

WAHHABISM AND POWER IN SAUDI ARABIA:  
A PRACTICAL TEST OF WEBERIAN THEORY

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **WAHHABISM AND POWER IN SAUDI ARABIA:**

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Weber's theory of authority is an important tool when studying power and its relationship to human collectives, especially religious groups. Weber focused on the rise of Protestants' power in the West and how this group created and maintained economic power which helped them gain political control in various countries, including the U.S. In this paper, I incorporate Weber's insights about the Protestant ethic, bureaucracies, and types of authority to examine Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia. I compare Saudi Wahhabism with Protestantism, analyzing the rise of the Saud family as controllers of the economy and politics. The role of bureaucracies in these processes will also be discussed. The similarities and differences between Protestantism and Wahhabism are used to investigate power inside their respective societies. These comparisons will highlight the types of authority which allowed each sect to enhance power and how those processes of creating, consolidating, and maintaining power relate to the larger social climates in both Saudi Arabia and the Western world. Finally, I investigate images of the Saudi State in the *The London Times* between 1927 and 1937 to explain how power in the hands of a Wahhabi king was presented to Western readers.

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## **Introduction**

As the birthplace of Wahhabism, Saudi Arabia is one of the most religiously conservative countries in the world (cf. Voll, 2009; Kraidy, 2009; 9-11 Commission Report, 2004, p. 372).

This conservatism influences both state control and societal customs, as traditional religious institutions resist change due to the fact that these institutions are based in revered religious texts. In addition, calls for a “more redeemed” (i.e., more theocratic) society are often heard in Saudi Arabia as neighboring Islamic nations become more modern. For the most part, Saudi Arabia tends to apply religious views as a template for the best way to manage the social, economic, and political lives of all institutions and individuals. The country also establishes a top-down power structure and strict rules regarding gender roles and class. Since the establishment of the current kingdom on September 23, 1932, almost everything needs to be justified by religion in Saudi society.

The country of Saudi Arabia consists of five major regions. First, Hejaz (the Western Region), is on the west coast and it is where Islam’s holiest cities of Mecca and Al-Madina are located and to which millions of Muslim pilgrims go every year. In addition, Hejaz is one of the oldest commercial centers in the Arabian Peninsula. The major city, Jeddah, is an important commercial capital city in Saudi Arabia. The population of this region are Sunni Sufi, in addition to the Wahhabist inspiration that increases the number of Wahhabis there. There is also a notable Shia community in Al-Madina and other cities in this region.

Second, Al-Hasa and Al-Qatif (the Eastern Region), is located on the east coast and is the country’s primary source of wealth, owing to the large oil reserves. This region is known for its



agriculture and bountiful fishing. It is also where one finds most of the Shia community in the Arab world, except Iraq (Fuller and Francke, 1999)<sup>1</sup>.

Third is the Northern Region, the least populated of the country with long borders with Iraq and Jordan. This province is known historically for animal production due to its abundant pastures. Most of population are *Sunni*. Fourth, the Southern Region, borders Yemen; the residents of this region have strong ancestral relations with Yemenis. Some researchers maintain (e.g., Salameh, 1980) that people in southern Saudi Arabia are more like Yemenis than like other Saudis. This region is also densely populated by followers of such diverse Islam sects as *Sunni* (both Sufis and Wahhabis), *Ismaily*, and *Zaidi*<sup>2</sup>.

Finally, Najd (the Central Region) is the home region of the House of Saud, the royal family, and may be considered the Wahhabism motherland. Riyadh, the capital city, represents the base upon which the very country itself was founded.

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Fuller and Francke indicate this information as the Saudi Arabia has the second largest Arab Shia population; only Iraq has a larger Shia population. Most Saudi Shia live in Eastern Region. Which still fits with Fuller and Francke.

<sup>2</sup> Ismaili and Zaidi are two shia sects which have some different beliefs from the largest Shia Sect, Jafari—"Twelvers", also called "*jafari*" and "*ithna'ashar*". The last one is the most numerous. Whenever you find the words "*shia*" or "*shiit*" without more details, it refers to the Twelvers.



Figure 1: Map of Saudi Arabia's 14 Administrative Provinces; the location of Saudi Arabia is on the top right.

Islam is virtually the only religion practiced by Saudi citizens, and various Islamic sects can be found throughout the country, though the Saudi regime recognizes Wahhabism as the official doctrine of the country. This sect represents the school of Sunni Muslims who adopted Mohamed Bin Abdul-Wahhab's interpretation of Islam. In brief, Wahhabism is a fundamental Muslim movement that began in the mid 18th century in Najd, the central region of the Arabian Peninsula, and was associated with the Saudi royal family and their adherents from the local tribes. The movement was used to "Islamize" Arabia by returning to what Wahhabis claim to be the only pristine version of Islam and it attempted to challenge, often using physical force, any "heretical" alternate versions (Benoist-Mechin, 1957; Lacey, 1981).

Since Wahhabism is practiced in the higher echelons of power in the oil-rich state, we must understand how this group gained power, continues to maintain that power, and imposes its hegemonic hold over Saudi culture. This paper aims to apply Max Weber's frameworks of power and authority as applied to Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia in order to explain the rise of this particular group. For the purposes of this paper, power describes the ability to exercise one's will over others and authority refers to power recognized as legitimate by those who are subject to it. I will compare Protestantism (Weber mainly focused on the Calvinist tradition) with the Wahhabis sect as two groups that relied upon religious practices to help gain and develop power over large groups of people. While Weber does not explicitly say that Calvinism was used by one group to gain power over another, *The Protestant Ethic* in particular shows the relationship between a religious group (Protestants) and the social, political, and economic movements of its time. Better than any other, this text explains how Protestants could dispose of many Catholic restrictions, such as the belief in the Church as the gatekeeper to Heaven that had centralized authority (e.g., the legitimized selling of so-called "indulgences") in many European countries. Protestants—such as Lutherans and Calvinists—created roles and interpretations of Scripture that helped them to gain power through what Weber called a rational authority to modify their lives in order to gain a better earthly life and afterlife (cf. Weber, 2009, pp. 19-20, 23-31).

What follows begins with a brief synopsis of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia. I then proceed to describe Weber's theoretical framework tying power to religion, followed by a brief comparative literature review of Western Protestantism and Saudi Wahhabism. I then offer research questions and hypotheses. Following this are extensive discussions of Weber's Calvinist-Protestant Ethic and Saudi Wahhabism, and Charismatic and Traditional Authorities,

and Bureaucracy. I conclude with an examination of the founding of Saudi Arabia and its position in Western media with concluding thoughts.

## Rise of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia

A review of the literature illustrates that Wahhabism as a religious belief has historically been spread via a technique one may describe as “gold or sword”, meaning the population of Arabia was either enticed—or forced—to adopt Wahhabism as their main sect. “He [Mohamed Bin Abdul-Wahhab] and his followers believe that they have a religious obligation to spread the call (in Arabic, *da'wa*) for restoration of pure monotheistic worship” (Commins, 2006, p. vi).

Wahhabism’s power began in 1744 with the founding of the first Saudi state under Mohamed Bin Saud, the great grandfather of Ibn Saud (the founder of the current Saudi state). At the time Mohamed Bin Saud was the ruler of Dariya, a small town in Najd. ‘the central region of Arabia’ Mohamed Bin Saud made a pact with Shikh Mohamed Bin Abdul-Wahhab (Steinberg, 2005) to spread the Whabbi doctrine under the House of Saud rule throughout the Bedouin tribes of the Arabian Peninsula (Benoist-Mechin, 1957; Lacey, 1981). Under the pact, power was divided into two realms: political power for the House of Saud, and religious power for Abdul-Wahhab and his disciples, who were later to become the religious scholars [*Ulama*] of the state (Al-Rasheed, 2010).

