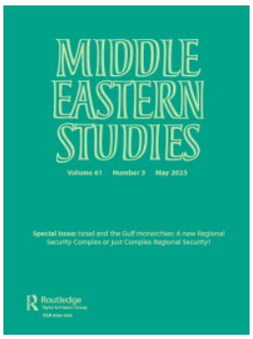

Middle Eastern Studies

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/fmes20

Refounding the Kingdom: Saudi Arabia from Islamism and Wahhabism to 'Moderate' Islam

Cole M. Bunzel

To cite this article: Cole M. Bunzel (02 Apr 2025): Refounding the Kingdom: Saudi Arabia from Islamism and Wahhabism to 'Moderate' Islam, Middle Eastern Studies, DOI: 10.1080/00263206.2025.2482632

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2025.2482632

Published online: 02 Apr 2025.

MIDDLE EASTERN STUDIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2025.2482632

Refounding the Kingdom: Saudi Arabia from Islamism and Wahhabism to 'Moderate' Islam

Cole M. Bunzel

Hoover Institution, Stanford University, USA

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, in the traditional account of its history, is the third of three Saudi states going back to the mid-eighteenth century, when a pact was struck between a reformist preacher, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, and the emir of the town of al-Dirʿiyya, Muhammad ibn Saud. Al-Dirʿiyya was one of several small oasis towns vying for influence and power in a fractured political landscape in the central Arabian region of Najd, which had not experienced large-scale state formation in centuries. Another of these towns was al-ʿUyayna, where Ibn Abd al-Wahhab had been preaching a controversial doctrine centered on a strict understanding of God's oneness (*tawhid*) according to which the popular practices of grave visitation and the cult of saints were regarded as polytheism (*shirk*). In his view, those engaging in these practices were not Muslims at all but polytheists (*mushrikun*); the true Muslim was one who directed all worship to God alone and denounced the polytheists as unbelievers.[1]

The movement that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab started, labeled Wahhabism by its enemies, was an intentionally divisive and provocative doctrine, and it earned him many enemies. It was for this reason that he found himself compelled to seek refuge in al-Dirʿiyya, where Muhammad ibn Saud, the town's ruler since approximately 1727, pledged to support him and his mission. The history of the Arabian Peninsula would never be the same. Wahhabism became the official religion of Ibn Saud's emirate – later known as the first Saudi state (c. 1744–1818) – and the ideological basis of its expansion. Ibn Saud adopted the teachings of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab as his own and waged war against the surrounding areas on the basis that they were centers of *shirk*. The expansionary warfare of the first Saudi state was justified, by Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and his followers, as offensive jihad for the purpose of eradicating *shirk* and instituting *tawhid*. In the late 1790s, the expansionary state conquered the eastern Arabian region of al-Ahsaʾ, and in the early 1800s, it incorporated the Hijaz as well. The conquest of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina was a red line for the Ottoman Empire, which soon directed Muhammad Ali of Egypt to recapture the Hijaz. In 1818, Egyptian forces overran the Saudi capital of al-Dirʿiyya, razing it to the ground.

The first Saudi state had met its end, but it was to provide the model for two subsequent Saudi polities that would revive the union of Saudi political power and Wahhabi religious authority. Several years after the sacking of al-Dirʿiyya, a member of the Al Saud founded a second Saudi state with its capital in Riyadh. Once again, the Al Saud ruled in partnership with the Wahhabi religious scholars (*ʿulama*ʾ), led by the descendants of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, known as the Al al-Shaykh. This second Saudi state never reached the heights of the first, lasting from 1823 to 1887, when it collapsed following a years-long civil war between contending members of the Saudi family and amid the rise of a rival dynasty, the Al Rashid, in northern Arabia. A decade and a half later, in 1902, a young Saudi prince named Abd al-Aziz Al Saud seized Riyadh in a surprise attack on the Rashidi governor, thus giving rise to a third Saudi state. As before, the Saudi ruler restored the partnership with the Wahhabi *ʿulama*ʾ, whose religious authority he leaned on in his

CONTACT Cole M. Bunzel cbunzel@stanford.edu

quest to reconquer the ancestral Saudi domains. By the late 1920s, Abd al-Aziz had succeeded in doing just this, and in 1932 he proclaimed the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as the new name of the restored Saudi polity.

This, in brief, is the story of Saudi Arabia as it has been taught by generations of Saudis. According to this narrative, what gave rise to the ancestral Saudi state in the mid-eighteenth century was its commitment to the true version of Islam as rediscovered by Ibn Abd al-Wahhab. It was the Al Saud's support for Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's movement that accounted for its success, and this formula had proved enduring, forming the basis of the next two Saudi states as well. The Saudi national project, in other words, was inextricably bound up with Wahhabism. Recently, however, the Saudi authorities have issued a major revision to this national origin story.

On 27 January 2022, the Saudi Press Agency published a royal decree by King Salman establishing a new national holiday called 'Founding Day' (*yawm al-taʾsis*).[2] The new national holiday, it stated, would be celebrated on 22 February of every calendar year, this being the approximate date of the 'founding' of the first Saudi state in 1727, a year no one had ever before associated with the founding of the state. According to the decree, 1727 was the year Muhammad ibn Saud came to power in al-Dirʿiyya, and his ascension (not the pact with Ibn Abd al-Wahhab in 1744) marked the beginning of the first Saudi state. As the decree stated, the decision to declare the new holiday had been taken 'out of pride in the deep roots of this blessed state and in its citizens' deep connection to its leaders since the rule of the Imam Muhammad ibn Saud three centuries ago and his initial founding in mid-1139 *hijri* (1727) of the first Saudi state … and what he introduced of unity and security in the Arabian Peninsula after centuries of disruption, division, and instability'. No mention was made here of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and his movement, though there was acknowledgment of an Islamic dimension to the early Saudi state, the state's constitution having been 'the noble Qurʾan and the sunna of His Messenger'. The message being sent by the announcement of Founding Day was subtle and yet obvious to all concerned. This was that that the story of Saudi Arabia as the union of Saudi political power and Wahhabi religious authority – a story associated with the year 1744 – was being replaced with a new narrative centered on the Al Saud dynasty as the harbinger of peace and prosperity in Arabia, a narrative that would be associated with the year 1727.

The fact that Founding Day represented a challenge to the traditional narrative was left unstated in the royal decree, but in the days and weeks ahead the official Saudi press would fill in the gaps. In February 2022, on the first Founding Day to be celebrated in the kingdom, the official Saudi newspaper *Arab News*, an English daily, published a story that laid bare the fact of the revision. 'For generations', the story's authors explained,

> historians and writers have unwittingly perpetuated the myth that the First Saudi State, forerunner of the modern-day Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, was founded in the year 1744. In fact, as a new reappraisal of the origins of the Kingdom reveals, they were 17 years out. There is no doubt that the events of 1744, the year in which Imam Mohammed ibn Saud of Diriyah offered sanctuary to the religious reformer Sheikh Mohammed ibn Abdulwahhab, were hugely significant. But over time the importance of that admittedly historic moment of common cause between state and faith came to obscure the far more complex and deeper-rooted origins of the First Saudi State.[3]

Those deeper roots, according to the article, went back to the migration of a branch of the Banu Hanifa tribe to Najd in 1446 and the establishment that year of al-Dirʿiyya by an ancestor of Muhammad ibn Saud. When the latter came to power some 300 years later, he brought with him 'a vision that extended beyond his immediate horizon'. The authors quoted Saudi historian Badran al-Hunayhin as stating that Ibn Saud 'was able to unite Diriyah under his rule, and to contribute to the spread of security and peace at the regional level and on the level of the Arabian Peninsula'. 'What we need to remember from this story', he continued, 'is unity, security and peace after centuries of lack of unity'. The article went on to assert that what attracted Ibn Abd al-Wahhab to al-Dirʿiyya was the fact that Ibn Saud was already building something special there: 'It was to this dynamic and politically and economically increasingly powerful new state that the

religious reformer Sheikh Mohammed ibn Abdul Wahab was drawn.' The first Saudi state, in other words, was already well under way before Ibn Abd al-Wahhab even began his preaching. Clearly, 1727 was when the state began. The 'myth' of 1744 was to be discarded.

