



**Calhoun: The NPS Institutional Archive**  
**DSpace Repository**

---

Faculty and Researchers

Faculty and Researchers' Publications

---

2005-03-01

The Clerics, the Sahwa and the Saudi State by  
Toby Craig Jones; Strategic Insights, v. 6,  
issue 3 (2005 March)

Jones, Toby Craig

Monterey, California. Naval Postgraduate School

---

Strategic Insights, v.6, issue 3 (2005 March)

<https://hdl.handle.net/10945/11229>

---

This publication is a work of the U.S. Government as defined in Title 17, United States Code, Section 101. Copyright protection is not available for this work in the United States.

*Downloaded from NPS Archive: Calhoun*



Calhoun is the Naval Postgraduate School's public access digital repository for research materials and institutional publications created by the NPS community. Calhoun is named for Professor of Mathematics Guy K. Calhoun, NPS's first appointed -- and published -- scholarly author.

**Dudley Knox Library / Naval Postgraduate School**  
**411 Dyer Road / 1 University Circle**  
**Monterey, California USA 93943**

<http://www.nps.edu/library>



## The Clerics, the Sahwa and the Saudi State

### *Strategic Insights*, Volume IV, Issue 3 (March 2005)

by [Toby Craig Jones](#)

*Strategic Insights* is a monthly electronic journal produced by the [Center for Contemporary Conflict](#) at the [Naval Postgraduate School](#) in Monterey, California. The views expressed here are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of NPS, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

For a PDF version of this article, click [here](#).

## Introduction

Saudi Arabia's political order is in the midst of a tentative transformation. After a promising start to 2003, when de facto ruler Crown Prince Abdallah met openly with activists calling for political liberalization, the Saudi reform drive slowed in early 2004.<sup>[1]</sup> While the pace and extent of change remains uneven, there is little doubt that the regime will proceed with some degree of political reshuffling. There is reason for optimism, demonstrated by the holding of limited elections in 2005, the first of their kind in four decades. Yet, there is also reason for wariness. For, as in the past, it is the ruling family's strategies for managing change as well as the political system more generally that generate uncertainty. To understand politics and the political system in the kingdom today, and to forecast its future, it is essential to look at the strategic political relationships being forged between the state and domestic groups. Of particular importance are the relationships the ruling family has cultivated in recent years with some of its boldest and oldest political adversaries, who, ironically, now embody both the hope of Saudi Arabia and its potential unraveling: the *ulema*.

This article looks at a particularly important and enigmatic cast of characters whose power to shape both the social and political arenas in the kingdom, and thus the future of the polity itself, is considerable: the *sahwa* or "awakening sheikhs", a group of former dissidents who have come to support the regime—at least for now. Of particular interest are two of the *sahwa*'s most prominent and remarked upon members, Salman al-Awdah and Safar al-Hawali, both of whom enjoy considerable notoriety for being hard-line and for allegedly continuing to support al Qaeda. That they have provided inspiration for radicals in the past is unquestionable, although their present role in providing spiritual comfort to militants is less certain. My objective is to outline their current significance, the extent to which they have or have not given up their previous criticisms of the regime as well as their support for al Qaeda sympathizers, and, to determine the ways in which they influence politics in Saudi Arabia.

I am less interested in determining whom amongst the royal family these clerics and others like them have formed specific strategic alliances than I am with the broad outlines of politics. Sorting out the former is particularly difficult given the opacity of the Saudi inner circle and is guesswork at best. Rather, I am more interested in recent political positioning and shedding some light on what these clerics say about politics and the world around them. In this respect some of their core

principles have changed little from the past, and will continue to be seen as ominous and threatening, particularly to the U.S. In other respects, however, their message, when coherent and unified, is radically different, thus meriting consideration rather than knee-jerk reprobation. It remains to be seen whether or not the *sahwa* will play a progressive role or a disruptive one. It is precisely this uncertainty which is so intriguing and of immediate significance.

