

# **The Ontological (In)security of Similarity**

## **Wahhabism versus Islamism in Saudi Foreign Policy<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

It has long been argued that identity matters in international relations. Yet, how identity impacts enmity and conflict among states remains the subject of debate. The existing literature asserts that differences in identity can be a source of conflict whereas convergence and similarity lead to cooperation. Nevertheless, empirical evidence from the Middle East has long defied this hypothesis. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which prides itself on being an Islamic model and claims Islamic leadership, has opposed the rise to power of Islamist movements in the Middle East. To address this paradox, this article builds on the growing literature on ontological security to propose a theoretical framework explaining how similarity can generate anxiety and identity risks. This framework, I argue, moves beyond traditional regime security approaches to reveal that security is not only physical but also ontological. I then illustrate the argument through a comparison of Saudi identity risks in the wake of the Iranian revolution (1979) and the ascendance of the Muslim Brotherhood to power in Egypt (2012). Ultimately, these cases provide intriguing insights into foreign policy behaviour during critical situations.

**Key words:** ontological security, anxiety, identity, distinctiveness, similarity

### **Introduction**

It has long been argued that identity matters in international relations. Yet, how identity impact enmity and conflict among states remains an issue of debate. The existing literature asserts that differences in identity and culture can be a source of conflict, whereas convergence and similarity can lead to cooperation (Horowitz 1995; Huntington 1993, 1996). Likewise, thin constructivism in International Relations (IR)

posits that states will identify positively with those with a similar identity (Wendt 1999). As Haas (2003, 36) argues, ‘the greater the ideological similarities among states’ leaders, the more likely they will view one another’s interests as complementary, and thus the greater the incentives pushing these individuals to form an alliance’. Nevertheless, empirical evidence from the Middle East has long defied this hypothesis. As Walt (1987, 170) observes in his study of alliances in the region, ‘certain ideologies are more a source of division than of unity, even though the ideology explicitly prescribes close cooperation among the adherents’. Pan-Islamism, which overtly aims to overcome national territorial differences, has paradoxically been a source of fragmentation and division.<sup>2</sup>

This article extends upon, and goes beyond, the existing literature to argue that similarities in identity can be a source of conflict and enmity. Largely based on the adaptation of ‘ontological security’ to IR theory (McSweeney 1999; Mitzen 2006; Steele 2005, 2008), this article proposes a theoretical framework to explain how similarity can generate anxiety. Building on the assumption that states have a basic need for ontological security, which refers to ‘the need to experience oneself as a whole’ (Mitzen 2006, 342), I argue that security is enforced through a stable conception of self-identity. The essence of such a conception of self-identity is the distinctiveness of the self vis-à-vis the other. Accordingly, critical situations leading to the erosion of such distinctiveness trigger anxiety and insecurity, as regimes’ identities become equivocal. As a reactionary imperative, actors attempt to restore a secure self-identity through two mechanisms: counter-framing the other in a demonizing manner and reinventing a new self-other distinction. This argument is illustrated through a close comparative examination of Saudi foreign policy in 1979 and 2012.

Despite its pan-Islamic nature, the Islamic revolution in Iran was perceived as a threat to the Saudi Kingdom, a monarchy which itself asserted a broad pan-Islamic identity. This anti-Iranian stance was often couched in sectarian terms, with the Kingdom defining its identity as 'Sunni' vis-à-vis a 'Shiite' other. Following the 2011 Arab uprisings, the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and its political offshoot the Freedom and Justice Party in Egypt brought up several uncertainties within the Saudi royal elite, who could not hide their relief at the Brotherhood's quick downfall a year later. The Saudi reactions to the ascendance of this Sunni movement to power in Egypt went beyond the conventional sectarian polarization in the region to reveal a fundamental truth: the rise of any Islamic regime with a pan-Islamic vocation is a considerable source of anxiety to the Kingdom. This article addresses the resulting puzzle: why did Saudi Arabia, a monarchy that prides itself on its compliance with Islam, controvert the specifications of the proper enactment of its pan-Islamic identity instead of embracing its principles? Why and how can identity similarity foster conflict rather than inclusiveness and cooperation?

Conventional explanations of Saudi foreign policy are divided between instrumentalist approach to identity, on the one hand, and sectarian accounts, on the other hand. Based on an adapted realism to Third World countries, scholars argue that authoritarian regimes are first and foremost driven by a quest for survival (David 1991; Mufti 1996; Telhami 1999). This instrumentalist approach claims that regime identities are seen as tools in the hands of leaders to fend off domestic or external threats to their survival. Scholars then look at the material interests of actors in propping sectarian divides, e.g. Sunni versus Shiite and Salafi-Wahhabi versus Muslim Brotherhood. Sectarian accounts, on the other hand, provided a primordial account based on Sunni-Shiite divide in the case of Iran or intra-Sunni divides in the case of the MB. These

primordial accounts analyse these identities as the core of the conflict in the region that reaches back to the 7<sup>th</sup> century and, hence, these identities continue to drive the politics of the region today. Sectarianism emerges as a kind of inevitable conflict between two clearly defined religious sects, much similar to the way ethnicity was analysed in relations to the conflicts in the Balkans in the 1990s (Abdo 2013; e.g. Nasr 2006).

Whereas explanations of Saudi foreign policy tended to be trapped by either instrumentalist or primordial approaches to identity, I argue here that ontological security provides a fruitful third position. Looking at identity narratives through the ontological security lens provides novel interpretations and explanations of events, for which material explanations failed to account. Realist falls short of explaining why Saudi Arabia perceived military weakened Iran as a threat in 1979. Also, why Egypt of the MB, suffering domestic turmoil and economic hardship, was source of fear to the Kingdom is another challenge to materialist explanations. This article largely moves beyond the existing literature to argue that the Kingdom not only feels that its physical security is threatened but identity risks could be the drive behind some foreign policy choices. Moreover, an ontological security lens provides insights to understand the policy implications of identity narrowing. In the process of forcing the Saudi uniqueness and distinctiveness, and restoring ontological security, the redefined regime identity ironically became a handicap for Riyadh's regional ambitions. A Salafi-Wahhabi identity, an inherently exclusionary narrative, lacks the necessary openness and the collective vision to support the role of a potential leader in the region (Richter 2014, 185–186).

Based on an ontological security interpretation, this article attempts to explain how the Islamic revolution in Iran and the rise of the MB in Egypt developed into a risk for the Saudi regime's identity. By comparing the Saudi foreign policy discourse towards

Iran in 1979 with that towards the MB in 2012, I argue that in both cases the self-identity of the Kingdom was threatened as its source of distinctiveness was eroded. Consequently, the Kingdom responded with the two mechanisms noted above to restore its identity security. In the case of the Islamic revolution in Iran, Saudi Arabia streamlined its own identity from that of a champion of the pan-Islamist discourse to being the leader of the Sunni world. In the case of the MB, the Kingdom further reduced its identity to portray itself as upholding a Salafi Wahhabi narrative, an offshoot of the Sunni tradition. The correlations between these critical situations and Saudi identity narrowing confirm this article's hypothesis: identity similarity causes anxiety and ontological insecurity.

