From Religious Revival to Religious Nationalism

The Wahhabi movement was a classic example of going to see what people were doing and telling them to stop it.

Michael Cook

The contemporary status of women in Saudi Arabia is shaped by the historical legacy of Wahhabiyya and its transformation into a religious nationalist movement under the banner of the Saudi state. This transformation had an important impact on gender after the movement became not only state religion but also state nationalism. Under the auspices of the state, Wahhabiyya transformed personal piety into a public project, the objective of which was to create a moral community under the authority of a political centre. The personal and the public combined to foster the piety of the state. The state was able to manipulate public Islam, enforced by Wahhabi teachings and scholars, to create a legitimacy and a rationale for the foundation of a pious nation. But historically, the contemporary state oscillated between demonstrating piety and Islamic authenticity on the one hand and modernity, reform, and progress on the other. With the changing and evolving political agenda of the state, we find that the religious element, mainly the Wahhabi historical legacy, was co-opted by a state acting in response to evolving political contexts and agendas of changing historical periods.

When Wahhabiyya emerged in the eighteenth century, it was a religious revivalist movement sharing in character and orientation many similarities with its contemporaries in the Muslim world.\(^2\) As such, its teachings centred on the cleansing of faith from impurities and a return to authentic Islam. Central to this project was the status and rights of women, their piety and ritual practices. While men’s religious practices and piety were crucial for the revival of true Islam, women were nevertheless seen as important pillars for the return to an authentic religious tradition among a stable, settled community.

This chapter explores the relationship between religious revival and the formation of the early Saudi state in the eighteenth century. Central to this relationship were the gender perceptions of urban religious scholars, who aspired towards universalising them and imposing them on the whole of Arabia with the assistance of a political leadership. The transformation of Wahhabiyya from religious revival to religious nationalism in the twentieth century is examined to understand the relationship between gender, religion, and politics in contemporary Saudi Arabia. The modern state of 1932 institutionalised perceptions of gender that sprang up among a narrow religious community in southern Najd. In the absence of a Saudi anti-colonial or secular nationalist movement, Wahhabiyya moved from revival to become a national religious movement, by virtue of its universalistic and homogenising rhetoric. This rhetoric aspired to obliterate local tradition in favour of an overarching universal Muslim ideal. In the twentieth century, Wahhabiyya developed into religious nationalism in which the exclusion of women was a visible sign, marking the boundaries of the pious nation and defining its unity in the absence of Saudi or anti-colonial nationalism.

THE HISTORICAL LEGACY: RELIGIOUS REVIVAL AND GENDER

Wahhabi revival in general, and its position on gender relations and the rights of women in particular, has split the academic community between those who see in its teachings a real potential for the emancipation of Arabian women from the restrictions of tribal society and those who regard its teachings as laying the foundation for later discrimination and disempowerment. Based on the interpretation of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab’s body of writings, Natana Delong-Bas belongs to the first

From Religious Revival to Religious Nationalism

5


4

Delong-Bas, _Wahhabi Islam_, p. 125.

5

Delong Bas, _Wahhabi Islam_, p. 125.

6

Delong Bas, _Wahhabi Islam_, p. 125.

7


camp as she asserts that ‘Ibn Abd al-Wahhab’s construction of gender was not one that displayed misogyny or sought to render women as second class or invisible citizens. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab’s interactions with women reflected concern for social justice. He saw them as human beings capable of serving as positive, active agents in both the private and public realms’. Arguing from a religious studies perspective, her reading of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab’s main religious treatises leads her to conclude that he was an emancipator of women in a society that suffered from misogyny and serious discrimination against women. His regulation of marriage, divorce, and inheritance could only be seen within his general intention to reform Arabian religious practices, emancipate women, and protect them against degrading cultural practices. Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab’s firm views on punishing transgression such as fornication are seen as inserting a legal framework for the protection of women under _sharia_. Misogyny, according to this reading of the Wahhabi original sources, is attributed to patriarchy and local custom rather than Wahhabi teachings. This conclusion is today the foundation of Islamist feminism in contemporary Saudi Arabia, a theme that I will discuss later in this book. In this reading of the historical legacy of Wahhabiyya, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab placed greater power in the hands of women than was typically the case for other jurists. The founder of Wahhabiyya becomes an advocate of ‘the empowerment of women through support of awareness and enforcement of their rights’.

These conclusions must be interpreted in the context of 9/11 and the attempt of some academics to absolve Wahhabi teachings from responsibility for many issues relating to gender discrimination and radicalism. While Delong Bas has adopted a positive reading of Wahhabi texts, the Egyptian theologian Khaled Abou El-Fadl offered a counterview grounded in legalistic terms that attributes the decline in the status of Muslim women to Wahhabi interpretations, the triumph of authoritarian discourse, and the decline of the juristic tradition. By analysing Wahhabi _responsa_ on women, Abou El-Fadl documents how the interpretive authoritarianism that underlines Saudi religious opinions has
become dominant, thus leading to fatwas on the prohibition of wearing high heels, visiting graves, travelling without a guardian, clapping the hands, and the seduction of women’s voices.8

While Wahhabiyya continues to split religious studies specialists, the historian Eleanor Doumato, adopting an anthropological interpretive perspective, highlights the negative experience of women under Wahhabi teachings. She argues that ‘in asserting their own brand of orthodoxy, the Wahhabis denigrated techniques of personal and spiritual empowerment in contradiction to orthodox standards that were available to women and condemned communal rituals that appealed to women’s needs’.9 She argues that the expansion of Wahhabi teachings led to the erosion of social and religious spheres in which women were prominent, most notably in healing rituals. The Wahhabi ulama replaced women as healers when they endowed the religious word with the power of healing, thus contributing to the shrinking of women’s religious ritual space across the Arabian Peninsula. Further than that, the Wahhabi religious scholars instigated an atmosphere of suspicion and hostility towards women who sought an alternative ritual space to help with issues related to fertility, love, and marriage. The strict condemnation of women’s witchcraft, sorcery, and exorcism rituals, allegedly so common in Arabia at the time, created the foundation for marginalising women even in areas where they had for centuries maintained a certain power and monopoly. Religious men, who claimed authority on the basis of their knowledge of the religious tradition, eventually replaced women even in those social spheres where they had previously enjoyed considerable influence.

It is not the intention here to resolve the contradictory readings of the Wahhabi legacy, but to examine the relationship between religious revival and the project of state formation, first in the eighteenth century and later in the twentieth, while highlighting the centrality of gender constructions in both periods. There is no doubt that the early eighteenth-century Wahhabi religious revival was entangled from the very beginning with the project of enforcing Islamic law, a substantial part of which involved its application to issues relevant to women. More importantly, Wahhabiyya was from the very beginning a project entangled with enforcing the doctrine of commanding right and forbidding wrong. It is this doctrine and its transformation under the auspices of the state that is most important for

8 Abou El-Fadl, Speaking in God’s Name, p. 177.
understanding the historical subordination of women and their persistent exclusion from the public sphere in Saudi Arabia. The early experience of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, first in al-Uyayna and later in Deriyya, illustrates the centrality of women in his religious revival project.