The changes underway in Saudi Arabia, as well as the make-up of most of the “new” political actors and forces, have been outlined recently by a number of analysts and observers.[2] In spite of external skepticism that claims otherwise, the regime has taken seriously many of the challenges facing it, particularly after the emergence of an ongoing domestic militant threat, one spearheaded by the al Qaeda affiliate in the Arabian Peninsula.[3] But it was not only the threat of local radicalism, nor external pressure regarding global terrorism, that spurred self-reflection and the motivation for transformation. Although extremists bent on toppling the regime capture much of the West’s attention, a much more constructive network of activists and other figures have mounted various appeals for progressive change as well, and have been given some room to voice their concerns and aspirations. An inchoate and loosely organized community of political activists, what one analyst calls the Islamo-liberal trend[4], has been the most high profile of those advocating for reform, although the political field is crowded with other interests as well. The attention devoted to new political actors is not surprising, given that the Saudi political system has long been closed and that its leaders usually have not encouraged political organization or activism.[5] With all this focus on Saudi politics, we still have little analytical depth or clarity regarding other networks of political actors in the kingdom, especially those *sahwa`ulema* with whom the regime is forging important but tentative new relations.

## Clerics, the State and the *Sahwa*

Historically, Saudi rulers have maintained an intimate relationship with leading *`ulema*, often manipulating the clergy and religiosity to ensure their grip on power.[6] Clerical leaders, in exchange for authority over theological, social and cultural affairs in the Saudi polity, initially conferred upon the ruling family religious legitimacy as political leaders. The relationship has not always been friendly or equal nor have the terms of the original political-religious partnership always been observed. Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the regime sought to subordinate an aggressive and unruly *`ulema* and its supporters. From 1926-1930, the Saudis faced a serious challenge to their power by the very band of holy warriors (*ikhwan*) that had enabled them to conquer much of the Arabian Peninsula. The *ikhwan* believed that in managing the political affairs of the nascent state, the regime had forsaken its religious duties.[7] After defeating the uprising in 1930 and vanquishing the religious rebels the state proceeded to enroll “the *`ulema* in an amoeba-like embrace and controlled them.” The objective was to limit their political power through bureaucratization, thus ensuring that the *`ulema* could never again directly threaten the polity.[8] One observer notes that “by the 1950s, the *`ulema* were firmly in their place as paid civil servants, hired and fired by the king.”[9] Religion remained a central element in state discourse and ideology, although the authority of religious leaders was highly restricted. Saudi rulers recognized, or at least maintained, that their authority derived from Wahhabi principles, even if few of its monarchs were openly pious or faithful.

In 1979 a dramatic series of events at home and abroad altered the regime’s posture. The occupation of the Mecca Mosque that year by Juhayman al-Utaybi, a descendant of the original *ikhwan*, along with the Islamic Revolution in Iran and open rebellion in the Shi`a communities in the oil rich eastern province of the kingdom set in motion a fundamental reorientation of Saudi Arabia’s religio-political order. Feeling threatened, the regime responded by re-empowering the kingdom’s restive religious elements. The shift in political strategy was profound. King Fahd “sought to bolster the legitimacy of the ruling family”, which had been directly challenged by the al-Utaybi led rebels, “by appropriating the power of Islam.”[10] The kingdom proceeded to undermine domestic critics by co-opting them. The result was the inculcation of the public sphere with an austere religious message. In the 1980s, the regime further empowered religious

institutions by expanding the purview of the *mutawwa`*, or religious police, to patrol and monitor behavior. It also expanded the network of *madrasas* and universities, which “fostered a new generation of sheikhs, professors and students,” leading to a widespread Islamic resurgence.[11]

In addition to its pervasive affect on social and cultural networks in the kingdom, particularly the proliferation of religion in all aspects of public life, the regime’s decision to refashion its Islamic credentials and promote religiosity also produced political effects. The process of politicization followed two tracks. Both laid the roots for what has become a generation of religio-political dissent and even violent extremism in the kingdom. First, the regime encouraged religious leaders to recruit *mujahideen* for the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan. Thousands of jihadis traveled to Central Asia. And thousands returned to the Peninsula at the conclusion of the war. The legacy of the jihad, particularly the belief that Islam was a powerful political tool that had vanquished a global superpower had a profound impact, leading to well-known consequences such as the radicalization of Osama bin Laden and his adherents. The politicization of Islam also occurred in more subtle yet profound ways, producing wide-ranging if unintended consequences. In particular, in seeking to re-forge its conservative religious credentials the regime sought to cultivate relations with, and provided succor to, a generation of *ulema* who would prove controversial and politically contentious.