These allies were able to combine the existing cultural codes of the tribes—emphasizing notions such as “war’s glory,” the tribal chief’s status affecting the “honor of all tribe members,” the “shame of being behind,” and so on, with the influence and specific interpretations of Islam to offer incentives to other tribal leaders to honor the pact. The pact was not without opposition. Still, the consolidated power on the Arabian Peninsula forced people who lived in the region to follow a leader who did not belong to their tribe. These Bedouin tribes, through the codes offered by Islam, became subject to leadership through an outside political [*wali al-amr*] Muslim community leader or religious person [*Imam*], rather than their traditional tribal leader (Mackey,

2002; Glosemeyer, 2005; Bowen, 2008). The tribal leaders, in turn, gained material and status-raising benefits by bringing their tribes into the fold of Bin Saud.

Mohamed Bin Saud further extended his power through expansionist wars using the Najdi tribes under the religious legitimacy provided by Abdul-Wahhab. For his part, Abdul-Wahhab's previously issued *fatwas* forbidding practices which had been considered acceptable by other Muslim sects (such as admiring saints' graves, wearing talismans, smoking, and so on) became the basis of Wahhabi jurisprudence for the new state (Bowen, 2008). As the new state grew under Mohamed Bin Saud and Abdul-Wahhab, the spoils of these wars were replaced by taxes paid by their subjects (Menoret, 2005). Under this developing mechanism of Saudi/Wahhabi empire, Mohamed Bin Saud and his successors (sons and grandsons) titles grew from leaders of a mere Bedouin/tribal group to the leaders of a religious and political entity which shaped the current Saudi elite—"Najdi-Wahhabis"—by combining three elements: the royal family, Islamic clerics, and tribal adherents.

In contemporary Saudi Arabia, the elite use a certain interpretation of Islam, Wahhabism, to impose their views on the Saudi people, and given that these views are couched in religious terms it protects their power and interests in a society where religion is considered the highest legitimate power. Legitimacy is the element that distinguishes power from authority.

[I]n those groups which were politically integrated by a common supreme authority, like ... the Islamic states, the body of laws to applied to by the judicial officers differed in accordance with the ethnic, religious or political characteristics of the component groups.... (Kalberg, cited in Weber 2009, p.402)

Kalberg continues (p.403):

The modern position of political organizations rests on the prestige bestowed upon them by a specific belief held by their members in a special consecration, namely, in the "legitimacy" of the social action prescribed by these organizations. This prestige becomes

greater wherever ... this social action involves physical coercion encompassing the power to dispose over life and death.

An example of these views would include accepting the principle that the only way to be a good Muslim is to adopt the “true interpretation of Islam” (i.e., Wahhabism). This requires full loyalty to *al-umma* and *wali-almr*—Arabic words for “nation” and “Muslim supreme leader”—the state and the king, and disloyalty to their enemies who are considered the enemy of Allah/Islam. Thus, Wahhabism succeeded in keeping tribalism in place as the concept of loyalty moved from the tribe to loyalty to the state [*al-umma*], and from loyalty for the tribal chief to loyalty for the king [*wali-almr*], both of which became religious entities. This change in loyalties also appears in some of the social values that come from the tribal customs such as rules for marriage that allow higher status tribes to refuse to give their daughters to men belonging to lower tribes to avoid losing their sense of honor and status. This cultural practice is legitimized by religious leaders as they claim that the couple should be socially qualified for each other.

Today, power in Saudi Arabia is centralized in two ways. It begins by keeping the circle of decision-making in the hands of a small, dominant group which enjoys all the privileges of state-power. This is reinforced by encouraging—or even forcing—all Saudis to follow the dominant sect, Sunni Wahhabism, and thus adhere to the dominant tribal values of the Najd region (Yamani, 2008). While the Wahhabis’ homeland of Najd represents 32.2% of the total Saudi population, the elite members, according to Hamza Al-Hassan, hold 84% of the country’s ministerial positions, 100% of the National Guard (Al-Hassan, 2006), and according to the Consultative Council website (found at <[www.shura.gov.sa](http://www.shura.gov.sa)>), holding approximately 47% of the Consultative Council (an illustrative table is provided on page 49). This last body is said to be representative of the country, but that has not been the case to this point in time as members

are appointed by the king who has a vested interest in populating it with people of similar interests and loyalties.



## **Theoretical Framework**

Weber argued that power could be manifested in a variety of forms, a revision of Marx's view of power being in the hands of those who own the means of production, and that social stratification entailed more than control over economic/material resources (Weber, 1978, p. 100 ff). Weber described three separate but interrelated dimensions of stratification: class, status, and party (power). These three dimensions of Weberian stratification have come to be known as the "multidimensional view" of social stratification (Stronks, 1997, pp. 3-4; Kerbo, 2009, p. 100).

Class is an economic concept associated with an individual's position in the marketplace, and it is this concept that is often used to understand a person's place in the larger society. In addition to property ownership, Weber added occupational skills, as these enabled people to share "the same class situation [...] chance of using goods or services for themselves in the markets" (Gerth and Mills 1958, pp. 182-183). As Hurst (1992, p. 187) put it, "it is the position of individuals in the market that determines their class position".

For Weber, unlike Marx, status is a social, rather than exclusively economic, concept based on a group's honor or prestige within society, again distinguished from the Marxist notion of material determination. According to Weber (in Gerth and Mills 1958, p. 187),

... status honor is normally expressed by the fact that above all else a specific style of life can be expected from all those who wish to belong to the circle. Linked with this expectation are restrictions on "social" intercourse.

Status is formed by specific privileged lifestyles within society, including endogamy, avoiding certain types of businesses and activities, and asserting certain traditions and behaviors. It is, as Weber said, a closed social approach to distinguish oneself from others outside this circle, regardless of one's economic situation (see also White 1992).

The authority of the political party is used as a means to influence others in society. Economic strength gives members of a group an opportunity to penetrate the institutions of state administration and thus acquire power at a macro level. According to Weber, “‘parties’ live in a house of ‘power’. Their action is oriented toward the acquisition of social ‘power’, that is to say, toward influencing a communal action no matter what its content may be” (Gerth and Mills 1958, p. 194). Horold R. Kerbo comments on Weber's statement:

The most important aspect of this party (or power) dimension of stratification is organization, or “rational order,” and a staff with which to dominate or influence others for whatever goal. Thus, it is the political party or the bureaucratic form of organization that most typifies this dimension of stratification. (Kerbo 2009, p. 104)

Thus, coming through bureaucratic forms, party organization legitimizes the power of the state and its leadership by acknowledging those who come from a certain party, and decisions are couched in rational terms.

Weber's theory offers a good explanation as to why a particular group's power rises above others in society. It does not, however, mean the rest of society's individuals/groups are equal to each other because they are all politically below the dominant party. Instead, Weber's dimensions rank society's members in hierarchies according to what they have as individuals (i.e., economy) or groups (i.e., honor) which support their “power” to move from the ruled class to the ruling class. These dimensions evoke two of Weber's concepts that are useful in understanding Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia—bureaucracy and the Protestant ethic.

According to Weber, bureaucracy was the typical expression of rationally regulated associations within a structure of domination. This form of rational social organization was based on fixed, written rules and a hierarchy of positions (Gerth and Mills, 1958). The bureaucratic mechanism works as an operating system of domination regardless of the dominant group's

goals. “[I]n contrast to feudal orders based on personal piety,” the bureaucratic mechanism “is easily made to work for anybody who knows how to gain control over it”. As the dominant authority changes, it “merely needs to change the top officials” (Gerth and Mills, 1958, p. 229). In a bureaucracy, no matter who is in power, the organization serves the party that holds the bureaucratic offices.

## Weber's Types of Authority

Weber distinguished between three types of authority: *traditional*, *charismatic*, and *rational-legal* authority. The first type, traditional authority, is based on customary values that give particular elites respect, supporting their power (Gerth and Mills, 1958). These elites might be institutional, such as sacred or religious or clannish, or tribal or familial. This type of authority requires two conditions—claim of this right by the leaders, and a belief from the followers (Ritzer, 2005, p. 55). This type of authority is derived from patriarchal domination, which “rests upon a belief in the sanctity of everyday routines” (Gerth and Mills, 1958, p. 297). In Weber’s perspective, this type of authority was enhanced by traditions and religion that prevented people from challenging authority and was supported by cultural contexts. In other words, it becomes the reality or truth, thus, any challenge to it is a challenge to the authority of higher powers.

