

# **The Historical Consistency between Tribal, Religious and Saudi National Identity**

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## **Abstract**

For a country that has no colonial past, the nation of Saudi Arabia is usually described as a Wahhabi Islamic country founded using tools from tribal strategies. If this had indeed been the case, then Saudi Arabia is essentially tribal in its political framework. How this tribal foundation continues to be a social and political driver has been largely unexplored. In this paper, I will argue that tribal identity remains strong and persistent in modern Saudi Arabia, and that the religious and nationalist components of identity are subordinated by the tribal influence. I will begin by describing how tribalism has been an influence through different phases of recent Saudi history. I will present a picture of tribal identity in what I have termed the Statecraft Phase (1930-1960), then I will show how tribal identity was influenced by the Ulema and throughout the the Sahwa Movement (1970s-1990s). I will demonstrate how tribal identity played a role in the religious institution of the Ulema. Finally, I will show how tribal identity plays out in more recent times in Saudi Arabia (2000s- present). I will reveal the influence of tribal identity through examining current Saudi state institutions, and describe how this tribal identity is rooted in social practice. I will also demonstrate how this deeply rooted tribal identity played a role in each of the historical phases, and this will make it more apparent. At the conclusion, political influence on Saudi national identity today will be reviewed, and compared and contrasted with religious and

tribal influences. Ultimately, Saudi society today continues to be stratified along tribal lines, making modern Saudi nationalism essentially a tribal value, and modern Saudi Arabia a highly-evolved chieftaincy.

## **Introduction**

Saudi Arabia has recently begun promoting a new nationalism and national identity, both domestically and internationally. The world may perceive a new, modern image of Saudi Arabia, but the history behind this modern identity reveals not only religious roots, but strong tribal roots. In this paper, I will argue that the core of Saudi national identity continues to be tribal, and that religious and government influences on Saudi national identity are subordinated by tribal influence.

To understand the root of tribal identity Saudi Arabia's history, Saudi's tribal and political history will be explained in four phases. The first phase will be called the pre-statecraft phase, and refers to the period before the birth of Islam in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. The next phase, the statecraft phase, will cover the period between the 1700s and when Saudi Arabia becomes a country in 1929. The third phase will be called the collaborative phase, and will extend from 1929 until the oil boom of the early 1970s. The final phase, the modernization phase, will consider the time from the 1970s until now.

### *Definition of Tribal Identity*

It is important to start with a working definition of the word "tribe". A tribe can be defined as an extended family or kinship group that can evolve and grow, and consequently assume a name, and even adopt a culture with a set of values (Kostiner 1991). When studying tribes from a political perspective, they should not be seen as "familial or ethnic groups but political and religious chieftaincies whose composition varies greatly" (Kostiner 1991, 22).

However, this definition mainly looks at the political aspects of a tribe. It is tempting to apply a more sociological or anthropological theory, but it is not clear which one applies. Studies

of the concept of “cultural identity”, which could be argued as an aspect of a tribe, have approached the topic from an essentialism perspective (Dervin 2014; AlQahtani 2015). Essentialist definitions of identity assume a fixed set of values and beliefs that are essential to that identity (Dervin 2014; AlQahtani 2015). While this term can be attractive even to the identity to which it applies (e.g. a “New Yorker”), essentialist definitions are far too simplistic to be applicable to something as complex as identity (AlQahtani 2015).

Dervin therefore refers to this approach as “methodological nationalism” because it presumes that society is the natural and political form of the modern world, and that it is static – both assumptions do not apply to the society of tribes in the Arab peninsula (AlQahtani 2015). Hence, researchers who are considering the influence of Saudi culture tend to avoid using essentialist theory to guide their inquiry, and instead look to more appropriate philosophies (AlQahtani 2015; Wedeen 2009). Another approach is to apply a constructivist view, but this can be confusing because it directly seems to oppose the essentialist view, and parts of both are probably needed for understanding identity (Wedeen 2009). Cultural identity, and specifically tribal identity, will have components that are deemed “essential”, as well as others that are deemed “constructed” and are expected to evolve (Wedeen 2009).

Perhaps a more fruitful perspective to take that avoids the essentialist vs. constructivist dichotomy focuses more on tribal identity as a function of how the individual sees themselves as a member of the group. This approach has been espoused by Jameson, who argued that an individual’s sense of identity is self-derived from both formal and informal memberships in groups by way of the groups transmitting their knowledge, beliefs, values, and practices into the individual (Jameson 2007; AlQahtani 2015). Once this has happened, this identity both evokes emotions, as well as remains flexible and can change over time (Jameson 2007; AlQahtani 2015).

This practical definition of identity is echoed by Aldokhaieel’s view of the tribes of the Arab peninsula (Aldokhaieel 2013). He holds that the gestation of tribal identity shapes the individual

by way of the individual's relationship to the tribe (Aldokhaiei 2013). As times evolved into modern life, the tribal lifestyles changed, and the members of the tribe evolved into a lifestyle that suits them in the modern time (Aldokhaiei 2013). Yet, even after this evolution into modern times, the individual still operates within the frame of his or her tribal identity, which includes not only genetic relationships but the feeling of kinship to the tribe, much as Jameson describes the "emotion" evoked by group membership (Aldokhaiei 2013; Jameson 2007).

Using this interpretation of tribal identity for the Arab peninsula is probably the most applicable in this context given historical interpretations of the meaning of tribe in this area. AlJabri writes extensively about philosopher Ibn Khaldūn's ideas about the meaning of tribes and tribal membership (AlJabri 2014). Ibn Khaldūn's writing is from the 1300s, when Islam had started declining; Ibn Khaldūn's work reflects a critical view of Islam, and a more favorable view of tribal membership (AlJabri 2014). He emphasized the critical concept of *aṣabiyyah*, meaning "solidarity", as a force that holds together the tribal community (AlJabri 2014). *Asabiyyah* is based on a number of factors, including blood ties, similar interests, as well as being part of a force that fights and protects together against the approach of other groups that would threaten to weaken the *asabiyyah* (AlJabri 2014).