The *al-sahwa al-islamiyya* (Islamic awakening) in Saudi Arabia, which first emerged in the 1960s, rose to prominence in the 1980s after the regime turned to its members in an effort to bolster its Islamic credentials.[12] Initially the members of the *sahwa* eschewed political ambition for themselves and avoided infringing on the affairs of the state, although they were certainly interested in the strengthening of the regime’s theocratic elements. They would not remain on the sidelines, however. Gilles Kepel notes that “in allowing the ideologues of the “awakening” to speak out publicly and proselytize openly during the 1980s, the royal family had hoped that this fringe group of radicals, mostly students, would fall in line with the dynasty’s interests. The doctrinal foundations on which the *sahwa* rested, however, made such an alliance impossible.”[13] The *sahwa`ulema* did not occupy official positions of power. They also did not replace the official religious establishment. Yet, they garnered considerable influence and power as a result of the regime’s decision to pour money into religious institutions in the decade that followed. “The unintentional result was to strengthen the *sahwa*, which used its strong presence in the educational sector to take advantage of the increased funds” creating in them a surrogate for the establishment and bestowing on them a kind of quasi-official status, a rank that would both embolden them and lead to their demise, at least temporarily.[14]

The Saudi regime’s decision to rely on American military forces during the 1990-91 Gulf War to defend the Peninsula against potential Iraqi aggression radicalized the leading figures of the *sahwa*, particularly the two clerics who have come to be known as the movement’s chief activists and ideologues, Salman al-Awdah and Safar al-Hawali.[15] They gained widespread popularity criticizing the regime by circulating taped audiocassettes of their fiery sermons around the kingdom. Their radicalization was further fueled by the emergence of more liberal minded dissidents, who called on the regime to embark on an ambitious political reform program, one that would open both the political and social fields to more diverse actors and thinking. With competing calls for the reform of the political system—the liberals petitioned for a more open system, while the *sahwa* implored for its complete Islamicisation—the regime responded by partially placating the former, cracking down on the latter, and attempting to outmaneuver both.[16]

By the middle of the 1990s, al-Awdah and al-Hawali, along with many others, had pushed too hard. The regime arrested both of the popular preachers in 1994 and detained them for five years, releasing them in 1999. The year also marked the passing of the face of the religious establishment Shaykh Abd al-Aziz bin Baz. Although not always highly popular, it was bin Baz that issued a fatwa legitimizing the presence of American forces in 1990, he did enjoy a considerable following and credibility.[17] Since the death of the charismatic bin Baz in 1999 and

his successor bin al-Uthayman in 2001 the establishment clerics have lost much of their popular support. In the last four years have the post-imprisoned *sahwa* clerics, building on the credibility and legitimacy they garnered in the 1990s as critics of the regime, have in the eyes of many Saudis superseded the official religious establishment with regard to religious authority. Although they enjoy a wider following, the *sahwa* have for now moderated their former positions. The International Crisis Group noted in 2004 that “[Salman] al-Awdah, [Awadh] al-Qarni, and [Safar] al-Hawali, all former *sahwa* leaders, toned down their criticism of the state, and the regime began to view them more tolerantly. Indeed, with the official religious establishment largely discredited, *sahwist* cooperation was considered highly valuable by rulers in desperate need of religious legitimacy.”[18]

## Dissent, Partnership—or Both?

The role of the *sahwa* in the current political order is complex. At various times, its members can be said to be both supporters and critics of the regime—a remarkable accomplishment considering both the short leash given by the ruling family to dissenters as well as some of the clerics’ personal history of anti-regime political activism. Since September 11 prominent non-establishment *‘ulema* have been outspoken in their defense of the Kingdom and their condemnation of militancy. Ironically, the *sahwa*, who had established themselves as the first line of dissent against the regime in the 1990s, were replaced by a more virulent brand of jihadi-centric clerics, who declared rivals as well as those they determined reluctant to support the global jihad as *takfir* (apostates). The *takfiri* shaykhs included Shaykh Shuaybi, Nasr al-Fahd, Ali al-Khudayr, and Ahmed al-Khalidi. The latter three were arrested in the fall 2003 after the bombing of a residential compound in Riyadh for their regular support of the jihad. They gained widespread attention for subsequently appearing on Saudi television and renouncing their support for militancy.[19]