To explicate this argument, the article proceeds as follows: First, I examine the concept of ontological security and develop a theoretical framework to explain why, and the conditions under which, similarity generates anxiety and insecurity. Second, I examine the case of the Iranian revolution and the threat it posed to the Saudi regime, and how the regime reduced its identity and reacted with a Sunni-versus-Shiite discourse. Third, I discuss the Saudi reaction to the rise of the MB in Egypt and how the Kingdom narrowed its identity to Salafi-Wahhabism to face this challenge.

## **1. ONTOLOGICAL (IN)SECURITY: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The emphasis on cultural and ideational factors as determinants of conflict and cooperation among states has emerged as a major trend in IR theory since the end of the Cold War. Huntington's (1993) famous argument about the clash of civilizations postulates that conflicts would erupt around cultural divides. He clearly claims that 'in this new world order (...) the most persuasive, important, and dangerous conflicts (...) will (...) be between peoples belonging to different cultural entities' (1996, 28). Some

scholars not only drew correlations between identity difference and enmity but also considered difference to be a major driver of conflict. Horowitz (1995) contends that group differences, highlighted by the lack of common identity denominators, are a factor in ethnic conflicts. Saideman (2001) suggests that states get involved in ethnic conflict based on identity affinities; they intervene to support the side of the conflict with which their constituents share an ethnicity. Also, social constructivists in IR asserted that a sense of shared identity eliminates the perception of threat, which is in turn likely to increase the probability of interstate cooperation (Hopf 2002; Wendt 1999).

Only few scholars opposed this trend, claiming that shared ties can be the most decisive in generating conflict and enmity. Axelrod (1997) suggests that convergence among individuals or groups can lead to division and divergence. The factors that create common identities—such as pan-Arabism, pan-Islamism, or a European identity—can lead to an increased perception of difference. Based on a quantitative analysis, Gartzke and Gleditsch (2006) also find that conflict is more likely among culturally similar states than among culturally dissimilar ones.<sup>3</sup> Although these few attempts cast doubt on identity similarity as a source of cooperation only, our knowledge of why and how identity similarity can be a source of conflict among states remains very limited. This section thus develops a theoretical framework based on ontological security to address this gap.

Why does similarity threaten actors? Why do states need to assert a distinctive self-identity? The answer, I argue, lies in the intricate ontological-security need of states to have a distinctive and consistent sense of self and to have that sense affirmed by others. Some IR scholars have aimed to transfer the concept of ‘ontological security’, coined by the psychiatrist R.D. Laing, from the individual to the state level.<sup>4</sup> For Laing, an

ontologically secure individual is one with a firm 'sense of integral selfhood and personal identity'. The concept was further developed in Giddens' structuration theory (1984, 1991). He defines ontological security as 'the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action' (1991, 92). Such a sense of self is reflected in agents' behaviour. As Mitzen (2006, 344) argues, 'ontological security is security not of the body but of the self, the subjective sense of who one is, which enables and motivates action and choice'. In other words, agents choose a course of action that conforms to their self-identity.

Accordingly, and in contrast to realist accounts, where security and survival are achieved through the accumulation of military capabilities, actors also engage in ontological security-seeking behaviour to affirm their self-identity, which provides them with 'a sense of continuity and order in events' (Giddens 1991, 243). Hence, ontological security involves the ability to 'experience oneself as a whole (...) in order to realize a sense of agency' (Mitzen 2006, 342). In other words, individuals need to feel secure in who they are, as they see themselves and as they want to be seen by others. As Giddens claims, 'to be ontologically secure is to possess (...) answers to fundamental existential questions which all human life in some way addresses' (Giddens 1991, 47). This claim suggests that 'insecurity' means that individuals are confused about who they are and uncomfortable with their identity in social interactions with others (Steele 2005, 525).

But how do states acquire this sense of self? The sources of ontological security are the subject of contention among scholars. On the one hand, Steele (2008) argues that ontological security is couched in a state's intrinsic narrative about the self. From this

perspective, this sense of self enables the state to process its environment and build sustainable relationships with others. However, other scholars argue that a state's sense of self is based on social interaction with others. As Mitzen (2006, 354) argues, the state's identity is 'constituted and sustained by social relationships rather than being intrinsic'. In this regard, the sense of self is only reinforced and distinguished through sustainable interactions with others.

Drawing on this contentious debate, Zarakol (2010, 19) has sought a middle ground but arguing that both are 'partly right'. As Kinvall states (2004, 749), 'internalized self-notions can never be separated from self/other representations and are always responsive to new inter-personal relationships'. I, therefore, argue that the exogenous and endogenous sources of ontological security are inextricably interrelated. As identity refers to 'the image of individuality and distinctiveness (selfhood) held and projected by an actor' (Jepperson, Wendt, and Katzenstein 1996, 95), the sense of self acquires meaning not only through the actor's distinctive personal characters but also through the uniqueness of this narrative from the other. On the one hand, self-identity is affirmed at the self-versus-other nexus. In other words, distinctiveness 'can only be established by difference, by drawing a line between something and something else' (Nabers 2009, 195).

On the other hand, the self-identity and its narrative do not originate in the interaction with others. Actors extract their self-identity from their own characters. Taking the example of Saudi Arabia, as will be demonstrated in the empirical section, identity was framed and reframed as a result of the interaction with similar others. Nevertheless, the new definition of the self emerged from a 'menu of identities' embedded in the Kingdom's reflexive understanding of the self. In sum, ontological



security emerges from that nexus of actor's understanding of the self and the interaction with others.

To demonstrate this argument, I develop a theoretical framework, which explicates how this need for distinctiveness renders similar identities threatening. The approach to study ontological security is often characterized as 'interpretivist' driven by understanding the intersubjective understanding of social actions as opposed to 'positivism' relying on causality in explaining actor's behaviour (e.g. Steele 2008, 6–7). This interpretivist approach evaluates the context in which self-identity narratives are created and the internal dialectic of the Self as opposed to the Other. In the below theoretical framework, I here argue that combining an interpretivist approach with a positivist one allows a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics underlying the all-embracing need for ontological security.<sup>5</sup> Arguing that state identity is not only self-reflexive but also relational paves the way for a causal analysis. Accordingly, the structure, within which actors interact, exists beyond actor's understanding. Therefore, I argue here that causal mechanisms are needed to unravel the influence of the structure and the interaction with others in this process of ontological security and identity framing.