The Saudi Wahhabi state of the eighteenth century was born out of an act against a woman who committed adultery and received the corresponding Islamic punishment: death by public stoning. Various chronicles tracing the religious career of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab celebrate several acts that distinguished him from his contemporaries among the *ulama*. He is known to have punished men who did not attend the communal Friday prayers, visited tombs of holy men, asked for their intercession, and revered charlatans posing as pious saints. He cut down holy trees and destroyed shrines revered by the population of Arabia. He set himself the task of applying the *sharia* in matters related to inheritance, *zakat* (alms-tax), marriage, and commercial transactions. He sought to purify the land from signs of blasphemy and debauchery. Local chiefs and rulers tolerated him as long as he did not encroach on their political authority. None saw him as a serious threat until he committed an act that led to his expulsion from a small town in central Arabia.

The stoning of a *zaniya* (an adulteress) in al-Uyayna was the ultimate act intended to purify the community and eradicate fornication. We are told the story and circumstances of the shaykh’s expulsion from al-Uyayna:

The shaykh remained in al-Uyayna commanding good and prohibiting evil. He taught people religion and purified their faith from innovations. He administered punishment and asked the ruler to enforce *hudud* [legal rulings]. An adulteress came to him and admitted her sin. She repeated her confessions four times. He asked whether she was in control of her mental abilities. She told him that she was not mentally deranged. He gave her several days to reconsider her confession. She remained defiant. The shaykh gave orders to stone her in public, fully clothed. The ruler of Uyayna, together with a crowd of Muslim men, went out to stone her. When she died, the shaykh ordered that her body be washed and prepared for burial. He asked Muslims to pray at her funeral . . . People of bad faith were horrified, and started alerting the ruler of Hasa, Sulayman al-Muhammad of the Bani Khalid tribe, to the danger the shaykh represented. He exerted pressure on the chief of Uyayna to expel the shaykh. The shaykh left for Deriyya, where he was received by Abdullah al-Suwaylim and his brother Ahmad, both were receptive to his call.10

10 Hussein ibn Ghannam, *Tarikh Najd* [History of Najd], Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 1994, p. 86.
It seems that while Ibn Abd al-Wahhab was able to preach tawhid (the oneness of God) and destroy physical signs of blasphemy without provoking a harsh reaction, the sedentary Arabian population was agitated by the act of public stoning inflicted on a defiant woman. Perhaps the practice of adultery was so widespread that many, both women and men, feared the punishment. Expulsion deprived the Wahhabi preacher of a home and a network of followers. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab became stateless – to use contemporary parlance, a wandering pariah, persona non grata, vulnerable to abuse, theft, and murder. He must have realised after his expulsion that he could not continue to command right and prohibit wrong without a political authority to protect him. Expulsion was often imposed on those who breached the community’s moral code or committed an abhorrent crime that endangered the whole group and subjected it to shame, retaliation, and revenge. Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab was expelled because he stoned a stubborn and defiant woman who admitted her sin but failed to repent. In this particular case, he does not seem to have guaranteed the authorisation of the local ruler. His expulsion followed a personal initiative, policing the settlement and enforcing law without the consent of the political authority of the town. He was acting according to the principle of forbidding wrong but without political sanction.

After his expulsion, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab travelled in search of a political authority, in the process transforming his early individualistic approach to dawa (call) and preaching into a state project. He sought refuge in the neighbouring town of Deriyya, where news of his preaching gained him popularity. His full integration and admission into Deriyya society was dependent on female sympathy and good will. He was expelled from al-Uyayna because of a woman, but was welcomed in another community thanks to the effort of another woman. Although his hosts were all men, the shaykh’s message initially reached the women in his host’s household. A woman transmitted the news of ‘true’ Islam to her friend, the wife of the ruler of Deriyya, Muhammad ibn Saud. It is through this female network, the chronicles assert, that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab was introduced to the ruler of Deriyya who took him under his wing.

The foundation of the first Saudi–Wahhabi state was thus laid down thanks to the efforts of women who appreciated his preaching and approached their husbands with a view to extending a welcome to the

---

11 Ibn Ghannam, Tarikh, p. 86.
shaykh. The women of Deriyya were perhaps pleased with the news of the punishment of adultery, and might have been more than happy to see the *hudud* inflicted on those women who led their husbands astray, deprived them of security in marriage, and undermined their pure genealogy. The details of the shaykh’s reception in Deriyya and the subsequent establishment of the state are well known.12

What concerns us here is how the chroniclers of the first Saudi–Wahhabi state emphasised the centrality of the two female characters, the al-Uyayna adulteress and the Deriyya pious sympathiser. Even in the present day, the historical narrative of the state reiterates and fixes these contrasting female images in the historical memory of the people. Saudi history books invoke the centrality of rejecting immoral women and celebrating their pious opposites.13 From classroom teaching material to advanced historical manuscripts, the population is reminded of the two women: one threatened the Islamic state; the other made it possible as a project. The two women are binary opposites, each contributing in her own way to the political project of establishing a pious and authentic Muslim state. Such a state is not only concerned with spreading *tawhid* and fighting blasphemy, but is above all an entity that engages in the construction of gender roles, establishing a clear separation between those women who pose a threat to community harmony and piety and those who contribute to promoting morality and piety. The adulteress and the sympathiser have remained constant and recurrent images in Saudi history until the present day. Both women’s transgression from the rules of the moral community and their endorsement of these rules make or break the political community. Fear of women’s power is not unique to Wahhabi religious revivalism, as it dominates perceptions of the female subject in almost all religious traditions. But what is perhaps unique about the Saudi context is the fact that this fear has shaped state policy. One important dimension of the Wahhabi religious revival that is relevant to understanding later state policy on gender was the doctrine of *amr bil maruf wa al-nahy an al-munkar* (commanding right and forbidding wrong). While commanding right seems straightforward, the second doctrine, related to forbidding wrong, bears great influence on how women are perceived, articulated, and controlled.


The Saudi polity of the eighteenth century reflected the concerns and interests of a sedentary society that was plagued by internal dissent and fragmentation. The polity was perceived as an alternative to the nomadic tribal organisation that encircled it. While much has been written on Ibn Abd al-Wahhab’s endorsement of the doctrine of forbidding wrong, the main authority on the subject remains Michael Cook, who doubts whether the doctrine was a prominent theme in Ibn Abd al-Wahhab’s early mission. According to Cook, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab’s references to the duty do not suggest any particular urgency or centrality in his conception of his mission. In one letter, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab stated that the duty to forbid wrong should be performed ‘nicely and in private, and not in such a manner as to give rise to schism in the community’. He added that ‘if the offender is a ruler (amir), it would seem that he should not be reproved in public at all’. This position seems to be a reflection of the movement’s early reluctance to create dissent if the doctrine was to be applied rigorously among a hesitant and apprehensive population, especially after the stoning of the adulteress in al-Uyayna and Ibn Abd al-Wahhab’s expulsion afterwards. He may have feared that the doctrine would be applied against his mission and those who supported it, namely the Al-Saud rulers of Deriyya. His early rejection and eventual expulsion following the forbidding of wrong committed by an adulteress may have moderated his early enthusiasm.