*Asabiyyah* can be seen as a way to view tribal identity in the context of the individual's self-perception of their role with reference to the tribe; it includes components of social solidarity, a natural intuition to help and protect group members when they are treated unjustly, and the urge to strengthen the group (AlJabri 2014; Baali 1988; Halim 2014). The reason why *asabiyyah* is a useful lens through which to see tribal identity is that it is flexible, and changes with the environment. As AlJabri argues, the strength of the *asabiyyah* changes depending upon the economic situation – economic pressures as well as abundance can change the intensity of the desire to unite (AlJabri 2014). Also, the imposition of religion can impact *asabiyyah* in different ways, depending upon how the religion is seen to meld with the existing tribal society (AlJabri 2014).

Therefore, tribal identity in this paper will be seen as a function of the individual's concept of their membership in the tribe, consistent with *asabiyyah*. This definition is appropriate, as tribal identity evolved over Saudi Arabia's political history, while retaining many essential features.

### **Tribal Identity Influence on Saudi National Identity**

Tribal identity has been critical to every phase of Saudi national identity, and of course was in existence long before the Saudi state. This section first describes tribal identity in the pre-statecraft phase, covering political and social life, and how tribal identity was maintained. Next, tribal identity during the statecraft phase will be covered, starting with the beginning of Wahhabism, and following history through the first two failed attempts to form a Saudi state to the third successful one. This part will be followed by an examination of tribal identity in the collaborative phase, when oil began to play a role in the economy and politics. Finally, tribal identity in the modernization phase will be covered, with attention to the rise and fall of the *sahwa* movement.

#### *Tribal Identity in the Pre-Statecraft Phase*

Tribal identity had always played a significant role in shaping life on the Arab peninsula in many ways, including socially, culturally and politically. Beginning before the spread of Islam and continuing until today, the tribe is the most common organizational system on the Arabian peninsula (Kostiner 1993). The history of tribal identity before and after the spread of Islam is complex, and it has been shaped and then reshaped as the tribes have evolved throughout time.

In the pre-Islamic era, the Arabian peninsula was not controlled under a single dominant power. Instead, each tribe was organized such that there was a leader, and the rest of the tribe expressed loyalty and support to this leader (Hourani, Hourani, and Ruthven 2002). But from a religious perspective, practices among the residents of the Arabian peninsula were diverse (Hourani, Hourani, and Ruthven 2002). These people used to worship pagan gods from local

culture inspired by natural objects including the sun, moon, stones and animals in some cases (Hourani, Hourani, and Ruthven 2002). Even though, at the time, some parts of the Arab peninsula had been influenced by Christianity, and the Roman empire was empirically proximal to the Arab peninsula, Christianity did not really impact the core of the tribal identities in this area (Ali 1968).

In the 7<sup>TH</sup> century with, the birth of Islam and its spread to the Arab peninsula greatly impacted the region from a cultural standpoint. However, tribal identity continued to be strong. In the history of the Middle East, tribes held considerable religious and political power, even after Islam entered the picture. "In cultural terms, the Islamization of the greater Middle East also led to a reformulation of tribe-state relations in Islamic terms" (Kostiner 1991, 23). This illustrates how Islam, when it was spread to Arab tribes, was readily adopted because it was suited to their culture. The tribal members simply added their new knowledge of Islam to their existing ideology. So while the Arabian peninsula may be known for Islam, the base and core of Arabian identity still remains tribal (Kostiner 1991).

### Political and Social Life

Even as religions encroached, chief was still the leader of each tribe, and these posts were established based on mutual responsibilities and duties, while the chief provided for the people in his tribe (Kostiner 1993). This concept was called *himaya*, and held that the chief was to protect his people from all threats, both physical and financial (Kostiner 1993). While this was easy to implement in nomadic tribes, for non-nomadic tribes that lived in villages and towns, the plurality required a political approach (Kostiner 1993). Effectively, one tribe would rise to the top as being prominent in the town, and a member of that tribe would be seen as the town's leader, with the townspeople accepting their authority (Kostiner 1993).

The chieftaincy system evolved naturally in the tribes, and served as the basis for how the members of the tribe understood authority and values (Al-Suwaiyan 2010). The structure of the tribal system had features of an institution, in that it was both hierarchical and survivalist (Al-

Suwaiyan 2010). Each of the tribes did not build a specific ideology, as they were mainly focusing on how to survive any threats coming from outside (Al-Suwaiyan 2010). The hierarchical structure of the tribe allowed the chief to have an assistant under him who had authority as well. Further, the chief could ask for the assistant's opinion, as well as opinions from the other advisors in the tribe (Al-Suwaiyan 2010). Because this tribal organization had features of a political system, there was the easy potential to translate the tribal structure into a nation state (Al-Suwaiyan 2010).

However, the translation was not direct. Unlike a state, the tribe had no clear territorial definition, and the chief's authority was limited within the zone of the people in the tribe. Another difference between a traditional state and a chieftaincy is the chieftaincy had no formalized administration or institution, leaving the system of authority to be loose and relatively uncomplicated compared to a state system. Further, in a chieftaincy, the relationship between the ruler and the tribe is based on loyalty, and the perceived capacity for the ruler to provide protection for his people, while state-sanctioned rulers can be established under many different approaches (Kostiner 1993).

#### The Maintenance of Tribal Identity

Before the founding of Saudi Arabia, poetry had played a significant role in tribal political life (Al-Suwaiyan 2010). Some of the poetry reflected tribal political values, and others actually documented peoples' opinions on politics (Al-Suwaiyan 2010). For example, the poetry would describe a sword as a symbol for fighting for justice, not just a weapon for killing (Al-Suwaiyan 2010). Historical poets Alwashim and Aljabar were known for their political poetry that provided a clear sense and understanding of the possibilities associated with the centralization of power in a chieftaincy (Al-Suwaiyan 2010). They illustrated in their works how chiefs could manage their great authority, as well as the qualities and duties of tribal leadership (Al-Suwaiyan 2010). Their poetry also provides a window into the social and political life of tribal members (Al-Suwaiyan 2010). As an example, Ajaber wrote advice to a new leader of his town

into his poetry, advising him how to treat people by considering them with dignity and following *sharia* laws (Al-Suwaiyan 2010).

### *Tribal Identity in the Statecraft Phase*

The statecraft phase saw the transformation from tribalism to statehood in the Arab peninsula. However, this transformation was not easy for the tribal peoples, because it ultimately resulted in the loss of power of the tribal chiefs (Kostiner 1993). On the other hand, the transformation was largely accepted by the tribes because it was carried out strategically and in line with generally accepted tribal values and processes (Kostiner 1993).

