

Khaled Beydoun: The Saudi Regime Does Not Represent Islam (Part One)

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Khaled Beydoun, author of a preposterous book about “Islamophobia,” has [taken to the pages of Al Jazeera](#) (the media mouthpiece of the government of Qatar, now at daggers drawn with Saudi Arabia) to deplore what he sees as blaming Islam for the murder of Khashoggi.

The Khashoggi affair is yet another reason for the world to abandon the assumption that the kingdom represents Islam.

The recent disappearance of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi

has the world's fingers pointed in the direction of the Saudi government, specifically at its de-facto leader, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman...

And where Saudi Arabia is the subject of wrongdoing, Islam stands alongside it. Collaterally implicated and indicted as the source of the vile actions taken by a government that, since its inception as a sovereign state, has been popularly anointed as the living embodiment of the religion.

This, again, was the case with the Khashoggi affair. The unknown whereabouts of the journalist, widely regarded to be among the most courageous indigenous critics of the Saudi regime, implicated Islam in the minds of many. The "redeployment of Orientalist tropes," as articulated by law scholar Leti Volpp, surged to the surface and steered the popular discourse, driving immediate conclusions that Islam itself is "intolerant to criticism," "resistant to independent media voices," and "suppressive of dissidence."

These blanket assessments of the religion, spurred by the actions of the Saudi state, colored conversations about Khashoggi's disappearance, and cast Islam as the source of Saudi actions. However, what is more insidious than these stereotypes is the assumption that undergirds them: specifically, that Saudi Arabia itself is the primary manifestation of Islam, and everything that it does is representative of the religion.

Saudi Arabia does not represent Islam. Despite its best efforts to promote and project itself as the symbol and "centre of Islam," the Saudi state represents a regime steered by a desperate and austere few and, namely, one Mohammed bin Salman. Home to Medina and Mecca, the two holiest sites in Islam, the regime leverages its role as ward to these cities to shroud its legitimacy with religion; and function as the gatekeeper to the 1.8 billion Muslims around the globe called to enter its bounds to complete the mandated

pilgrimage to Mecca. Being home to these holy sites has been just as potent as its boundless supply of crude oil to sustain the regime, with ruling monarch after monarch strategically intertwining the heft of their petrodollars with the global promotion of Wahhabism to propel the idea that Saudi Arabia and Islam are interchangeable entities.

Let's be clear: while the bulk of the idea that Islam and Saudi Arabia are one is rooted in Orientalist ideas and portrayals of Saudi clerics, sheiks and monarchs as the very archetypes of Islam, Saudi Arabia itself has been very intentional in distilling that idea and disseminating it broadly in the Middle East, Muslim majority countries, and the West. In fact, Wahhabi thought is largely intolerant of other Islamic traditions, and holds itself out to be the only authentic mode of Islamic practice. In addition to this, strategic alliances with global powers, principally the US, have emboldened the Saudi regime to further its project of positioning itself as the political representative of Islam. For better, and far more frequently, as represented by the Khashoggi affair, for worst.

But it does not represent Islam, before and especially today. Saudi Arabia is just one nation, which enshrines an austere and primitive interpretation of Sunni Islam, Wahhabism. This tradition is only practised within the country of approximately 32 million people and other nations where the Saudi regime has spread its influence by way of direct economic and political influence, or indirectly, through the spread of terror networks. In fact, Indonesia, Pakistan and India are home to far bigger Muslim populations, and Nigeria has two-and-a-half times the number of Muslim citizens as Saudi Arabia. Beyond its spiritual and demographic shortcomings, Muslims globally are beginning to see Saudi Arabia as a blight to how Islam and Muslims are viewed, a sentiment that is especially strong in the US.

To highlight the force of the popular association of Saudi

Arabia with Islam, it is common for both media pundits and lay people to conflate the whole of Islam with the aberrant tradition of Wahhabism, viewing the latter as a stand-in for a religion comprised of distinct sects, subsects, and diverse schools of thought. Again, this is in great part the work of prominent Orientalists and modern Islamophobes, but also the intended fruit of Saudi policy and propaganda, proselytization and posturing. At most, Saudi Arabia represents the insular and static canon of Wahhabism. But further investigation of its domestic and global maneuvering even renders that position obsolete, revealing that the regime is fundamentally driven by the all-costs ambition of one crown prince and the shadowy figures backing his rise to power.

In what way does “Wahhabism” represent an “insular and static canon”? Having spent \$100 billion to promote Wahhabism, it is certainly no longer either insular nor static. Wahhabism is simply the name that has been given to the strict Saudi version of Salafism, which stands for a deliberate return to the purity of early Islam. It is literalist, strict, and puritanical. Khaled Beydoin claims that Salafism, under the name Wahhabism, is only to be found in Saudi Arabia. But Salafism has appeared in a great many countries other than Saudi Arabia: half the Muslims in the U.A.E. and Qatar call themselves “Salafists.” Salafists are found, thanks in large part to Saudi financial support for mosques and imams, all over the Muslim world: in Pakistan, in Nigeria (the Uzala Society), in the Sudan (only 10% of the population is now Salafi, but they continue to make inroads against the 60% who are Sufis). Salafists have been increasing in numbers, and shown their power by destroying Sufi mosques and shrines in Somalia, Egypt, Chechnya, and a half-dozen other Muslim countries. Their greatest act of civilizational vandalism was the destruction by Salafists of the ancient Muslim library in Timbuktu, Mali. In the United States, the Sufi cleric Hisham

Kabbani claims that 80% of the mosques he investigated were “Wahhabi” or “Salafist” in orientation.

The Saudi regime is not yet a one-man affair, as Khaled Beydoun seems to think. In fact, it is farther away than ever. MBS has been shaken by the Khashoggi fiasco, and will be even less able to consolidate all power in his hands after the death of King Salman. His ambitions are not nearly as sinister as Khaled Beydoun seems to think. What, after all, has MBS done so far? First, he rounded up both rich businessmen and members of the ruling family whom he accused of corruption, and holding them hostage in a luxury hotel, forced them to disgorge to the Saudi state \$100 billion in ill-gotten gains. That is something no previous leader in Saudi Arabia had attempted. Was he hypocritical, given his \$500 million dollar yacht, and his \$400 million French chateau? Of course. But he has made a start, in combating the culture of corruption, by clawing back \$100 billion, much of it from his relatives.

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