Identity distinctiveness, though connected to the self-other relationship, becomes integral to the actor's self-identity and the maintenance of a consistent narrative contributes to the actor's ontological security. If continuity and order in the self-versus-other relationships are the main source of ontological security, 'critical situations' that disrupt actor's distinctiveness can pose risks to the sense of self. Giddens (1984, 61) defines 'critical situations' as 'circumstances of a radical disjuncture of an unpredictable kind which affect substantial numbers of individuals'. These

unpredictable situations constitute an identity threat, as 'agents perceive that something can be done to eliminate them' (Steele 2008, 12). Giddens' structuration theory presented these critical situations as endogenous to the self-identity. In other words, they are situations constituted by the fragilities of entities; only actors who care about ontological security will perceive these critical situations as such. Acknowledging that self-identity is the product of interaction with others alongside the reflexive understanding of the Self, my conception of 'critical situations' goes beyond the endogenous sources of ontological security.

If the constitution of the Self is related to the other, 'critical situations' can also be external events that alter the representation of the Other, which ultimately constitutes a source of instability and insecurity for the self. These events can include revolutions, wars, and regime changes. When critical situations alter the established Self-Other distinction, agents uncomfortable in who they are. This constant effort to forge a self-distinctiveness can be seen as part of a larger process in the state system, that is actor's 'struggle for recognition'.<sup>6</sup> States not only frame their self-other distinction but also desire to have their particular narrative recognized by their interlocutors in the international system. As Wendt (2003, 559) argues: 'it is through recognition by the Other that one is constituted as a Self in the first place'. Therefore, acquiring ontological security entails reproducing a particular self-versus-other distinctiveness and having this narrative recognized by others. Therefore, critical situations evolve as the actor's distinctiveness is disrupted and it is not recognized by the Other.

As the very basis of identity construction is differentiation and uniqueness from others, any disturbance in the self-versus-other distinction leads to agents' uncertainty

about their own identity. From this perspective, and in contrast to the conventional wisdom that similar identities lead to convergence and cooperation, cultural and identity similarities can lead to differentiation and conflict. Based on social identity theory, Brewer (1991) postulates that the need for distinctiveness is met through comparisons. Consequently, similarity constitutes a threat to one's need for differentiation or distinctiveness. As Currie (2004, 86) notes, 'one's individuality is more threatened by similarity rather than difference'. Therefore, similarity is a source of disturbance because the old and secure meaning of self and the associated sense of agency become irrelevant.

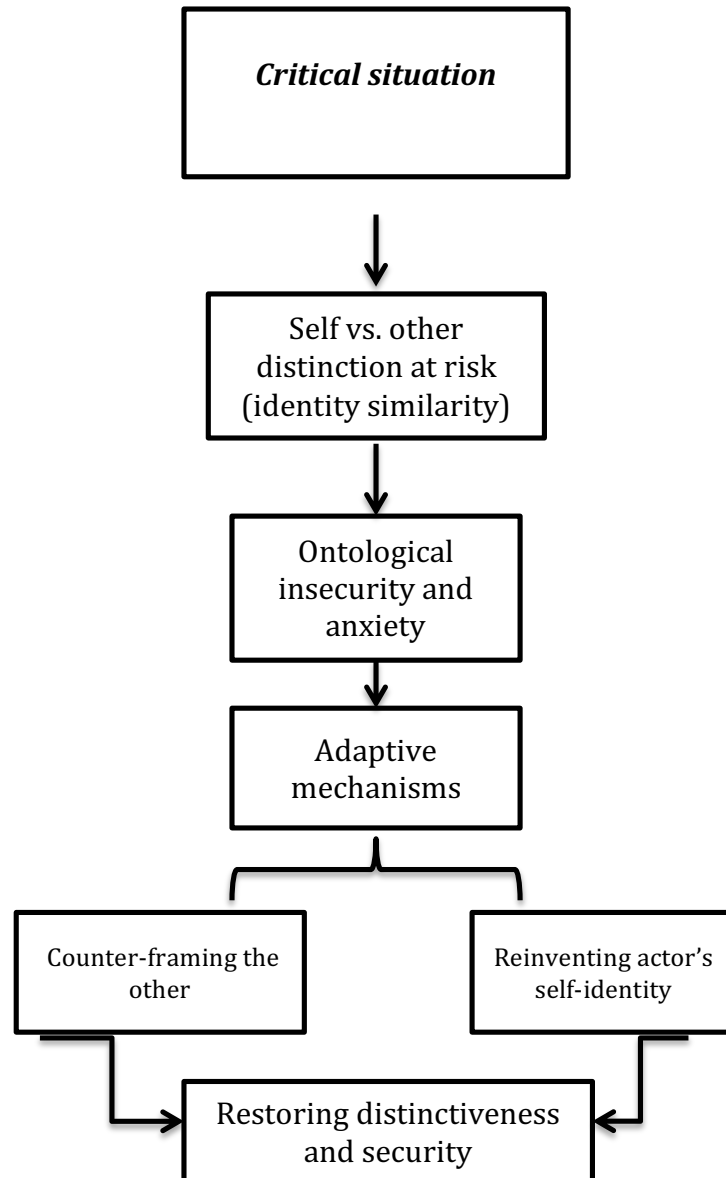
But what does 'identity similarity' mean? And is similarity always threatening? Absolute similarity, that is sameness, is implausible. Therefore, by similarity I mean that actors share common beliefs. Social psychology literature highlighted the process of developing larger collective identities between groups as an effective technique of reducing conflicts. The Common Ingroup Identity Model (CIIM) advocates the elimination of group boundaries by facilitating the inclusion of different groups into a 'superordinate identity' (Gaertner et al. 1993, 2000). Applications of this model conclude that sharing a common identity can reduce the perception of the Other as a threat (Prentice and Miller 1999; Rousseau and Rocio 2007). Despite the supportive literature of the idea that superordinate identities can reduce conflict among groups, some work within social identity theory postulate that low levels of similarity can foster cooperation whereas high levels of similarity can lead to the opposite (Snyder and Fromkin 1980). Freud (1917, 197) argues that individuals hold aggression, hatred, and envy toward those who resemble them the most. Individuals feel threatened not by the 'Other' with who they have little in common – the 'nearly-we', who mirror and reflect

them. Brewer's (1991) theory of 'Optimal Distinctiveness' posits that actors simultaneously express a need for both assimilation and differentiation. Actors become satisfied and secure when they adopt a level of social identity that lies somewhere between the uniqueness of his own self-identity and larger collective identities. At the extremes, actor's identity is threatened. Being highly individualized leads to actor's isolation and stigmatization. At the other extreme, being totally included in a larger collective identity eliminates the actor's self-identity, which is based on comparison with others (Brewer 1991, 477–478). Consequently, actors are motivated to find an optimal balance between assimilation with and differentiation from others. From this perspective, similarity could be threatening if states' assimilation becomes much higher than its differentiation from others. Similarity, I argue here, becomes threatening if it extends to that particular line of distinctiveness without which the actor's *raison d'être* is meaningless.