On May 17, 2003—five days after the first al Qaeda strike against residential compounds in Riyadh—fifty clerics, including al-Awdah, al-Hawali and other prominent members of the *sahwa*, signed a statement condemning the May 12 attacks. One observer noted ironically that pre-9/11 radicals had become reformists.[20] The *sahwa*’s public support for the regime as well as its condemnations of both violence and other political dissent has continued in various forms after the Kingdom came under criticism in the wake of September 11 and then direct fire in 2003. Shaykh Safar al-Hawali, for example, offered on several occasions in 2003 and 2004 to mediate between Saudi based militants and the regime, exhorting the former to surrender to the authorities in exchange for limited amnesty. Al-Hawali’s efforts have been doctrinal as well, as he has criticized the religious justifications offered by al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula for their jihad.[21]

More recent efforts are particularly illustrative of the clerics’ activism on behalf of the regime. In December 2004 thirty five *‘ulema*, including Salman al-Awdah and Ayidh al-Qarni, signed a statement denouncing efforts by the London based Saudi exile and political dissident Saad al-Faqih to organize demonstrations and civil disobedience targeting the government. Although he did not sign the statement, Safar al-Hawali distributed his own lengthy harangue condemning demonstrations and any activities that threatened disorder. Al-Faqih, who has lived in exile since the mid-1990s, has long sought the overthrow of the al-Saud. In the early 1990s he was a founding member of an early Islamist dissident organization, the Committee for the Defense of Legitimate Rights, which operated in conjunction with al-Awdah and al-Hawali’s criticisms of the regime. As a result of recent criticism of al-Faqih, there is considerable tension between the adherents of al-Faqih’s *Harakatal-Islah* (The Reform Movement), who are able to follow and support al-Faqih through a popular internet discussion forum or via a live satellite radio broadcast that can be heard in the Kingdom, and the *sahwa* shaykhs.[22] In response to the attack on the Ministry of the Interior in Riyadh in late December 2004, forty-one clerics issued a statement on Salman al-Awdah’s Islam Today website on January 15, 2005 warning against actions and discourse that target the regime. Using language similar to that of previous statements, the clerics

warned against any activity that threatened the security, stability, and the unity of the country. They also remarked that bombings and destruction in the name of religion “distorts the image of Islam and increases the reasons for attacks on places of worship and the prescriptions of Islamic Law.”<sup>[23]</sup>

The *ulema*'s support for the regime is not unconditional. They remain controversial, provocative and confrontational. The *sahwa* have consistently agitated against the regime's close relationship with the United States as well as what they perceive to be aggression against religious beliefs and rituals in the Kingdom.<sup>[24]</sup> Deep distrust of American foreign policy and the suspicion that the U.S. seeks to remold Saudi religious institutions and relationships in its own image form the substance of a popular anti-Americanism and sermonizing against Westernization. While anger and cynicism regarding the U.S. has led to criticism of Saudi domestic liberal reformers as well as reform efforts that are deemed to West-oriented, direct anger with the U.S. as well as its close relationship with the Saudi regime has manifested in conflicts that have little to do with reform. In fact, there are indications that several members of the *sahwa* are willing to cooperate with aspects of reform, including sitting down with Shiites.<sup>[25]</sup> Since the beginning of the Iraq war, however, it is an anti-U.S. policy platform that frames much of their politics, and, that has created tension between them and the Saudi regime.

In November 5, 2004, on the eve of the U.S. siege on the Iraqi city of Falluja, 26 Saudi clerics, including both al-Awdah and al-Hawali, signed an “open letter to the Iraqi people” that called for Iraqis to join in a defensive jihad against the U.S. military occupation. The *fatwa* has received considerable attention, although little analysis, let alone consideration of its significance in the Saudi domestic political arena. The fatwa made the case for violence against U.S. forces in Iraq, noting that “jihad against the occupation was mandatory for those who were able.” For those unable to participate themselves, the statement did forbid “harming any member of the resistance,” which the clerics did not bother to define, as well as forbidding “any Muslim from providing support or assistance to military operations on behalf of the occupying soldiers.” The *fatwa* has widely been interpreted as an endorsement of Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi and his operations in Iraq. This is unlikely. The statement unequivocally condemned all Muslim-on-Muslim violence as unjustifiable and determined that strikes against non-military targets were harmful to the interests of Iraqis and Muslims everywhere. The statement even called for Shiites and Sunnis in Iraq to work together in confronting the forces of the occupation, contradicting Zarqawi's very public appeal for sectarian war as well as some of the signatories' own past violently anti-Shiite discourse. While the signatories made clear that opposition to the occupation was necessary, they also made clear that it was time for more constructive activities as well. They wrote “the country is now forming—those who are pioneers will be influential, especially if they perfect their management, practical courage, and organized institutional efforts. This is why schools, mosques and other means should be used to guide the people to rely on other media, news, radio stations, satellite stations, newspapers, magazines, lectures and seminars that are based on truthful beliefs and an understanding without bias—personal or partisan—and are detached from narrow loyalties and short-sighted views, detached from sectarian factioning that will lead to fragmentation, quarrels and fighting.”<sup>[26]</sup> The statement did not exhort Saudis or Muslims from outside Iraq to travel there to fight the Americans, although they did vaguely encourage “our Muslim brothers to stand by their brothers in Iraq by...supporting them as much as possible.” Nevertheless, while the November 2004 *fatwa* was not an endorsement of al Qaeda, it was also not a reflection of a moderate political position. It clearly demonstrated that both jihad and other violence were justified within certain boundaries and especially against the U.S. and its interests, a position constituting a real dilemma for the royal family.

