Introduction

It was a quiet Monday evening in Riyadh when car bombs ripped through the housing compounds. The triple suicide attack on 12 May 2003 killed thirty-five people and marked the beginning of a protracted wave of violence in Saudi Arabia. Over the next few years, the campaign waged by 'al-Qaida on the Arabian Peninsula' (QAP) would take the lives of around 300 people and maim thousands. Never before in its modern history had Saudi Arabia experienced internal violence of this scale and duration.

The 2003 violence is intriguing because it put an end to the paradox which marked Saudi Islamism in the 1980s and 1990s, namely the curious discrepancy between the large number of Saudis involved in militancy abroad and the near-absence of Islamist violence at home. Apart from a few isolated incidents, the kingdom had largely been spared the unrest which haunted Egypt and Algeria in previous decades. Why, then, did the QAP campaign break out in 2003 and not before?

The reason, this book argues, is that the jihadist movement in Saudi Arabia differs from its counterparts in the Arab republics in being driven primarily by extreme pan-Islamism and not socio-revolutionary ideology. The outward-oriented character of Saudi Islamism is due to the relative lack of socio-economic grievances and to the development of a peculiar political culture in which support for suffering Muslims abroad became a major source of political legitimacy and social status. The 2003 violence was a historical anomaly, undertaken by an extreme offshoot of the Saudi jihadist movement which had radicalised in Afghan training camps. Unlike the Egyptian and Algerian insurgencies which lasted for years, the QAP campaign lost momentum after only eighteen months, because the militants represented an alien element on the Islamist scene and had almost no popular support.

Saudi Arabia occupies a central place in the modern history of militant Islamism. Since the oil boom in the 1970s, the kingdom has promoted its ultra-conservative Wahhabi interpretation of Islam across the

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world. Since the 1980s, Saudi Arabia has been a prominent supplier of fighters and funds to Muslim guerrillas in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya and elsewhere. More recently, it gained infamy as the homeland of al-Qaida leader Usama bin Ladin as well as fifteen of the nineteen hijackers on 9/11. To many in the West, Saudi Arabia is synonymous with, and partly responsible for, the rise of Muslim extremism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Yet the inner workings of Saudi Islamism remain notoriously underexplored. In much of the literature, Saudi Arabia features as a black box from which radicalism is steadily pumped into the international system. Until recently, very few studies treated Saudi Islamism as having internal dynamics and a variety of politically minded actors. The opaqueness of Saudi Islamism has been illustrated several times in recent decades by spectacular but isolated violent incidents, such as the 1979 Mecca mosque takeover, the 1995 Riyadh bombing or the 1996 Khobar bombing. Each event took observers by complete surprise, only to fade rapidly into a mist of secrecy and speculation. This book will use new primary sources to shed light on the history and dynamics of violent Islamism in the kingdom.

In a comparative political perspective, Saudi Islamism is highly interesting because of the many apparent idiosyncrasies of Saudi politics and society. Most obvious is the central role and conservative interpretation of religion in the kingdom. The kingdom cultivates its identity as the heartland of Islam by conceding considerable power and funds to the Wahhabi religious establishment and making religion a central part of its own discourse. The political system is also uncommon: Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy ruled by an extensive royal family (the Al Sa'ud) in alliance with a family of clerics (the Al al-Shaykh). Moreover, the kingdom has one of the region's longest-ruling families and is one of few Middle Eastern countries untouched by Western colonialism or military coups. Economically, oil has made Saudi Arabia considerably wealthier than most of the other countries that have produced large jihadist communities, such as Egypt or Yemen. Socially, the kingdom is characterised by, among other things, the prominence of traditional social structures such as tribes and noble families. Perhaps even more striking is the speed and scale of socio-economic change in late twentieth-century Saudi Arabia. These and other factors raise intriguing questions whose significance extends beyond the narrow fields of Saudi studies or jihadism studies. For example, how can militant Islamism emerge in an Islamic state? How do the specificities of Saudi politics

and society affect dynamics of contestation? How does individual rad-
icalisation occur in ultra-conservative, tribal and wealthy societies?[1]