Authorities of the charismatic category are “natural” leaders. They are those individuals who “in times of psychic, physical, economic, ethical, religious, political distress” are seen to be “holders of specific [indeed, supernatural] gifts of the body and spirit,” serving without remuneration. They are unlike the patriarchal leader of daily routine in the bureaucratic structure. “Pure charisma is contrary to all patriarchal domination” (Gerth and Mills, 1958, p. 248). Even if it is irrational, charisma denotes a special relationship between leaders and their followers that raises up the image of the individual hero among the public. “The charismatic leader simply has an indeterminate number of intimates who share in his charisma or who possess charisma of their own” (Giddens, 1985, p. 161).

Rational-legal authority is based on rules and regulations, rather than giving obedience to a particular leader, as in the cases of traditional and charismatic forms of leadership. Law is at

the top of the hierarchy, which is the case in most modern states. Indeed, this is the type of authority Weber believed was reflected in the Bureaucracy as the typical system of the modern state. However, it should be mentioned here that the state authority organizes the economic system according to the policy makers' values and beliefs. Thus it is important for us to understand how a religious ethic can shape the worldview of policy makers and how those values can also shape larger societal trends that affect the distribution of wealth and power.

In *The Protestant Ethic*, Weber argued that Protestant asceticism contributed to wealth accumulation by encouraging hard work, business planning, and self-denial. According to Weber, "the power of the religious movements, not alone but above all other factors" (Weber, 2009, p.96) played a large part in encouraging capitalism in the West. Other factors included rationalism and scientific development to interpret matters in daily life formerly thought to be accomplished through magic or divine intervention. But religious movements were of central importance. Indeed, Weber emphasized the importance of the "calling" in his discussion in the third chapter of *The Protestant Ethic* to distinguish this as a clear division from pre-Luther Catholicism. A calling is understood as a field in which to work, a life task set forth by God, and thus believers can serve God in devotion to a worldly calling. An injunction to constantly labor, to restlessly effort for the glory of God in a worldly activity meant that believers could demonstrate their godliness through their diligence in worldly tasks. Success in a calling was interpreted as a sign of being one of the elect, and the hard work and sober conduct that resulted from living a life of strict discipline led to greater wealth for the faithful adherent. As God calls His saved believers to serve His glory, they must respond to their Lord to prove their certainty and worthiness. At this point, John Calvin considered that it was the individual's duty to believe that God has chosen the individual for salvation with no doubt; individuals were then enjoined to

work hard to serve God's glory and gain self-goods, demonstrating that "steadfast faith would produce salvation.... Work [in the secular sphere], and work alone, banishes religious doubt and gives certainty of one's status among the saved" (Weber, 2009, p. 111).

The certainty of one is calling and subsequent secularization does not conflict with Protestantism, Weber argued, because Protestants sought other "signs" besides those indicating salvation. Weber's argument about the Protestant ethic was that their belief that they were among the elect motivated them individually to work hard in order to serve God's glory, which logically required gaining power, as power and economic rewards proved that God was watching over them. Starting with a focus to raise their individual "economy", Calvinist Protestants gained from a hegemonic notion of rational individualism in Western cultures. While this assisted in their gaining political and social power, the gain was thought to merely be a side effect of their religious ethic. Nevertheless, this hegemonic strategy helped the Protestants avoid conflict with others, and assisted its believers in establishing their power gradually in order to maintain religious and political identity.

## **Wahhabism and Protestantism in the Literature**

Parallels have been drawn between Wahhabism and Protestantism, and/or between Mohamed Bin Abdul-Wahhab and John Calvin. Barbara Ehrenreich (2006, p. 119-125) pointed to Samuel P. Huntington as potentially the first who noted this parallel in his 1996 book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. However, Huntington did not address Wahhabism or its founder, Mohamed Bin Abdul-Wahhab, but rather compared Protestantism with Islamic fundamentalist movements in general. Moreover, the only leader that Huntington addressed was Ayatollah Khomeini whose monastic discipline he compared to that of John Calvin (see Huntington, 1996, p. 111). Khomeini was a Shia leader, a sect which is in theological conflict with Wahhabism and Huntington's point concerns Shia's power in Iran rather than Wahhabism's power in Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, Huntington did lay the groundwork for further investigation.

Ware and Kisriev (2010, p. 93) mention the sect briefly when they wrote "[a]t its best, Wahhabism offered many of the traditional appeals of Protestantism". They draw upon similarities, such as Wahhabis and Protestants believing themselves loyal to the more "pure" and ancient faith than other sects of Islam/Christianity, as well as a confidence that their beliefs were the most accessible to the creator. The same ideas are raised by others (see Browsers and Kurzman, 2004; Allen, 2006; and Ankerberg and Caner, 2009). Doumato (2000, p. 217) added the aspect of a harsh attitude against miraculous healing and supernatural forces other than from a Godly source. These scholars have offered only general statements describing a sort of parallel between the Protestant (Calvinist/Presbyterian) Christian and Wahhabi Muslim without enough explanation of this parallelism to understand if the social forces behind each are similar. Rather than mentioning to potential parallels, scholars need to discuss how those particular religious

groups “Calvinist Protestant and Wahhabis” developed their power and gain political/economic control in their nations considering the distinctions of circumstances that both groups experienced.



## Research Question and Hypotheses

Weber's work on Protestantism and historical work on the rise of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia raises a number of questions, the foremost being whether Weber's theoretical work on *The Protestant Ethic* can be used to understand Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia? I will discuss Weber's concept of *charisma* as it applies to Saudi elite characters, and how Weber's concept of *bureaucracy* can best applied to support the elite in the case of Saudi Arabia. For these two questions, I will rely on historical and contemporary accounts of Saudi Arabia to develop my argument.

I also present Western media coverage of the Saudi state during the decade of recognizing the Kingdom to show what was being read by Western audiences. It is not the goal of this paper to scrutinize the media, *per se*, but those articles give a view of the development of the Saudi state identity based on Wahhabism and Saudism<sup>3</sup> particularly the change of the title of the state from "Wahhabi Territory" to the "Kingdom of Saudi Arabia".

Furthermore, I hypothesize that there are a number of similarities between Protestantism and Wahhabism, which makes analyzing the rise of Wahhabism's power in Saudi Arabia based on Weber's theoretical work on Protestantism worth investigating. In addition, as Saudi media and educational curricula enhance the heroic image of Saudi kings, we could attempt to analyze this sort of image based on Weber's concept of *charisma*.

Finally, I explore Saudi systems that protect the royal regime, share the same regional background and religious beliefs, and a closed circle of blood relations. Since the Kingdom is the largest oil producer to develop into a modern state, one must investigate the impact of the oil

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<sup>3</sup> "Saudism" in this context is derived from "House of Saud", as well as the Wahhabism that derived from Abdul-Wahhab.

economy on the structure of power in Saudi Arabia. It is at this point the analysis of the workings of bureaucracies is best explored.

## Weber's Calvinist Protestant Ethic and Saudi Wahhabism

In *The Protestant Ethic*, Weber discussed how a group, chosen by God for salvation and saved by God's will, became the elected of God (Weber, 2009). Calvinist Protestants believed themselves to be chosen by God for salvation. Stark and Glock (1966, p. 20) refer to this as particularism, that is, "the belief that only one's own religion is legitimate". The implication is that members of other faith groups are not eligible for salvation and thus only the elect are worthy of divine favor and deliverance. Calvin himself addressed this in his doctrine of

Unconditional Election:

The Elect are saved unto good works (Ephesians 2:10). Thus, though good works will never bridge the gulf between man and God that was formed in the Fall, good works are a result of God's saving grace. This is what Peter means when he admonishes the Christian reader to make his "calling" and "election" sure (2 Peter 1:10). Bearing the fruit of good works is an indication that God has sown seeds of grace in fertile soil. (Schervish and Whitaker, 2010, p.125)

This notion of election is also evident in the Islamic tradition. In Muslim literature, there is a *Hadith*<sup>4</sup> which indicates that the *Ummah* [Muslims] would part into 73 groups, 72 of which would go to Hell either temporarily or eternally (see Al-Bag, 1920, p. 9), while one part would be saved. Wahhabism asserts this *Hadith* and links it with their interpretation of the saved part that follows the pristine version of Islam. There are several versions of this *Hadith*, for example,

... my *Ummah* will split into 73 sects: one will enter Paradise and 72 will enter Hell". Someone asked, "O Messenger of Allah (Peace be upon him), who will they be?" He replied, "The main body of the Muslims (*al-Jama'ah*)".<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> All narrations concern the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad.