Interestingly, the position of *sahwa* clerics was not uncontested inside Saudi Arabia. The publication of the fatwa on Salman al-Awdah's website also coincided with a series of daily newspaper columns written by another Saudi cleric, Abd al-Mohsen al-`Ubaykan. On the pages of the Arabic language London based daily *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, Al-`Ubaykan wrote throughout Ramadan that the anti-occupation violence in Iraq was not jihad and could not be justified on

religious grounds. Another columnist for the paper, Husayn Shubakshi, who was fired from his post in a local Saudi paper in 2003 for criticizing the forces of conservatism in the Kingdom, wrote that al-Ubaykan was an “Islamic star”. In a November 10, 2004 column in *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, Shubakshi proclaimed that for Saudi readers to “vote for al-`Ubaykan!” for his Islamist activism in the print and television media.[27] Al-`Ubaykan’s efforts invited scorn from supporters of hardliners, as evidenced by scathing commentary found on various Islamist websites, including that of Saad al-Faqih. He was widely pilloried for what was perceived as favoring the U.S. in its struggle against Muslims. It is unclear if the twenty-six supporters of the jihad *fatwa* were directly criticizing al-`Ubaykan and his stand, although they did warn against the issuing of “confusing fatawa” that distracted from the defense of Islam—just vague and broad enough to mean anybody.

While the *sahwa* may not have resolutely supported al Qaeda and terrorism, they are nevertheless walking a knife-edge. Their continued support for jihad in Iraq and elsewhere against the U.S. puts them in direct opposition to the royal family and the Saudi regime itself, which fashions itself a strong ally of America. Their continued hard-line has certainly been interpreted in the U.S. as providing tacit if not direct succor for militants. There are suggestions that the *sahwa*, particularly al-Hawali and al-Awdah, condemn terrorism at home while supporting it abroad in order to garner both support from the Saudi state and the Saudi people.[28] The reality is that they need not appeal to al Qaeda outside the Kingdom to garner political support when their outspoken anti-American position has so much public appeal and resonance. It is precisely on this point, however, that they part ways with the regime, threaten its alliances and perhaps invite future trouble. The “jihad *fatwa*”, when read in the context of the Saudi domestic political arena, reads as a direct criticism of the Saudi state’s close relationship with the United States. It is this strategic relationship which has in the past divided the *sahwa* and government camps and which could drive a wedge between them again. For now, the two camps continue to forge a strategy of co-existence if not total mutual support. The clerics believe that the continued survival of the royal family is in the best interest of stability in the Kingdom as well as a providing them renewed power to spread their religious message. It is a fragile peace at best, however.

Disturbingly, the issuing of the jihad *fatwa*, as well as subsequent statements about political activities in the kingdom including those that support the regime, mark the increasing politicization of the *sahwa*. For the most part, since the release of al-Awdah and al-Hawali from prison in 1999, their activities focused on social and religious affairs. The intensification of their writings and public commentary on foreign and domestic politics in 2003 and especially in the second half of 2004 is potentially ominous, however. If the clerics continue to grow emboldened and wield an anti-U.S. agenda to expand their base of support, they will come to believe that they are both able and entitled to influence the political future of the kingdom from a position of leadership, rather than partnership. They do not and likely will not directly threaten the interests of the United States in Saudi Arabia or in the Middle East. However, from their support for jihad does help perpetuate an atmosphere of frustration and anger. It also distracts the royal family from dealing with urgent domestic issues having to do with political reform. More importantly, while the royal family no doubt appreciates the *sahwa*’s efforts to support the regime against both internal and external political pressures, it will view with suspicion the efforts of *sahwa* leaders to expand their own influence by addressing domestic politics and, in particular, the Kingdom’s strategic relationship with the United States.