This reappraisal of Saudi origins comes as part of a larger effort on the part of the Saudi rulers, and of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in particular, to rebrand and redefine the Saudi nation in terms befitting the Vision 2030 reform plan launched in 2016. Vision 2030 is very closely associated with Mohammed bin Salman (or MBS, as he is known), who emerged from relative obscurity at the ascension of his father, in January 2015, to become first defense minister and then crown prince in June 2017. Today, MBS is widely considered the day-to-day ruler of the kingdom, and unlike before, when Saudi political authority was divided among different princes each controlling one powerful ministry or branch of the armed forces, MBS has undercut his rivals and centralized all authority within the royal court.[4]

In April 2016, MBS published the text of Vision 2030 that serves as the official plan for the country's economic and societal transformation, the stated goal of which is to create 'a thriving country in which all citizens can fulfill their dreams, hopes and ambitions'.[5] While a 14-year economic plan devised in large part by a team of international consultants might not seem like something to write home about, the Vision 2030 branding is everywhere in the kingdom today, and it is not uncommon to hear Saudis speak of living 'in the age of the Vision' (*fi zaman al-ruʾya*). Indeed, the name has become a catchword for the numerous reforms in the kingdom spearheaded by MBS.

MBS's 'vision' admits of many dimensions – economic reform to encourage foreign investment and the development of new economic sectors, the creation of novel entertainment venues for young Saudis, the reshaping of the educational system to keep pace with the modern world – all of which would require radical departures from the past state of affairs. The text of Vision 2030 foreshadowed many of the dramatic changes in Saudi society, economics, and politics that would take place in the coming years, and that in some cases were already beginning. The stress on eliminating corruption presaged the rounding up of Saudi notables in the Ritz Carlton in Riyadh in November 2017 as part of the so-called anti-corruption campaign, a move that also illustrated MBS's increasing centralization of political authority. The emphasis on promoting entertainment portended the opening of movie theaters, the hosting of concerts and sporting events, and the building of designated entertainment zones including the notable Boulevard Riyadh City, a sprawling area replete with shops, restaurants, games, concert venues, a replica of New York's Times Square, and a massive light-colored fountain redolent of the Bellagio in Las Vegas. The multiple references to 'moderation' (*al-wasatiyya*, *al-iʿtidal*) in Islam in Vision 2030 signaled major changes ahead in the religious sector. Already in April 2016, a royal decree had withdrawn the power of arrest from the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, which for decades had policed public morality in accordance with a strict interpretation of Islamic law. Soon after the announcement of Vision 2030, the government ended gender-segregated entrances for restaurants, granted women permission to drive, and withdrew the requirement that shops and restaurants close for prayer. The result of all these changes is that Saudi society looks strikingly different from how it did just seven or eight years ago. The religious police, once a ubiquitous presence on city streets and in shopping malls, are nowhere to be seen. The separate lines for 'men' and 'families' at the entrances of restaurants are gone. Movie theaters abound. In Riyadh, it is even common, depending on where one is in the city, to see women going unveiled and mingling freely with men. Shops and restaurants still close for prayer in the more conservative parts of the city, but this is no longer the norm.[6]

While Vision 2030 did not explicitly signal that Saudi Arabia would seek to rebalance the partnership with the Wahhabi '*ulama*', the emphasis throughout on creating a dynamic and modern society stood against the ideal of the conservative Islamic state that Saudi Arabia had long prided itself in being. Under Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia would of course not cease to identify as proudly Islamic. Islam would remain a key pillar of Saudi national identity, for Saudi Arabia is 'the

land of the two holy places' of Mecca and Medina. Its king enjoys the title of 'the steward of the two holy places', and this is a distinction that will never be conceded. 'Our nation is the core of the Arab and Islamic worlds and represents the heart of Islam,' Vision 2030 proudly states.[7] Yet in the new Saudi Arabia, Islam, in the form of the Wahhabi clerisy, would no longer play the dominant role it once had. Religion would be fully subordinate to politics.

In setting out the state's approach to Islam 'in the age of the Vision', MBS has adopted two principal strategies, each of which is focused on what 'moderation', or 'moderate' Islam, is not.[8] The first has been to say that Islam in Saudi Arabia was radicalized only after 1979, when the Sahwa movement came to dominate Saudi religious life for two decades. The second has been to downplay Wahhabism as a defining feature of the kingdom's history and identity. The first of these strategies, which emerged earlier, has been the more prominent and has received the greater share of attention from journalists and academics. The second, however, is arguably the more important, as it amounts to an attack on the Saudi-Wahhabi religiopolitical compact in place for more than 250 years.

The Scourge of the Sahwa

MBS's first extensive comments regarding 'moderate' Islam came during an October 2017 investment conference in Riyadh called the Future Investment Initiative. In a forum with several international business leaders, MBS was asked by Fox Business Network journalist Maria Bartiromo to explain the recent 'change in thinking' in the kingdom vis-à-vis the 'radical ideas' that Saudi Arabia once seemed to promote. 'Saudi Arabia', MBS responded,

> was not like that before 1979. The project of the Sahwa spread in Saudi Arabia, and in the entire region, after 1979, for many reasons that need not be gotten into today. We were not like that in the past. We are merely going back to what we had before, which is moderate, balanced Islam (*al-Islam al-wasati al-mu'tadil*) that is open to the world, to all religions, and to all traditions and peoples. 70 per cent of the Saudi people are less than thirty years old, and, to be perfectly frank, we will not waste thirty years of our lives dealing with any extremist ideas. We will destroy them today and immediately. We want to live a normal life, a life that translates our tolerant religion and our positive customs and traditions, to live in harmony with the world, and to contribute to the development of our homeland and the world. This is something I believe clear steps have been taken toward recently, and I believe that we will eliminate the remnants of extremism in the near future. I do not think this is a challenge, because we represent tolerant, balanced, true values (*al-qiyam al-samha wa-l-mu'tadila wa-l-sahiha*).[9]

These comments were greeted with raucous applause in the conference hall. As many observers saw it, here was a Saudi ruler finally owning up to his government's past embrace of extremist ideas and committed to rooting them out. For others, however, the comments may have been encouraging to some extent, but they also smacked of historical revisionism. The idea that Saudi Islam became radical only after 1979, and that before then it was somehow 'moderate', beggared belief. Wahhabism had been Saudi Arabia's official religion since the mid-eighteenth century, and it was a famously intolerant version of Islam. What on earth was the crown prince talking about?