<sup>5</sup> To see this in English translation see: <http://www.sunnah.org/msaec/articles/madhhabs.htm>

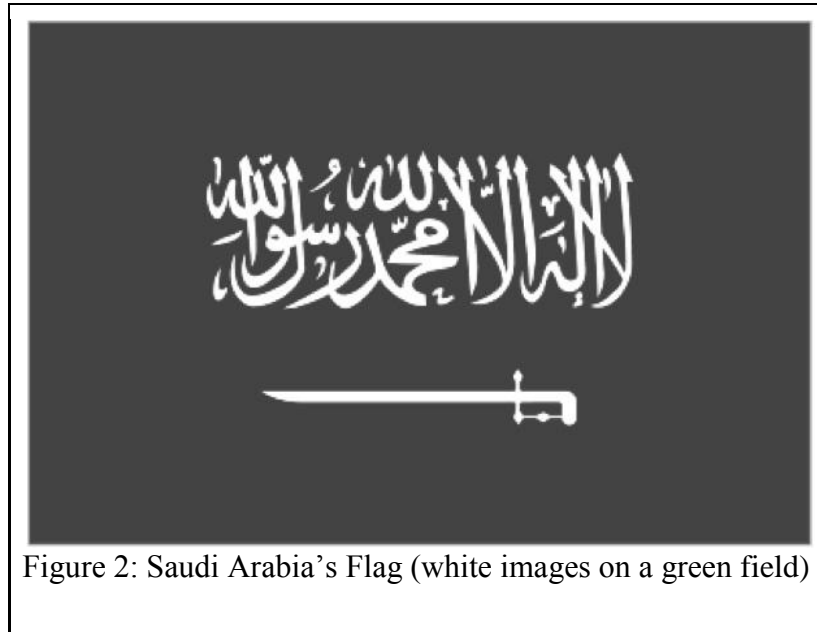
As Wahhabis always call themselves *Ahl-sunnah wa al-Jama'ah*<sup>6</sup> (Schubel, 1993; Ibn Taymiyah, 1989, p. 219). In this vein, some scholars argue that *Ahlus-sunnah wal Jama'ah* is the saved sect (see for example Sheikh Omar Bakri Muhammad, 2004, p. 11). Wahhabis share a perspective similar to a Calvinists perspective of self-identity as those available for God's salvation. This dovetails John Calvin's beliefs when he said "a few were saved; most were damned. One's 'salvation status' was preordained" (see Weber, 2009, p. 19).

Both the Calvinist and Wahhabi traditions look at themselves as those who carry an obligation to represent their religion and serve God. Calvin believed that "[t]he cosmos of the world serves the majesty of God and His self-glorification" (Weber, 2009, p. 19). In the same way, this obligation in Wahhabism makes the faithful the defenders of the monotheism of Allah. The principle base of the Wahhabism movement is defense of *Tawhid* (the Arabic word for monotheism). This movement fought most of the Arabian population who had different interpretations of *Tawhid* (Moussalli, 2009). Moreover, the Wahhabism movement set itself in the position of the Prophet Mohamed, whose "mission was to show that straight path of Islam" (Metcalf, 1999, p. 222). The monotheism of Allah (*Tawhid*) is the primary concept that Wahhabis declare as the matter they most want to clarify and bring other Muslims to accept. As a concept, *Tawhid* started with the *Shahadah*, the Islamic pledge of the conviction of one's faith: "I bear witness that there is no deity but Allah and I bear witness that Muhammad is His

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<sup>6</sup> *Ahlus sunnah wal Jama'ah* "refers to those who follow the Prophet (saw) and the understanding of the *Sahabah* (companions) and those that followed them *bil Ihsaan* i.e., the *Tabi'een* and *Tabi' Tabi'een*" (Muhammad, 2004, p. 49). According to Ibn Taymiyah, whom Wahhabis highly admire as *Sheikh ul-islam* (the highest scholar of Islam), *Ahlus sunnah wal Jama'ah* are the people who "have faith in the same manner as they have faith on the information given about them by *Allah* in His Book without distortion and negation and without adding quality and resemblance. In fact, among all the sects of the *Ummah*, this sect alone is moderate just as the community of Muslims is a moderate one among all the communities" (Ibn Taymiyah, 1989, p. 144).

Messenger”. All Muslims claim to adopt this pledge, though Wahhabis claim that other Muslims do not follow the truest path of the pledge. Indeed, the Saudi flag includes this *Shahadah* in Arabic script, but shares the flag with a sword. This perhaps best illustrates that the most contentious matter Wahhabis address regarding the faith of their Muslim enemies is that of *shirk* (idolatry).



In this context, it is again worth noting that *shirk* refers to “idolatry” or associating profane things with God, Allah, which in practice is considered nothing short of polytheism (Izutsu, 2006, p. 44). Addressing people by the “title” of *shirk* means giving permission and justification to fight them as heretics, as people who are a danger to true Islam. Furthermore, they would be considered more dangerous than “mere infidels” who obviously never believed in Islam. In this vein, Wahhabis utilized the concept of *shirk* against people who did not follow them and fought them by declaring “*Jihad* (holy war) against non-Muslims and those Muslims whose Islam did not conform to the reformer’s teachings” (Al-Rashedd, 2010, p. 17).

Another common theme between Protestants and Wahhabis is their struggle against the notion of the miraculous and the sacred power of saints. To both groups, saints are no more than dead people. Peter Berger (1967) argues that Protestantism brought about an inevitable tendency to shrink the miraculous power of the saints. Similarly, Wahhabism calls for cutting irrational relations with the dead, and Wahhabis will fully disrespect the graves of Muslim saints (Moussalli, 2009). Peter Beyer (2006, p. 161) summarized the Wahhabis' attitude: "submission (Islam) as obedience to God was not to be done on the basis of imitating a human authority, thereby creating another intermediary between God and Human beings". Both Wahhabis and Protestants look at the relationship between people and God as a personal one to be kept individually. Hegel (1944, p. 417) commented on this very notion:

This is the essence of the Reformation: Man is in his very nature destined to be free. [...] And it is a fact of the weightiest import that the Bible has become the basis of the Christian Church: henceforth each individual enjoys the right of deriving instruction for himself from it, and of directing his conscience in accordance with it.

In order to defend their religion, some religious groups have engaged in holy wars that help to protect their beliefs, establish their state, and maintain their identity. In this cultural context, the warriors' status would rise because they were the group who had the honor of protecting the state and society in the name of a shared religion. At this point, Weber argued that warriors of holy wars enjoyed a prestige of nobility as the knight caste and God's soldiers (Weber, 1922). Both Protestants and Wahhabis legitimized their wars as the carrying out of God's will (Peters, 1999). Each victory cemented this notion in the eyes of their leaders, warriors, followers, and most likely among some of those who had been conquered.

From this viewpoint, there is a certain group of people who enjoy a special sort of honor because of their ability to exercise their will over others and secure material advantage for their

members. This relates to Weber's discussion of parties in his analysis of stratification. Weber notes:

whereas the genuine place of "classes" is within the economic order, the place of "status groups" is within the social order, that is, within the sphere of the distribution of "honor". From within these spheres, classes and status groups influence one another and they influence the legal order and are in turn influenced by it. But "parties" live in a house of "power". (Gerth and Mills, 1958, p. 194)

In addition, Weber emphasized that while parties operated within a rational-legal order, they could be "organized around a charismatic or traditional leader ... in a rational way with formal positions" (Hurst, 1992, p. 191). As Kerbo wrote, "Weber wanted to emphasize that status groups tend to draw lines around themselves restricting intimate social interaction, marriage, and other relations within the status group" (2009, p. 104).