It seems that the doctrine of forbidding wrong became central during the nineteenth century at a precarious moment for the Wahhabi revival when the Al-Saud ruler Turki ibn Abdullah (1823–34) emphasised its importance and later Wahhabi scholars provided the religious justification for it, thus turning it into rukn, a pillar of Islam. This reflected the weakness of the second Saudi state following the Egyptian invasion in 1818. The weakness was translated into more vigorous attempts to enforce the duty and make it incumbent on every member of the community. This was the beginning of a process that Cook calls ‘officialisation’ of forbidding wrong whereby the ruler is under an obligation to send officials to faraway communities to ensure that forbidding wrong is respected and supported. This reflected the quest of the weak nineteenth-century state to monitor communities under the guise of religious purity and conformity at a time when no real power was exercised over them.

14 Cook, Commanding Right, p. 169.
15 Cook, Commanding Right, p. 170.
16 Cook, Commanding Right, p. 179.
Turki ordered his emissaries to inspect people who gathered together to smoke tobacco and keep count of those who did not turn up for communal prayers, thus penetrating society at a time when he was not in a position to impose his authority or engage in expansionist wars under heavy Ottoman Egyptian surveillance of central Arabia. Consequently, as the restrictions on *jihad* against polytheism were in place after the Egyptian invasion of Arabia in 1818, the nineteenth-century state had to turn its righteousness inward.\textsuperscript{17} This was a strategy to gain legitimacy at a time when warfare against religious innovators could not be carried out.

**WOMEN OF OASES, WOMEN OF DESERTS**

Wahhabi concern with gender in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries reflected the needs of the local towns and oases of southern Najd. In these settlements, religious scholars were mainly focused on applying the *sharia* in densely populated small towns.\textsuperscript{18} They saw women as a threat to the internal integrity of the moral community. The pious women of such settlements where marriage, divorce, inheritance, and ritual practices were regulated not only provided signs of conformity but also accrued to the *ulama* who administered the *sharia* a regular income. Wahhabi scholars could not tolerate oasis women who stood outside mosques, collecting the saliva of pious men after prayer, which they used to heal the sick, a tradition that was still observed outside the mosques of Riyadh in the early twentieth century. The *ulama* condemned these women and eliminated their participation in the traditional healing rituals of the settlements, which were later appropriated by pious men, thus excluding women and paving the way for the monopoly of men over traditional space that had been associated with women.\textsuperscript{19} As such, the *ulama* began to limit women’s participation in the social and folk religious spheres in which they had previously enjoyed a kind of influence. Their exclusion from mosques and social religiosity contributed to tightening control over them and marginalising them as actors in a society that restricted their presence in the public sphere in general.

\textsuperscript{17} Cook, *Commanding Right*, p. 179.
This enforced exclusion of oasis women from traditional arenas of public social and religious interaction became generalised to other women, mainly those who belonged to tribal nomadic groups in the desert. Wahhabi denunciation of the unorthodox religious practices and laxity of oasis women finds an echo in their concern with the lack of religiosity among desert women. Tribal tradition among the Bedouin – for example urfi marriage, an old, unregistered marital union, exclusion from inheritance, and heterodox religious practices, such as sorcery, spirit possession rituals, magic, and folk practices of supplication in pursuit of healing, fertility, and marriage – were common among Bedouin women. These practices offered social contexts in which women, long excluded from the political community of men and public space, took control. The alleged degeneration of women could be corrected through instruction and ‘commanding good and forbidding wrong’ practised by the many religious scholars in the oases, but Bedouin women had to be reached by emissaries whose role combined the occasional and seasonal collection of zakat (Islamic tax) and religious instruction. This irregular introduction to the teachings of Wahhabiyya could not be formalised and institutionalised until the early years of the twentieth century when Ibn Saud invented the hujjar settlements where Bedouin were forced to live in fixed camps to receive preachers, tax collectors, and subsidies from the royal purse. As Wahhabi preachers maintained their control over the religious practices of women in the oases and punished transgressors, they aspired to do the same among women in the desert where tribal organisation was the main cohesive framework of social, political, and economic relations within and between groups. Tribal Bedouin women, as much as their men, had to be urgently brought to the realm of Islam.

The Islamisation of the settlements of central Arabia via controlling their women had to be extended to the tribal hinterland where ‘blasphemous’ women were depicted as ignorant of their religion and immersed in un-Islamic practices that survived from the age of ignorance (jahiliyya). According to Wahhabi doctrine, such women had to be rescued not only from ignorance but also from the control of their own men. While in Najd the cultural boundaries between oases and desert were ill defined, it was in the oases that salvation had to be sought for the simple reason that the ulama were residents of these settlements. Tribal custom that dealt with

---

20 Doumato, Getting God’s Ear, p. 153.

transgressing women, for example banishment or honour killing, had to be replaced by the application of *hudud*, Islamic prescribed punishment, thus replacing the tribal code with a religious one.

Wahhabi scholars aspired to take away from tribal men the right to deal with female transgression according to their own tribal honour codes and grant this right to a selected community of learned men whose authority derived from their knowledge and application of *sharia*. When Wahhabi *ulama* insisted on the ruling that women’s voices were shameful (*awra*), thus reflecting the intermingling of several communities in the small settlements of Najd, this ruling was not an issue in Bedouin camps where lineages travelled and camped together and where strangers outside the lineage would not be seen except on odd occasions. Tribal women who encouraged their men before raids, composing songs and chanting them loudly, and contributed to the nomadic economy of herding, weaving, and trade with settlements, needed to be brought under the authority of the settlement scholars. Bedouin women’s voices would have only been heard by their own chiefs, brothers, and extended lineage. Their forays into the space outside their tents to seek pasture, wood, and water had no equivalent among the sedentary women for whom movement outside their walled neighbourhoods within each town and oasis – especially the elite within each settlement – would be regarded as a dangerous appearance in a space controlled by men and where non-kin would intermingle in mosques, markets, and fields. Only women of humble origins and market traders would be seen in the markets of the oases, while none would have considered attending a mosque ceremony or prayer.\(^22\) Oasis women of the learned religious families and the settlements’ *amirs* were confined to their large houses, as can be glimpsed from the accounts of Lady Ann Blunt and Gertrude Bell,\(^23\) the two Englishwomen who visited the oasis of Hail in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries respectively. While the two women travellers visited Hail at the height of its eminence, their description of elite women’s lives was not uncommon in other oases of central Arabia, for example in Unayza, Burayda, and Riyadh. Elite oasis women took pride in the fact that they made just two journeys outside their abode – one to move to their husband’s ancestral house upon

