

Mecca: Islam's cosmopolitan heart

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Mecca, the capital of all Muslims, is a focal point of pilgrimage (the annual *hajj*) and prayer. It is also a centre of cultural exchange, of mutual borrowing, and peaceful coexistence of different groups. This cosmopolitan, open tradition was evident for more than a thousand years, until the forced annexation of Mecca - also the capital of the kingdom of the Hijaz - by the al-Saud rulers and their *Wahhabi* partners in 1932.

The Hijaz is the largest, most populated, and most culturally and religiously diverse region of the country [1], in large part because it was the traditional host area of all the pilgrims to Mecca, many of whom settled and intermarried there. The repression of the Hijaz, and of the Hijazi cultural model, immediately became the spearhead of Saudi-*Wahhabi* efforts to impose conformist [2] orthodoxy on Muslims everywhere.

It is worth recalling what was lost. Until the beginning of the 20th century, the Great Mosque in Mecca hosted the "circles of knowledge", which provided a unique opportunity for dialogue between Muslims from different ethnic backgrounds and from all of the diverse branches of Islam. Central Asians, Indonesians, Malaysians, Indians, Persians, Egyptians, Turks - Indeed, all those who represent the *umma*, the worldwide community of Muslims - came not only to perform the pilgrimage [3], but also as students and scholars in search of knowledge. Mecca was a place where Islam renewed and enriched itself.

The new Saudi-*Wahhabi* conquerors regarded this cultural and religious diversity as chaotic, degenerative, and heretical, and set about resolutely enforcing their narrow vision of Islam in the name of national unity and religious purification. The political interests of the regime took precedence over the vitality of the *umma* [4]. Indeed, the ultimate desire of the Saudi-*Wahhabi* leaders was to impose their drab, dogmatic politico-religious ideology on the Islamic world as a whole. Having conquered Mecca, the regime was confident that it could reshape Islam in its image.

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The fissures in the stone

This outward-looking ambition was soon supplemented by a potent extra element that allowed the Saudi-*Wahhabi* ideology to become supercharged: oil money [8]. *Madrasas* and mosques around the world, from Kosovo to Jakarta, received generous Saudi donations and became obedient to the strictures of *Wahhabism*. Soaring global demand for oil and a close relationship with the United States appeared to set this ideological dominance in stone.

But events since the beginning of the 21st century have begun to fracture the stone. The attacks on the United States in September 2001 identified *Wahhabism* with nihilistic terrorism [9] and unleashed America's wrath, often indiscriminate, on Muslim countries.

The US, of course, cloaked its military response with a high-minded purpose - the need to implant democracy, or "freedom", in the Muslim middle east. But the unintended outcome of America's frenetic assault has instead been the empowerment of *Shi'a* Muslims, as first the *Sunni* Taliban rulers fell in Afghanistan, followed by Saddam Hussein's *Sunni* regime in Iraq, where *Shi'a* Iran's allies now wield significant political influence. Iran's proxy in Lebanon, Hizbollah, achieved a crowning moment in this process with the effective defeat of Israel's objectives in the war of July-August 2006 [10].

The once-powerful grip of the *Sunni* Saudi-*Wahhabi* regime's tentacles has been weakened internationally and domestically. Whereas Saudi Arabia, together with the *Sunni* regimes in Egypt and Jordan, initially criticised Hizbollah for triggering a war with Israel, this position soon became untenable, as Lebanese civilians suffered and Hizbollah, despite heavy losses of men and military supplies, survived the Israeli onslaught. Indeed, Hizbollah's "victory" has made it the vanguard of Islamic self-assertion, with the Wahhabis [11] forced into the background, muttering sectarian complaints to which no one listens.

Paradoxically, Hizbollah's new stature [12] throughout the Arab world suggests that, contrary to the conventional view, the politics of Islam cannot be understood solely in terms of the balance of power between *Shi'a* and *Sunni*. On the contrary: although cultural distinctiveness does still play an important role, the sectarian schism in the Muslim world is expressed far more by governments and guerrilla groups than at the popular level. The Saudi rulers won favour in Washington for opposing Hizbollah, but this counts for nothing. The Saudi-*Wahhabi* model of negative and sectarian politics, reflected in the condemnation of Hizbollah as *Shi'a*, has been washed away by the tide [13] of Islamic opinion sweeping over the region and, indeed, the wider Muslim world.