## A United Front?

On matters related to foreign policy, especially their renunciation of what they characterize as American aggression against Islam as well as the repudiation of Islamist militants and the threat they pose to stability inside the Kingdom and out, the *sahwa* clerics stand united. There are important divergences when it comes to domestic politics, however. They agree that the *ulema*’s control over religious matters, such as education and gender affairs, should remain undisputed. In response to domestic stirrings in late 2003 that the Saudi educational system needed reform, for

example, the clerics issued a statement challenging any effort to re-shape local schools and the educational curricula, particularly efforts to Westernize it. The clerics also agree that Islam should remain the central framework for political life in the Kingdom.

On other matters, particularly those related to the supporting of pluralism and acknowledging diversity in the Kingdom, there is less unity or coherence in the *sahwa's* position. Salman al-Awdah, for example, attended National Dialogue meetings in 2003 and is even said to have reportedly tacitly supported the December 2003 reform petition signed by other members of the *sahwa* calling for the creation of a Constitutional Monarchy.<sup>[29]</sup> Perhaps even more notable given the vehemence with which members of the *sahwa* have previously condemned Shiites as infidels, even calling for nothing short of ethnic cleansing against them in the past, al-Awdah met personally with the Shiite cleric Shaykh Hassan al-Saffar in 2003. Ayidh al-Qarni, another prominent supporter of the *sahwa*, visited Shiite communities and leaders in the Eastern Province in 2004. Not surprisingly, he endured some rancor and the venting of years of frustration from Shia citizens angry about years of hate-speech targeting them. Even so, the visit was symbolic and signified that there are possibilities of coexistence in Saudi Arabia.<sup>[30]</sup> When asked about whether he believed in the sincerity of al-Awdah's and al-Qarni's softened line, one Shia community leader told me in February 2005 that at the very least he was happy that some of the clerics had stopped the vicious ethnic and religious attacks. But, caution rules in the Shiite communities, particularly since key *sahwa* figures such as al-Hawali specifically refuse to participate in any dialogue with the Saudi Shia.<sup>[31]</sup>

Differences regarding the Shia are only one sign that there is limited uniformity in the *sahwa* camp. Gilles Kepel noted that al-Awdah and al-Hawali started to go their separate ways as early as 1999, particularly as al-Awdah sought to improve his standing with the royal family. He "presented a new profile intended to make him appear suitable to occupy the space left empty by the deaths of Bin Baz and Bin Uthayman."<sup>[32]</sup> Moreover, Safar al-Hawali's reluctance to meet with Saudi Shiites reflects his deeper ambivalence about the Saudi reform project altogether. Al-Hawali continues to adhere to the line he developed in his 1986 Ph.D. dissertation that sovereignty belongs to God alone—a challenge both to the idea that Saudi citizens should enjoy more participation in governance as well as to the royal family itself.

The differences between al-Awdah and al-Hawali are not insignificant. Al-Hawali in particular is threatening to the current political balance, considering his more reserved approach to the domestic political changes underway as well as his closer relations with militants in the kingdom. Their differences, however, are not enough to unsettle the powerful convictions they share regarding the U.S., its policy in the region, and inside the kingdom, especially when U.S. interests threaten the power of the *sahwa* and its members' grip on religious authority. In the current political climate inside Saudi Arabia, it is precisely their position regarding the U.S. that provides them with credibility and power. It is also this position that most seriously threatens the government, which continues to struggle to formulate an earnest reform program that does not alienate its religious partners. For the moment, it is difficult to discern who is beholden to whom, the *sahwa* to the state or vice-versa. It is clear, though, that the relationship is precarious and that the future of politics in the kingdom hinges to a great extent on how it develops. Should the more moderate amongst the *sahwa* find support and space to evolve, there is reason to hope that a temperate form of Islamism can take root and help stabilize Saudi Arabia. Unfortunately, the opposite is also entirely possible.

## About the Author

Toby Jones, Gulf Analyst for the International Crisis Group, has written previously on Saudi Arabia and domestic politics for *Middle East Report* and the *Daily Star*. He wrote this article in his personal capacity.