With these broader questions on the horizon, this book focuses on the
evolution of jihadism in Saudi Arabia after 1980. Jihadism is used here
as a synonym for 'militant Sunni Islamism', while Islamism is defined
broadly as 'Islamic activism'. Non-violent Islamist actors will be con-
sidered where relevant, but this is neither a book about Saudi Islamism
as such, nor about the Saudi political system as a whole. Shiite Islam-
ist militancy, such as the 1979 riots in the Eastern Province, the 1987
Hajj riots and the 1996 Khobar bombing, will also be left out because
it represents a largely separate political phenomenon. Earlier Sunni vio-
lence such as the 1920s Ikhwan revolt is not included either, because it
has been treated by other scholars and has few direct implications for
militancy after 1980.[2]

The analysis downplays two of the most well-known parts of Saudi
Islamist history for reasons that are less intuitive. The first is the famous
Mecca mosque siege in November 1979. This spectacular event, which
caused the death of hundreds of people, was the work of an apoca-
lyptic sect led by the charismatic Juhayman al-Utaybi. The rebels,
who called themselves the *Ikhwan*, represented a radicalised clique of
an extreme pietist organisation known as *al-Jama'a al-Salafiyya al-
Muhtasiba* (JSM) that had been established in Medina in the late 1960s.
The clique, radicalised by arguments with scholars in Medina, the fiery
personality of Juhayman and finally by a two-year desert existence, had
come to believe that the end of the world was nigh. They believed that
the Mahdi, an Islamic messianic figure, had manifested himself in one
of the group's members, and that the latter needed to be consecrated in
the Great Mosque at the end of the fourteenth century of the Islamic
calendar. The Juhayman group is not treated in detail here because as
an organisation it died out in 1979 and because it represented a piet-
ist current of Saudi Islamism that is distinct from the pan-Islamist

[1] For general works on Saudi Arabia, see Alexei Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia*
(London: Saqi Books, 2000); Madawi al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia* (Cam-
bridge University Press, 2002); and Robert Lacey, *The Kingdom: Arabia and the House
of Saud* (New York: Avon, 1981).
[2] For more on Shiite militancy, see Fouad Ibrahim, *The Shi'is of Saudi Arabia* (Lon-
don: Saqi, 2007); Toby Jones, 'Rebellion on the Saudi Periphery: Modernity, Margin-
alization, and the Shi'a Uprising of 1979', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*
38, no. 2 (2006); and Thomas Hegghammer, 'Deconstructing the Myth about al-
Qa'ida and Khobar', *The Sentinel* 1, no. 3 (2008). For more on the 1920s Ikhwan,
see John Habib, *Ibn Saud's Warriors of Islam: The Ikhwan of Najd and Their Role in the
Creation of the Sa'udi Kingdom, 1910–1930* (Leiden: Brill, 1978); and Joseph Kostiner,
The Making of Saudi Arabia: From Chieftaincy to Monarchical State (Oxford University
Press, 1993).

movement that produced the QAP. The Mecca event had an import-
ant indirect effect on Saudi Islamism by prompting the regime to give
the ulama more power and Islamic activists more political space in the
early 1980s. However, there are practically no substantial links, neither
organisational nor ideological, between Juhayman and al-Qaida.[3]