Clearly, MBS was sidestepping the matter of Wahhabism in these remarks. But in highlighting the impact of 1979 and the rise of the Sahwa, he was pointing to something very much real. The year 1979 saw the Islamic revolution in Iran, the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by a group of eschatological militants who had rejected the Saudi royal family's legitimacy, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that led to the so-called Afghan jihad. These events turbo-charged what was already a societal turn toward political Islam in the Middle East beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a development in which Saudi Arabia was swept up. After 1979, the kingdom embraced the Islamist turn more emphatically, providing even more support for the Wahhabi religious establishment and its local Islamist allies. The upsurge in Islamist activity in Saudi Arabia in the 1980s and 1990s came to be known as the 'Islamic awakening' (*al-sahwa al-Islamiyya*), or just the Sahwa. To MBS's mind, the Sahwa was the scourge that had wreaked

societal havoc and set the country back decades, and 1979 was its catalyst. The roots of the Sahwa, however, went far deeper than that crucial year. In fact, the Saudi state had been nurturing and supporting this nascent movement for decades.

In ideological terms, the Sahwa was a mixture of the political activism of the Muslim Brotherhood and the theological exclusivism of Wahhabism.[10] The mixture of these two traditions began in the 1950s when Riyadh began giving refuge to persecuted Muslim Brothers fleeing the republican Arab states, particularly Egypt and Syria. The migration of Muslim Brothers to the kingdom would continue in different waves during the 1960s and 1970s. One of the most famous of these Brotherhood migrants was Muhammad Qutb, the brother of the more famous Sayyid Qutb who was executed in Egypt in 1966. Arriving in the kingdom after his brother's death, Muhammad Qutb became an influential professor of shariʿa at what later became Umm al-Qura University in Mecca. So great was his role in the theoretical development of the Sahwa that he was known as 'the shaykh of the Sahwa'.[11] The impact of these Brotherhood migrants on the culture of Saudi Islam from the 1960s onward was massive. In the words of Stéphane Lacroix, the Sahwa 'managed to gain a hold over an entire generation of young Saudis'.[12] One reason for this influence was the Brotherhood migrants' role in the Saudi educational system, which they helped to shape and develop. This meant that virtually everyone in the kingdom who came of age during this period was exposed to the Brotherhood's Islamist ideas in school. In this way, this entire generation of Saudis came to be known as *jil al- sahwa*, or 'the Sahwa generation'.[13]

Following the events of 1979, the Sahwa's influence over Saudi society grew stronger still, with the encouragement and support of the Saudi authorities. For the Saudi royals, supporting the Sahwa made perfect sense. The Sahwa seemed to be an effective counterweight to the newly formed Islamic Republic of Iran, which was seeking to undermine the Saudis' Islamic legitimacy. Meanwhile, the movement led by Juhayman al-ʿUtaybi, which culminated in the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in November-December 1979, had convinced the kingdom that it needed to bolster its religious credentials.[14] The Saudi government moved quickly to suppress the liberal trend in Saudi culture and to appease the conservative Wahhabis and the Islamists. As David Commins has summarized, 'Women disappeared from television and newspapers stopped publishing photographs showing them; gender segregation was more strictly enforced; cinemas and video stores were shut down; censorship of university textbooks was tightened.' In addition, 'the rulers augmented the budgets of religious universities and the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice'.[15] It is no coincidence that during this period, in 1986, King Fahd adopted the title 'steward of the two holy places'. Five years earlier, the same Fahd, then crown prince, had given rhetorical support to the Sahwa, hailing the rise of the region-wide Islamic 'awakening' during a speech at the Organization of the Islamic Conference in Mecca. In the speech, he condemned the infiltration of Western ideas into Islamic culture and praised the Islamic awakening as 'a good tiding to a new society that will secure the aspirations of the Muslim individual'.[16] Both politically and rhetorically, the Saudi rulers were with the Sahwa.

The Saudi government soon lost control, however, of the movement it had been cultivating. By the 1990s, the Sahwa's key contributors grew more outspoken in their demands for a more conservative Islamic society, one that that would brook no cooperation with either the heretical Islamic Republic or the decadent and imperialist West. The deployment of US forces to Saudi Arabia in 1990 in response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait was the catalyst for this oppositionist stance. The Sahwa scholars and their supporters, who saw the stationing of infidel forces on Saudi soil as a great affront to Islam, began to mobilize. In January 1991, they drafted a document known as the 'Letter of Demands', calling on the government to apply the shariʿa more fully, to adopt foreign and domestic policies more in line with the shariʿa, and to afford Muslim scholars a greater role in government affairs. This was followed by a more developed document titled 'The Memorandum of Advice' issued in mid-1992.[17] As the Sahwa increasingly transformed into an outright protest movement, the rulers began to crack down on it. In September 1994, they launched a vast roundup of Sahwa scholars and preachers, including Salman al-ʿAwda and

Safar al-Hawali, two of the most prominent. Over the next year, almost all the leading Sahwa figures would be put behind bars. The protest movement had been crushed. In the late 1990s, the government began releasing the Sahwa scholars, some of whom, such as al-ʿAwda, became prominent supporters of the government.

Yet while the opposition activity of the Sahwa had been suppressed, it was not until MBS that the Saudi government grew committed to rooting out the Sahwa as a broader cultural force. The newfound focus on eliminating the movement once and for all was linked to the Gulf states' regional struggle against the Muslim Brotherhood that followed the Arab Spring in 2011. With the Brotherhood's rise to power in Egypt and Qatar's support for Islamist activity across the region, the Saudis spearheaded a counterrevolution against Islamism. Following the coup in Egypt that ended Brotherhood rule in 2013 and returned the military to power, the Saudis and Emiratis designated the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization.[18] For them, the Muslim Brotherhood represented an existential threat, a view not shared by the Sahwa scholars, such as al-ʿAwda, who condemned the 2013 coup in Egypt.[19] With the rise of MBS, Saudi Arabia's anti-Islamist stance became even more pronounced. In September 2017, multiple scholars associated with the Sahwa, including al-ʿAwda and ʿAwad al-Qarni, were arrested as part of a broad crackdown on dissent in the kingdom.[20] It was a month later, in October 2017, that MBS delivered his remarks about 'moderate, balanced Islam' at the Future Investment Initiative. The Sahwa, which he had just cracked down on, was in his mind the 'extremist' enemy that had set the kingdom back with its efforts to Islamize the country. It was also a political enemy, given that it harbored aspirations to share in his rule. Al-ʿAwda was arrested, it should be noted, just after publishing a tweet expressing hope that Saudi Arabia and Qatar would repair relations – a perceived affront to the Saudi policy of isolating Qatar for its support for Islamism.[21]

In the coming years, it would become clear that those Sahwa scholars who wanted their freedom would have to toe the government line. They would have to renounce their previous affiliation with the movement. The most prominent instance of such a public renunciation would come from the scholar ʿA'id al-Qarni, a cousin and brother-in-law of the aforementioned ʿAwad al-Qarni and a best-selling author. In a May 2019 interview on the popular television show *al-Liwan*, al-Qarni went so far as to apologize for the Sahwa in its entirety. 'In the name of the Sahwa', he said, 'I apologize to Saudi society for the errors … that contradicted the Book and the sunna, that contradicted the tolerance of Islam, that contradicted the moderate and balanced religion [revealed as] a mercy to the worlds, that imposed restrictions on people. I apologize to Saudi society in the name of all the Sahwa, both dead and alive.' Al-Qarni was now, he wished to make clear, a loyal supporter of the government and of MBS. In a direct reference to MBS's remarks at the Future Investment Initiative, he stated, 'Today, I am with the balanced and moderate Islam open to the world that his highness the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has called for and which is our religion.'[22] Al-Qarni was aligning himself with the new government-approved version of Islam, which was being defined as the converse of everything that the Sahwa had stood for. The Sahwa was the foil for the 'moderate' Islam that MBS was championing. But the elephant in the room at the Future Investment Initiative – Wahhabism – would also soon need to be addressed.

