocates are consistently arrested, interrogated (Saudi style in the torture chambers in the basement of the notorious Ministry of Interior), tried in [terror ist- designated courts](#) and thrown into Saudi dungeons for publically expressing their opinion about the government's policies.

The Saudi "Government Basic Law" which King Salman referenced when he lectured his government's human rights appointees was decreed by King Fahd in 1992. It was written by the ruling family for the purpose of re-enforcing the royals' perpetual rule and absolute control over the country. For example, article 5 of the Basic Law states that the "Rule passes to the sons of the founding King, Abd al-Aziz Bin Abd al-Rahman al-Faysal Al Sa'ud, and to their children's children." Article 6 demands [absolute submission](#) to the will of the king at all times under all conditions and circumstances, as stipulated in the Quran and Prophet Mohammed's tradition. "Citizens are to pay allegiance to the King in accordance with the holy Koran and the tradition of the Prophet, in submission and obedience, in times of ease and difficulty, fortune and adversity."

In face of overwhelming evidence that contradicts King Salman's hollow assertions that all citizens regardless of gender, race, ethnicity or religious orientation are equal under Saudi law and are free to express their opinions, the king is either delusional, incoherent or absurdly assuming that people are utterly oblivious and that time is standing still and people never change. King Salman, his religious establishment, hired advisors and apologists ought to know that, like all peoples, the Saudis are affected by regional and global events and by the uncontrollable flow of globalized information that exposes all forms of injustice, exploitation, discrimination, inequality and differences between democratic and absolute systems.

"Saudi Arabia is the world's [last absolute monarchy](#)" and saying that it is just, egalitarian and free does not make it so.

### King Salman "[Vows](#)" to Punish the Assassins of Shi'a

**CDHR's Commentary:** Two days after the murderous attack on Shi'a worshippers in eastern Saudi Arabia on Friday, May 22, 2015, King Salman promised that 'Any participant, planner, supporter or sympathizer with this heinous crime will be held accountable, tried and will receive the punishment he deserves.' Not surprisingly, the missing key *word* in the king's list of those who will be punished for their role in the crimes against Shi'a is the *inciters*, the Saudi clerics. King Salman's religious establishment of which he is a staunch supporter considers the Shi'a heretics, "rejectionist" and "deviants," therefore suitable candidates for [extinction](#).

The never ending violent Sunni-Shi'a split begun after the death of Prophet Mohammed more than 14 centuries ago and has subsequently gained momentum and become more lethal, especially since the founding of the unbending Saudi brand of Islam, Wahhabism, in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. As has been described by many Muslims and non-Muslims, "Wahhabi Islam really is a [loathsome and dangerous ideology](#)." The philosophy of attacking and murdering Shi'a is disseminated in mosques, schools and living rooms in Saudi Arabia and in other majority Sunni countries.

Condemnation of and discrimination against the Shi'a is legal in Saudi Arabia as stated in the

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Saudi government basic law: "According to the basic law, Sunni Islam is the official religion and the country's constitution is the Qur'an and the Sunna (traditions and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad). The legal system is based on the government's application of the Hanbali School of [Sunni Islamic jurisprudence](#) ." Given this practice, how can the Saudi Shi'a get fair treatment or equality under the current Saudi regime and its sectarian laws? Despite King Salman's and his clerics' condemnation of crimes committed against their Shi'a citizens, promises by Saudi officials to punish Wahhabi-inspired terrorists in or out of Saudi Arabia are preposterous.

As long as the creators and implementers of the dangerous Saudi dogma, Wahhabism, re-enforce intolerance toward Shi'a [in and out of Saudi Arabia](#) , there can be no justice for Shi'a, nor can there be social harmony or equality for them in their own homelands. This trend is likely to intensify under King Salman's reign, as exemplified by his war against the Houthis in Yemen and his determination to continue his family's support for the minority Sunni government in Bahrain in its efforts to crush the aspiring majority Shi'a population in that country.

Attacking and killing Shi'a in eastern Saudi Arabia may spiral out of control and may reach the door steps of the royals themselves, as exemplified by the May 29 car suicide bomber who blew himself up in front of a Shi'a mosque, [killing four people](#) and injuring others. This mayhem took place in Dammam, the power seat of the Eastern Province of the country where the massive Saudi oil facilities and a large Shi'a population share the same region.