Similarly, the rise of the so-called Sahwa (Awakening) movement
in the 1980s and early 1990s is treated only peripherally in this book,
because the Sahwa was a non-violent reformist movement whose aims,
means and social base were different from that of the extreme pan-
Islamists on the foreign jihad fronts. The Sahwa, whose ideology repre-
sented an amalgam of Wahhabi conservatism and Muslim Brotherhood
pragmatism, grew on Saudi University campuses from the early 1970s
onward under the influence of exiled teachers from the Egyptian and
Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. Sahwists began engaging in open polem-
ics in the mid-1980s against the modernist literary current known as the
hadatha. After the Gulf crisis and the deployment of US troops to Saudi
Arabia, the Sahwa, led by the charismatic preachers Safar al-Hawali
and Salman al-Awda, presented formal political demands to the Saudi
government, most famously through the petitions known as the *Let-
ter of Demands* in 1991 and the *Memorandum of Advice* in 1992. At this
point part of the Sahwa movement also produced a formal organisation,
the 'Committee for the Defence of Legitimate Rights', the founders of
which were soon forced into exile in London. After a crackdown in Sep-
tember 1994, the movement was silenced until it re-emerged severely
weakened in the late 1990s. The Sahwa will necessarily feature in our
analysis, because it was such an important part of the political land-
scape in which the jihadist movement operated, but the Sahwa's history
and internal dynamics will not be a major line of inquiry.[4]

The choice of terms and concepts used in this book to differentiate
between various actors and ideological currents is based on two funda-
mental assumptions. The first is that Islamism is politically heteroge-
neous. Islamists work towards different short- and mid-term aims and

[3] Yaroslav Trofimov pushes the Juhayman–al-Qaida link a little too far in his
otherwise brilliant account of the Mecca siege; Yaroslav Trofimov, *The Siege of
Mecca: The Forgotten Uprising in Islam's Holiest Shrine and the Birth of al Qaeda* (New
York: Doubleday, 2007); for more on the origin of Juhayman's group, see Thomas
Hegghammer and Stéphane Lacroix, 'Rejectionist Islamism in Saudi Arabia: The
Story of Juhayman al-Utaybi Revisited', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*
39, no. 1 (2007).

[4] For more on the Sahwa, see Mamoun Fandy, *Saudi Arabia and the Politics of Dissent*
(New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); and Stéphane Lacroix, 'Les champs de la
discorde: Une sociologie politique de l'islamisme en Arabie Saoudite (1954–2005)'
(Ph.D. thesis, Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris, 2007).

display systematic differences in political behaviour. The second is that many of the theological descriptors commonly used in the literature on Islamism, such as *salafi*, *wahhabi*, *jihadi salafi* and *takfiri*, do not correspond to discrete and observable patterns of political behaviour among Islamists. I therefore rely instead on terms that signal the political content of the ideology at hand or the immediate political priorities of a given actor, such as 'revolutionary' or 'pietist'. This approach, I argue, is a prerequisite for analysing social movements, because a social movement is by definition united by a shared set of political preferences. It makes no sense to speak of a 'salafi social movement', for the simple reason that actors labelled salafi have wildly different, often diametrically opposing, political agendas. This is not to say that the terms Salafism or Wahhabism should be discarded, only that they are more useful for analysing theological discourse than political behaviour.[5]

For the same reason, it is not fruitful to look at the relationship between Wahhabism and contemporary militancy as a causal one. Wahhabism, although named after a historical figure, the eighteenth-century scholar Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, is not a political doctrine, but a living theological tradition, interpreted and contested by successive generations of scholars. In the modern era, both the regime and its violent opponents anchor their discourse in the Wahhabi tradition, but they draw vastly different conclusions about politics, as Madawi al-Rasheed has shown in *Contesting the Saudi State*. Wahhabism shapes the way in which activists and their opponents articulate and legitimise their agenda; it does not, however, dictate the core content of their activism.[6]

The actor labels used in this book derive from a broader conceptual framework for distinguishing between ideal types of Islamist activism (see Table 1). The framework is based on the idea that five main rationales for action underlie most forms of Islamist activism. Under the term rationale, I subsume observed mid-term political aims and strategy. These rationales, which may have both a violent and a non-violent manifestation, represent the five principal purposes for which

[5] John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, 'Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory', *American Journal of Sociology* 82, no. 6 (1977): 1218; Thomas Hegghammer, 'Jihadi Salafis or Revolutionaries? On Theology and Politics in the Study of Militant Islamism', in *Global Salafism*, ed. Roel Meijer (London and New York: Hurst and Columbia University Press, 2009).