In Saudi Arabia, the complicated system of intimate social interaction of tribal kinship restricts relationships by tying certain tribal values to religious values. As mentioned earlier, marriage is one of the most restricted social practices by tribal traditions that most tribes, especially Najdis, follow. The House of Saud refuses to allow their daughters to marry men belonging to lower tribes. To do so would mean losing honor and status. Even after a marriage has taken place, if the family should find out that their daughter's husband belongs to a low-ranking tribe, they would force him to divorce (see Human Rights Watch, 2007, 17 July). This is more than a social tradition, as it is supported by Wahhabi clerics who control judicial institutions. Hamzah Al-Hassan (2006, p. 72) wrote: "while the Al-Saud take wives from all societal segments, they refuse, without religious reference, to give their daughters in marriage to other than their relatives, or to members of other ruling families". As such, Najdi-Wahhabism is representative of Weber's closed caste.

[A closed “caste” distinction] occurs in such a way that every physical contact with a member of any caste that is considered to be “lower” by the members of a “higher” caste is considered as making for a ritualistic impurity and to be a stigma which must be expiated by a religious act. Individual caste develop quite distinct cult and gods. (Girth and Mills, 1958, pp. 188-189)

Consequently, monopolizing power leads to stratification, which is the structure of inequality among societal members according to their categories of race, class, gender, religion, and so on. It divides societies into classes in a social hierarchy (Darity 2008, pp. 166-167; Marshal, 1994, pp. 512-513). This division is associated with Weber’s previously-mentioned categorization of stratification according to three major types: property (class), power, and honor/prestige (status). Wahhabis impose their authority according to their religious-tribal background. They were the founders of this nation and they were the Bedouins<sup>7</sup> who continue to psychologically represent to the Saudi people something similar to what the cowboy folk heroes (Mackey, 2002)—most of whom were Protestants (Szasz, 2004, p. 25 ff)—represent to Americans.

There is, however, a practical difference between Weber’s Protestantism and Wahhabism of Saudi Arabia has to do with the creation of power in two aspects. First, Protestantism tends to generate wealth as individuals honor God and live according to His will (wealth becomes a byproduct of living a holy [ascetic] life, and it also was seen as a sign of divine favour); Wahhabis tend to live as a group in a state that imposes God’s law. Second, as the primary desires are different, the intent of the sort of power both religious groups have gained is different. Protestantism encourages its followers to live a life of strict discipline leading to the one possible consequence that individuals obtain economic power. On the other hand, Wahhabism

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<sup>7</sup> Arab nomads who depend on their autonomous tribal system. In Saudi Arabia, nomadic life has been collapsed; the term defines the society with a nomadic background yet still depends on the tribal system.



encourages its adherents to follow—an Islamic version that imposes God’s law, which has led to the establishment of a theocratic state and obtaining political power as a group. One may argue that Protestants maintain political hegemony in some nations—such as the U.S.A. and the U.K.—and Wahhabis have economic power in others, such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. This has occurred without religious motivation. Indeed, political power and economic wealth are matters supportive of each other regardless of the intention. This is especially the case wherein:

1. The political system of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia gives the King and his elite circle the ability and authority to rise to economic power. Saudi Arabia is a Rentier state (Burnell and Randall, 2008, p. 446), receiving substantial income from the outside world, thus, economic power supports the political elite and helps it to maintain political power. This economic power has become an unintentional consequence for the religious leaders as well.
2. The economic system in the West involves more than political interests. Political power is used to make policies that support merchants’ interests in maintaining and increasing economic gains. Thus, political power supports the economic elite merchants and helps this group to maintain its economic power, even though the religious authorities did not intend it, it again comes unintentionally.

Regardless of the intentions of religious authorities, the mechanism of power in both cases—Protestants and Wahhabis—work in opposite ways. Protestants intend to generate wealth through economic power based on religious ethics, and political power helps them without an overtly religious motivation. In contrast, Wahhabis seek to establish a state imposing theocratic laws through political power based on religious ethics, and economic power helps them without imbuing religious motivations.

**Table 1: Parallels Between Protestantism and Wahhabism**

Concept	Protestantism	Wahhabism
Working as	Individuals	Group
Self-Belief	Calling people, people saved/elected by God.	The only group among 73 groups saved by God “ <i>Ahl-sunnah wa al-jama’ah</i> ”.
Missionary (Spreading the Faith)	Evangelism in order to increasing the number of believers	<i>Da’wa</i> (Muslim proselytizing) in order to increase the number of believers.
Main Goal	Living to honor God by living according to His will.	Living to honor God by living according to His will.
Method to Achieve the Goal	Generating wealth via saving money and investments through capitalism.	Imposing theocratic law (Shria) via building a theocratic state through monopolizing the highest governmental positions, sources of wealth, and religious leadership.
Outcomes	Gaining the intended power (economic) and unintentional power (political).	Gaining the intended power (political) and unintentional power (economic).

At this point, we need to examine Wahhabism’s power according to Weber’s themes of Charisma and Bureaucracy. He first explained the historical foundation of building power before moving to the maintenance of power through the creation of systemic state control.

## **Charismatic and Traditional Authorities in Saudi Arabia**

According to Madawi Al-Rasheed, the Saudi state continues to be seen as a state of personalities rather than institutions (Al-Rasheed, 2005, p. 199). Ibn Saud established the current Saudi state in the early 20th century. Furthermore, he revived Wahhabism with the Najdi-Wahhabi adherents, which included both clerics and warriors. That is to say, Ibn Saud expanded his Kingdom by using the Najdi tribes under the religious legitimacy that Wahhabis clerics provided by renouncing practices previously condemned by Wahhabism. Starting with the reoccupation of Riyadh in 1902 before declaring the Kingdom unified in 1932, Ibn Saud expanded, ruled, and then passed on his kingdom to his sons. This story creates a heroic image of this king in the Saudi public sphere-including media, educational curricula, and oral poetry-the image of the ideal man who exhibited all ideal features is embodied in the historical (re)telling of the king's character.

This ideal character appears throughout the Saudi public sphere as a dominant authority that is devoted to serving Islam. Saudi educational curricula goals often “remind students that the rulers are the protectors of the Wahhabi State” (Mordechai, 1993, p. 11). According to Doumato (1992), the Saudi royal family appears to be the uniquely qualified family to defend Islam and impose Islamic morality among the people. This uniqueness comes from an Arabic heritage of leadership that admires chivalry, vigor, generosity, and wisdom, and it is associated with biographies of Ibn Saud and his sons who continue to succeed him (Al-Rasheed, 2005).

This image brings us to Weber's concept of the charismatic, especially the idea regarding leaders who hold specific qualities that others do not have (see Gerth and Mills, 1958, p. 245). As an instance of these qualities, Saudi students in tenth-grade Reading Classes have a lesson titled “His Majesty al-Faisal Describes His Great Father”. In this lesson, King Faisal describes

the courage and strength of his father, Ibn Saud, when he was severely injured in a battle with the Ajman tribe. Despite being eviscerated by an enemy's lucky bullet igniting the shells on the cartridge belt around his waist, he merely cinched his belt and successfully led his warriors to victory. This story fits with Weber's description of the charismatic leader as someone who is great and beyond normal human abilities and actions. "The genuinely charismatic ruler is responsible precisely to those whom he rules. He is responsible for but one thing, that he personally and actually be the God-willed master" (Gerth and Mills, 1958, p. 249). It is the power God has given the hero to protect God's Glory. This is the case of *Tawhid* monotheism.

According to Weber, charisma moves against norms by relying on the individual's features and beliefs (Gerth and Mills, 1958), making it a type of authority which is not inheritable. Every King has to build his charismatic image in the national public sphere. The making of the image of the current King Abdullah is a good example. His status as the King of Humanity and his chivalrous, knightly image as the leader of the National Guard for four decades—in addition to the characteristics of generosity and wisdom—place him firmly in Weber's category of a charismatic authority. One might argue that the successor of the dead Saudi king is chosen according to his charismatic qualities, which fits with Weber's idea of successorship that is based on charismatic qualification that

... can lead to a belief in hereditary charisma, as represented by hereditary kinship and hereditary hierocracy.... [T]he hierocrat no longer rules by virtue of purely personal qualities, but by virtue of acquired or inherited qualities.... .... The process of routinization, and thus traditionalization, has set in (Gerth and Mills, 1958, p. 297).