---


marriage and one to the grave. Their black cloaks (abayas) had to be long enough to erase their footprints on the sand, thus leaving no trace whatsoever of their ventures into public space. Where tribal women enjoyed greater freedom of movement within their group, their settled counterparts, especially those belonging to the upper classes of society, were not to be seen moving between houses unless fully covered and sometimes in the darkness of night. The confinement of elite women was an exception, as commoners and slave women continued to appear in markets and fields. The images that Gertrude Bell took in Hail in 1914 included pictures of veiled women promenading in the public market of the town. This was restricted to women traders, non-tribal women, and slaves. They all were totally covered in black abayas. Images of Bedouin women that Bell took during her journeys in Arabia in 1914 reflected greater flexibility, as the Bedouin women who posed in front of her camera sometimes had their faces exposed.24

Confinement to the house and within the boundaries of the space reserved for kinsmen, which became a requirement for urban women under Wahhabi rule, had no meaning or precedent among nomadic tribal communities. Many choirs in which Bedouin women performed could only perform outdoors. Herding, milking, and cooking are not activities that can be conducted in closed spaces. In addition to its impracticality, confinement was unnecessary, as such women remained within larger units governed by kinship and local honour codes. More importantly, tribal men and elderly women monitored their women’s behaviour. Men were responsible for punishing those who violated their women’s honour through raid, plunder, capture, or theft. Recent accounts of Bedouin women’s lives confirm these cultural practices that pertain to honour, chastity, and tribal codes relating to sexuality, marriage, and fertility.25

The most dangerous situation that faced both nomadic and agricultural tribal women and their urban counterparts was the perishing of their men after raids or hazardous travel. Until the 1930s, raids were common between tribal groups, and between them and oasis dwellers, who were themselves a mixed tribal and non-tribal population, but the violation of women on such occasions was extremely rare in a society where the consequences were so grave. Revenge that was perpetuated for generations

---

between raiding parties acted as a deterrent against the rape, kidnapping, or violation of free women. While raiding parties felt free to cut down palm trees, steal camels, destroy agricultural fields, and damage wells and watering canals, they hesitated before they inflicted any harm on women, even after defeating their menfolk. Abiding by this practice in the warfare of Arabia was cherished and respected, as no group wanted a violation of its women which would eventually lead to perpetual cycles of revenge.

Protecting the free women of a defeated group was expected from the victors, as it demonstrated manly qualities and honour. The worst that could happen to free women was the violation of their honour. Widowed women of defeated men occasionally found themselves incorporated in the victorious party’s circles of women and wives. Many women suffered as a result of this eventuality after their men were killed in battle. This practice has survived in Saudi Arabia, and was elevated to a ‘state strategy’ enforced by the founder of the current state, Ibn Saud, who included among his wives many tribal and non-tribal daughters of his defeated enemies. After the defeat of Faisal al-Duwaish, the rebellious Ikhwan Mutayr leader in 1927, Ibn Saud took his widow as a wife. Such practices reflected a clear and obvious inclination to use marriage and women to integrate an imagined nation with the state, which was at the time represented in the persona of the king and his sons.

It is inaccurate to conclude that by virtue of their economic mode of production nomadic tribal women enjoyed a status more elevated than their counterparts in the oases of Najd. Freedom of movement for the former was possible not because these women were granted rights but because they travelled and lived with people of their own lineage in which relations were built on kinship, trust, and solidarity. Women were denied inheritance rights in communities where the common capital, mainly herds or agricultural land, could not be divided upon the death of a father, as this would threaten the survival of the whole group. Female marriages were dictated by the tradition of tribal endogamy in which women had

little choice or say in the matter.\textsuperscript{30} This was the norm among tribal women and those who settled in oases. In addition to the Islamic \textit{nikah} marriage, unregistered \textit{urfi} marriages were common. Such marriages never died out and continue to be practised even after the establishment of the state and the availability of religious courts that register marriages in contemporary urban and rural Saudi Arabia.\textsuperscript{31}

In contrast to women of the tribal periphery, oasis women lived in settlements whose populations consisted of diverse groups belonging to tribal, non-tribal populations, sojourners, and travellers. Early descriptions and maps of central Arabia’s oases indicate that extended families and large lineages lived in walled neighbourhoods within each oasis.\textsuperscript{32} The only space that was open to all was the local \textit{amir}’s residence, the market, and the main Friday mosque, although some lineages had their own small mosques within their walled neighbourhoods, and some oases had several local lineage and family chiefs without one overarching leadership. Central Arabian oasis dwellers found in the Wahhabi body of literature on segregation and exclusion a solution to the proximity of communities in limited urban space and the intermingling of strangers in walled towns. The Wahhabi movement reflected the fears and agony of men in the oases where population density and diversity created conditions that required greater control of women. It is the fears of those oasis men that became generalised first among the nomadic tribal population of Najd and later among other inhabitants of other regions outside central Arabia, for example in Hasa, Asir, and the Hijaz.

Nomadic tribesmen initially could not conceive of giving up the duty of protecting their own women to strangers or, later, a state committee that commands right and forbids wrong. They themselves had a loose connection with regulated piety and ritual practices, or monitored personal conduct. They had little experience of the institutions of Islam, the mosque, the court, and the study circle. Most nomadic groups did not have a religious figure who would apply the \textit{sharia} and engage in dispute settlement. If a man sought an Islamic legal opinion, he would have to travel to the nearest oasis where there was most likely to be a religious scholar or judge, a journey that a mere few made on special

occasions. They would most probably have travelled to their tribal chief to resolve disputes. Men remained in charge of a private patriarchy springing from a collective duty shared by members of the kin group. Rudimentary knowledge of religious affairs coexisted with beliefs in spirits, folk magic, and minimal religious rituals. A simple monotheistic inclination persisted among nomadic groups until the twentieth century.

The duty to command right and forbid wrong and its later institutionalisation in the towns ensured that the private patriarchy exercised by ordinary men became a religiously sanctioned state duty, thus introducing a new dimension in the subordination of women: institutionalised public patriarchy. The two patriarchies worked together, one enforcing the other at different historical moments until the contemporary period, when the state aspired to replace private patriarchy altogether and emerge as the sole arbiter of women’s status, rights, and responsibilities.

The state and the Wahhabi movement gained control of the private patriarchy practised in both the desert and the oasis, first through the many ulama and later with the help of what is often referred to as the religious police, thus creating in the process the institutions for state public patriarchy. From 1932 onward, the ulama and the state police force worked together. Religion and power became inseparable, thus turning the Wahhabi historical legacy into a state project. In the process, control of men over women became state and national policy.

The Wahhabi project aspired to create an Islamic order that sprang from the conditions of Najdi settlements. These conditions were different from those among nomadic tribal populations or among non-elite women who participated in the economy of the community through agricultural work and commerce. Among Bedouin, there was no need for a committee to guard against moral transgression or a police force to assist in maintaining an Islamic moral order. The tribal honour code and fear of consequences were enough to deter potential transgressors.

While desert Arabian women may have enjoyed greater freedom of movement than their urban counterparts, it is certain that they too were subjected to the same restrictions of patriarchal society. Even women who actively participated in the economy of trade, herding, farming, or

---

fishing were not exempt from subordination.\textsuperscript{34} Although the necessities of economic participation required greater flexibility in restrictions on their movement, women remained subject to the will of men. Only elite women may have exercised some kind of authority over men, yet they experienced greater restrictions – in, for example, marriage choices. Elite women were married off within a strict endogamous system, and only occasionally offered to men of a similar status outside their lineages. This was often a function of political alliances rather than the individual choices of women.