Consequently, the lack of distinctiveness will trigger *anxiety*, which Giddens (1991, 43) defines 'a generalized state of emotions'. When the agent's self-identity is challenged, anxiety causes a state of ontological insecurity that is not based on a specific objectified threat as it attacks the 'core of the self once a basic security system is set up' (Giddens 1991, 44). But what is the worst scenario of a case of ontological insecurity? Can it ultimately lead to the elimination of actors as physical security does? The ontological security literature stresses that ontological and physical security are distinct, as they are characterized by different dynamics and process. Although both types of insecurities are inherently separate, I argue that both are interrelated and affect one another. As Rumelili (2015, 60) states: 'concerns about instability and uncertainty of being can easily be politically mobilized and manipulated into concerns about

survival'. Also, if statesmen fail to maintain a consistent narrative about the state's self-identity and its *raison d'être*, domestic rifts can ensue. Because the endogenous and exogenous sources of identity become inextricably related in the state narrative, such challenges can pose an existential threat to the state, jeopardizing its survival as a collective community of several societal groups. In short, challenges to states' distinctiveness and uniqueness vis-à-vis the Other can lead to physical threats.

When critical situations create identity similarity, actors adopt an imperative reactionary behaviour to restore clear waters between them and the other, what Freud (1917, 197) referred to as 'the narcissism of minor differences'. Two general adaptive strategies can be discerned. Firstly, actors tend to frame the other in a demonizing way to legitimize their own identity. As illustrated in the following sections, Saudi Arabia has tended to frame the Islamic revolution in Iran and the MB in Egypt as unfaithful and deviating from the true path of Islam. Secondly, actors are likely to bolster the old self-other distinction and seek to generate a new and secure identity. Actors reinvent relationships with others by fostering new differences and distinctions in the discourse of their identity (Bloom 1990, 39–40). The Saudis thus reinvented their self-identity, moving from pan-Islamism to Sunni Islam, to highlight a new distinction vis-à-vis the Iranian revolution—that is, Sunni versus Shiite. With the MB's ascendance, the Saudi Kingdom further streamlined its identity, moving from a broadly Sunni narrative to a narrow Salafi-Wahhabi discourse—an offshoot of the Sunni tradition—and, thereby, excluding the MB and any other Sunni group.



*Figure 1: Restoring ontological security*

The remainder of this article uses the case of Saudi foreign policy to illustrate this theoretical framework. By demonstrating the correlation between the critical situations of 1979 and 2012 and Saudi mechanisms of restoring ontological security: demonizing the Other and identity narrowing, this article's hypothesis of anxiety and ontological

security as the drive behind Saudi foreign policy behaviour is rendered plausible. With the rise of Islamist movements to power, the Saudi regime feared the erosion of its identity. The following two sections explore Saudi foreign behaviour toward the Iranian revolution in 1979 and the Muslim Brotherhood in 2012. Such an empirical comparison, I argue, offers an extremely useful opportunity to illustrate the above theoretical framework. This correlation in the case studies illustrates the preliminary validity of the main hypothesis: identity similarity can be a source of anxiety and ontological insecurity. In addition, they shed light on the relevance of the theoretical proposition and probe its plausibility for theory building.<sup>7</sup> As these cases benefit the process of theory building, this theoretical framework provides a novel lens to enhance our understanding of the cases through unpacking the manifestations of anxiety in foreign policy behaviour.

## **2. AN ONTOLOGICAL SECURITY INTERPRETATION OF SAUDI FOREIGN POLICY**

Before examining the Saudi Kingdom's behaviour, I will briefly explore what 'Saudi state identity' means. As opposed to Arab states, where nationalism was based on ethnic elements, such as Arabism, combined with territorial affinities related to the struggle against colonialism, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was not formed on the basis of a 'national' identity. Modern Saudi Arabia came into existence as a result of the Al Saud's attempt to establish an Islamic monarchy on the Arabian Peninsula. The unification of the Arabian Peninsula was an outcome of the long-standing alliance between Muhammed Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (the eponym of Wahhabism) and the Al Saud.<sup>8</sup> The new state lacked a national identity that could stand in contrast to the patriotism developing in the neighbouring Arab states.<sup>9</sup> The Saudi state identity thus came to be based on an appropriation of Islamic symbols: 'our constitution is the Quran and the application of

shari'a'. Islam, and its Wahhabi interpretation in particular, enabled the regime to distinguish itself from other regional actors.<sup>10</sup> As Nevo (1998, 35) states, 'religion has played a prominent role not only in moulding the individual's private and collective identities but also in consolidating [the] national values'.<sup>11</sup>

Since Saudi Arabia has two of the three holy cities of Islam within its borders—Mecca and Medina—Islam served as a source of its distinctiveness from other states in the region. For decades, the Kingdom relied on Islam to provide it with a unique identity in the region, separate from the secular pan-Arab wave that swept the region during the 1950s and 1960s under the charismatic leadership of Egyptian President Nasser (Piscatori 1983). In an attempt to discredit pan-Arabism, the Kingdom emphasized the imagery of the pan-Islamic *umma*<sup>12</sup> and crowned itself the defender of faith in the region. In other words, pan-Islamism, which prescribed solidarity among Muslims, emerged as a superordinate identity that gathers different people in different states under the banner of Islam. This pan-Islamic narrative was often identified by King Faisal (1964–1975) as the inherent *raison d'être* of the Saudi state (Sindi 1986). With the demise of the pan-Arab project,<sup>13</sup> Saudi Arabia portrayed itself as the representative of the Muslim world and prided itself on being the only Islamic state to rule according to shari'a.

Ironically, its claim to be the protagonist of 'true' Islam in the world sowed the seeds of the Saudi state's ultimate vulnerability to other emerging Islamic models in the region. Despite the presence of pan-Islamism as a superordinate identity, which prescribes that all Muslims are one people, any possibility of a neighbouring state adopting an interpretation of Islam similar to the Saudi version constituted a critical threat to the state's uniqueness and distinctiveness. In 1979, the Kingdom feared that it



would lose its unique Islamic credentials when the Islamic revolution in Iran adopted a pan-Islamic identity similar to that of the Saudis. Pan-Islamism as a distinction according to which the kingdom had consolidated its identity vis-à-vis the other states in the region became irrelevant. Seeking to re-establish its uniqueness, the Saudi state narrowed its regime identity from pan-Islamism to Sunni Islam. Based on this Sunni version of Islam, Iran became a Shiite 'other'.