It is worth noting that birth order is not the only measure of choosing the Saudi King among the royal family (Kechichian, 2001). Nevertheless, its circle of selection is narrowed to the Royal family, which is not consistent with Weber's model of charisma.

Indeed, the Saudi regime is more likely illustrative of traditional authority based on traditional values which gives certain elites respect and support for their power (Gerth and Mills, 1958). This elite is a mix from the House of Saud, Wahhabi Clerics, and Najdi Tribes, all representing the Wahhabi elite. In addition, Weber considered patriarchy to be the most important type of domination associated with traditional authority, which fits with the case of Saudi Arabia. In addition, the status of the elite members as adherents to the Royal Family reminds us of Weber's statement that the officials of the state rule through traditional authority: "the character of the stratum of officials upon whose support the ruler has relied in the struggle for the expropriation of status prerogatives has varied greatly in history" (Gerth and Mills, 1958, p. 298).

As a modern state, Saudi Arabia has built its institutions in order to govern society and manage its oil-wealth. Needless to say, that requires a sort of bureaucracy that brings the state to quite formal business.

## **Bureaucracy**

The discovery and exploitation of oil in the late 1930s changed the structure of the Kingdom. While Ibn Saud started his Kingdom with direct rule and only four ministers (Salameh, 1980), Saudi Arabia today has a Council of Ministers in addition to a number of major institutions that represent the bureaucratic apparatus of the state.

Wahhabis control the formal institutions of Saudi Arabia, but that does not mean the Kingdom is a theocratic state (Al-Hassan, 2006). At this point, the term “Wahhabi” appears to indicate more than religious background. It is an “umbrella” term representing the elite who come from Najdi tribes and adopt Wahhabism as a belief, regardless of the individual’s level of religiosity. Hamza Al-Hassan’s survey of the Saudi bureaucratic apparatus found that Najdi-Wahhabis control all the vital ministries and institutions. Furthermore, the more important the apparatus, the more it will be controlled by the elite. For example, the Royal Court, which represents the small circle surrounding the king, is completely composed of Najdi-Wahhabis of the King Fahd epoch<sup>8</sup> (Hamza Al-Hassan 2006). Until 2006, the Najdi-Wahhabis held 84% of the country’s ministerial positions. Using the Al-Hassan approach, I reviewed the formal websites of the Saudi ministries, and then collected the results shown in Table 2, which shows a small decrease in the number of seats held. Table 2 shows the backgrounds of members of the highest institution, The Council of Ministers.

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<sup>8</sup> It is difficult to gain precise information about the recent Royal Court because there is no official website for this institution. It should also be noted the data used by Hamza Al-Hassan were collected by May 2005. However, I have searched the formal websites that are available and collected my own data presented here.

**Table 2: Size of Ministerial Position Per Region in Saudi Arabia, 2010**

	Najd (Central Region)	Hejaz (Western Region)	Al-Hasa (Eastern Region)	Southern Region	Northern Region
% of Total Population	32.2%	30.2%	15.5%	18.8%	3.3%
Number of Members (out of 28)	18	6	3	1	0
% of Members	64.23%	21.43%	10.71%	3.57%	0

Table 2 shows that Najdi-Wahhabis hold 18 of 28 ministerial positions. Fully 64.23% of the higher ranking positions are held by members accounting for just 32.2% of the total population. Having such a position puts the minister in a high economic class in a country where its people define themselves by economic class, kinship group, and geographic region (Mackey, 2002). This fits with Weber's categorizations of power into wealth ("economic class"), prestige ("kinship group"), and party ("geographic region").

Additionally, Najdi-Wahhabis always have the majority in the Consultative Council whose members are appointed by the king, even though that institution is not a real parliament because it only gives recommendations without power to write laws. Al-Hassan (2006) has collected the Consultative Council data and the percentage of its members per region in the first

four cycles between 1992 and 2005. The data collected for Table 2 is from the last cycle, which started in February 2009 and uses the same approach<sup>9</sup>:

**Table 3: Regional Origin of the Members of the Consultative Council**

Consultative Council	No. of Members	Najd (Central Region)	Hejaz (Western Region)	Al-Hasa (Eastern Region)	Southern Region	Northern Region
1992	60	33 55%	18 30%	5 8.33%	2 3.33%	2 3.3%
1996	90	48 53.3%	28 31.1%	6 6.7%	5 5.6%	3 3.3%
2004	120	59 49.16%	38 31.67%	6 5%	9 7.5%	8 6.67%
2005	150	72 48%	45 30%	9 6%	18 12%	6 4%
2009	150	70 46.64 %	45 30 %	9 6 %	17 11.3 %	9 6 %
% of total population		32.2%	30.2%	15.5%	18.8%	3.3%

Even though this council is no more than a consultative institution with limited power, it is a symbol of representation of social prestige, as these individuals are positioned to have strong relationships with decision makers at the state level which strengthen the members' immediate social circles.

There are several Saudi institutions that are completely controlled by theocrats. These include: the Ministry of Islamic Affairs Endowments, *Da'wah* [preaching] and Guidance; the Ministry of Justice; and the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice—the so-called “religious police”. In addition, there are three Islamic universities located in Riyadh, Mecca, and Madina controlled by theocrats. Moreover, theocrats have controlled

<sup>9</sup> From the members' CVs at <http://www.shura.gov.sa/wps/wcm/connect/ShuraEn/internet/cv/> accessed November 9, 2009.



females' education ever since King Faisal convinced the religious clerics that females' schools would not Westernize these Muslim women, but still established females' education under theocrats' rule.

In practical terms, Wahhabi clerics limit their authority to religious teaching and jurisprudence, and leave the political authority to the King and his assistants. They would not engage in such authority unless the King asked them to intervene in some matter. For example, in 1990 when the Grand Mufti [religious scholar] Abdul-Aziz Bin Baz issued a *fatwa* [religious edict] proclaiming there was no problem with the non-Muslim military participating in the Gulf War, this posited the formal religious institution against the younger, more fanatical Wahhabi clerics (Al-Rasheed, 2005; Moderchai, 1993).

In addition, Najdi-Wahhabis control such vital Ministries as: Interior, Foreign Affairs, Defense, Municipal and Rural Affairs, Finance, Health, Education, and Higher Education. Furthermore, the Prime Minister of the country is the King himself, the First Deputy is the Crown Prince, and the Second Deputy is the Minister of Interior, all Ibn Saud's sons. Najdi-Wahhabis are the driving force behind the bureaucratic device of the state.

The aforementioned leads to the conclusion that the Saudi bureaucratic system does not fit with Weber's bureaucracy as one based on rational-legal authority, though the structure may look similar to a Western bureaucracy. According to Weber, the rational-legal authority is dependent on written notions and law rather than individuals as traditional and charismatic authorities (Gerth and Mills, 1958). Yet the Saudi bureaucratic system supports the Kingdom's traditional authority by asserting its dependency on individuals who mostly come from the same Najdi-Wahhabi background. This is obvious from the power circles the King and senior princes have around themselves (see Al-Rasheed, 2005, pp. 199-208). Each of the royal senior members

surrounds himself with a group of loyal adherents who come from Najdi-Wahhabi noble families under the title of a national institution. Examples include the National Guard (controlled by King Abdullah and his sons) the Saudi Army (controlled by Crown Prince Sultan and his sons) and the Internal Security Forces (controlled by the Second Deputy Prince Naif and his sons). The combination of these institutions include hundreds of thousands of employees, most of whom are soldiers, ruled by a single family. Indeed, the Saudi bureaucracy asserts individuality and it is far from what Weber believed would have been a typical bureaucracy.