[6] For more on Wahhabism, see David Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006); Guido Steinberg, *Religion und Staat in Saudi-Arabien* (Würzburg: Egon, 2002); Madawi al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State: Islamic Voices from a New Generation* (Cambridge University Press, 2007); and Mohammed Ayoob and Hasan Kosebalaban, eds., *Religion and Politics in Saudi Arabia: Wahhabism and the State* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2008).

Table 1. *A rationale-based typology of Islamist activism with examples from Saudi Arabia*

RATIONALE	NON-VIOLENT FORM		VIOLENT FORM	
	Manifestation	*Examples*	*Manifestation*	*Examples*
State-oriented	Reformism	Sahwa	Socio-revolutionary Islamism	n/a
Nation-oriented	Irredentism	n/a	Violent irredentism	n/a
Umma-oriented	Soft pan-Islamism	World Muslim League	Violent pan-Islamism Classical jihadism Global jihadism	Saudis in Afghanistan, Chechnya, Bosnia, Iraq al-Qaida, QAP
Morality-oriented	Pietism	JSM	Vigilantism	Juhayman's Ikhwan, Unorganised *hisba*
Sectarian	Sectarianism	n/a	Violent sectarianism	n/a

Islamists act. For violent groups, they represent the most important mid-term objectives for the armed struggle:

- *Socio-revolutionaries* fight for state power against a Muslim regime perceived as illegitimate.
- *Violent irredentists* struggle for a specific territory against a local non-Muslim occupier.
- *Violent pan-Islamists* fight to defend the entire Muslim nation and its territories from non-Muslim aggression. Among these, classical jihadists will fight conventionally in local conflict zones, while global jihadists fight the West with all means in all places.
- *Vigilantists* use violence to correct the moral behaviour of fellow Muslims.
- *Violent sectarians* kill to intimidate and marginalise the competing sect (Sunni or Shiite).

These are not mutually exclusive categories, but ideal-type motivations that partially overlap. Most Islamists act to promote several or even all of these objectives, but all actors will, at any given time, have one dominant rationale which determines the principal modalities of the actor's violent behaviour.

Three terms feature prominently in the following analysis and require further elaboration, namely 'socio-revolutionary Islamism', 'classical jihadism' and 'global jihadism'. The first term is associated with the ideas of Sayyid Qutb and refers to activism intended to topple a Muslim government through a military coup. This was the principal form of militant Islamist activism in 1970s Egypt and Syria, as well as in 1990s Algeria. The violence of these groups struck primarily targets associated with the government, and the dominant discursive theme or frame in their texts was the corruption, repression and malgovernance of the Muslim ruler.

The two latter terms refer to extreme forms of pan-Islamist activism. Classical jihadism is so termed by this author because the underlying doctrine is closer than other militant ideologies to orthodox conceptions of jihad, though not identical to them. The classical jihadist doctrine is a modern invention, first articulated by Abdallah Azzam in the context of the 1980s jihad in Afghanistan. Azzam argued that non-Muslim infringement of Muslim territory demanded the immediate military involvement of all able Muslim men in defence of the said territory, wherever its location. He thus redefined the political content of contemporary jihad from a struggle against Muslim regimes over state power to a defensive struggle against non-Muslims over territory. This conception of jihad was closer to orthodox views on legitimate jihad – hence its popularity – but Azzam differed from mainstream ulama in arguing that all Muslims, not just the population immediately concerned, had a duty to fight.[7]

Classical jihadism has long been confused with its more radical ideological sibling, the doctrine of global jihadism, which was developed by Usama bin Ladin in the mid-1990s. Both considered the fight against non-Muslim powers involved in the oppression of Muslims as more important than the fight against corrupt Muslim governments. Both framed their struggle similarly, using a rhetoric whose discursive theme was the humiliation of Muslims at the hands of non-Muslims, usually illustrated by long lists of symbols of Muslim suffering. However, while Azzam advocated guerrilla warfare within defined conflict zones against enemies in uniform, Bin Ladin called for indiscriminate mass-casualty out-of-area attacks. This is why Arabs in 1980s Afghanistan or 1990s Bosnia and Chechnya, all of whom were classical jihadists, practically never undertook international terrorist operations, while