Decades later, the ascendance of the MB to power in Egypt in 2012 constituted another acute challenge. The Kingdom had been successful in re-establishing its distinctiveness following the Iranian revolution by making a sectarian distinction, but the MB belonged to the Sunni interpretation of Islam. To adapt to this new situation, the Kingdom thus adopted a narrow Salafi-Wahhabi interpretation of Islam vis-à-vis the MB's Islamic Sunni discourse. An ontological security lens allows the interpretation of this process of identity narrowing as driven by anxiety.

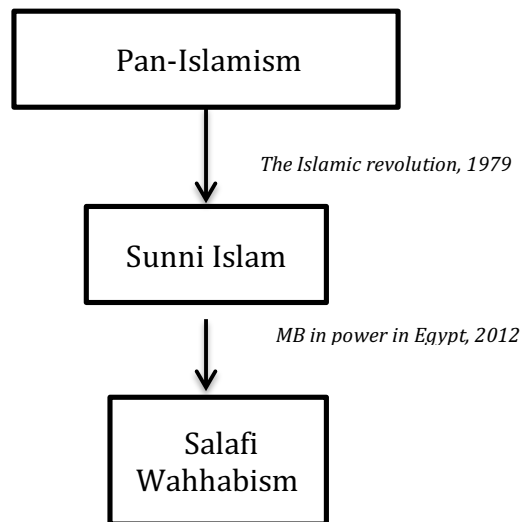


Figure 2: The Saudi Identity Reframing Process

### A- The Islamic Revolution and the Security of Sectarianism

While the ideal of Islamic unity and solidarity is encapsulated in the Quranic notion of *umma*, pan-Islamism became an integral component of Saudi regime identity and foreign policy in only the 1960s and the 1970s (Al-Yassini 1987). Saudi Arabia portrayed itself as the leader speaking in the name of Islam. This narrative was even recognized by the Iranian Other. Whereas the Saudis embraced a pan-Islamic identity, the shah opted to construct an identity for the Iranian state that appealed to Iranian nationalism adoptive of liberal Western values (Adib-Moghaddam 2006, 13–16). Recognizing Saudi Arabia’s pan-Islamic identity, the shah wrote:

I had traveled on several occasions to Saudi Arabia, a country whose integrity and independence are sacred for all Muslims (...) As a faithful Muslim and Defender of the Faith, I hope that Saudi Arabia will always remain the guardian of [the] holy places,

Mecca and Medina, where millions of pilgrims travel every year on the path to God. (Pahlavi 1982, 134)<sup>14</sup>

Pan-Islamism became a Saudi foreign policy doctrine under King Faisal. To promote this identity narrative, King Faisal established a number of national and supranational institutions (Hegghammer 2010, 17–18), which worked to promote cooperation and solidarity in the Muslim world, especially in providing support to the Palestinians (Ochsenwald 1981, 276). In this framework, King Faisal established the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) between 1969 and 1972 and the Muslim World League (MWL) in 1962. These diplomatic endeavours allowed the Kingdom the recognition from other Arabs and non-Arabs of its status as the leader of the Muslims world.

When Saudi Arabia had consolidated its distinct identity as the sole Islamic model in the region, the Islamic revolution broke out in Iran in 1979, thereby undermining the Saudi's self-identity by altering the representation of the 'other'. The Islamic revolution downplayed Persian nationalism and promoted Islamic universalism transcend its national context and called for Muslim unity and solidarity (Buchta 2002). The new identity of the Islamic Republic portrayed Iran as the vanguard of revolutionary and anti-imperialist Islam and the legitimate leader of the Muslim *umma*. It thus explicitly converged with the Saudi worldview, which was based on solidarity among Muslims.

According to Khomeini, Muslims formed a single community (*umma*), and the existing borders were the result of imperialism and domination. He argued that Islam was one and that Muslims should henceforth unite: 'Muslims must become a single hand. They must become a united hand, remain united, become one; they must not think themselves separate from us' (quoted in Halliday 2002, 31). This claim remained a core

concern for Iran and was reflected in the new constitution. Accordingly, the Islamic Republic pursued a foreign policy strategy that appealed to all Muslims. Iran constantly emphasized its commitment to the Palestinian cause. At the height of the Second Intifada (2000), Supreme Leader Khamenei termed Palestine ‘a limb of our body’ (Wehrey et al. 2009, 23). This pan-Islamist narrative was accompanied by increasing financial support to Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Hezbollah in Lebanon. The Iranians thus presented themselves as the leader of Islam in the region and the epitome of virtue in the Arab–Israeli conflict, a narrative similar to the one embedded in Saudi regime identity.

Pan-Islamism, appealing to the idea that all Muslims form a group based on the ties of the common religion and are, therefore, duty-bound by fraternity and brotherhood regardless of creed, colour, ethnicity, or nationality, should have served as a common denominator between the Iranian Republic and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Ironically, its implications were divisive. The Kingdom saw the foundations of its state identity eroded. Turki al-Faisal Al Saud<sup>15</sup> has offered an interesting perspective on the kind of risks Iran posed to the Kingdom:

Saudi Arabia is the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques,<sup>16</sup> and the Birthplace of Islam, and as such it is the eminent leader of the wider Muslim world. Iran portrays itself as the leader not just of the minority Shiite world, but of all Muslim revolutionaries interested in standing up to the West (Al Saud 2013, 38).

The distinctiveness the Saudi state claimed to have in relation to other actors was endangered by the rise of a pan-Islamist ideology in Iran. The perceived danger was magnified by the Iranian revolution’s efforts to discredit the Saudi version of Islam. A Saudi official explicated this tension as follows: ‘Iran’s biggest struggle is with Saudi Arabia, not with the United States. Iran wants to challenge the Saudi version of Islam, that is the division of politics and religion’ (quoted in Marschall 2003, 48).

This challenge to Saudi identity distinctiveness was exacerbated by other material and domestic threats to the Kingdom in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution. The Shiites in the eastern province of the Saudi Kingdom staged protests on 28 November 1979. The regime claimed that its small Shiite community, estimated at approximately 350,000 in 1986, was beholden to Iranian influence (Goldberg 1986, 230). Regime security approaches argue that these domestic problems might have caused the threat to the Saudi regime and led the elite to reframe their identity. I argue that domestic dimension on its own could not pose an identity risk to the regime. There is no compelling evidence that Iran was involved in Saudi internal affairs; only a small number of Shiite clerics in Saudi Arabia were inspired by Khomeini's speeches (Ibrahim 2006, 117). Nevertheless, this community was small, and its influence on the stability of the Saudi regime is negligent. From an ontological security perspective, I argue that the domestic dimension became only relevant as the narrative of self-identity is inextricably related to the interaction with other, which was disrupted following the critical situation created by the Islamic revolution. This domestic dissent magnified the lapses in the regime's identity narrative and its ontological insecurity.