The urban Wahhabi revivalist movement offered a standardisation and institutionalisation of patriarchal practices through resorting to a higher religious authority, supported by the state. The movement universalised the restrictions on women that were born out of the needs of Najdi settlements. It endeavoured to create a universal moral order in which gender relations are uniform, thus paving the way for the project of homogenising society. It focused on the family and its religious and moral propriety, in addition to unifying religious ritual and law, both of which promised to create the underlying conditions for the consolidation of an imagined religious nation in which control over women is central.

**A RETURN TO COMMANDING RIGHT AND FORBIDDING WRONG**

The establishment of the contemporary Saudi state three decades after the conquest of Riyadh in 1902 prompted the Saudi leadership to strengthen its commitment to forbidding wrong as a mechanism of homogenising religious practices and moral codes. The doctrine of forbidding wrong became prominent because it was the mechanism that ensured the emergence of a unified high culture based not on common history, language, or ethnicity but on common religious practice, rituals, and law. It seems that the power of the state rather than the scattered references to the doctrine in Ibn Abd al-Wahhab’s treatises created a Saudi model in which society should be forbidden from doing wrong publicly while the rulers should be advised in private by secret advice (nasiha). The doctrine of forbidding wrong was incorporated in what Michael Cook calls a ‘Hanbalite state’ that grew among a Hanbalite majority in central Arabia.\textsuperscript{35}


\textsuperscript{35} Cook, *Commanding Right*, p. 188.
Cook asserts that the curtailment of *jihad* against polytheism after 1932 meant that the righteousness of the state needed to be turned inward in a manner similar to the nineteenth century. So forbidding wrong became inversely proportionate to the power of the state to launch war against infidels, innovators, and those who threaten its public piety. It is the quest for legitimacy that made the state endorse a vigorous approach to forbidding wrong, which has influenced and shaped the perception of women in the public sphere until the present day. As the state finalised its military expansionist *jihad* campaign, it directed its attention to proving its piety within the realm. However, the concern was not simply with piety. Rather, the state was mainly concerned with creating a common homogeneous constituency where regional, tribal, and other differences would eventually disappear, paving the way for a more efficient, centralised state to rule over a homogeneous nation. At times of uncertainty and weakening of central authority, controlling the public sphere through the doctrine of commanding right and forbidding wrong became even more urgent. It was urgent in the nineteenth century, but intensified after various regions came under the authority of the Saudi state.

From the 1920s, the state’s *ulama* began a vociferous campaign to Islamise not only the region’s inhabitants but also Muslim pilgrims, the only foreigners who visited Arabia at the time. It seems that an official committee for commanding right and forbidding wrong was established in Mecca as early as 1928 after it was suggested by the king’s Egyptian adviser, Hafiz Wahba. Wahba advised Ibn Saud to create a bureaucratic body of this nature to control the excesses and religious zeal of the invading Saudi army, known as the Ikhwan, which began to harass the pilgrims and punish practices they deemed inappropriate in the newly emerging Islamic state. In 1928, Ibn Saud could not afford the loss of income from Muslim pilgrims who were increasingly being pursued by the Ikhwan in Mecca for their heterodox rituals. He acted on Wahba’s advice and established the first nucleus of a bureaucratic body that became known as the Committee for the Promotion of Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong. While a loose body of vigilantes had already been present both in Riyadh and among the conquered tribal and sedentary population, the Hijazi committee was the first step towards the institutionalisation of the doctrine of commanding right and forbidding wrong. It was also a step towards restricting the influence of Hijazi *ulama* who at the time were more diverse and vibrant than their Najdi counterparts. The Najdi

---

36 Cook, *Commanding Right*, p. 188.
scholars who took charge of the committee turned it into a bureaucratic institution whose surveillance of the public sphere became notorious in Saudi Arabia. Michael Cook concludes that the state’s adoption of the doctrine of forbidding wrong led to its transformation from an apolitical and individual doctrine of forbidding wrong into a bureaucratic function, discharged by a set of committees under the supervision of a general director with ministerial rank.

While the 1928 Hijazi committee was first concerned with restraining the Ikhwan in their dealings with pilgrims, its sphere of activity incorporated a wider range of responsibilities and surveillance. One important responsibility was the exclusion of other religious sources of authority in the Hijaz. The committee focused on a whole range of visible practices deemed un-Islamic. Among other things, it endeavoured to banish women from the public sphere – not only in Mecca but also elsewhere, under the pretext of sad al-tharai, a pre-emptive principle prohibiting acts that potentially lead to moral chaos and sin. While the immediate concern of the state in the late 1920s was to avoid jeopardising state income from the pilgrimage, the religious identity of the new political realm had to be established to distinguish it from the alleged laxity of the previous Hashemite polity and its overlords in Istanbul. Muslim pilgrims visiting Mecca under the new Saudi regime must see the political change reflected in the public sphere; Mecca had to be purified from laxity, a clear sign of the Islamic credentials and legitimacy of the new era. Meccan and Muslim women pilgrims had enjoyed relative freedoms under the ancien r´egime of the Hashemites, but from this time on restricting women from venturing into the public domain became the marker of a new Saudi political legitimacy.

From these early days of consolidation, the Saudi state used women to establish its Islamic credentials, especially against those who might have offered an alternative Islamic piety. While religious revival fixed the status of women and aspired to homogenise them, the state made use of women in more practical and utilitarian ways, as the stories of the king and his conquests in the following section will illustrate.

RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM AND GENDER

In around 1902, Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud returned to Riyadh from exile in Kuwait to restore the vanished Saudi state. According to the national

37 Cook, Commanding Right, p. 192.
narrative, he assembled a force of about fifty able men and headed towards his ancestors’ capital, now under the authority of a new ruler, Abd al-Aziz ibn Rashid of Hail, and his representative, Ajlan ibn Muhammad, who resided in the Masmak palace with his wives. The recapture of the city proved to be difficult, and the raiding party decided to hide until night fell. The story goes that Ibn Saud divided his men into three groups, one of which managed to occupy a small house adjacent to the governor’s palace. According to a famous Saudi historian, the story unfolds as follows:

Ibn Saud and his men arrived at night at the gates of Riyadh. They secretly entered the house of the local governor, Ajlan, who ruled on behalf of the Rashidi emirate of Hail. They immediately found the governor’s wife, who informed the raiding-party that the governor was in Qasr al-Masmak with his garrison. Ibn Saud and his men waited until the morning in the governor’s private quarters. When the governor emerged after dawn prayers, he was attacked by Ibn Saud’s men. News of this heroic act spread across Riyadh. The inhabitants rushed to greet their legitimate ruler and swear allegiance to him. This is how Ibn Saud was successful in the battle of Riyadh, his first attempt to unify the country. 39

Ajlan’s wife was either terrified or sympathetic to the cause of Ibn Saud. Regardless of her state of mind at that important historical moment, she must have been an invaluable informer. Ibn Saud and his men waited all night, and when Ajlan returned to the Masmak palace, he was attacked and killed by Ibn Saud’s cousin, Abdullah ibn Juluwi. Ibn Saud was then declared ruler of Riyadh.