[7] For overviews of the concept of jihad in the classical tradition, see David Cook, *Understanding Jihad* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); and Michael Bonner, *Jihad in Islamic History: Doctrines and Practice* (Princeton University Press, 2006).

al-Qaida militants have attacked a broad range of Western targets in a
variety of locations. The difference between classical and global jihad-
ists is important because in late 1990s and early 2000s Saudi Arabia, the
two communities opposed each other, notably on the issue of whether
to fight in Saudi Arabia or abroad.

Interestingly, extreme pan-Islamism shares a number of structural
similarities with nationalist-type ideologies, notably the focus on the
liberation of territory, the primacy placed on the fight against the
external enemy and the emphasis on internal unity in the face of out-
side threats. It is indeed possible to view pan-Islamism as a macro-
nationalism centred on the imagined community of the umma, which
is defined by religion and to some extent by language (Arabic having
a special status in Islam). Although the Muslim nation is by definition
aterritorial – the umma is wherever Muslims are – pan-Islamists have a
clear sense of what constitutes Muslim territory, namely all lands once
ruled by Muslims, from Andalucia in the West to Indonesia in the East.
Some scholars may object to the view of pan-Islamism as a macro-na-
tionalism. However, the perspective makes better sense when linked
to the ideal-type distinction between revolutionary-utopian and eth-
no-nationalist ideologies, which has proved heuristically very fruitful
in the analysis of militancy outside the Middle East. Peter Waldmann
documented generic differences in behaviour and recruitment patterns
between ethno-nationalist and leftist extremist groups in 1970s and
1980s Europe. As we shall see later in the book, some of these same dif-
ferences characterise the relationship between socio-revolutionary and
pan-Islamist activists.[8]

If we examine the history of Sunni Islamist violence in the king-
dom with the above-mentioned concepts in mind, a clear and inter-
esting pattern emerges, namely that most of the violence has been of
the extreme pan-Islamist kind. There has been some moral vigilant-
ism, while socio-revolutionary violence is very rare. Seven episodes
of Sunni Islamist violence have marked the kingdom's recent history.
First was the 1979 Mecca incident, which was a sui generis phenom-
enon, although closest to vigilantist violence because it was intended
as an act of collective moral purification. Second was a series of three
small attacks on US targets during the 1991 Gulf war. Third was a
little-known series of around ten non-lethal attacks on symbols of
moral corruption (video shops, women's centres, etc.) in the Qasim

[8] Peter Waldmann, 'Ethnic and Sociorevolutionary Terrorism: A Comparison of Struc-
tures', in *Social Movements and Violence: Participation in Underground Organisations*, ed.
Donatella Della Porta (Greenwich: JAI, 1992).

province and in Riyadh around 1991. The attacks were carried out by a small group of extreme pietists who viewed their deeds as *hisba*, or moral policing. Fourth was the 1995 Riyadh bombing, which targeted a US military facility. The fifth wave took place between 2000 and early 2003 in the form of a series of small-scale attacks (booby traps on cars, drive-by shootings, letter bombs etc.) on Western expatriates. Although none of the perpetrators were ever found, the violence was most likely the work of amateur militants driven by anti-Westernism. The sixth wave was a series of five assassination attempts on judges and policemen in the northern city of Sakaka in the Jawf province in late 2002 and early 2003. The Sakaka events represent arguably the only cases of violence against civilian representatives of the government in modern Saudi history.[9]

The seventh and by far the most important wave of violence was the QAP campaign. Through both acts and discourse, the QAP exhibited a primarily pan-Islamist agenda. Most premeditated attacks were on Western targets, and there was never a single successful attack on a Cabinet member, royal palace or civilian government building outside the security apparatus. There were attacks on security forces and the Interior Ministry, but only relatively late in the campaign when vengeance had become a factor. In its publications, the QAP consistently justified its violence as a defensive reaction to US aggression in the Muslim world. The top al-Qaida leadership may well have wanted regime change, but it is clear from the QAP literature, in particular the many interviews with and biographies of militants published in the magazine *Sawt al-Jihad* (Voice of Jihad), that most mid- and low-level operatives saw themselves as waging primarily a pan-Islamist struggle.