These circumstances drove the Saudi rulers to reinvent their state's identity, which they needed to separate from the generic pan-Islamic rhetoric in order to re-establish a sense of self vis-à-vis the changing representation of the 'other'—namely, Iran. The Saudis thus narrowed their identity to the Sunni approach, known for its rejection of the Shiites as a legitimate Islamic community. Sunni Islam was broadly introduced into Saudi foreign policy not as a source of legitimacy but as a component of Saudi regime identity distinguished the Kingdom from the Islamic Republic.

The reduction of Saudi pan-Islamic identity to a Sunni Islamic one created a new self-versus-other distinctiveness couched in sectarian terms (Sunni versus Shiite). Henceforth, the Kingdom adopted an anti-Shiite discourse designed to discredit the pan-Islamic narrative of the Iranian revolution. For this endeavour, the regime strengthened the power of the *'ulama* (as representatives of the state religion) and promoted the Kingdom's conservative Sunni image. It also reinforced a stricter Wahhabi code of conduct, granting the *'ulama*, such as Ibn Bāz,<sup>17</sup> more control over social and religious life (Steinberg 2005, 28–29). This was manifested in the strengthening of the religious strands in the educational system, which resulted in the state becoming closely associated not only with Islamic symbols but also with a Sunni approach that rejected Shiite symbols (Niblock 2006, 55). Moreover, the Kingdom's rulers aimed to consolidate the Kingdom's image as the eminent leader of the Muslim world by using the title of 'the custodian of the two holy sites'—Mecca and Medina.

In addition, the Kingdom explicitly used sectarian language to counter-frame and demonize the Islamic Republic. The Saudi clerical establishment produced an overflow of anti-Shiite publications to blunt the pan-Islamic appeal of the Islamic revolution.<sup>18</sup> From the perspective of the Sunni *'ulamas*, the Shiite propensity for saint worship, shrine and grave cults, and veneration of imams were abhorrent acts of polytheism (*shirk*). Indeed, Sunni scholars viewed Shiites as 'the incarnation of infidelity, and (...) polytheists', making it the duty of believers 'to manifest enmity to the polytheists [who] were perceived as unbelievers (*kufar*), and were therefore liable to the severest sanctions, including that of holy war (*jihad*)' (Goldberg 1986, 232). By describing Iranians as defectors (*rafidda*), this Saudi counter-framing of Shi'ism placed the Iranian regime outside of the Muslim community,

Based on this identity consolidation, the representation of the 'Saudi-Sunni self' was contrasted with the 'Iranian-Shiite other' in Saudi foreign policy. The discourse of exclusion, based on religious otherness and framed by a religious narrative, highlighted Saudi Arabia's religious uniqueness, which was necessary to forge a distinct regime-identity narrative. In other words, sectarianism was simply a strategy for re-establishing the Kingdom's distinctiveness and, thus, its ontological security.

### **B- The Rise of the Muslim Brotherhood: Increasing Similarity and Increasing Insecurity**

Following the Islamic revolution, the Kingdom prided itself on representing Sunni Islam against its enemies from the Shiite sect. Although this distinction provided the Kingdom with a secure sense of self for decades, it was challenged by the critical situation created by the 2011 Arab uprisings, which toppled dictators and opened the doors of power to Islamist movements. Most importantly, the ascendance of the MB to power in Egypt, with the first elected Islamist president Mohamed Morsi was a key development at the regional level. The MB represented a Sunni approach<sup>19</sup> very close to the Kingdom's Salafi-Wahhabism, as explicitly acknowledged by an old fatwa from the Permanent Committee for Scholarly Research and Ifta'<sup>20</sup> in the Kingdom:

The closest of all Islamic groups to the Truth and the keenest to apply it: *Ahl-ul-Sunnah wal-Jama'ah* (adherents to the *Sunnah* and the Muslim mainstreams). They are *Ahl Al-Hadith* (the scholars of Hadith), *Ansar Al-Sunnah* group, and then *Al-Ikhwan-ul-Muslimun* (the MB). (The Permanent Committee 2014)

Despite this convergence, I hypothesize that the ascendance of the MB to power was a source of anxiety for the Kingdom, as the latter's distinct representation of itself as the sole leader of the Sunni Islamic world was called into question. The Saudis saw in the MB a group with expansionist intentions to project its Sunni project in the Arab

world. According to Saudi officials, the kingdom was ready to spend billions to keep the Muslim Brotherhood from coming to power in Egypt (Alterman and McCants 2015, 162). This section examines the similarity between the MB's identity and that of the Saudi state, and how this similarity created discomfort for the Al Saud. I subsequently examine how the Kingdom reacted in order to re-establish its ontological security.

Although the ideological foundations of the MB were initially different from those of Saudi Arabia, the group underwent drastic internal ideological changes over the decades. It increasingly embraced Salafi ideas, thereby moving into the same ideological paradigm as the Saudis. During the 1970s, the MB underwent what Tammam (2011) called 'Salafization', becoming a Salafi entity. This transformation started with the group's interaction with the Saudi Kingdom following the oppression exercised upon it by Nasser's regime in the 1950s. The majority of the Muslim Brothers who fled the country found refuge in Saudi Arabia, where they were actively engaged in the social and economic modernization of the Kingdom, under the reign of King Faisal. Through protracted exposure to the Saudi environment, the members of the group gradually embraced Wahhabi ideas, which became integral to the group's ideology (Tammam 2008). When the MB reconvened its activity in Egypt in the 1970s, the ideological fusion between the Brotherhood's initial approach and Salafism was apparent. The Salafi-Brotherhood intermarriage manifested in the group's intolerance toward other Islamic and non-Islamic groups, such as the Copts (Tadros 2012, chap. 5). This trend was also manifested in the perceived necessity of applying shari'a. These positions clearly demonstrated that the Salafi discourse was becoming the dominant ideology within the group. Moreover, many Brotherhood sheikhs adopted the Salafi clothing and temperament, and a generation of '*salafized*' preachers emerged within the group.<sup>21</sup>



These changes in the Brotherhood's approach made the group ideologically more convergent with the Saudi interpretation of Islam. The MB's ideology became even more concrete with the group's rise following Mubarak's downfall in February 2011. Salafi Islamic values provided the source of identity in Brotherhood-led Egypt. During his electoral campaign, Mohamed Morsi emphasized the group's adherence to Salafism:

The Koran is our constitution, the Prophet Muhammad is our leader, jihad is our path, and death for the sake of Allah is our most lofty aspiration ... shari'a, shari'a, and then finally shari'a. This nation will enjoy blessing and revival only through the Islamic shari'a. (Morsi 2012)

If the Kingdom claimed to represent the Sunni Islamic world, with a King portraying himself as the protector of the holy mosques of Mecca and Medina, an Islamist-led Egypt undermined the main credentials of the Saudi identity. The Kingdom was no longer the sole Sunni model in the region (Al-Rasheed 2013). In other words, the very existence of the Saudi state was at stake as its distinctiveness vis-à-vis the other was eroded. Since ontological security is the security of being, actors can feel uncomfortable if their relations with others are disrupted. With the rise of the MB, the uniqueness of the Saudi identity as the leader of Sunni world was disrupted. In other words, the Kingdom found itself in a new, critical situation that generated insecurity.