The centrality of this personality in the foundation myth of Saudi Arabia attests to the importance of constructing gender as an integral part of the political unification of Saudi Arabia, a process that started with Ibn Saud’s successful return to Riyadh, thanks to the role played by a woman. The capture of Riyadh does not fit within a heroic narrative, as there were no swords or large-scale bloodshed, the main ingredients of Arabian raids at the time. The story builds on events marked by surprise attack and the manipulation of female fears. According to oral versions of the story, Ajlan’s wife was restrained with a rope all night lest she escape and spoil the surprise element of the attack. Other versions claim that she

A Most Masculine State

voluntarily provided information on the whereabouts of her husband, who was probably spending the night with a co-wife. Because of her jealousy, which was situated in the context of a polygamous marriage, she willingly informed the raiders about her husband’s location and expected time of return. It is probably impossible to ascertain the exact details of what took place between Ibn Saud and Ajlan’s wife. But it is certain that this brief encounter under the dark sky of Riyadh in 1902 remains alive in the historical imagination of the state. No historical account or lesson is complete without reference to Ajlan’s wife, whose contribution to the conquest of Riyadh, and later Arabia, was paramount.40

How do we interpret and understand Ajlan’s wife? Is she a collaborator, a terrified victim, a bitter and jealous co-wife, or a courageous woman? We can objectively argue, however, that her role as a woman was so important that she remained a crucial personality, who contributed to the success of the capture of Riyadh, regardless of duress, courage, fear, or jealousy. The so-called battle of Riyadh was dependent on a woman and the information she provided. Unexpectedly, Ajlan’s wife occupied – and continues to occupy – a central position in the foundation and legitimacy narrative of a very masculine state.

If the collaboration of the female subject was crucial for the foundation myth of the state, we find that the founder continued to invoke women as important for state consolidation. In Ibn Saud’s many encounters with foreign writers and in his private daily majlis (council) where the king’s confidants gathered, one common subject seemed to be recurrent: the king talked about women as sources of pleasure, comfort, and sexual indulgence. Women who were talked about in this manner were concubines or of humble origin. Obviously, such discussions were mainly for entertainment; they have never found their way to the Saudi national narrative, but remain confined to the old Orientalist monographs of the early twentieth century. In such monographs, glimpses of the king’s evening talk among his loyal and trusted companions occasionally appear in the narrative, adding a sensational dimension to the life of the man who unified Arabia.

However, the official national narrative about the foundation of Saudi Arabia features – and indeed celebrates – other types of women. These are members of the royal household, who serve as exemplary figures, supporting the monarch, encouraging him, and in their own way providing knowledge deemed important for the state. Ibn Saud’s sister Nura

40 Al-Rasheed, ‘The Capture of Riyadh Revisited’.
(1875–1950) is such a figure. Her name is fixed in the historical imagination as the king’s *nakhwa* (war cry), *Akhu Nura*! (the brother of Nura). He invoked her name at times of stress, anger, and war to give him the courage and resolution expected in such situations. Her name was meant to inspire the king, as he derived pride from this fraternal association with her. In a society where female names are not mentioned in public, it was common to invoke the names of important female relatives to inspire men to defend their honour, especially at times when such behaviour is expected, for example in battle or confrontation with other men.41

During childhood, Ibn Saud’s sister was a delightful and spirited playmate, and in later life she became a source of support and courage, especially after the family’s exile in Kuwait following defeat in 1891. We are told that she played an important role in pushing her brother to embark on the long journey to re-establish their family’s rule over Arabia. Later, after Riyadh fell into his hands, Nura remained supportive, managing the royal household and dealing with mundane matters that would have distracted the king from his more urgent business. No day passed without the king visiting her in her private quarters, where he exchanged news with her and sought advice and assurance.

More importantly, Nura agreed to be married off to a rival Saudi prince, Saud al-Kabir (Saud ibn Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud ibn Faysal ibn Turki), an arch-enemy who in the early 1910s had taken refuge with his mother’s tribe, the Ajman, to challenge the king’s right to the throne. Nura offered herself up to effect a lasting reconciliation between the competing men of her family, whose rivalry was threatening the survival of the nascent Saudi state. After the king brought the rebellious Ajman under his control and pacified his rival relative, Nura continued to cement the relationship between the contenders and the wide tribal milieu in which their competition was fermenting. Placing Nura in the intimate confines of Saud al-Kabir’s household was a political strategy that the princess willingly accepted for the sake of the stability of her brother’s domain. She used contacts with the Ajman tribe through her husband’s affines to contribute to the pacification of this rebellious tribe and their chiefs. She served as a messenger between the king and the women of the tribe, especially the mother of their chief, Dhaydan ibn Hithlayn.

While Nura operated comfortably in the world of competing chiefs and their women, some of whom needed support and paternalistic attention from the king, we are told that she was also comfortable with some aspects of modernity into which Saudi Arabia was slowly being drawn. Hers was the face that greeted the wives of travellers and writers who visited Riyadh with their husbands in the 1920s. On several occasions, she hosted foreign women and introduced them to the intimate secrets of the royal female household, revealing a composed posture and an engaging personality. Violet Dickson was one such woman, who admired the princess when she encountered her in Riyadh in the 1920s.42

Nura’s celebrated ‘modernity’ is demonstrated in her willingness to have the first telephone line in Riyadh, connecting her house with the king’s palace. An early hotline of communication between a brother and a sister, joined by blood, common vision, and mutual support, added to this woman’s responsiveness to and engagement with modernity. From her new marital abode, she kept in touch with the monarch and provided him with inside information about a whole range of urgent issues in addition to continuous support and encouragement.

Nura’s death in 1950 came as a shock for the king who mourned a loyal and supportive sister. News of her death prompted him to cancel a previously organised banquet marking the fiftieth anniversary of his reign in Riyadh. Foreign guests and invited local notables were told that the king was in no mood to celebrate. An important state event thus passed without pomp or joy. Saudi Arabia had to wait another fifty years before the state organised the centennial celebration in 1999. But the memory of Nura lingers until the present day. King Abdullah named the first women’s university after her, Princess Nura bint Abdulrahman University in Riyadh, in 2008.

Comfortable with both traditionalism and modernity, Nura is a celebrated woman whose legacy underpins the Saudi incorporation of gender in the state. Her story illustrates the shift towards state consolidation in which women were beginning to surface as important contributors. She offers a constructed role model that confirms the state’s vision of women. Women are an auxiliary force that is cherished in times of exile, displacement, rivalry, and political strategies. They are symbols that need to be endowed with multiple meanings. Piety, wisdom, sacrifice, trust, and intimacy all define the moral universe in which women are expected

to operate. Nura is a role model, not only for other Saudi princesses but for the whole nation.