## **The Secularism of Protestantism vs. the Theocracy of Wahhabism**

Protestants, especially in the United States, tended to accept secularization as a political view as early as the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

As noted, Weber contends that the Protestant ethic began to lose its specifically religious foundation in many regions of the United States as early as the mid-eighteenth century. .... Despite this shift to “secular” values, the “sect spirit” ... lived on throughout the nineteenth century, Weber argues. Community-oriented clubs, societies, and voluntary associations now cultivated and conveyed the spirit of capitalism (Kalberg, qtd. in Weber 2009, p. 177).

Wahhabis in Saudi Arabia, conversely, still assert the theocratic as a political view through emphasizing Ibn Saud’s decision when he declared the Kingdom in 1932 and “made the Quran the nation’s constitution, and made Islamic law (sharia<sup>10</sup>) supreme” (Habib, 2009, 67). How can a theocratic overview be compared with a secular overview? The answer requires that we discuss the procedure of acquiring power by groups who follow certain religious philosophies. Both groups aim to gain power through utilizing the cultural codes regarding social and political climates through religion. Again, the starting point is quite different between the two groups. While Calvinist Protestantism grew from economic power to political power, Wahhabism grew in the opposite direction. Two opposite approaches led to the same resulting power. Yet, the contexts are clearly different.

In the West, there is a strong relationship between democracy and capitalism, since capitalist economies developed along with the process of democracy and political participation (Alford and Friedland, 1985). The development of democracy and capitalism connected the role of the economy to political power. Capitalism encourages economic competition among

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<sup>10</sup> *Sharia* is both the body of Islamic religious law and the legal framework in which public and private aspects of life are regulated based on Muslim principles of jurisprudence (Standke, 2008, p.2)

individuals and decreases the state's role in the market, which leads to the development of powerful individuals/groups among the members of society. Democracy is an open political competition as capitalism is a theoretically open economic competition (see Khan, 2003, pp.167-8). Force, either military or from a dictatorship, supposedly does not work in such a climate.

In Saudi Arabia, the circumstances of establishing the state required both religious legitimacy and military force to control the territories. During the early Wahhabi period beginning in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, religion was the supreme source of knowledge in the Arabian Peninsula, as well as the only source of education and law, so every social-political expression needed to be articulated through religious terms (see al-Dakhil, 2009, p. 34). In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Ibn Saud started building his state, the Arabian Peninsula was ruled by different families who controlled limited territories and followed patriarchal systems (Lacey, 1981; Menoret, 2005). Thus, the only way to gain power in Arabia during that period was by military force. Such patriarchal rule fits with Weber's model of traditional authority. Just as Saudi families followed the patriarchal system with the father of the family as the highest authority, at the top of the national patriarchal hierarchy were the male Saudi rulers (Federal Research Division, 2004).

In the case of the Saudi state, the King is the father. His Islamic title is *wali-almr*, which literally means the guardian with authority over his dependents. In Islamic literature, in the case of state affairs, *wali-almr* is the leader of the Muslim nation; it is normal for the father to control the economic functions of his family—or in the case of a state, its citizens—and manage the sources of production and distribution. Saudi Arabia is a rentier-economy state. The state owns and controls the natural resources and provides public services such as education, health care, and so on (Niblock and Malik, 2007). In addition, Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy

(Mackey, 2002; Brown, 2008) which gives the King and his circle the full authority to control the enormous wealth coming from oil, helping to keep political power connected to economic power for the Saudi elite. This is the opposite of Western Calvinist Protestants who started from economic power to reach political power. For example, we find even today many business leaders who, directly or indirectly, follow what might be termed Calvinist economic traditions in American politics, underscoring which potential leaders are to be blessed with favor. That is to say, they offer Adam Smith's invisible hand to guide political destinies. According to Donald Macleod, John Calvin himself "made sure that the politicians were not short of clerical advice" (2009, p. 5). Moreover, one scholar, Mark Peterson, argued that

most Puritans sought to use the market as a means for profits to be used for the spread of religion. Puritanism ... was evangelic; what is more, its most alert adherents took economic expansion as a corollary to religious growth. (Davis, 2010, p. 21)

Both Protestants and Wahhabis take what they believe is the rational way to gain power. As indicated above, both sects employ unique methods to expand their power. They are rationalists because they choose what fits with their social-political climate and utilize it in a way that puts them on the top of the hierarchy. The cultural hegemony of these groups is then legitimized through religious doctrine, interpreted to meet the needs of the group in power.

At this point, I would argue that Wahhabism could not survive as a significant political power without ties to state control that lead to economic resources. For example, after losing Saudi and American support, the Taliban (a branch of Wahhabism) in Afghanistan were forced to find illegal economic sources such as opium production and arms dealing to generate economic wealth (Rubin, 2000). These and other examples point to the fact that each Wahhabi sect found a method to strengthen its status as the "chosen group".

It is important to understand the cooperation between Wahhabis in Saudi Arabia and the Afghanis and American regimes against communism (e.g., Soviet Union invasion in Afghanistan) in the 1980s. Saudi Arabia was one of main players in the “Reagan Doctrine” which attempted to cut off the global influence of the Soviet Union and its communist alliances during the final years of the Cold War in the 1980s. Both regimes supported the Mujahedeen against the Soviet military (Simpson, 2006). For Wahhabis, communists are enemies because they represent *al-kufr* [infidelity] in terms of Islamic beliefs. For Americans, communists are enemies because they represent an alternative model to capitalism. In the 1980s, the interests of both power groups met. Once the Soviet threat was defeated, relationships between the US, Saudi Arabia, and Afghanis changed. The relationship between Saudi Arabia and Western audiences did not start, however, with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The United Kingdom had a vested interest in the area between World War I and II, and readers of *The London Times* were kept abreast of the rise to power of the Wahhabi King.

## **Saudi Arabia in Western Media, 1927-1937**

The founding of Saudi Arabia on September 23, 1932 with Ibn Saud, a follower of Wahhabism, as its leader would have been of little concern throughout the world without media coverage of the events surrounding the new state. According to Thompson (1990, p. 163), “[d]ay by day, week by week, newspapers, radio and television present us with a steady flow of words and images, information and ideas, concerning events which take place beyond our immediate social milieu”. Gamson (1992) argued for much the same thing, stating that people are more likely to believe media information on topics for which they have little or no experiential knowledge. It is assumed that when Saudi Arabia was recognized as a state in 1932, few people in Western societies had much knowledge of that part of the world, especially regarding contemporary political and religious aspects of the area.

One of the difficulties of introducing media coverage into a topic such as religion and statehood is the concern with the tie between the media and the public. Literature on media effects is split regarding whether the media are biased (e.g., Lee and Solomon, 1990) or if it is the audience member who brings bias to the media (e.g., Gunther, 1992). Ten Eyck (2005) found that the relationship between the media and audiences is not straightforward, but can take a number of different forms depending upon the topic and how audience members are questioned regarding their opinions. Gamson, et al. (1992) argued that the media are multivalent, and any attempt to argue that the media impact the audience in a certain way is problematic.

It is not my intention to contend that media coverage of the founding of Saudi Arabia influenced Western, and specifically U.K., public opinion of the state, its king, and its religion in any specific way. Instead, I propose that the media were setting an agenda about the rise of Saudi Arabia for Western readers between January 1, 1927 and December 31, 1937. To understand the coverage of Saudi Arabia at the time, I turned to *The London Times*. England was one of the

most important nations at the time, and *The London Times* was one of the more popular newspapers during these years. In addition, Britain was heavily involved in Middle Eastern affairs between World Wars I and II (Leatherdale, 1983), so it is assumed that the coverage was comprehensive given the technology that was available at the time. The years 1927 to 1937 cover the years before and after the announcement of Saudi Arabia's statehood in 1932. To gain an understanding of what was being written about Saudi Arabia, Ibn Saud, and religion in the region at this time, I searched articles which contained any of the following words: "Saudi", "Arabia", "Arabian", "Ibn Saud", "Bin Saud", "Sa'ud", "Wahhabism", "Wahhabi", "Wahabi". This search resulted in 206 articles. After reading through these articles and determining that some were not about Saudi Arabia, Ibn Saud, and religion (i.e., articles that covered other states such as Oman, Bahrain, Iraq, articles that covered geographical concerns, or discussed wildlife in the area, and so on), I was left with 142 articles on the topics of interest.