For more insights into contemporary international security issues, see our [Strategic Insights](#) home page.

To have new issues of *Strategic Insights* delivered to your Inbox at the beginning of each month, email [ccc@nps.edu](mailto:ccc@nps.edu) with subject line "Subscribe". There is no charge, and your address will be used for no other purpose.

## References

1. Noted mostly by the arrest of several prominent liberals and by a much more guarded approach to the opening of the political system by the ruling family. There has been speculation, including from this author, that it is internal divisions in the family that has fostered the recent paralysis with some family members seeking to slow any changes that might loosen their grip on power. To some extent this is true, but is probably overstated. See Greg Gause's letter to the editor, "[Keeping it in the Family](#)," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2004.
2. Richard Dekmejian, "[The Liberal Impulse in Saudi Arabia](#)," *Middle East Journal*, Vol 57, No 3, Summer 2003; James Russell, "[In Defense of the Nation': Terror and Reform in Saudi Arabia](#)," *Strategic Insights*, Volume II, Issue 10, October 2003; Toby Jones, "[Seeking a 'Social Contract' in Saudi Arabia](#)", *Middle East Report* (228), fall 2003; Michael Scott Doran, "[The Saudi Paradox](#)," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2004; Greg Gause, "[How to Save Saudi Arabia](#)," *Foreign Policy*, September/October 2004; Stephane Lacroix, "[Between Islamists and Liberals: Saudi Arabia's New 'Islam Liberal' Reformists](#)," *Middle East Journal*, Vol 58, No 3, Summer 2004; Gilles Kepel, *The War for Muslim Minds: Islam and the West*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Gwenn Okruhlik, "Empowering Civility Through Nationalism: Reformist Islam and Belonging in Saudi Arabia," in *Remaking Muslim Politics: Pluralism, Contestation, Democratization*, ed Robert W. Hefner, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 189-212.; International Crisis Group, "[Can Saudi Arabia Reform Itself?](#)," *Middle East Report N°28*, July 14, 2004.
3. Anthony Cordesmann and Nawaf Obaid, "[Al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia: Asymmetric Threats and Islamic Extremists](#)," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, January 26, 2005.
4. Lacroix, [Op. Cit.](#)
5. Toby Jones, "[Violence and the Illusion of Reform](#)," in *Middle East Report Online*, November 13, 2003.
6. Known widely as Wahhabis, the official clergy traces its roots to the 18 th century religious ideologue Muhammad ibn `Abd al-Wahhab, from whom they derive the modern moniker. There is a diverse unofficial clergy in the kingdom, whose variety merits further study. Members of the non-establishment `ulama have variously rejected the legitimacy of the regime, opposed it openly, or acknowledged it. Some of the most prominent religious figures, such as Muhammad Qutb and Abdallah Azzam, have their roots outside the Arabian Peninsula and came to the kingdom in the course of the 20th century, often as a result of persecution or pressure in their home countries. The regime has responded in varying ways to both foreign and domestic born `ulama, welcoming those who did not pose a significant political threat while driving others into exile.
7. 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*, (Brill, 1978).
8. Joshua Teitelbaum, "Holier Than Thou: Saudi Arabia's Islamic Opposition," *Policy Papers no. 52* (Washington: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2000), 10-11.

9. *Ibid.*, 12.

10. Gwenn Okruhlik, "Empowering Civility Through Nationalism," 194.

11. Okruhlik writes that "by 1986, over 16,000 of the kingdom's 100,000 students were pursuing Islamic Studies. By the early 1990s, one-fourth of all university students were enrolled in religious institutions. They had ideas and resources: intellectuals, computers, fax machines, libraries and everything necessary for mobilization. This generation of students serves as bureaucrats, policemen, mutawwa, shari`ah (religious law) judges, or preachers in some twenty thousand mosques in the country." *Op. Cit.*, 195.

12. The International Crisis Group wrote that "the young *sahwa* Islamists espoused a blend of the traditional Wahhabi outlook (mainly on social issues) and the more contemporary Muslim Brotherhood approach (especially on political issues). They distinguished themselves from the Wahhabi establishment by their willingness to discuss issues of contemporary significance rather than concentrate on abstract theological debates," in "[Saudi Arabia Backgrounder: Who are the Islamists?](#)," *ICG Middle East Report N°31*, September 21, 2004.