THE CONTEMPORARY STATE AND RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM

The foundation of the Saudi state of 1932 was not a function of anti-colonial struggle or secular nationalism. Nor was the state an embodiment of a unifying national culture, shared history, printing, or other factors that are often attributed to the emergence of nationalism in both Europe and the third world post-colonial states. Although important internal factors contributed to the process of state formation, the state was born following the struggle between two foreign powers, the Ottomans and the British, on the eve of the First World War. The political and cultural fragmentation of Arabia, coupled with illiteracy, militated against the emergence of a ‘national culture’. A polity was formed prior to the emergence of a national discourse, whose seeds were often associated with a national intelligentsia in other parts of the Arab world and state institutions such as the judiciary and the military.

Neither the sedentary population of the cities and oases nor the nomadic tribal groups that were incorporated in the Saudi state had a sense of a developed national identity to be mobilised in the quest for a state. Some regions did have distinct cultural traits – mostly related to their religious significance, ecology, economic mode of production, and social organisation. Such regions were known by their names. The Hijaz, Asir, Najd, and al-Hasa were regional autonomous units, ruled by local chiefs in cities and oases, while maintaining tenuous relations with either the Ottomans (prior to 1918) or the British imperial power on the Gulf coast. With the exception of the Hijaz, discussed in the introduction, no region produced an intellectual elite who articulated a national identity for their own region, let alone the whole of Arabia.

On the eve of the formation of the contemporary Saudi state, and with the exception of the Hijaz, where an Islamic Arab nationalism had a short-lived experience, its regions lacked a national intelligentsia or movement imagining a national unity within each region or across regions.

---


Neither Arabia nor its fragments had cross-regional institutions, military force, or any other organisation that transcended local identities and regional belonging. The fragments had two important interconnecting forces: trade\textsuperscript{45} and Islam. Trade linked various parts of Arabia along trade routes, while Islam provided an umbrella world view that manifested itself in belief and practices, the most important of which was the pilgrimage to Mecca. But none of these forces was able to create regional integration or interdependence, let alone national culture, national intelligentsia, or institutions. Ulama networks linking central Arabia and the regions were developed, but they remained dependent on personal connections, kinship, and small study circles, based primarily on face-to-face interaction, and the exchange of religious treatises, letters, and \textit{responsa}. These networks were not embodied in long-lasting institutions that would survive individuals, religious scholars, and learned families.

Internal diversity within the regions of Saudi Arabia – between tribal and non-tribal populations, shaykhly nobility and commoners, and warriors and labourers – created identities that remained anchored in primordial constructions of the self and others. The idea of a shared culture upon which a state could claim sovereignty was not developed or imagined. The fact that Saudi Arabia had not been directly ruled by a foreign power may have delayed the emergence of Saudi nationalism, which might have arisen in opposition to foreign domination or colonialism. Wahhabi opposition to the Ottoman Empire’s nominal suzerainty over parts of Arabia, mainly the Hijaz, led to the demise of the movement in 1818. Furthermore, the low level of literacy and education, in addition to the absence of institutions (military, educational, social, and economic) must have been contributing factors that delayed the formation of a national discourse or consciousness across regions. Needless to say, cross-regional legal and military institutions were also absent.

Before 1932, nobody in the interior of Arabia had imagined a Saudi nation or narrated its origins, characteristics, and aspirations. The rest of what became Saudi Arabia was submerged in local identities celebrated in poetry and narratives. Although ethnically all inhabitants – with the exception of small pockets of non-tribal communities and foreign settlers in the Hijaz – claimed Arab descent, confessed to Islam, and spoke a dialect of Arabic, the idea of the nation in pre-modern Arabia had little significance. Cultural and religious diversity rather than uniformity was

\textsuperscript{45} Al-Rasheed, \textit{Politics in an Arabian Oasis}. 
the norm. No group had a project to homogenise culture, define its contours, or articulate its future in the form of a state, thus inhibiting the development of a Saudi nationalism. Homogenising religions was a different matter, as this became the project leading to unifying fragments of an imagined nation.

In the absence of a unifying national narrative and against the background of fragmented primordial identities, after 1932 the Saudi state transformed the eighteenth-century Wahhabi religious revival into religious nationalism. The transformation succeeded in allowing a central power to rule over territories that had very few common cultural traits and lacked a historical memory of being part of a single polity. The Saudi state of 1932 was imposed on regions that had no heritage as one nation governed by one state. A political community had to be created after the fact to justify the emerging state. To unify a dispersed and culturally diverse population that had maintained its autonomy vis-à-vis foreign powers, the Saudi state relied on transforming Wahhabi Islam into religious nationalism. Wahhabi religious nationalism aspired to provide a common overarching Islamic identity in the absence of a common culture and the prevalence of deep-rooted local urban and tribal identities. The new movement looked back to the example of the Prophet, who managed to unify tribes and regions under the banner of Islam to create a state. This became the model to be adopted in Saudi Arabia. After 1932, Wahhabiyya preached unity on an Islamic rather than a national or cultural foundation. It aspired to homogenise religion against cultural diversity and fragmentation. By promoting the ethos of a Muslim nation, it provided the justification for the emerging state.

Under Wahhabi religious nationalism, the project of the 1932 state became entangled with specific constructions of political community. The community was homogenised not only in its apparent religious praxis and compliance with religious law but also in the uniformity of its values, appearance, and lifestyle. Two important developments were crucial for the project: the creation of cross-tribal military–religious force under the name of the Ikhwan and the sedentarisation projects targeting the nomadic Bedouin tribes to shift them to sedentary agricultural work. While these projects did not bring the fragments together, they were mechanisms allowing central authority to incorporate one element after another in its unification project. The project linked each fragment to the state without allowing them to mix under its banner. It was only in the later phase of increased urbanisation – the oil economy and rural–urban migration from the 1950s onward discussed in the following
chapter – that the fragments came face to face with each other. In the second half of the twentieth century, the emerging state bureaucracy, including the army, oil industry, education, media, and civil service, allowed the fragments to mix and interact, after they were subjected to the discourse of being one pious nation. Up to that moment, the discourse was an imaginary propaganda under the banner of religious scholars who aspired to purify faith and in the process bring the fragments together in common law, ritual practice, and religious orientation.

In the first half of the twentieth century, homogenising religion was the first mechanism through which the nation was to be constructed. If conquest was the way to establish power, religious nationalism was the means to create a nation out of the fragments. Becoming an Islamic nation was from the very beginning a project of imagining the different fragments as one single pious entity. With the development of the state and its religious and educational institutions, a much later project associated with the influx of oil wealth, membership in the political community was entangled with becoming Muslim as defined by Wahhabi religious nationalism.

The history of the political events that culminated in the foundation of the Saudi state in 1932 privileged men as political actors. In archival sources, local chronicles, and travel literature the focus was always on the role of important men, a category that included Ibn Saud, his sons, ulama, early Arab aides, functionaries, tribal chiefs, colonial officers, military advisers, and foreign intermediaries. Conquest that led to political centralisation, and eventually the rise of the modern state, was obviously a masculine affair, the work of men who combined chivalry, diplomacy, and piety to bring about a historic break from the age of blasphemy, religious fragmentation, and cultural diversity. As Wahhabi religious nationalism sought to create a moral community, women were invested with special significance in the project of nation building, despite the fact that they were denied a space in the public sphere. Imagining the newly emerging Islamic/Wahhabi nation depended on articulating gender roles suitable for the purity of the new emerging political and religious community.