Saudi Arabia actually did not become a state until the third effort at statehood. Prior to the first effort at statehood, in the period of 1634 to 1711, there was a rise in unrest in the Najid area of the Arab peninsula. Tribes were lacking resources, members were dwindling, and some dying of hunger (Aldokhaiei 2013). This created cutthroat competition between tribes, with some even going so far as to control and block routes of transportation, as well as engage in outright violence (Aldokhaiei 2013). In this environment, it became clear that such broad unrest would not be brought under control without some sort of centralized power, because it was approaching a state of lawlessness (Aldokhaiei 2013). This situation led people to consider different ways of organizing so that there would be more social stability (Aldokhaiei 2013).

### Tribalism and Wahhabism in the Statecraft Phase

To understand the advance from tribal organization to Saudi statehood, it is necessary to first understand the significant role of the Wahhabism movement in the Arab peninsula. The founder of this movement was Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, who was born in a small town in Najid called al-Uyayna in 1703 (al-'Uthaymin 2009). This was during the rise of unrest in the Najid area, and this likely had an influence on Al-Wahhab's later philosophies.

From an early age, Al-Wahhab learned the Quran (al-'Uthaymin 2009). Al-Wahhab's father was a judge, so he learned the *Hanbali* jurisprudence under his father (al-'Uthaymin 2009). However, Al-Wahhab's main influence were the writings of scholar Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya



(1268-1328) (al-'Uthaymin 2009). Al-Wahhab's study of Taymiyya's philosophy helped him to form his philosophy about how society should be run (al-'Uthaymin 2009).

Another influence on Al-Wahhab's thinking was his experience when from his travels. Al-Wahhab traveled to Hijaz, Makkah and Medina to observe how Islam was practiced, and other aspects of tribal life in these regions (al-'Uthaymin 2009). He noticed some of the practices he observed that did not match his interpretation of Islam, which bothered him (al-'Uthaymin 2009). One of the practices on which Al-Wahhab frowned was the practice of religious people going to the tomb of the Prophet and asking him to intervene in their lives like a god (al-'Uthaymin 2009). Al-Wahhab saw this practice as a *shirk*, which is defined as a practice that can lead a person away from Islam (al-'Uthaymin 2009). Al-Wahhab felt that this was not the way to practice true Islam, and the combination of his readings and his experience traveling led him to believe that there was a need for an Islamic awakening (al-'Uthaymin 2009). He became interested in *dawa*, which is a concept in Islam where one person helps another stay on the correct path to Islam, and saw that this concept could be used to help society (al-'Uthaymin 2009).

### The First Effort at a Saudi State

When Al-Wahhab returned to his town of al-Uyayna, he started to spread his ideas around to the people under the concept of *dawa*. However, the ruler of the town did not like that, so Al-Wahhab had to leave his town (al-'Uthaymin 2009). This led him to move to nearby *Diriyya*, when he experienced a turning point in his thinking. Al-Wahhab's image of the ideal community was based on Islamic values (Kostiner 1993). With respect to the government of such a community, it should follow *sharia* law and the ruler – the *imam* – should be required to consult the *ulema* – the religious council – and follow their advice (Kostiner 1993). In this political structure, the *ulema* are the authoritative guardians and interpreters of *sharia* law (Kostiner 1993).

At the time, *Diriyya* was ruled by Muhammad ibn Saud. Although Al-Wahhab did not have a big movement at this time, after his travels, he did have some ideological followers. After

meeting ibn Saud's brothers, Al-Wahhab met the ruler himself, and offered a proposal: the idea of creating a state under *sharia* law with ibn Saud at the head (Aldokhaiei 2013). Muhammad ibn Saud liked the idea, and after some negotiations, in 1745 the two came to an accord known as the *Diriyya* Agreement (Aldokhaiei 2013).

The new alliance was predicated on accepting Al-Wahhab's religious interpretation as the basis for the new state while on the other hand recognizing Muhammad ibn Saud as the political leader for this movement (Aldokhaiei 2013). This agreement conferred benefits on both sides. Al-Wahhab wanted to spread his ideas around but recognized that in order to have an Islamic state there must be a political component (Aldokhaiei 2013). Hence, he teamed up with a political leader so he could more effectively spread his ideas within the framework of a state (Aldokhaiei 2013). On the other hand, Muhammad ibn Saud required legitimacy to his to maintain his rule of *Diriyya* while also expanding it make a state (Aldokhaiei 2013). At the same time, he needed to maintain legitimacy as a tribal ruler, differentiated from other tribal rulers in the area (Kostiner 1993).

With this alliance, Al-Wahhab started to promote his ideas about the new Saudi state and spread his *dawa* (Aldokhaiei 2013). As part of his *dawa*, he added new terminology to the socio-political environment. He introduced the terms polytheism, apostasy and corruption, and defined these terms in the context of his interpretation of Islam, which he claimed to be "true" Islam (Aldokhaiei 2013). This exclusiveness with which Al-Wahhab insisted with respect to his interpretation of the true Islam using the *dawa* to spread this ideas was his technique to persuade these relatively survivalist people to believe and to follow his ideas (Aldokhaiei 2013).

Originally, among the tribes, there was a lack of political ambition because the tribal ruler was limited to his own tribe, and because of the nature of tribal values, leadership roles were based on family relations (Aldokhaiei 2013). This tribal organization also limited territory available to each tribe, so overall, the concept of statehood was not envisioned (Aldokhaiei 2013). How Al-Wahhab was able to surmount this indifference was by appealing to the idea of

having the tribes retain their original rulers, but have them unite under the idea of the Wahhab doctrine (Aldokhaiei 2013). This meant that if they united under ibn Saud, ibn Saud could ensure that the various tribes were able to align under the “true” Islam (Aldokhaiei 2013). By making his points this way, he appealed to tribal leaders without offending them or making them fear he was trying to usurp their power. In this way, those spreading the Wahhab doctrine were generally well-received, because they were espousing a familiar culture of tribalism and a chieftaincy structure to the area (Kostiner 1993).