Extreme pan-Islamism thus seems to have been the dominant, though not the only, rationale behind Islamist militancy in the kingdom in recent decades. The history of Saudi jihadism is therefore largely the history of the extreme pan-Islamist subcurrent of Saudi Islamism. How, then, can we best go about explaining the rise of this current and the outbreak of the QAP campaign?

Broadly speaking, the existing literature offers three main paradigms for explaining the evolution of Saudi jihadism. First are

[9] For the 1991 attacks, see Elizabeth Rubin, 'The Jihadi Who Kept Asking Why', *New York Times*, 7 March 2004; author's interviews with Mansur al-Nuqaydan, Riyadh, April 2004 and Nasir al-Barrak, Dammam, December 2005. For the 1995 Riyadh bombing, see Joshua Teitelbaum, *Holier than Thou: Saudi Arabia's Islamic Opposition*, vol. LII (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2000). For the 2000–3 attacks and the Sakaka assassinations, see J. E. Peterson, 'Saudi Arabia: Internal Security Incidents Since 1979', *Arabian Peninsula Background Note*, no. 3 (2005).

organisational-level analyses which attribute the QAP campaign to a decision by Usama bin Ladin and al-Qaida to open a battlefront in Saudi Arabia. Anthony Cordesman, Nawaf Obaid, Dominique Thomas and Bruce Riedel have each provided very valuable insights into al-Qaida's strategic thinking and the early history of the QAP organisation. However, these analyses do not adequately explain why Bin Ladin suddenly decided to launch the campaign in 2003 and not before. Moreover, organisational-level analyses tend to skirt the deeper causes of the violence.[10]

Some scholars have therefore presented structuralist explanations which see the violence as the natural result of deep socio-economic problems or fundamental dysfunctions in the Saudi state system. Some have emphasised the economic dimension and argued that Saudi Arabia experiences violence because it is in a terrorism-prone stage of economic development. Others, such as Joshua Teitelbaum, have acknowledged the importance of socio-economic factors, but suggested that the real problem is the 'ideology of religious extremism' which underlies the legitimacy of the Saudi state. A related, but more sophisticated analysis is that presented by Madawi al-Rasheed in her landmark work on Saudi Islamism, *Contesting the Saudi State*. Al-Rasheed explains Saudi jihadism as one of several permutations of Wahhabism after the authoritarian Saudi state lost the monopoly over Wahhabi discourse under the pressures of globalisation. Al-Rasheed does not articulate a clear explanation for the outbreak of the 2003 violence, presumably because this is not the focus of her book, but she does allude to the authoritarian nature of the state and its instrumentalisation of Wahhabism as root causes of Saudi jihadism. The key problem with these explanations, however, is that they rarely account for chronological variation in levels of violence, and they are particularly badly suited to explain small-scale violence of the kind that has taken place in the kingdom. Political violence is rarely the linear expression of structural strain, because violent contestation requires actors who can mobilise followers and operationalise intentions.[11]

[10] Nawaf Obaid and Anthony Cordesman, *Al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia: Asymmetric Threats and Islamic Extremists* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2005); Dominique Thomas, *Les hommes d'Al-Qaïda: Discours et stratégie* (Paris: Michalon, 2005), 39–58; and Bruce Riedel and Bilal Y. Saab, 'Al Qaeda's Third Front: Saudi Arabia', *The Washington Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (2008).

[11] Robert Looney, 'Combating Terrorism Through Reforms: Implications of the Bremer-Kasarda Model for Saudi Arabia', *Strategic Insights* 3, no. 4 (2004); Joshua Teitelbaum, 'Terrorist Challenges to Saudi Arabian Internal Security', *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 9, no. 3 (2005); al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State*, 134–74.