The Downgrading of Wahhabism

In one way, MBS's approach to the issue of Wahhabism has not been entirely novel. This is his assertion that Wahhabism simply does not exist, a claim that Saudi leaders have repeated since at least the early twentieth century.[23] As MBS said in an interview with *The Atlantic's* Jeffrey Goldberg in 2018, 'No one can define Wahhabism. There is no Wahhabism. We don't believe we have Wahhabism.'[24] The same argument was commonly made by MBS's father. In 2010, for instance, then Prince Salman, serving as governor of Riyadh, told reporters that 'enemies of the sheikh Mohammed bin Abdul Wahab labelled his teaching as Wahabism, a doctrine that doesn't

exist here … I dare any one to bring a single alphabetical letter from the Sheikh's books that goes against the book of Allah … and the teachings of his prophet, Mohammed.'[25]

Yet the claim that Wahhabism does not exist is about theology, not history. In saying that Wahhabism did not exist, Salman's point was that Wahhabism was nothing more than the expression of true Islam. The teachings of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab could not be labeled anything but Islam, plain and simple, and therefore 'Wahhabism' was a meaningless and misleading term. If, however, one defines Wahhabism as the predicatory movement (*daʿwa*) initiated by Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, there is no denying that Wahhabism exists as a historical phenomenon. Indeed, the movement has long been understood by its adherents as a discernible *daʿwa*, one whose doctrinal tenets distinguish it from other movements and trends in Sunni Islam. In the words of its own followers, Wahhabism has long been known as 'the Najdi *daʿwa*' (*al-daʿwa al-Najdiyya*).[26] The *daʿwa* stood for an uncompromising approach to *tawhid*, one informed by the ideas of the fourteenth-century Hanbali scholars Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350).[27] In practice, this translated into a fierce intolerance of the prevailing currents and institutions of contemporary Sunni Islam, not to mention those of Shiʿism, also condemned as a polytheistic heresy. As late as the early twentieth century, the Wahhabi *ʿulama*' saw the neighboring countries of the Ottoman Empire as lands of *shirk* on account of the perceived prevalence there of hagiolatry. Their inhabitants were not accorded the presumption of Islam; it was still assumed that most professed Muslims were in fact polytheists.[28]

This was the version of Islam that the Saudi rulers stood by for more than two centuries. For the majority of the Islamic world, Wahhabism was a dreadful heresy. For the Al Saud, however, it was the expression of true Islam and the lifeforce of their political project. It was the union of Wahhabi Islam and Saudi political power that made the Saudi state. Beginning in the early twentieth century, the more extreme views of the Wahhabi establishment were modulated under the influence of King Abd al-Aziz (r. 1902–1953), who sought to bring his country into the modern world. Gradually, Wahhabism shed something of its schismatic character. Even as the exclusivist and militant principles enshrined in the Wahhabi doctrine remained in theory, in practice they were toned down.[29] Nonetheless, the Saudi rulers never shed their connection with the Wahhabi *daʿwa*, and in fact consistently trumpeted the relationship as inherent to the Saudi political project. In their view, the state (*dawla*) was inextricably linked to the movement (*daʿwa*).

This was the view expressed by Salman, while still governor of Riyadh, in a lecture delivered in 2011 on 'the historical and ideological foundations of the Saudi state'.[30] In the lecture, Salman praised Wahhabism, or what he called 'the reformist mission' (*al-daʿwa al-islahiyya*), as 'being nothing other than a sound understanding of Islam',[31] and he repeatedly emphasized the historical connection between the *dawla* and the *daʿwa*. '[T]he special relationship between the *dawla* and the *daʿwa*', he said, had been foundational to the Saudi state from the mid-eighteenth century to the present, the modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia being an extension of the first Saudi state.[32] 'The history of the *daʿwa*' was 'connected to the history of the *dawla*'.[33] The first Saudi state 'had relied in its founding on the reformist mission begun by Shaykh Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab', and it was the forging of this connection that set the state in motion.[34] 'With the historical pact' between Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and Ibn Saud, 'the foundations of the first Saudi state, which were premised on the religion, began.'[35]

Remarkably, it is precisely this idea articulated by his father – that the defining feature of the Saudi state is its association with the Wahhabi *daʿwa* – that MBS would soon begin to attack. In several interviews since 2018, he has called into question the state's relationship with Wahhabism, both in historical and in normative terms. In the 2018 interview with Jeffrey Goldberg, for instance, after asserting that there is no such thing as Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia, MBS turned to the history of the first Saudi state. In his presentation, the state's origins were not about reformist religious ideology at all, but rather about bringing peace and economic prosperity to a chaotic land:

> The first Saudi state, why was it established? After the Prophet Muhammad and the first four caliphs, the people of the Arabian Peninsula went back to fighting each other like they did for thousands of years. But

> our family, 600 years ago, established a town from scratch called Diriyah, and with this town came the first Saudi state. It became the most powerful economic part of the peninsula. They helped change reality. Most other towns, they fought over trade, hijacked trade, but our family said to two other tribes, 'Instead of attacking the trade routes, why don't we hire you as guards for this area?' So trade grew, and the town grew. This was the method. Three hundred years later, this is still the way. The thought was always that you need all the great brains of the Arabian Peninsula – the generals, the tribal leaders, the scholars – working with you. One of them was Muhammad ibn abd al-Wahhab.
>
> But our project is based on the people, on economic interests, and not on expansionist ideological interests. Of course we have things in common. All of us are Muslim, all of us speak Arabic, we all have the same culture and the same interest. When people speak of Wahhabism, they don't know exactly what they are talking about. [Ibn] Abd al-Wahhab's family, the al-Sheikh family, is today very well known, but there are tens of thousands of important families in Saudi Arabia today. And you will find a Shiite in the cabinet, you will find Shiites in government, the most important university in Saudi Arabia is headed by a Shiite. So we believe that we are a mix of Muslim schools and sects.[36]

This was a radically different approach to the history of the first Saudi state than the one found in his father's 2011 lecture. While Salman had also emphasized the fact that the first Saudi state brought peace and security to Arabia, in his telling this was not merely the result of Muhammad ibn Saud's leadership but also, and more critically, the result of his support for the Wahhabi *daʿwa*. In MBS's view, however, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab's *daʿwa* was far from being the driving force behind the early Saudi state. It was the Al Saud's gifted leadership and commitment to changing the economic and security 'reality' of the area that mattered. This was the origin of the first Saudi state. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab had a role, he conceded, but so too did many others, and by no means was he or his *daʿwa* defining of the state's interests – hence the religious diversity that one finds in modern Saudi Arabia.