13. Gilles Kepel, *The War for Muslim Minds: Islam and the West*, Translated by Pascale Ghazaleh (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 182. Kepel notes that Safar al-Hawali, who earned his doctorate in 1986, levied his first oblique political critique of the regime in his dissertation in which he explored the familiar *salafi* argument that sovereignty (*hakamiyya*) is Allah's alone, implying that the Saudi regime had failed to follow His will.

14. ICG, [Op. Cit.](#), 2.

15. See Mamoun Fandy, *Saudi Arabia and the Politics of Dissent*, (New York: Palgrave, 1999). Gwenn Okruhlik has argued that the *sahwa* created a dangerous crisis of legitimacy for both the regime and the establishment `ulama during the Gulf War, when "the alternative clergy wrote fatwas ...that contested the fatwa of the official clergy and provided reasons to prohibit the stationing of US troops on Saudi Arabian soil. The alternative fatwas drew wider public support than did the official fatwa." See "[Understanding Political Dissent in Saudi Arabia](#)," *Middle East Report Online*, October 24, 2001.

16. Saudi rulers did implement some important although arguable cosmetic institutional reforms in 1992 when it issued the Basic Law, the kingdom's first codified statement of laws and regulation, and founded the Majlis al-Shura, an advisory body that enjoys little real and no legislative authority. These changes were intended to appease the more moderate reformers. The regime also named Shaykh Abd al-Aziz bin Baz, a one-time controversial figure, as Grand Mufti and assigned him a ministerial post in 1993, a signal that they were aiming to shore up religious support from quarters other than the *sahwa*. See Teitelbaum, *Holier Than Thou*, 101-107.

17. He was also a somewhat troublesome figure for the regime throughout the 1990s, as he bordered on dissent himself, particularly his implicit support for the *sahwa* and their ideas. See Teitelbaum, *Holier Than Thou* for an excellent discussion of the tensions between bin Baz and the regime in the mid to late 1990s. bin Baz's *fatawa*, including several commenting on the *sahwa* in the early 1990s, are available on-line at <http://www.binbaz.org.sa/tree.asp?t=bab4>.

18. ICG, [Op. Cit.](#), 7.

19. Their interviews and statements can be found at <http://www.murajaat.com/>.

20. Okruhlik, *Op. Cit.*, 204-05. She notes that “many Saudis charge that some of the former radicals turned reformists have come full circle, and are now simply co-opted by the government and have become a tool of the regime. Because some individuals appear to be opportunists, it is unclear what role they will play in Saudi political development.”

21. Shaykh Faris al-Zahrani, an al-Qaeda ideologue, issued a statement rejecting an amnesty offer made by the regime in the summer 2004. Al-Hawali played a prominent role in attempting to broker negotiations, although the amnesty offer yielded few results. In a written statement Al-Zahrani challenged al-Hawali to debate theological foundation for jihad in the Arabian Peninsula.

22. Al-Faqih’s website can be found at [www.yaislah.com](http://www.yaislah.com).

23. See petition at [www.islamtoday.com](http://www.islamtoday.com).

24. The May 17, 2003 statement condemning the Riyadh bombings also condemned “hateful” American policies against Saudi Arabia and Muslim communities around the world.

25. See ICG, *Op. Cit.*

26. English translation from [www.globalterroralert.net](http://www.globalterroralert.net).

27. *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, November 10, 2004.

28. See Michael Scott Doran, “[The Iraq Effect?](#)”, *The Wall Street Journal*, December 11, 2004.

29. ICG, *Op. Cit.*

30. It would be wrong to conclude that al-Awdah is fully committed to coexistence. In 2003 he condemned the killing of Baqir al-Hakim, the former head of SCIRI, in Iraq. In early 2004 he issued a statement blasting regional Shia leaders, particularly the marja`iyya, for not denouncing inflammatory remarks made by a Kuwaiti Shia religious figure regarding Abu Bakr and `Umar, the Prophet Muhammad’s two immediate successors and the source of great theological friction between Sunnis and Shiites. Al-Awdah claimed that the failure of Shia leaders to condemn the statement represented a threat to coexistence and worked against setting aside old animosities.

31. It is notable that al-Hawali signed the November 26, 2004 *fatwa* on jihad Iraq that specifically called for unity between Shias and Sunnis. He has made no indication that he believes the same should be true in Saudi Arabia, but the precedent could be important.

32. Kepel, *Op. Cit.*, 188.