Given the unparalleled domestic and regional threats and amassed enemies facing the Saudi regime and its kingdom, it might only be a matter of time before the targeted Saudi Shi'a or one of the other Saudi regime's enemies, such as ISIS, Al-Qaeda, Al-Houthis or the Muslim Brotherhood, decide to blow up one of the massive and vulnerable oil facilities in Eastern Saudi Arabia where oppressed Shi'a and Western expatriates work and live. Thousands of miles of oil pipelines, as well as scores of storage tank farms, refineries, oil fields, harbors and the expansive oil administrative headquarters in Dhahran are easy targets despite the vigilance of Saudi and foreign security forces.

If this scenario were to occur, it's more likely than not that the US will use its Persian Gulf naval and ground military might to ensure the defense, production and shipment of oil to the world's markets in order to prevent global economic meltdown. The question is at what price to the Saudi people, to the US and other oil consuming powers? Can a costly military intervention by the US to protect oil be minimized or avoided? Potentially, yes, if the Saudi oligarchy is willing or can be induced to embark upon doable political reforms so that all citizens (regardless of

religion, race, region or gender) are legislatively empowered to participate in all aspects of their country's affairs, including all decision-making processes, disposition of the country's wealth and the formulation and execution of domestic and foreign policies.

Would it not be more pragmatic, safer and less costly for the Saudi monarchy's major allies, the US and its democratic allies, to make it unequivocally clear to the Saudi royals that the status quo is unsustainable? Given the Saudi regime's history and mindset, it's likely that this proposal will be vehemently rejected. However, the Saudi regime can be convinced, especially at this juncture in its history when it has never been more vulnerable, that its options are limited.

### **The Saudi Royals, Businessmen And Clerics Have Things In Common, Including Suppression, Larceny And Hypocrisy**

**CDHR's Commentary:** Wealthy Saudi businessmen like [this one](#) and their royal and religious partners live in the most expansive and expensive palaces, mansions and chateaus throughout the world, especially in democratic Europe and in the US. While this is taking place, millions of Saudi people are suffering from [poverty, unemployment](#) and numerous diseases, including diabetes, heart ailments, malnutrition and genetic syndromes due to inter-marriage. Furthermore, the most progressive Saudi advocates of human rights, social justice, accountability, transparency, freedom of expression, religious tolerance and equality for women and religious minorities are languishing in Saudi prisons, awaiting flogging or other forms of retribution.

All segments of Saudi society know the hypocrisy and misdeeds of the ruling elites and their partners in the looting of public wealth. The people are becoming increasingly resentful of the way they are being ruled, exploited and abused by their political and religious rulers and by the wealthy Saudi businessmen who hardly invest in human development or in the well-being of Saudi society.

Additionally, the Saudi people are not only languishing under their regime's severe domestic policies, but they are also paying the price for Saudi foreign policies which include, but are not limited to, exportation of lethal ideology, [support for extremists and terrorists](#) worldwide and more recently, by the Saudi royals' intervention militarily and subversively in most Arab and Muslim countries, such as Yemen, Bahrain, Egypt, Pakistan, Iraq and Syria. Consequently, the Saudi people are among the most detested people in the world.



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Myopically, Western decision-makers, traditional think tanks and prominent educational institutions not only look the other way when it comes to the Saudis' draconian domestic and perilous foreign policies, but defend the Saudi regime as an ally in the war on terrorism. This is dangerous because in reality, [Western Civilization](#) and its democratic values are the targets of Saudi dogma-inspired terror groups like Al-Qaeda, ISIS, Al-Gamaat Al-Islamiyya and many others.

Unless the Saudi political, religious and business elites and their Western partners realize that the current status quo of repression, exploitation, intolerance and inequality for women and minorities is unsustainable and act to remedy the situation, a mob-like uprising is inescapable. The Saudi regime ought to embark on transitioning to a more inclusive society where all citizens participate in all aspects of the state's activities, especially the decision-making processes. Continuing to claim that all is well, stable and ideal is suicidal given the current realities of the Middle East.

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