Similarly, in an interview on Saudi television in April 2021, MBS would deny that Saudi Arabia has any special attachment to the teaching of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab. In the interview, he reaffirmed that the state's constitution is the Quran and the sunna as stipulated in the Basic Law of Governance of January 1992, going on to discuss which prooftexts he is obligated to uphold as a Muslim ruler. Asked whether the state adheres to 'a particular school (*madrasa*)', such as 'the school of Shaykh Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab', he replied:

> When we attach ourselves to a particular school or a particular scholar, that means we have deified man … God did not set down a barrier between Himself and mankind. He revealed His Quran to His Messenger, who applied it on the earth. Independent reasoning (*ijtihad*) is open until the end of time. Shaykh Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab, were he to come out from his grave and find us adhering to his words, closing our minds to *ijtihad*, and deifying or aggrandizing him, he would be the first to oppose this. So there is no recognized school and there is no recognized person. *Ijtihad* continues concerning the Quran, and *ijtihad* continues concerning the sunna of the Prophet. All *fatwa*s are given according to time and place, and according to [individual] understanding.[37]

According to this presentation, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab was a scholar who issued *fatwa*s in his own time and place, and these were not necessarily binding today. His views were not timeless but timebound, the product of contingent *ijtihad*. To see it otherwise was to treat him like a god. MBS's argument here concerning Ibn Abd al-Wahhab was controversial enough to warrant a defense from the Council of Senior Scholars, who affirmed in a statement that what the crown prince had said concerning not adhering to any particular school or scholar was correct.[38] Ironically, the argument that emulating the views of any particular scholar amounts to deification was one that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab had himself made in taking on the religious establishment of his day in Najd.[39] Now it was being used to undermine the validity of his own teachings, which in fact were not intended as timebound judgments but rather as the expression – on a theological level – of the essence of Islam.

In March 2022, *The Atlantic* published a feature-length article on MBS and Saudi Arabia by journalist Graeme Wood, who had interviewed the crown prince earlier that year.[40] An edited transcript of the interview, which the Saudis later published, included several lines on Ibn Abd

al-Wahhab and Wahhabism, in which MBS again sought to make light of the Wahhabi founder's influence.[41] In the original interview, which was conducted in English, MBS can be heard saying:

> Wahhabism, I do not agree with that [i.e. that it exists], because Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, he's not a prophet, he's not an angel, he's one scholar in the first Saudi Arabia among many scholars, among many political leaders, among many military leaders … So Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab is not Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia, it has, you have Sunni and Shiite, in Sunni [Islam] you have four *madhahib* [schools of law] … and in Shiite [Islam] you have different schools …[42]

Here again was the view that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab was merely one among many notables in the first Saudi state. He was *not* Saudi Arabia, and this was confirmed by the fact of the country's religious diversity. 'Ibn Abdul Wahhab is not Saudi Arabia', ran a headline in the *Saudi Gazette*, the second English-language daily published in the kingdom.[43]

According to MBS, the reason so many people seemed to believe otherwise had to do with the way Saudi history had been written, and more precisely with who had written it. As MBS said in the same interview, 'The only problem at that time in the Arabian Peninsula [was] that only the people who know how to read and write [are] the students of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. So the history is being written based on [how] they view it.'[44] The most important of the unnamed students of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab being referred to here was the Wahhabi scholar Husayn ibn Ghannam (d. 1810–11), the author of the first history of Wahhabism and the first Saudi state.[45] In his history, Ibn Ghannam painted a stark portrait of Najd and the surrounding areas preceding the *daʿwa* of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, describing everywhere from Egypt to Iraq to Arabia as steeped in the 'filth' of *shirk*. According to him, the period before the rise of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's movement was akin to the era of pagan ignorance (*jahiliyya*) preceding the rise of Islam; much like the prophet, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab had preached the true meaning of *tawhid* amid a sea of *shirk*. Throughout the book, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab is portrayed as the most important figure in the first Saudi state, even playing a political role in the early years. Muhammad ibn Saud is mentioned only sparingly.[46] It was the Ibn Ghannam school of history, with its portrayal of the first Saudi state as the outgrowth of the Wahhabi movement, that MBS was setting out to challenge. With the announcement of Founding Day in January 2022, he was throwing down the gauntlet.

The royal decree announcing the new holiday was accompanied by a flurry of articles and opinion essays in the official Saudi press defending and justifying the move. In *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, the leading Arabic daily, opinion columnist Mishari al-Dhayidi drew attention to the long history of Saudi rule in Najd stretching back to Manīʿ al-Muraydi, the founder of al-Dirʿiyya in 1446, some 300 years before Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab's arrival in the town.[47] His colleague Abdallah ibn Bijad al-ʿUtaybi likewise emphasized the Saudi dynasty's long history in the region, complaining that 'traditional historians', out of emotional attachment to the *daʿwa*, had minimized the role of Ibn Saud and other critical actors in favor of those who played 'secondary roles' – an indirect reference to Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and the Wahhabi clerics.[48] Ibn Saud had aimed to build a state that would bring 'unity', 'stability' and 'security' to Arabia, and this was important to emphasize at the present time. The new narrative would remind Saudis of their long and storied national history and serve 'to deepen national belonging and strengthen national identity'. Similarly, in an interview with *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, the Saudi historian Rashid ibn ʿAsakir argued that the religious dimension of Saudi history had been exaggerated.[49] The establishment of the first Saudi state, he claimed, had been for the purpose of 'achieving security for the people of the region'. Ibn Ghannam had been wrong to portray Najd as a land where *shirk* was widespread, and he had not done justice to the pioneering role of Ibn Saud.[50] The columnist Mishʿal al-Sudayri was blunter still. Ibn Ghannam, he wrote, was a 'failed historian' for the way he depicted Najd prior to the *daʿwa* of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab.[51] The knives were out for Ibn Ghannam and his version of Saudi history.

It is tempting to view such commentary through cynical eyes. MBS had articulated a new narrative, and this cued the commentariat to repeat and validate it. To a very large extent, that

is what was happening, though there is more to the new historical narrative than one might initially suspect.

MBS is not the first to try to raise the profile of Muhammad ibn Saud or to downplay the role of Wahhabism in Saudi history. As noted above, MBS's father, Salman, had emphasized that the first Saudi state created a new reality of peace and security in the Arabian Peninsula. He had even asserted that Ibn Saud set the stage for this before the alliance with Ibn Abd al-Wahhab. In his words, Ibn Saud had 'laid the foundations of unity and security in his restricted emirate', that is, in the minor emirate of al-Dirʿiyya.[52] In this regard, MBS was likely influenced by his father's thinking, but Salman had presented the alliance with Wahhabism as crucial to the development of the state. MBS would take the exact opposite approach, reducing the role of Wahhabism to a trifle. Here, then, he was following the lead of other thinkers.

In the later twentieth century, a number of young Saudi academics trained in the US, including the scholars Uwaidah Al-Juhany and Khalid Al-Dakhil, developed a sociological interpretation of the rise of the first Saudi state according to which the doctrine of Wahhabism was of minor importance. They hypothesized that the state arose in response to growth among the settled population (*hadar*) of Najd, and that gradually this resulted in greater levels of state formation. The settled peoples of the area were increasingly in need of protection from the predatory nomads (*badw*), and thus they were searching for the safety and security of a powerful state. The first Saudi state was precisely what they were looking for. The role of religion had in fact been minimal.[53] In the view of critics, such views amounted to wishful thinking by secular-minded intellectuals. The evidence to support such an interpretation simply did not exist.[54]