The politics of al-Qaida stem from the original divisive discourse of *Wahhabism*. As a result, the change in the balance of power in the Muslim world has affected not only official *Wahhabism*, but also its deformed creation. Al-Qaida's uncontrolled violence and contradictory agenda, as seen in its sectarian war [14] against *Shi'a* in Iraq, has left it unable to build popular support. Whereas al-Qaida's rhetoric appeals only to angry and dispossessed *Sunnis* in Iraq and elsewhere, Hizbollah's more calculated and sophisticated model [15], according to which it operates as a political party, a military organisation, and a social-welfare provider, has managed to attract and unite the Arab street.

A return to the cradle

The perceived weakening of the Saudi-*Wahhabi* political system is leading to a release of pent-up social energies within the Saudi [16] population, which could bring about unpredictable forms of activism. As the regime entrenches itself in its *Wahhabist* bastions and narrows the popular bases of its legitimacy, tendencies toward popular assertions of cultural distinctiveness have become more marked. Repression is no longer a guarantor of order, and legitimacy can be renewed only through the adoption of religious, as well as political, reforms.

In historic moments like now, new groups will emerge as the old order dissolves [17]. The repression of known traditional leadership facilitates the emergence of a new generation that is competitive and innovative. With *Wahhabism* weakened, the al-Saud could seize the opportunity either to abandon *Wahhabism* as the sole ideology of the state or to modify the ideology in order to render it compatible with acceptance of religious diversity in Saudi Arabia and beyond.

However one perceives the political strengthening of Hizbollah, its dramatically heightened stature suggests that the cosmopolitan tradition of Mecca resonates much more with Arabs and Muslims than the sectarian ideologies of their rulers. Perhaps this moment represents a call to Mecca, the capital of Islam, to renovate the open and inclusive tradition of the Hijaz. (I have explored this issue further in my book *Cradle of Islam: The Hijaz and the Quest for an Arabian Identity* [IB Tauris, 2004 [18]]).

The Saudi regime is presented with an opportunity to reclaim its leading position in the Muslim world by reinstating "the circles of knowledge" in the Great Mosque and strengthening the position of Mecca. After all the Saudi-*Wahhabi* rulers are a minority in their own country as well in the wider Muslim world. They need to move from a survival strategy and aspire to a role of genuine leadership. Restructuring the political and religious institutions of Saudi Arabia is essential if real diversity is to be accommodated.

Recovering the lost traditions in Mecca will inevitably be linked to vital domestic change. Within Saudi Arabia, *imams* of the mosques must become representative of the *umma*. The whole religious-educational system should be opened up to encompass all Islamic schools of thought and a culture of tolerance and creativity. Having representative religious institutions will support local political representation such as regional governors [19], be they Hijazis in Mecca or *Shi'a* in the eastern region. The monopoly of al-Saud princes must cease. This does not mean that Mecca could become a political capital; rather it should be a model of religious and cultural inclusion.

Meanwhile, the west must monitor developments in the "cradle of Islam" closely and heed local calls for reform [20]. Reformers who remain in jail or silenced must be heard. The west must encourage the al-Saud to allow for freedom of expression and of worship. It seems that both the west and the Muslim world at large have long forgotten or ignored Mecca's contribution to civilisation. It is time to remember, for the benefit of all.

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[1] <https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/sa.html>

[2] <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/saudi/interviews/yamani.html#religion>

[3] <http://www.holtzbrinckpublishers.com/academic/book/BookDisplay.asp?BookKey=2687458>

[4] <http://www.oup.com/us/catalog/general/subject/ReligionTheology/Islam/?view=usa&ci=9780195125597>

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[8] http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict/abqaiq_3318.jsp

[9] <http://www.randomhouse.com/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9781400030453>

[10] http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-middle_east_politics/westasia_crisis_3833.jsp

[11] <http://www.oup.com/us/catalog/general/subject/ReligionTheology/Islam/%7E%7E/dmIldz11c2EmY2k9OTc4MDE5NTE2OTkxMQ==>

[12] http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-middle_east_politics/hizbollah_victory_3809.jsp

[13] http://www.cornellpress.cornell.edu/cup_detail.taf?ti_id=4441

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[15] <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero073106.html>

[16] http://www.worldstatesmen.org/Saudi_Arabia.htm

[17] <http://mondediplo.com/2006/03/03oilfields>

[18] <http://www.ibtauris.com/ibtauris/>

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[19] <http://www.saudiembassy.net/Country/Map.asp>

[20] <http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk/index.php?id=40&bid=24>



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