The rise of the MB not only eroded the distinctiveness of the Kingdom's identity at the regional level, but it also became a potential threat at the domestic level as it inspired contentious voices within the Kingdom. It led to discussions that questioned Saudi religious theory – the foundation of the Kingdom's identity. Dissenters questioned the contradictions within this theory, especially regarding the political aspects, such as individual constitutional rights.<sup>22</sup> These debates were initiated most explicitly by the leaders of the al-Sahwa al-Islamiyya movement (the Islamic Awakening),<sup>23</sup> a group that had played a crucial role in legitimizing the policies of the Al Saud, especially those

against al-Qaeda, in the first decade of the century. It is worth noting that these critics did not question the legitimacy of Al Saud.<sup>24</sup> In contrast, they appealed to the ability of the ruling family, and only the ruling family, to initiate reforms. In other words, these discussions did not endanger the physical security of the regime, but rather its existential ontological security.

From an ontological security perspective, we would expect the Kingdom to respond by asserting its distinctiveness. Whereas the Kingdom had reinvented its identity vis-à-vis the Islamic revolution in Iran by narrowing its Islamic identity to a purely Sunni version, re-establishing identity security in 2012 was more challenging. While forging this new distinction by narrowing its own identity narrative, the Kingdom went on discrediting the MB or the new 'other'. It used several mechanisms to do so.

First, the Kingdom sought to discredit the viability of the MB as a 'true' Salafi group. The Saudi religious establishment denied the Salafi nature of the group, especially in the regime-influenced media outlets. In a local newspaper, *Al-Madina*, leading Saudi sheikhs pronounced fatwas claiming that the MB had 'no Salafi roots'. In response to the question of whether the MB belonged to the 72 groups in Islam that had gone astray, Sheikh Salih bin-Fawzan al-Fawzan, a senior member of the Ifta' Committee, stated, 'yes, everyone who violates *ahl-Sunna wa al-Jama'a* in Islam in da'wa or doctrine or any of the faith pillars belongs to the 72 groups'. Sheikh Muhammed bin al-Laydan, a member of the Council of Senior Scholars, claimed, 'the Brotherhood ... are not from the truthful Islamic schools of thought and its name has no origin in the *Salaf* predecessors' (Al-Sayali 2013).

Second, the Kingdom portrayed itself as the guardian of 'truthful' Islam against the MB, which was accused of 'pragmatism' and, thus, faithless. In other words, the

Kingdom accused the MB to manipulate religious texts to justify policies that only serve the group's interests. Moreover, the MB was accused of shifting allies, which were driven by material interests, regardless of their compliance to their Islamic identity. During Morsi's rise to power and until he was removed from power, the regime-influenced media portrayed the MB as 'unfaithful' and accused it of using religion as an instrument. This portrayal was often exemplified by the long history of the group and its relationship to the Al Saud. The MB was depicted as an unfaithful organization that did not acknowledge the help and the support provided to it by the Al Saud (Al-Utaybi 2011).<sup>25</sup> In this vein, the Saudi Minister of Islamic Affairs, Endowment, Da'wa, and Guidance, Salih bin Abdul-Aziz Al-Sheikh, stated that the MB was known for 'hypocrisy', as its behaviour was driven by interests instead of 'faith'. This narrative was best exemplified in the series of six articles published by *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* and entitled 'The Brotherhood and Saudi Arabia: The Entire Story'. These articles described the group as treacherous and unfaithful (Anonymous 2014).

Third, the Kingdom distinguished itself as the leader of 'moderate' Sunni Islam, in contrast to the supposed 'radical and fundamental' nature of the MB. When the new regime in Egypt massacred Brotherhood protestors in August 2013, King Abdullah uncharacteristically voiced his public support for the military intervention:

Let the entire world know that the people and government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia stood and still stand today with our brothers in Egypt against terrorism, extremism and sedition, and against whomever is trying to interfere in Egypt's internal affairs. (King Abdullah Al Saud 2013)

When the new Egyptian government declared the MB a terrorist organization in December 2013, Saudi Arabia followed suit. On 7 March 2014, a Saudi Interior Ministry statement pronounced the MB, along with other groups, including al-Qaeda in Yemen

and Iraq, a terrorist group (BBC 2014). Since then, the regime narrative has portrayed the MB as intrinsically violent.

In a word, in order to restore its identity security, the Kingdom aimed to forge a new, distinctive identity narrative, not only as the sole leader of Sunni Islam in the region, but also as the upholder of a strict Salafi-Wahhabi interpretation of Islam (Commins 2015, 164–165). It also portrayed the MB as unfaithful, treacherous, and radical. In this way, the Saudi royal elite was able to maintain a seemingly coherent and distinct identity, and was thus able to restore its identity security.

## **CONCLUSION**

Similarities in identity can both unite and divide. In this article, I have developed a theoretical framework to explain how, and why, similarity can cause cleavages. In the case of Saudi foreign policy, I have found that similarity became particularly threatening as the distinctiveness of the Saudi identity was challenged. The distinctiveness of the Kingdom was based on two exclusive identity narratives, which portrayed Saudi Arabia, first, as the sole and legitimate leader of Islam, until 1979, and then, subsequently, of Sunni Islam, until 2012. By showing how these critical situations led to the reframing of Saudi identity narratives, this article probed and confirmed the plausibility of an ontological security explanation of Saudi foreign policy. In addition, Saudi identity reframing through demonization and narrowing highlights anxiety as a driving cause behind Saudi behaviour. The theoretical framework showed that this under-explored concept of ‘anxiety’ as a drive of ontological insecurity deserves further inquiry. Despite its development as an individual feeling in Giddens’ structuration theory, future research would explore how collective actors, such as states, suffer anxiety.