After the establishment of the Wahhab doctrine and the first expansion of the first Saudi state around the Najid area, ibn Saud and Al-Wahhab had the ambition to expand their territories further into parts that included Hijaz (Abu Ali 1985). They were able to inspire a movement such that even after Al-Wahhab’s death in 1791, the movement kept expanding. This continued through the 1800s, as Muhammad ibn Saud continued to lead the movement.

This first effort at the Saudi state continued in 1811 as part of an effort to expand into Hijaz. Hijaz at the time was exposed to a strong presence from the Ottoman empire, and the area was led by Muhammad Ali Pasha, who was an Egyptian ruler operating under Ottoman rule (Abu Ali 1985). The religious scholars and tribal leaders in Hijaz were also cool to the Wahhabi ideas (Abu Ali 1985). In response to the advance of the Wahhab doctrine into Hijaz, Pasha sent troops guided by his son to stop the expansion of the Saudi state and the Wahhabi movement (Abu Ali 1985). This led to a war between the Ottoman empire and the developing Saudi state in from 1811 to 1818, and in the end, the Saudi expansion was defeated, and ibn Saud was sent to the Ottoman capital for execution (Abu Ali 1985). Thus ended the first effort to create a Saudi state.

### The Second Effort at a Saudi State

The second effort at creating a Saudi state took place between 1820 and 1891, and was essentially a revival and evolution that picked up from the first effort at the Saudi state (Abu Ali 1985). After the end of the first Saudi state, members of Al Saud family went back to *Diriyya*,

and in 1920, a member of the Al Saud family, Turki Al Saud, succeeded in returning the rule of *Diriyya* to the Al Saud family. By that time, the first effort at becoming a Saudi state was recent history, and influenced the thinking of the people in the area (Abu Ali 1985). They saw a Saudi leader as much better than the Ottoman empire, and still had the idea of the Wahhabi movement and the potential to form a unified state (Abu Ali 1985).

The second effort at a Saudi state took many years, and was not successful at expanding for a number of reasons. First, the Ottoman presence in the area limited Al Saud authority to the Najid and Riyadh areas. Next, the Ottoman empire preferred that the tribal powers were decentralized, and would back tribes who opposed Al Saud's expansion. Third, within the Al Saud family there were internal conflicts and clashes. The second effort at the Saudi state finally ended in 1891 when the Al Saud family was defeated by Ibn Rasheed who had the support of the Ottoman empire (Abu Ali 1985).

#### The Third and Final Effort at a Saudi State

After the end of the second Saudi state in 1891, the last ruler of what had formed of the Saudi state, Abdurrahman ibn Saud, moved to Kuwait. Even so, Abdurrahman ibn Saud's son, Abdulaziz ibn Saud, had the ambition to reestablish the Saudi state (Kostiner 1993). With the support from the British and the Kuwaiti ruler (under the authority of the British), ibn Saud moved to Riyadh to regain the Al Saud rule of Riyadh (Kostiner 1993). The British were keen to support efforts against the Ottoman empire, and were convinced by ibn Saud's persuasion that his family should rule the Riyadh area.

In 1902, ibn Saud defeated ibn Rasheed and occupied Riyadh (Kostiner 1993). From there, ibn Saud continued to expand his territory with help from the tribes while at the same time maintaining the support of the British, who provided resources (Kostiner 1993). Ibn Saud's understanding of the tribal environment was displayed in the way he engaged the tribes in the process of statecrafting (Kostiner 1991). First, he tried to unify the tribes in the central Arab peninsula by training them as military. Another effort he orchestrated was intermarrying between

elitist tribes to create strategic ties (Kostiner 1991). In this way, he maintained the loyalty and support of the tribes that was suited to their sense of authority (Kostiner 1991). Unlike Al-Wahhab, ibn Saud did not promote a new ideology; instead, he used the culture already rooted in the Arab peninsula, which was based on Islamic and tribal values (Kostiner 1991).

Although ibn Saud was ultimately successful in his unification of the tribes, it was not particularly easy. Schisms had formed because some of the tribes were still loyal to ibn Rasheed (Kostiner 1993). Tribes like *Mutayer* and the tribes in the area of al Qasim were originally loyal to ibn Saud and continued to be proudly in his camp, but other tribes shifted their allegiances in response to these political changes. Even within al Qasim, there was some dissension, and some tribes remained loyal to ibn Rasheed. However, even within tribes, there could be disagreements. Within ibn Saud's family, which was large, there were internal disagreements about allegiances. Ultimately, ibn Saud was able to shape and manipulate these allegiances to resolve disputes and maintain power (Kostiner 1993).

As the British also backed the leader of Hijaz at the time, ibn Saud avoided expanding into that area, but in 1924 when the British withdrew support from ibn Saud, his efforts sought to expand into Hijaz (Kostiner 1993). The unrest that followed created an incentive for the British to orchestrate some diplomacy, as well as for ibn Saud to develop a military force (Kostiner 1993; Gause 1994). ibn Saud turned to the Wahhabis for recruiting a military (Gause 1994). While the British did not like this show of military force, they were unable to successfully intervene (Gause 1994). In 1930, after the success of ibn Saud's force, the two kingdoms of Najid (represented by ibn Saud) and Hijaz were united under the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and a nation was born under ibn Saud, who would now be known as King Abdulaziz (Kostiner 1993).

#### *Tribal Identity in the Collaborative Phase*

King Abdulaziz could not have risen to power after the unrest that preceded the successful formation of the Saudi state had he not been backed by sufficient forces. By this

time, forces had been built up of Wahhabists who continued to spread Wahhabi Islam under the concept of *dawa* (Antonius 2015).

Those in the military had helped expand the Saudi territories during statecrafting, but now that the state had formed, its political structure would be a cooperation between the royal Saud family and the *ulema* who followed the Wahhabi doctrine (Gause 1994). As a result, there was not a major political role or any power left for tribal leaders (Kostiner 1991). Tribes like *Mutayer* and *Utaypa* who had been aligned with ibn Saud from the beginning were relegated to military service and were not given a leadership role in new state institutions (Kostiner 1991). This new centralization policy proved to be a threat to tribal autonomy, although there were winners and losers (Kostiner 1991). This new structure led to the decline of the chieftaincy, so a new social order emerged. Big tribes evolved into landowners and joined the upper class (Kostiner 1991).