The sociological interpretation of Saudi history, however, has remained popular among a certain segment of the Saudi intelligentsia. One of these is the sociologist Abd al-Rahman al-Shuqayr, who in November 2018 published a long article in the Saudi daily *al-Jazira* taking aim at the traditional narrative of Saudi origins predicated on Ibn Ghannam's work.[55] Historians who trace the first Saudi state to 1744, he argued, were ignoring the deeper 'political, sociological, and cultural inheritance' of the country. The Saudi royal family's role in Najd, he explained, went back to 1446 when an ancestor of the Al Saud built al-Dirʿiyya, and the period between then and 1727 had witnessed the building of institutions, markets, and mosques. Before the rise of Wahhabism, Muhammad ibn Saud had succeeded in creating 'a centralized political authority' in al-Dirʿiyya. It was high time that Saudis began reevaluating their history. In a subsequent interview on the popular Saudi show and podcast *Thamaniya*, al-Shuqayr went further. 'We need to reassess our history', he stated, 'especially because Vision 2030, many of the values that it is promoting in terms of social values, family values, and structures, the fundamental source of these was there in Saudi society before [Wahhabism].'[56] Historians such as Ibn Ghannam looked at history from a narrow religious perspective; they were historians of the *daʿwa* before they were historians of the *dawla*. The title of the show appeared as 'The History of the *daʿwa* or the *dawla*?' Al-Shuqayr did not deny that Wahhabism had played some role in the development of the first Saudi state, noting elsewhere that 'the religious social cohesion' (*al-ʿasabiyya al-diniyya*) provided by Wahhabism was critical to the growth of the first Saudi state in its earliest stages. In his view, however, it was only one factor and Ibn Saud soon had little need for it.[57] The historian Rashid ibn ʿAsakir, for his part, has publicly espoused the view that Wahhabism had played practically no role at all. In a long interview in *al-Sharq al-Awsat* published in February 2023, coinciding with the second celebration of Founding Day, Ibn ʿAsakir claimed that 'the religious dimension in the founding of the state was nonexistent'.[58] The people of Najd, in his view, were already practicing Muslims and not in need of religious enlightenment. What lay behind the founding of the state, then, was the aim of 'establishing security and spreading equity and justice amid chaos and division'. Scholars such as al-Shuqayr and Ibn ʿAsakir were making such arguments not necessarily to please MBS but because they genuinely believed them. And they had been making them well before the announcement of Founding Day. In any event, these intellectuals would serve as a convenient brain trust for validating the new holiday and the narrative that it enshrined, one

Figure 1. Historical exhibit in al-Dirʿiyya (photo by the author, 9 November 2022).

focused on the centuries-long contribution of the Saudi royal family to building peace and stability and unity in the Arabian Peninsula.

The announcement of Founding Day was also accompanied by an impressive website emphasizing these themes,[59] as well as a government-sponsored book by Saudi historian Khalid al-ʿAbudi. In the book, titled *Mawlid umma* ('The Birth of a Nation'), the author narrates Saudi history from 1727 to 1932, emphasizing the new era of 'peace and stability' that was brought about by the leadership of Muhammad ibn Saud upon his rise to power in al-Dirʿiyya.[60] The emphasis on 1727 as the founding year of the first Saudi state has also been given emphasis in a new historical exhibit in al-Dirʿiyya (see Figure 1), which has been the site of extensive reconstruction and renovation in recent years. The massive project at al-Dirʿiyya, which pairs the reconstructed old Saudi capital with new modern areas boasting fancy restaurants and musical entertainment, is being harnessed in service of the new narrative. Tributes to Wahhabism are few and far between here.

Conclusion

The attempt to restructure Saudi Arabia's relationship with Islam is ultimately about finding new sources of legitimacy 'in the age of the Vision', as it aims to leave Islamism and Wahhabism behind. MBS does not wish Saudi Arabia to be a country that identifies first and foremost as a conservative Islamic state as was the case in the past. The alliance with political Islam and the close relationship with the Wahhabi clergy are thus no longer suitable. Worse, they are a hindrance to the intended direction he seeks to take the country, and for that reason he has sought to undermine them by means of repression, on the one hand, and historical revisionism, on the other.

In all of this, no step has been more symbolically important than the attempt to revise the founding date of the nation from 1744 to 1727, thus downgrading the role of Wahhabism.[61] MBS wishes to tell a story about Saudi Arabia in which Wahhabism plays no more than a bit role, and that is what Founding Day is all about. To all appearances, it is a story that he genuinely believes, but it is also a story that, from his point of view at least, he badly needs. The idea that Saudi Arabia's history began in 1727 with the ascension of Muhammad ibn Saud redefines the nature of the Saudi state, putting the emphasis on the Al Saud as opposed to Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and his *daʿwa*. And the argument that Ibn Saud's rule was above all about bringing peace and security to Arabia, about taming a fractious and inhospitable wilderness, ties in with

the themes of Vision 2030 about building a thriving economy and vibrant society. If 1744 was about the rediscovery of pure Islam in a region beset with *shirk*, 1727 is about the pursuit of security and prosperity in a region beset with chaos and disorder. The latter is better suited to the intended Saudi Arabia of the future.

The question that all this begs, however, is whether this new narrative is historically accurate in any way. From this author's perspective, the answer is surely no. The idea that the first Saudi state could have arisen in the absence of Wahhabism is difficult to entertain, and flies directly in the face of nearly all the historical evidence. The emergence of the first Saudi state was in many ways a black swan event. The area of Najd had not experienced any significant level of state formation in centuries. Prior to the rise of Wahhabism, no major developments in Najdi social, political, or economic life can be ascertained with any level of certainty from the available sources.[62] It stands to reason that it was the Wahhabi *daʿwa*, with its radical message aimed at converting the masses to true Islam and eradicating *shirk*, that provided the spark for the first Saudi state.

That being said, one may well ask whether revising the founding date of the country with a view to weakening the hold of Wahhabism is such a bad thing, regardless of historical accuracy. One view might be that while Founding Day is a lie, it is a noble lie in view of what it seeks to accomplish. Saudi Arabia is currently undergoing a profound transformation in identity and orientation, both decoupling from Wahhabism and repudiating its past support for Islamism as it pursues a vision tied to an amorphous 'moderate' Islam.[63] As far as the Saudi leadership is concerned, this process requires a healthy dose of historical revisionism, if not to say historical amnesia. It would not be the first instance of such a development. As Ernest Renan famously remarked, 'The act of forgetting, I would even say, historical error, is an essential factor in the creation of a nation.'[64]

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

ORCID

Cole M. Bunzel http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2221-8305

Notes

1. For a detailed treatment of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's doctrine, see Cole Bunzel, *Wahhābism: The History of a Militant Islamic Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), chapters 2–3. And see also Michael Crawford, *Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2014).
2. 'Yawm al-taʾsis' [Founding Day], *Wikalat al-anbaʾ al-Suʿudiyya*, 27 January 2022: https://www.spa.gov.sa/viewfullstory.php?lang=ar&newsid=2324646#2324646.
3. Noor Nugali and Jonathan Gornall, 'The Inside Story of Saudi Arabia's Founding Day, Celebrating the Year It All Began', *Arab News*, 22 February 2022: https://www.arabnews.com/node/2029316/saudi-arabia.
4. On this process, see David Rundell, *Vision or Mirage: Saudi Arabia at the Crossroads* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2021), chapter 6.
5. 'Vision 2030', n.d., p.7, available at https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/media/rc0b5oy1/saudi_vision203.pdf.
6. Most of what I write here is based on personal observations. For more on the recent changes in the Saudi religious sector, see Yasmine Farouk and Nathan J. Brown, 'Saudi Arabia's Religious Reforms Are Touching Nothing But Changing Everything', in Frederic Wehrey (ed.), *Islamic Institutions in Arab States: Mapping the Dynamics of Control, Co-option, and Contention* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2021), pp.7–32; and see also Ali Shihabi, 'The Saudi Succession and the Sociocultural-Religious Reforms of Mohammed bin Salman', Hoover Institution, 19 January 2022: https://www.hoover.org/research/saudi-succession-and-sociocultural-religious-reforms-mohammed-bin-salman.