Ontological security approaches provide a novel theoretical entry point for the study of Middle Eastern countries' foreign policy. They supplement realist assumptions about regimes' physical security with the consideration of ontological security needs, which can explain how the emergence of a similar identity can cause a state anxiety. The framework developed here may shed additional light on recent developments in the region—for example, Saudi fears resulting from the establishment of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (cf. Dorsey 2014). Also, an ontological security approach shows that the seemingly sectarian divisions of the region can be understood differently. Predominantly sectarian explanations consider identity difference to be the driving force behind conflict. Ontological security approaches suggest a different starting point—that is, that states have a stake in maintaining these sectarian divisions to fulfil ontological security needs. By demonstrating ontological security's usefulness in explaining rare moments in history, this paper yields implications beyond the context of the Middle East. Ontological security approaches might also illuminate cases where revolutions and the diffusion of democratic waves threaten the existential security of authoritarian regimes (cf. Gunitsky 2014).

Ultimately, this argument makes important contributions to IR theory and the ontological security literature in particular. While there is some recognition that identity similarity drives cooperation, this examination of the Saudi case has probed the plausibility that identity similarity can be a source of conflict, a proposition that invites theory building and testing to confirm such a hypothesis. The discussion on how identity is framed and reframed has also contributed to our understanding of the sources of ontological security. In line with Zakarol (2010), the contention among scholars of ontological security on the sources of identity, whether endogenous or exogenous, the case of Saudi Arabia demonstrates that both approaches are present in the process of

state identity reframing and its related sense of security. States reframe their identity in the process of interaction with others but also according to their reflexive understanding of the Self.

In its quest for distinctiveness, the Kingdom has constantly highlighted its differences vis-à-vis the other, reducing its identity narrative from pan-Islamism to Sunni Islam and then to Salafi-Wahhabism as a result. Future research should, henceforth, examine how differences are framed and how states choose among various sources of distinctiveness. As Bateson (1979, 98) has said, 'the number of potential differences (...) is infinite but very few become effective differences (...) that make a difference'.

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<sup>2</sup> Scholars, who developed theories derived from constructivism to explain Middle East politics, arrived to an important conclusion: shared identities can be ties to conflict or cooperation (Barnett 1998; Kaye 2013; Lynch 1999). The rivalry between the Syrian and Iraqi Ba’athist regimes provides another illustration (Kienle 1990).

<sup>3</sup> There is also a trend within the social identity perspective (Tajfel 1978; Tajfel and Turner 1986) arguing that differentiation increases when group distinctiveness is low and threatened by similarity with other groups (Jetten, Spears, and Manstead 2001; Moghaddam and Stringer 1988; Roccas and Schwartz 1993).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Zarakol (2010), Huysmans (1998), McSweeney (1999), Mitzen (2006), and Steele (2005, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> On the possibility of combining these two approaches, cf. Roth & Mehta (2002).

<sup>6</sup> On the role of recognition in IR, cf. (Greenhill 2008; Haacke 2005; Lindemann 2010; Ringmar 2002, 2010; Wendt 1999, 193–245)

<sup>7</sup> Plausibility probe cases are ‘attempts to determine whether potential validity may reasonably be considered great enough to warrant the pains and costs of testing’ (Eckstein 2000, 140–1).

<sup>8</sup> Wahhabism refers to the Saudi variant of the Sunni tradition. The word ‘Wahhabism’ is derived from the teachings of the Muslim scholar, Muḥammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab, who lived in the Arabian Peninsula during the eighteenth century (1703–1792). Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab founded a religious movement that aimed to reverse what he perceived as the moral decline of the Islamic society on the Arabian Peninsula. Based on an alliance between Muhammed Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab and Muhammed Ibn Saud, the founder of the first Saudi state, Wahhabism provided the ruling family with legitimacy and a powerful tool to unite various tribes and regions under it. It is worth noting that the term Wahhabism is a pejorative term. The

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Wahhabis call themselves *Muwahidun* (monotheists). Despite the imperfection of the term 'Wahhabism', I retain it, as it is widely used.

<sup>9</sup> On the lack of a national Saudi identity, see the article of the leading Saudi columnist Hamid Al-Din (2014).

<sup>10</sup> This does not mean that the state identity was an amalgamation of diverse groups in the society. Instead, the Al Saud monopolized the state's identity narrative, which derived from Wahhabism.

<sup>11</sup> For further details on the role of Wahhabism in the formation of the Saudi state, cf. Ayoub & Kosebalaban (2008).

<sup>12</sup> *Umma* is used to refer to all Muslims as one community bound by religion.

<sup>13</sup> Pan-Arabism refers to the political project of unifying all Arabs under a single state.

<sup>14</sup> Khomeini, following the revolution, contested Saudi Arabia's right in the guardianship of the Holy Mosques and described the Al Saud to be infidels.

<sup>15</sup> Turki al-Faisal is a member of the Saudi royal family. From 1977 to 2001, Prince Turki was the director of *al-mukhābarāt al 'aāma* (the Saudi general intelligence service).

<sup>16</sup> This title was introduced in 1986 in reaction to Iranian demands to place Mecca and Medina under international rule.

<sup>17</sup> Ibn Bāz, one of the most prestigious Islamic scholars, was the grand mufti for the Kingdom from 1993 until his death in 1999.

<sup>18</sup> For an overview, cf. Algar (2002).

<sup>19</sup> Sunni-Islam is also constituted of diverse groups, including Salafism, Salafi-Wahhabism, the Muslim Brotherhood, Sufism, and others. For an overview, cf. Ayubi (1991).

<sup>20</sup> This is an Islamic committee established by the King that issues rulings in Islamic jurisprudence. The members are drawn from the Council of Senior 'Ulama. The members of this council are appointed by the King and usually reflect state interests.

<sup>21</sup> For more details on this development, see the autobiography of Abdul Moneim Abu Al-Futuh (2012) and an interview with a former member of the MB, Al-Kharabawy (2012).

<sup>22</sup> For example, see the petition to King Abdullah by al-Sahwa movement leaders entitled 'A Call for Reform' ('A Call for Reform' 2011), and 'An Open Letter' to the King published by Salman Al-Awda in March 2013 (Al-Awda 2013).

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<sup>23</sup> Al-Sahwa is one of the most important reformist movements in the Kingdom. For more details, cf. Lacroix (2011) and Fandy (2001).

<sup>24</sup> None of the Sahwa leaders supported the demonstrations in Riyadh on 11 March 2011 following the Arab uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia (Lacroix 2014).

<sup>25</sup> Since the 1950s, the Saudi royal family had offered political asylum for members of the MB fleeing the crackdown of the Egyptian regime. It also funded the creation of Islamic charities that served not only the Wahhabi religious doctrine but also the MB (Mourad 2013).