Ibn Saud's structure of the new Saudi state was itself a renewed version of a traditional chieftaincy (Kostiner 1991). Tribes and their Islamic and tribal values formed the culture of the new Saudi state. Some of the most important values that solidified the new state were the concepts behind the chieftaincy: the value of kin relationships, the fatherly stance in the political behavior of the chief, the solidarity and commitment to the group, and complete loyalty to the "tribe" (Kostiner 1991). These values shaped the political features of the new Saudi state, and continued to appear throughout future phases as Saudi Arabia crafted its new state (Kostiner 1991).

Ironically, in terms of statecrafting potentially producing nationalism at the state level, this manifested but not in the image of the nomads and the tribes that actually formed the new state. Instead, the state chose to use a palm tree as a logo, which has been observed as not being as representative of the actual tribes in Saudi the way a camel would be (Al-Suwaiyan 2010). This marked the beginning of a shift away from tribal life and toward new technology, as the state infrastructure changed and grew in the background (Al-Suwaiyan 2010).

## Oil, Tribes and the Ulema in the New Saudi State

In the early years of the new state, the economy was centralized and there were new state institutions put in place. Nevertheless, these changes did not produce a change socially in the Saudi value system. In fact, the state was still governed informally by tribal practices and family ties (Kostiner 1991). As of the 1930s, the centralized economy was mainly based on the pilgrimage tax (Kostiner 1991). However, the discovery of oil in Saudi land in 1938 transformed the tribal society to a monumental global presence (Hertog 2011). The new oil economy itself shaped Saudi Arabia also, in terms of its policymaking and its structure (Hertog 2011).

Continuing into the 1950s through the 1980s, Saudi Arabia continued to develop rapidly, thanks to the new oil economy as well as the other institutional changes put in place (Hertog 2011). Decisions were made in a top-down way, and could be made rapidly, thus promoting the quick development of the oil infrastructure, which was reflected in the growth of oil revenue and production (Hertog 2011).

### *Tribal Identity in the Modernization Phase*

The modernization phase in Saudi Arabia is impossible to talk about without relating it to the oil boom of the 1970s, which resulted in a transformation of the Saudi state with accelerated development in many areas (Kostiner 1991). These developments provided many social advantages to the Saudis, including the provision of government-sponsored healthcare and education (Kostiner 1991).

Also, this growth of the public sector opened up opportunities in the form of scholarships from the government, allowing many students go abroad to study topics that they would have been unable to study in their home country (Kostiner 1991). This top-down rapid state building allowed state leaders to facilitate the elite gaining control over state institutions (Hertog 2011). This elitism added a new term to describe this bureaucratic system – the word *wasta*, which means hiring someone based on personal relations, not qualifications (Hertog 2011). This demonstrates how informal tribal practices exerted their impact at the institutional level in the

Saudi state (Hertog 2011). Hiring decisions could be made entirely based on tribal membership and nepotistic considerations (Hertog 2011).

In the second half of the 1970's, with the new the infrastructure changes brought by the oil boom, the Saudi state also gained a new societal class: non-Saudis (Kostiner 1991). By this time, the oil industry had attracted two million foreign workers to Saudi Arabia, who were put to work in jobs that Saudis saw as lacking prestige (Kostiner 1991). These foreigners went into a new social class, and this too played a role in shaping the Saudi state (Kostiner 1991).

Throughout this growth in wealth due to the development of the oil industry, the Saudi state interestingly did not attempt to make changes in societal values (Okruhlik 1999). It was felt that the country could simply depend on the oil, and it did not need to follow any economic model; therefore, the Saudi state felt no pressure to exert any social changes to the enduring tribal culture (Okruhlik 1999). In traditional Saudi culture, in a family, the man's role is to work and provide for his family, and the woman is responsible for raising children (Varshney 2019). However, the oil and wealth fostered a dependency in this dynamic, creating a disincentive to push away traditions and make changes socially (Varshney 2019). Because of the culture, the employment rate for men was always higher than the rate for women, and men have always had a bigger role and more opportunities in the workforce, with women having far fewer options (Varshney 2019). It would be hard to believe that decades in the future, Saudi Arabia would actually encourage an increase in the women's employment rate and more job opportunities as part of an effort to gain independence from the oil industry (Varshney 2019).

### The Sahwa Movement

From the 1970s through the 1990s, Saudi society witnessed the emergence of the *sahwa* (meaning "Islamic awakening"). This is an ideology shaped by Wahhabi tradition (Lacroix 2011). This movement was mounted in the 1970s as a reaction to some of the events that had occurred, such as the Iranian revolution in 1979, followed by the Camp David agreement, which was an agreement of peace between Egypt and Israel (Al-Ghadami 2015). This agreement



resulted in the fall of Arab nationalism, which was followed by the rise of the Islamic movement, first in Egypt and then in Saudi Arabia (Al-Ghadami 2015).

Two major elements that promoted the emergence of the *sahwa* were the natural conservatism already present in Saudi society coupled with the oil boom which reached maturity in the 1970's (Lacroix 2011). The rise of the economy enabled this movement to produce its own organizations and policies that impacted every area of social life (Lacroix 2011). For example, the Council of the Committee of Senior *Ulema* and the Permanent Committee for Research and *Fatwas* were formed; they both had an institutional hierarchy of clergy, and all their members belonged to the Wahhabi doctrine (Lacroix 2011). Also, these committees and *ulema* lacked tribal diversity; they were all from the Najid tribes who continued to dominate the religious field (Lacroix 2011). This ideologically narrow group succeeded in mixing religious and tribal identity, and therefore, were able to go on to lead this social movement (Lacroix 2011).

The *sahwa* movement reflected Saudi society's struggle to form a new national identity (Al-Ghadami 2015). Two main figures were treated as holiness, and became main figures in the movement: ibn Baz and ibn Ottimen (Al-Ghadami 2015). These two were seen as unquestioned, and issued *fatwas* that related to social life, and pertained to women in particular (Al-Ghadami 2015). For example, they issued *fatwas* that prohibited women from driving, and that regulated the way they dress (Al-Ghadami 2015). These *fatwas* issued as part of the *sahwa* movement strongly guided Saudi identity into a new shape where every detail of Saudi social life was defined (Al-Ghadami 2015).