7. 'Vision 2030', pp.16–17.
8. The term *wasatiyya*, commonly translated as 'moderation', might more accurately be rendered as 'centrism'. In Arabic it often appears together with *i'tidal*, meaning 'balance' or 'measuredness', though this too is commonly translated as 'moderation'. In what follows *wasatiyya* and *i'tidal* are translated as 'moderation' and 'balance', respectively, their adjectival forms (*wasati* and *mu'tadil*) as 'moderate' and 'balanced'.
9. 'Day 1 coverage: Saudi Arabia hosts landmark investment conference', 31 October 31 2017 (recorded 24 October 2017): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n_scKvgUkS8 (starting at 13:45). Translation from the Arabic is my own. For a transcription of much these remarks, see 'Muhammad ibn Salman: sa-naqdi ʿala al-tatarruf… wa-sa-naʿudu ila al-Islam al-wasati' [Mohammed bin Salman: We Will Put an End to Extremism… and We Will Return to Moderate Islam], *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 25 October 2017: https://aawsat.com/node/1062851.
10. On the Sahwa generally, see Stéphane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia*, trans. George Holoch (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011); Madawi Al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State: Islamic Voices from a New Generation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Joshua Teitelbaum, *Holier than Thou: Saudi Arabia's Islamic Opposition* (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2000).
11. Lacroix, *Awakening Islam*, p.53.
12. Ibid., p.38.
13. Ibid., p.62.
14. On Juhayman's movement, see Thomas Hegghammer and Stéphane Lacroix, 'Rejectionist Islamism in Saudi Arabia: The Story of Juhayman al-ʿUtaybi Revisited', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 39 (2007), pp.103–22; Cole Bunzel, 'Toward the Seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca: The Writings and Ideology of Juhaymān al-ʿUtaybī and the Ikhwān', *Die Welt des Islams*, 63 (2023), pp.383–417.
15. David Commins, *Islam in Saudi Arabia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), pp.142–43.
16. 'Jalalat al-Malik Khalid ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAziz yulqi kalima hamma fi al-jalsa al-iftitahiyya li-muʾtamar al-qimma al-Islamiyya al-thalith' [His Majesty King Khalid ibn Abd al-Aziz Delivers Important Remarks at Opening Session of Third Islamic Summit Conference], *Majallat al-Mubtaʿath*, 10 (February-March 1981), pp.5–6.
17. Lacroix, *Awakening Islam*, pp.179–86.
18. See Stéphane Lacroix, 'Saudi Arabia's Muslim Brotherhood Predicament', *The Washington Post*, 20 March 2014.
19. Angus McDowall, 'Gulf Islamists Irked as Monarchs Back Egypt's Generals', *Reuters*, 27 August 2013.
20. See 'Saudi Arabia: Prominent Clerics Arrested', Human Rights Watch, 15 September 2017.
21. For the tweet, see https://twitter.com/salman_alodah/status/906280562956132352.
22. "Aʾid al-Qarni fi Liwan al-Mudayfir' [ʿAʾid al-Qarni in the Liwan of al-Mudayfir], YouTube, 19 May 2019: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FbURkz6nQHE.
23. See Bunzel, *Wahhābism*, p.326.
24. Jeffrey Goldberg, 'Saudi Crown Prince: Iran's Supreme Leaders "Makes Hitler Look Good"', *The Atlantic*, 2 April 2018: https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/04/mohammed-bin-salman-iran-israel/557036/.
25. Wael Mahdi, 'There Is No Such Thing as Wahabism, Saudi Prince Says', *The National*, 18 March 2010: https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/mena/there-is-no-such-thing-as-wahabism-saudi-prince-says-1.552348.
26. Bunzel, *Wahhābism*, p.6.
27. While influenced by them, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab took the ideas of Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-Qayyim in a more radical direction. See ibid., chapter 3.
28. Ibid., chapter 6, esp. p.290.
29. See ibid., chapter 7.
30. See Salman ibn Abd al-Aziz Al Suʿud, *al-Usus al-tarikhiyya wa-l-fikriyya li-l-dawla al-Suʿudiyya* [The Historical and Ideological Foundations of the Saudi State] (Riyadh: Darat al-Malik ʿAbd al-ʿAziz, 2011–12).
31. Ibid., p.35.
32. Ibid., p.40.
33. Ibid., p.35.
34. Ibid., pp.39–40.
35. Ibid., p.35.
36. Goldberg, 'Saudi Crown Prince'.
37. 'Liqaʾ wali al-ʿahd Muhammad ibn Salman maʿa ʿAbdallah al-Mudayfir bi-munasabat khams sanawat ʿala itlaq al-ruʾya' [Meeting of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman with Abdallah al-Mudayfir on the Occasion of Five Years Since the Unveiling of the Vision], *Rutana Khalijiyya*, 27 April 2021: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MnKoES8rcKA (starting at 1:02:00). Cf. Mustafa al-Ansari, 'al-Suʿudiyya tuʿidu siyaghat ʿalaqat al-din bi-l-dawla' [Saudi Arabia Reformulates the Relationship Between Religion and State], *Independent Arabia*, 30 April 2021: https://www.independentarabia.com/node/217426.
38. 'al-Amana al-ʿamma li-Hayʾat Kibar al-ʿUlamaʾ: taʾkid sumuww wali al-ʿahd bi-anna dastur al-mamlaka wa-manhajaha al-daʾim huwa kitab Allah min al-usus wa-l-murtakazat allati qamat ʿalayha al-mamlaka' [Secretariat of the Committee of Senior Scholars: His Highness the Crown Prince Reaffirms that the

Constitution of the Kingdom and Its Enduring Methodology Are the Book of God, Among the Foundations and Pillars upon which the Kingdom Was Founded], *Wikalat al-Anbaʾ al-Suʿudiyya*, 29 April 2021: https://www.spa.gov.sa/2223607?lang=ar&newsid=2223607. On the Council of Senior Scholars, see Nabile Mouline, *The Clerics of Islam: Religious Authority and Political Power in Saudi Arabia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), chapter 6.