Articles were coded as positive, negative, or neutral. The coding was accomplished by reading each article, evaluating the words and slant of the article, including the headline, and then relegating the article to one of the three value codes. Table 4 shows the results of these efforts. I began with headlines (i.e., an article describing an agreement in Arabia on February 8, 1934 was considered positive, while a discussion of a war in Arabia on March 24, 1934 was considered negative, and a discussion of European Interests in the area on January 20, 1927 was considered neutral). After headlines were coded, articles were analyzed in the same way, taking into account the overall slant of the article (i.e., greeting the King, highlighting the strength of the state without any mention of violence, and good relationships with others were all considered positive, while articles discussing Wahhabis raiding and killing their neighbors was considered



negative, and articles that provided no indication of value or discussed both positive and negative aspects of an event or situation were considered neutral).

**Table 4: Headlines and Articles from The London Times, 1927-1937**

Year	Total Articles	Title			Article		
		Positive	Negative	Neutral	Positive	Negative	Neutral
1927	17	1	9	7	1	11	5
1928	30	1	21	8	3	25	2
1929	12	1	8	3	4	7	1
1930	3	3	0	0	3	0	0
1931	7	1	4	2	3	1	3
1932	9	1	2	6	6	2	1
1933	8	2	2	4	6	1	1
1934	28	12	8	8	20	6	2
1935	12	3	3	6	8	4	0
1936	11	4	0	7	8	0	3
1937	5	0	0	5	5	0	0
TOTAL	142	29	57	55	66	57	18
%	100%	20.42%	40.14%	38.73%	46.48%	40.14%	12.68%

Table 4 clearly shows the difference between headlines and actual news content. Headlines tended to be either negative or neutral (39.28% each), though the highest percentage of article content was positive (47.14%). In looking more closely at the articles, most of negative articles discussed various Wahhabi individuals and tribes raiding neighboring states such as Iraq,

Kuwait, Transjordan, and Yemen. The positive articles tended to focus on putting a positive spin on Ibn Saud and his dependencies regardless of the actual situation. For example, war victories were coded as positive because they represented achievements of Ibn Saud. War itself, however, was a negative topic, especially if death or destruction were noted. In addition, some of the treaties that the Wahhabi government signed represented political victories stemming from the army's operations, especially those with Yemen. Furthermore, the positive articles that highlighted good relationships with Western countries, especially the British government and its expatriates who visited Arabia and were sponsored by Ibn Saud, were considered positive as these positioned Ibn Saud's personality as welcoming. These media portrayals point to Ibn Saud's awareness of the importance of Western media at a time when many of Arab rulers were only concerned about the happenings in their own territories.

**Table 5: Categorizing Positive (+) Articles**

Category of Positive Articles	# of articles	% of + articles (66)	% of entire articles (142)
Good relationship with West, including supporting explorers	17	25.76%	11.97%
King's personality, he imposes of security (including destroying non-peaceful enemies.	14	21.12%	9.86%
War Victory of the Wahhabi King	13	19.7%	9.15%
Signing treaties (including those caused by his victory)	11	16.67%	7.75%
King's desire against war	8	12.12%	5.63%
Providing services inside the state	3	4.55%	2.11%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>46.47%</b>

Table 5 shows the various categories for the articles that were considered positive. Given that the newspaper used for this study was from Britain, the most frequent category found among these sixty-six articles was good relations between Ibn Saud and his state and Western countries ( $n = 17$ , 25.76% of positive articles) (Franklin 2006). This was followed by articles about Ibn Saud (14 articles, 21.12%) and Ibn Saud's war victories ( $n = 13$ , 19.7%). If we are to understand how Ibn Saud and Saudi Arabia were being presented in religious terms to Western readers, we must understand that these articles were often saying that the Wahhabi King, Ibn Saud, was winning wars, was a nice individual, and had good relations with the West. From this vantage point, one could argue that British readers would have had very little to worry about regarding the rise and recognition of a religious state.

As this data came from the period around the announcement of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932, it means that the Arabian people were addressed as the House of Saud, which is a tribal name, not a national one. *The London Times* articles ran the main themes of Ibn Saud and Wahhabism, addressing him by the title "the Wahhabi King" and his government "the Wahhabi Government". For example, in an article titled "Mr. Philby's Arabian Journey: A Scientific Expedition," it was indicated that, "[t]his was the first scientific expedition organized by the Wahhabi Government" (24 May 1932). Identifying the state by "Wahhabi" labeled the group as the one in control of the state. In addition, Ibn Saud did not hesitate to name the new state by his family name since the international media had already recognized the state by its non-national name. From the vantage point of nearly a century later, I would argue that Ibn Saud tended to avoid any sectarian title for his state in order to maintain his grip over the largest Muslim sect "Sunni" on one hand, and to legitimize his monarchical regime by socializing the Arabian population under the title of "Saudi" as their national identity in the other. His success is obvious

as people then as now accepted being addressed by the royal family name as their national identity.

Not all the coverage was positive, however. There were five articles that described Wahhabism as a puritan sect. The term “Puritan” was used to refer to those who followed Wahhabism as savage raiders who attacked others without provocation. In addition, their attitudes toward issues such as tobacco were considered extreme and brutally violent. Tying Wahhabism to Puritanism, these “Muslim Puritans” support the Weberian notion that this group was fanatical in their religious beliefs, and much like the Christian Puritans, was unwilling or unable to accept other doctrines. That their rise to power in Saudi Arabia was grounded in violent actions could have meant to readers of *The London Times* that this was an unstable group because of their religion. For example, in his article “In Forbidden Arabia V.-A Night Of Storm, From Sea To Sea” Bertram Thomas wrote, “[w]e are now in Wahhabi land and must move furtively. The sands and the horizons were scanned for signs of the intolerant Puritans we feared”. (15 May 1931). Such a description of Wahhabi followers by a Western writer would be unlikely to be seen as simply adventurous to readers. In the following year under the title “Arab Border Raids A Tribal Sport” it was indicated that, “[t]he Wahhabis, of who one hears so much nowadays, are a puritan sect of the Mohammedan [sic] religion who originated in the Hejaz more than a century ago” (27 April 1932). This is yet another clear and convincing example of Wahhabism being associated with Puritanism in terms of a harsh religious sect that took over power at the state level.

## Conclusion

This paper examined Weber's ideas of power, especially the Protestant ethic, bureaucracy, and the charismatic, traditional, and rational-legal types of authority in order to explain the rise and continuation of Wahhabi power in Saudi Arabia. Weber's concepts apply in some cases, but they do not apply in others. The most important matter is the parallel between Protestantism and Wahhabism as religious sects that utilize their theocratic beliefs in order to gain power.

Both sects obtained power, yet their way to gain power differs. Calvinist Protestantism moved from economic wealth to gain political power, while Wahhabism started from political-military power to gain economic wealth. I have argued that the reason behind this is the type of authority each chose. In the Western world, industrial and intellectual developments made any challenge of power need to appear peacefully. The economy was the best way to build power to move toward cultural hegemony, and that is what Protestants did by controlling the market through capitalism and influencing the public sphere to assert their political hegemony based heavily on individualism. By contrast, in the Middle East in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, building a military was the best way to gain political control, and then gain economic benefits. The Saudi elite then pursued hegemony through building a system of bureaucracy that asserted their authority and kept decision making in a small circle of Najdi-Wahhabi elites.

Finally, there is a principle difference between the two sects regarding the legitimizing of power. As Wahhabism asserts theocratic thinking, Calvinist Protestantism accepts secular gain as a latent effect of their religious ethic. Both theocracy and secularization help its sects to pursue power in their appropriate social climates. Indeed, theocracy and secularization are no more than cultural tools that have been utilized by power elites under the name of God that each sect claims to be serving His Majesty, and Western readers were basically assured that the rise of the Saudi

state, while based on religious beliefs, was a benign situation. However, as long as large portions of the population believe in these doctrines, power will continue to be held by those who can manipulate religion and religious beliefs.

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