This *sahwa* movement was fueled by religion, and this served to challenge tribal identity in some ways. By focusing on the identity behind religious values, the *ulema* and other state actors could argue that there was no longer acknowledged differences between the tribes or advantages conferred on some of the tribes. As evidence of this, ibn Baz was asked his opinion about marriage between members based on differing tribal roots, and his answer condemned any type of discrimination between tribes (ibn Baz n.d.). He even mentioned that he himself did

not know what tribe he was from, and that was okay as well (ibn Baz n.d.). This stunning announcement from a cleric known as holiness to his society opened up a conversation and even a debate challenging the importance of tribal identity (ibn Baz n.d.). This demonstrates that during this time, even though religious influence was playing a large role in developing Saudi national identity, tribal practice was still strong and persistent.

### **Religious Influence on Saudi National Identity**

When Saudi Arabia is mentioned, generally, the first thing that comes to mind is Islam. Any action coming from this country is usually related to Islam. These assumptions are based on the presence of the two holy mosques, and the role of Wahhabism in shaping the Saudi state and society (Lacroix 2011). The role of religion in the history of the Saudi state actually goes all the way back to 1754, when Mohammed ibn Saud and Al-Wahhab formed a collaboration and agreement to build a state based on *sharia* law (Lacroix 2011). Two centuries later, the influence of the Wahhabi doctrine is still persistent, and this continued to help Abdulaziz ibn Saud build the new Saudi Arabia based on Wahhabi Islam (Aldokhaiei 2013).

Although Saudi Arabia was established in 1932, Islamic identity was rooted in the society long before, and this continued long after (Aldokhaiei 2013). The role of Islam in this equation was purely social and not political. The religious influence came in the strong role religious actors played in manipulating social institutions, such as the educational system in Saudi, which has always been under strong influence of religious people (Lacroix 2011). In fact, with the new state, religious figures used education as a method for inculcating an Islamic Saudi identity, and it was the base from which the *ulema* spread their messages to society (Lacroix 2011).

In the 1960's, significant members of the Muslim Brotherhood from Egypt came to teach in the Islamic Studies Departments of Saudi Universities (Lacroix 2011). As with the University of Imam Muhammad ibn Saud in Riyadh, the Muslim Brotherhood impacted the Saudi educational system not only with their teaching, but also by redefining the curricula (Lacroix

2011). It is this generation that later would find itself in the religious throes of the *sahwa* movement.

### *The Ulema and the Sahwa Movement*

In the 1970s and 1980s, the *sahwa* movement was seen as “rebels without a cause” (Lacroix 2011). Ironically, the biggest enemies of the main figures in the *sahwa* were not the West or political authorities, but instead were the non-Wahhabis within Saudi society (Lacroix 2011). The changes in the educational system brought about in the 1960s resulted in a new crop of religious scholars who, unlike their predecessors, were armed with academic degrees (Lacroix 2011). On the other hand, many Saudi students had been sent to study abroad in the 1970s, and these students returned to Saudi Arabia to serve in academia in the 1980s (Lacroix 2011). This phenomenon actually changed the structure of education in Saudi Arabia, adding an intellectual elitist level to the Saudi classes, while also challenging the *ulema* and opening new conversations that never existed before. (Lacroix 2011).

A philosophical conflict therefore grew between the *ulema* and the non-Wahhabi intellectuals, creating a war of ideology (Lacroix 2011). Members of these non-Wahhabi intellectuals went on to hold high positions in the government, such as Ghazi Al Gosaibi, a well-known writer who served as a minister and an ambassador (Lacroix 2011). Al Gosaibi was also a major figure of the *sahwa* movement, whose writing emphasized modern ideas and criticized the strictness of the Wahhabis (Lacroix 2011). Society was impacted by this conflict, which was aiming to determine what are societal norms, and what is considered acceptable.

### *Decline from the Sahwa Movement*

The mid 1990s and onward witnessed the decline of the enthusiasm and popularity behind the movement (Al-Ghadami 2015). This was largely because of the internal conflict between the principles promoted and the actual practices of the *ulema* (Al-Ghadami 2015). The *ulema* appeared powerful as they commanded changes to society, but in the end, they lacked the authority to back up their admonishments, and came to be perceived as weak, and their

holiness was reduced. At the turn of the century, the influence of the *sahwa* movement was already greatly reduced (Al-Ghadami 2015).

The *sahwa* movement was marked by a unified voice that promoted the movement, however, this had the unintended effect of creating more awareness around this unified voice, which led the Saudis to start questioning the clerics (Al-Ghadami 2015). Their unified voice became obvious in the new media phase, where *ulema* began to issue “media *fatwas*” over the television, which was considered less formal than in-person ones (Hudson, Iskandar, and Kirk 2016). Another big influence was social media, in that clerics set up their own Twitter accounts and were exposed to immediate interaction with the public without any restrictions. This led to Saudis engaging clerics in discussion, which afforded them a chance to get to know the clerics on a more personal level, and understand their thinking behind their *fatwas*. This type of interaction revealed to many Saudis that the clerics seemed to misunderstand them. This actually led to decline in holiness with which the *ulema* had been regarded (Al-Ghadami 2015).

It is true that Saudi national identity was always rooted in Islamic identity, as Islamic influence itself is what led to the original collaboration between Al-Wahhab and ibn Saud in 1745 (Aldokhaieel 2013). However, the tribal roots were not emphasized once the state had formed and state institutions began to develop. Instead, there was an emphasis on the religious, and social and national identity came to be impacted greatly by the religious *sahwa* movement (Al-Ghadami 2015). Yet, even this effort declined as a result of political circumstances and changes in the global geopolitical context (Al-Ghadami 2015). Therefore, ironically, it cannot be argued that religious influence is the main determinant of Saudi social identity.

### **Political Influence on Saudi National Identity**

Saudi Arabia’s identity as a state could be conceived of either being associated with Islam, with oil, or with a particular tribe. Instead of choosing one of these, state actors used all of

these as tools for political and cultural production for the new national identity (Gause 1994). Islam and the tribe were the two major components of Saudi Arabia state identity at the initial time of statehood, and this balance comprised the cultural identity of Saudi Arabia at that time (Gause 1994). During the period of 1910 through the 1920s, as the final statecrafting phase was underway, ibn Saud used the fact that Islam was already embedded in the Wahhabi doctrine to create a state ideology, while referring to tribalism as the foundation for the cultural values in the society (Kostiner 1991). These are the two main elements that shaped Saudi Arabian national identity, and these continued to be used by the state at different degrees and levels (Al-Ghadami 2015).