39. Bunzel, *Wahhābism*, pp.115–16.
40. Graeme Wood, 'Absolute Power', *The Atlantic*, 3 March 2022: https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/04/mohammed-bin-salman-saudi-arabia-palace-interview/622822/.
41. For the edited transcript, see 'Sumuww wali al-ʿahd fi hiwar maʿa majallat Atlantik yuʾakkidu: al-Suʿudiyya tatattawaru wifqan li-muqawwimatiha al-iqtisadiyya wa-l-thaqafiyya wa-shaʿbiha wa-tarikhiha' [His Highness the Crown Prince in Interview with *The Atlantic* Magazine: Saudi Arabia Is Developing in Accordance with Its Economic and Cultural Components and Its People and Its History], *Wikalat al-Anbaʾ al-Suʿudiyya*, 3 March 2022: https://www.spa.gov.sa/2334337.
42. Audio file shared by Graeme Wood via WhatsApp, 7 March 2022. Cf. the similarly rendered English in 'Ibn Abdul Wahhab Is Not Saudi Arabia, Reaffirms Crown Prince', *Saudi Gazette*, 3 March 2022: https://saudigazette.com.sa/article/617728. And cf. the Arabic in 'Sumuww wali al-ʿahd fi hiwar maʿa majallat Atlantik'.
43. 'Ibn Abdul Wahhab is Not Saudi Arabia'.
44. Audio file shared by Graeme Wood via WhatsApp, 7 March 2022.
45. The title of his work is *Rawdat al-afkar wa-l-afham li-murtad hal al-imam wa-taʿdad ghazawat dhawi al-Islam* [The Garden of Thoughts and Reflections for the Inquirer into the Condition of the Imam and the Enumeration of the Raids of the Muslims]. It was written no later than 1801. See Bunzel, *Wahhābism*, pp.21–22.
46. On Ibn Ghannam and his history, see Bunzel, *Wahhābism*, pp.21–22, 151.
47. Mishari al-Dhayidi, 'Riyadat Muhamamad ibn Suʿud' [The Pioneering Leadership of Muhammed ibn Saud], *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 14 February 2022: https://aawsat.com/node/3473461.
48. Abdallah ibn Bijad al-ʿUtaybi, 'al-Wataniyya wa-yawm al-taʾsis al-Suʿudi' [Nationalism and Saudi Founding Day], *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 30 January 2022: https://aawsat.com/node/3444191.
49. Badr al-Khurayyif, 'Yawm al-taʾsis: al-muʾarrikh Rashid ibn ʿAsakir li-l-Sharq al-awsat: al-buʿd al-dini fi qiyam al-dawla al-Suʿudiyya al-ula mubalagh fihi' [Founding Day: Historian Rashid ibn ʿAsakir to *al-Asharq al-Awsat*: The Religious Dimension of the First Saudi State's Rise Is Exaggerated], *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 22 February 2022: https://aawsat.com/node/3489071.
50. This was a point that Ibn ʿAsakir had long been making. See, for instance, his 'Khadaʿuka fa-qalu Najd wa-l-shirk!' [They Deceived You and Said Najd and Polytheism!] *al-Riyad*, 23 February 2007: https://www.alriyadh.com/227193.
51. Mishʿal al-Sudayri, 'Laysat hunaka Wahhabiyya' [There is No Wahhabism], *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 8 March 2022: https://aawsat.com/node/3517916.
52. Al Suʿud, *al-Usus al-tarikhiyya*, p.33.
53. See Uwaidah M. Al-Juhany, *Najd Before the Salafi Reform Movement: Social, Political and Religious Conditions During the Three Centuries Preceding the Rise of the Saudi State* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 2002) (based on 1983 PhD dissertation at the University of Washington); Khalid S. Al-Dakhil, 'Social Origins of the Wahhabi Movement', (PhD dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1998). For more on these scholars and their school of thought, see Jörg Matthias Determann, *Historiography in Saudi Arabia: Globalization and the State in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), pp.191–215. A related argument, also developed by Al-Dakhil, holds that the first Saudi state represented an attempt by the *hadar*, suffering from a lack of tribal organization, 'to end Bedouin historical hegemony throughout pre-modern Arabia'. See Abdulaziz Al-Fahad, 'The 'Imama vs. the 'Iqal: Hadari-Bedouin Conflict and the Formation of the Saudi State', in Madawi Al-Rasheed and Robert Vitalis (eds), *Counter-Narratives: History, Contemporary Society, and Politics in Saudi Arabia and Yemen* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp.35–75, at 36.
54. See, for instance, Michael Cook, 'The Expansion of the First Saudi State: The Case of Washm', in C. E. Bosworth, Charles Issawi, Roger Savory et al. (eds), *The Islamic World from Classical to Modern Times* (Princeton: The Darwin Press,1989), pp.661–99, at pp.675–79. See further the discussion in Crawford, *Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab*,pp. 89–91.
55. Abd al-Rahman al-Shuqayr, 'al-Suʿudiyyun mundhu ʿam 850 *h*.… ʿumquna al-tarikhi wa-l-siyasi wa-l-ijtimaʿi yastalhimu khibarat sittat qurun' [Saudis Since 850 A.H.… Our Historical, Political and Social Depth Draws on Six Centuries of Experience], *al-Jazira*, 10 November 2018: https://www.al-jazirah.com/2018/20181110/cm1.htm.
56. 'Tarikh al-daʿwa am al-dawla?' [History of the Mission or of the State?], *Thamaniya*, 14 June 2020: https://thmanyah.com/podcasts/fnjan/183/.
57. Abd al-Rahman al-Shuqayr, *al-Adyan wa-l-jama'at al-diniyya fi Najd hatta zuhur al-da'wa al-salafiyya* [Religions and Religious Organizations in Najd Until the Emergence of the Salafi Mission] (Beirut: Dar al-Rawafid, 2021), pp.86–87. My thanks to Abd al-Rahman for clarifying his views to me (WhatsApp communication with Abd al-Rahman al-Shuqayr, 23 February 2023).

58. Badr al-Khurayyif, 'Bin 'Asakir li-l-Sharq al-Awsat: muntaliqat wa-raka'iz ta'sis al-Su'udiyya khalat min al-dawafi' al-diniyya' (Ibn 'Asakir to *al-Sharq al-Awsat*: The Starting-points and Bases of Saudi Arabia's Founding Were Devoid of Religious Motivations), *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 21 February 2023, https://aawsat.com/node/4172031.
59. https://www.foundingday.sa/.
60. Khalid ibn Abdallah al-'Abudi, *Mawlid umma: kayfa kunna wa-kayfa asbahna* [The Birth of a Nation: How We Were and How We Came to Be] (Riyadh: n.p., 2022), p.7.
61. While some steps in this direction may have been taken by earlier leaders, as Rosie Bsheer has argued, none of these in my opinion foreshadowed the sharp repudiation of Wahhabism as a significant historical or legitimizing force as undertaken by MBS. See Rosie Bsheer, *Archive Wars: The Politics of History in Saudi Arabia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020), pp.19–20.
62. Bunzel, *Wahhābism*, pp.14, 191.
63. By amorphous I mean not as yet clearly defined. Shaykh Muhammad al-'Isa, the head of the Muslim World League, is the Saudi religious scholar most closely associated with promoting 'moderation' (*wasatiyya*) and 'moderate discourse' (*al-khitab al-wasati*), but mostly what this amounts to is tautological calls for 'strengthening the importance of moderation and balance (*al-wasatiyya wa-l-i'tidal*) in the consciousness of the Muslim *umma*', as a 2017 statement summarizing his efforts put it. See 'Da'wa li-stilham qiyam al-wasatiyya wa-l-i'tidal min al-sira al-nabawiyya' [Call for Seeking Inspiration of the Values of Moderation and Balance from the Prophetic Biography], Rabitat al-'Alam al-Islami (Muslim World League), 23 December 2017: https://www.themwl.org/ar/node/34995. Saudi religious textbooks, meanwhile, do not articulate a fundamentally different version of Islam, rather setting out a kind of toned-down Wahhabism in which the historical emphasis on *takfir* and the duty of showing hatred and enmity to unbelievers is minimized. See *Review of Changes and Remaining Problematic Content in Saudi Textbooks 2021–22*, IMPACT-se, June 2022: https://www.impact-se.org/wp-content/uploads/Annual-Review_Review-of-Changes-and-Remaining-Problematic-Content-in-Saudi-Textbooks-2021%E2%80%9322.pdf.
64. Ernest Renan, *What is a Nation? and Other Political Writings*, trans. M.F.N. Giglioli (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), p.251.