#### *Initial Saudi National Identity*

When Ibn Saud established the state in 1932, there was no serious attempt at the state level to engineer a national identity (Kostiner 1991). The new Saudi state was a remaking of the tribal chieftaincy, but also a modern state in twentieth century (Kostiner 1991). Ibn Saud's image as a king followed the image of a tribal leader, acting as a protector the way a tribal leader would (Kostiner 1991). As Saudi continued to grow domestically and economically from the 1930s through the 1960s, state institutions continued to uphold the tribal values and practices in the society, and the state did not make any efforts to add new norms or shape the habits of society (Kostiner 1991).

#### *Saudi National Identity During the Sahwa Movement*

In the 1970s, the Middle East witnessed a shake-up in the balance of regional power which led to policy changes as well as changes in society (Al-Ghadami 2015). These changes conferred legitimacy onto the clerics in the *sahwa* movement to begin controlling social messaging (Al-Ghadami 2015). Hence, the *sahwa* movement was a reaction of Saudi Arabia to the regional circumstances, and this caused a shift in social life orchestrated at the state level (Al-Ghadami 2015). The government empowered the religious police at a higher level, and

granted them the role of making sure that people upheld Islamic values in public places (Al-Ghadami 2015).

However, there were some contradictions in the cultural messages coming from the state level. On one hand, the educational system continued to be very much under control of the clerics (Al-Ghadami 2015). On the other hand, the media was controlled by liberals (Lacroix 2011). Television channels like MBC and Rotan had a different approach and promoted different messages compared to ones promoted by the *ulema* (Lacroix 2011). These two institutions were not speaking the same language and were promoting different ideals, causing internal conflicts in Saudi identity in some cases (Lacroix 2011). Even as an ideological war waged between the conservative *ulema* and the liberals, the state did not intervene (Lacroix 2011).

#### *Saudi National Identity After 9/11*

The events of September 11, 2002 shook up Saudi and American relations. The government reflected on how to improve relations, and felt that the level of influence of Wahhabism needed to be reduced somewhat. Consequently, the Saudi state started making serious attempts to reduce the influence of Wahhabism in the education system (Al-Ghadami 2015). In 2002, King Fahd changed the name of the Ministry of Education to the Ministry of Education and Culture, and this act was followed by changes in the Islamic curriculum that reduced the proportion of time spent learning Islamic subjects (Al-Ghadami 2015; Al Madina Directorate of the Ministry of Education 2015).

This signaled the beginning of top-down nationalism production from the state (Alhussein 2019). In 2005, King Abdulla started to introduce a new sense of state nationalism by announcing a new holiday that Saudis would start celebrating: National Day (Alhussein 2019). This was to celebrate Saudi as a country, which had been prohibited previously by the clerics (Alhussein 2019). The importance of this move was it was intended to cultivate loyalty in people by way of recognition of the state, reviving a national sense in the population (Alhussein 2019).

King Abdulla also started a legendary scholarship program that sent Saudi students to get higher education globally (AlQahtani 2015). This was different from the previous time in history when students were sent abroad in that there was a very low barrier-to-entry, meaning the scholarships were given out without much in the way of requirements, providing opportunity to classes of Saudis to travel when they had never left Saudi Arabia before (AlQahtani 2015). This acceleration in advanced education abroad challenged society to open up to new changes. While King Abdulla was seen promoting this openness, he was also careful to maintain social norms without making abrupt changes (Alhussein 2019).

### *Saudi First*

At the beginning of 2015, when King Salman took the throne. Muhammed bin Salman, known colloquially as MbS, became the crown prince of Saudi Arabia, the country entered a new era of “Saudi first” (Alhussein 2019). A national sense of identity had shifted the perception of the kingdom from within, both socially and politically (Alhussein 2019). This era witnessed a new hybrid nationalism (Alhussein 2019). At this time, there was a rise in young leadership that had been unprecedented in Saudi political history (Alhussein 2019). MbS came to power with an ambition to shift the society both socially and politically (Alhussein 2019).

In 2016, the young prince introduced a new national strategy called Vision 2030 that, among other goals, promotes diversifying industry to stop Saudi’s economic dependency on oil (Alhussein 2019). In addition, there was the creation of the General Entertainment Authority, which now allows cinemas and concerts that had been prohibited for decades under the *ulema* (Alhussein 2019). These actions by the state shifted the norms of society as well as peoples’ relationship to Saudi identity itself; in fact, having a Saudi national identity became popular (Alhussein 2019). MbS also began to promote Saudi nationalism by reviving tourism, aimed at both domestic and international audiences (Alhussein 2019). As an example, in 2018, MbS promoted Al-Ula as an international tourism destination (Alhussein 2019).

This shift in the spirit of the state nationalism project was very clear in the historical announcement made by MbS during the Future Investment Initiative Conference in October 2017 (Alhussein 2019). He said, “We will not waste another 30 years combating extremist thoughts,” referring unabashedly to the *sahwa*, and said that Saudi would transition back to “moderate Islam” (Alhussein 2019). The announcement of the change in Saudi’s international image to a “moderate Islam” country was not intended only for a domestic audience (Alhussein 2019). Internationally, this would be a way to attract foreign investment by countermanding Western stereotypes (Alhussein 2019). In a historical context, this was ironic; it was at the state’s blessing that the *ulema* spread Wahhabi Islam; this clearly signaled a new approach from the state (Alhussein 2019). This was a new, clear message to the religious establishment that the era of their unquestioned influence had ended, and now, they were operating in a new era of a modern, more open state (Alhussein 2019).

The new nationalism under “Saudi first” changed standards in society that were counter to traditional tribal values (Alhussein 2019). After this announcement, women’s status in Saudi society changed socially. Tribal values were challenged as women were given a larger role to play in day-to-day society (Alhussein 2019). The state lifted bans on women engaging in certain activities, like driving or traveling without permission from their male guardian (Alhussein 2019). Women were offered different employment opportunities that had not been available before, and this resulted in the employment rate for women rising (Varshney 2019).

It is important to remember how these regulations were originally put in place. Although ostensibly, women’s behavior and activities had been restricted for religious purposes, in reality, these religious values also matched tribal values. Essentially, these were deeply rooted cultural values, and now, they were being directly challenged by the state. The state had a reason to try to shift these values, because the shift would bring the country more in line with the new project Vision 2030. Importantly, women are envisioned to play a large role in the diversification of the economy. But this new nationalism also introduced new statuses and social norms that



challenge tribal identity and existing, long-held social practices. In a way, this new nationalism has shaken up a patriarchal, tribal society.

This new hybrid nationalism continues to send messages to influence the perception of the state, rather than messaging societal values as had happened under the *ulema* during the *sahwa* (Alhussein 2019). This new messaging serves to help consolidate power, a move that is necessary if MbS is to implement his social reforms (Alhussein 2019). State messaging has become more important than religious messaging in this phase of societal reform (Alhussein 2019).

This change in messaging changed the balance between the political and religious sides, and was followed by an openness to entertainment that had not existed before (Alhussein 2019). Before this time, the religious establishment would have held silent power in that the political establishment would be concerned about how entertainment such as media would be received by them (Alhussein 2019). After this balance of power changed, the political side was no longer as concerned about the reaction by the religious, and became more open to different types of entertainment (Alhussein 2019). This demonstrated how the religious side declined in authority during this period.

On the political side, a unique feature of MbS's rule is that it is essentially a one-man power, which had not existed previously in Saudi history (Alhussein 2019). Up until this point, power had been distributed among the sons of ibn Saud, and each had control of an institution or sector of government (Lacroix 2011). This consolidation of power is what enabled the crowned prince to reshape and introduce new norms into Saudi society, which reflects on the cultivation of a national identity (Lacroix 2011).

This new nationalism that promoted a new national identity top-down from the state level had been crafted by weaving together religious and tribal values. From the religious side, there was the consensus to unite under Islam, and from the tribal side, there was the expectation of chieftaincy from MbS. However, it is important to realize that underneath this construct was the

original tribal arrangements that had existed prior to and throughout the statecraft phase (Kostiner 1991). Even at this modern time, those in the religious establishment still come from the Najdi tribes (Lacroix 2011). People hired to work at the state level are often considered on the basis of their tribal identity, honoring fellow tribal members and those in allied tribes, and eschewing those in competing tribes (Lacroix 2011). In this new Saudi hybrid nationalism, Saudi actually modernized the chieftaincy and religious culture of the Saudis into a nationalism consistent with long-held tribal and religious values.

### **Analysis**

To understand why modern Saudi nationalism is rooted in tribal values, it is important to grasp the strength with which members of these communities held tribal values before the birth of Islam. At the birth of Islam, as the Prophet spread Islam, it brought internal conflict in his tribe, the *Quraysh*, because it was a very prominent tribe in the community, and was very concerned about how it was perceived. This tribal value was so strong that even the Prophet's uncle felt he could not risk converting to Islam.

This powerful tribal identity therefore has been used by leaders in different ways in history to achieve societal and political goals. But the role of tribal identity has never been an ideology; it was rooted in the life on the Arab peninsula, which was survivalist, and the tribe was protective (Al-Suwaiyan 2010). Tribal structures created a safe, predictable system which disincentivized political ambition to make any changes (Al-Suwaiyan 2010).

All of these historic features of tribal identity continue to influence Saudis and the modern Saudi state. Saudi Arabia is an exceptional case in terms state creation. It is a modern evolution of the tribal chieftaincy with influence from Islam (Kostiner 1991). Although these pieces fell into place well, the Saudi state was challenged when it came to creating an ideology to promote its legitimacy. Ultimately, it leaned on Wahhabism, and with a good rationale. The Wahhabi doctrine itself had already lasted two centuries, and ultimately was part of the foundation that led to King Abdulaziz's rule that unified the state. And although the Wahhabi

doctrine is seen in the light of Islam, it ultimately began as a tribal activity that led to the negotiation of a balance of religious and state power that became Saudi Arabia. It is not surprising that Wahhabi Islam suited the members of tribes, as it followed original tribal values such as privacy and conservatism.

As stated before, many people see Saudi Arabia and think of Islamic religious conservatism. However, it is important to realize that the current state ideology is built on both Islamic and tribal values. The *sahwa* movement provides an ideal example. During this movement, the religious component of Saudi national identity was at its peak, and even loyalty to the state was not considered patriotism, but for *umma*. But after the decline of the *sahwa* movement, the focus shifted to the hybrid nationalism of the “Saudi first” agenda. Now, the identity being promoted top-down is more about patriotism and less about shaping societal values, while societal values had been the focus of the *sahwa* movement. This again can be explained by tribal politics, in that different groups continue to shift in their roles which are largely stratified by occupation and tribe.

And these tribal politics continue in the personal lives of Saudis today. Tribes know their history, and even today, tribal identity is strongly taken into account in marriage arrangements, and not knowing one’s tribal identity can pose societal problems (Aldokhaiei 2013). Also, when countries look to their leaders, Saudi must be considered unique in that the Saudis see something special in their leader that is based on their tribal history. “Government” has many meanings, but how the Saudis consider the royal family is above government, and more as tribes would see their chief – as leader, steward and protector.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, although Saudi history has seen strong influences from religious and government institutions to shape Saudi national identity, ultimately, the strongest influence has been rooted in tribal politics and tribal values. Although Wahhabi influence was seen as largely religious, ultimately, the initial agreement and alliances between tribes ensured that tribal values

were also part of the Wahhabi doctrine, making it not only a religious philosophy but also one that provided a socially-acceptable way to organize tribal society. While this influence was useful during the *sahwa* movement at crafting a Saudi national identity, currently, the “Saudi first” agenda does not have a strong role for religious leaders, and is largely promoting patriotism. However, this message is received by the Saudis much the way a tribal message would be received, and the Saudis continue to look up to their leaders in a uniquely Saudi way, as a result of a complex tribal history. Ultimately, as Saudi identity has changed over the years, one common thread has been the strong core tribal identity at the root of Saudi identity.

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