The centrality of the Wahhabi national narrative meant that Saudi Arabia never developed an indigenous, secular anti-colonial nationalist movement similar to those in other Arab countries. The country was immersed in local political struggles between emirates whose legitimacy rested on a combination of tribal traditional authority, ability to generate meagre surplus, control of trade routes, protection of the pilgrimage,
and patron–client relationships with the superpower of the time. The expansion of each emirate was dependent on its military might rather than its ability to produce a unifying discourse that went beyond the limited confines of the local power base and its narrow primordial or regional identity.

The age of local emirates gave way to a single state in 1932, the date when the kingdom of Saudi Arabia came into being as a sovereign state. All local emirates in the Hijaz, Hail, and Asir vanished, and their territories were incorporated into the emerging Saudi realm with Riyadh as its capital. While the Hijaz remained the religious centre, Riyadh was from that time the political power base and the initiator of a homogeneous national religious culture. The so-called wars of unification of the first thirty years of the twentieth century took place under a strong religious umbrella that had all the elements and characteristics of religious nationalism. Wahhabiyya, the religion of a small minority in central and southern Najd, evolved into a religious nationalist movement under which the process of unification was justified. The Wahhabi movement was keen from that moment to cast itself as the true Islam and shed its previous image as a narrow movement of the Najdi religious scholars of central Arabia. At this historical moment, the movement needed to transform itself from being Wahhabi to being Salafi, the latter anchored in a wider authentic and ancient Islamic tradition that is not specifically central Arabian.

Important Arab religious scholars and activists were instrumental in this transformation. Rashid Rida, a Syrian scholar previously associated with the Salafi modernist trend that had its roots in Egypt under Muhammad Abduh, came to play an important role in carving a place for Wahhabiyya that anchored it in the Salafi tradition, thus appealing to very sceptical Muslims in the 1930 and 1940s. After his disappointment with the demise of the Sharifian Hijazi project, and his subsequent introduction to Wahhabism by the Hijazi Nasif family, he found in this narrow religious movement a Salafi revolution under the umbrella of the state.

The religious nationalism of the Wahhabi movement after 1932 had never attracted supporters from all over Arabia, let alone the Muslim

---


world as a whole; it was a specific religious tradition anchored in a narrow and isolated niche in central Arabia. From this limited base, it mobilised various tribes and non-tribal groups, eventually enlisting them in wars that lasted more than thirty years, to impose a religio-political realm on the disparate parts of Arabia. At the same time, it needed to enlist famous Arab religious scholars to construct it as a pan-Islamic Salafi movement with an appeal beyond its narrow ethnic and regional origins.

In reality, Wahhabi religious nationalism was a sectarian, exclusive project that drew on religious dogma and interpretations within one Islamic school of jurisprudence: the Hanbali school. It positioned itself against narrow identities of tribe, ethnic group, regional specificity, and linguistic difference. It claimed unity on the basis of Islam, defined in local parochial terms. Wahhabiyya was linked to a specific community of central Arabia, namely the hadari (sedentary) population of the oases of Najd and Qasim, where Wahhabi theology and doctrine were developed by specialist religious scholars. Its language was that of purging, purifying, obliterating, and eradicating difference, especially that emanating from faith, tribalism, regionalism, and cultural practices. It endeavoured to circumvent alternative priesthoods, for example those associated with folkloric Islam, Sufism, Shiism, and other holy personalities revered at the local level by the Arabian population. It strove to curb alternative and competing religiosity, folk sacred spaces, and religious figures to ensure monopoly over the interpretation and dissemination of religious knowledge and authority. It fought holy men in Arabia to establish the authority of its own interpreters. It denounced the religions of all others to secure its spread among a hesitant and resistant population. The religious project of elimination was in need of military mobilisation and political leadership.

The project of imagining the religious nation was linked to homogenising religious creed and practice. After conquest, a state was needed to impose specific religious interpretations on the various regions and apply a narrow definition of Islamic law that negated historical diversity and pluralism. Wahhabi religious nationalism propagated its narrow creed and practice as the only road to salvation. Opposition to the project of this aggressive religious nationalism was dubbed blasphemy and an offence against God rather than the nation. Homogenising religion became a priority for the state after conquest. For this purpose, the state endeavoured to enforce uniformity through law and public appearances. Judges from the central Najdi heartland, preachers, vigilantes, and religious educators were the first to be sent out to distant regions. Their presence was an
indicator of the subjugation of territories and the Islamisation of space. The state was also able to monitor and control all religious practice that deviated from Wahhabi principles, especially in areas that had important historical and religious significance, for example in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina and the Eastern Province where a substantial Shia community lived. Monitoring public space and religious practices could only be achieved fully in the oil era.

Religious nationalism promoted a narrow definition of belonging to the pious community. Only those who adopted its jurisprudence, religious ritual practice, gender interpretations, and strict creed qualified to belong. This religious nationalism was based on a perpetual cosmic struggle between good and evil, which rejuvenated faith and ensured that practice conformed to the set principles of good religiosity. Above all, the struggle contributed to drawing strict boundaries between those who belonged to the pious nation and those who did not. The latter were branded enemies of Islam. The religious struggle needed the resources of the state and its support, hence the alliance between the religious doctrinaires and the political leadership. The political leadership needed the common identity articulated by the preachers and the legitimacy this bestowed on it. In return, religious doctrinaires received protection and subsidies for their services in the pursuit of defining identity and enforcing loyalty to the state.

The political leadership adopted the discourse of equality, universalism, and the strict definitions of boundaries that Wahhabiyya imposed in the public sphere. The Wahhabi religious scholars propagated the discourse of the equality of believers to mask serious inequalities, exclusion, and even discrimination. The universalism of their Islamic message concealed its exclusive and narrow religious interpretations, which were presented as the only ones valid for the community. The universalism of Wahhabi religious nationalism was imposed as an act of faith and salvation. The movement claimed to represent Islam, but in reality it represented the narrow solidarity of one group of scholars drawn from southern Najd and Qasim who achieved a monopoly of the religious field. They swore allegiance to the Al-Saud leadership in return for domesticating the Arabian population and extracting its submission to the religio-political leadership.

One of the most noted contributions of Wahhabi religious nationalism to the formation of the state was its capacity for military mobilisation. The movement invoked the concept of jihad against unbelievers, mostly other Arabian Muslims who refused to submit to the authority of the
Al-Saud. Between 1902 and 1932, under the auspices of the Al-Saud, Sunni Muslims, along with Shia, Sufis, and Ismailis, were subjugated under the pretense of purifying their faith and teaching them true Islam. They were attacked as non-believers in true Islam rather than territories or people who defended their local autonomy against the invading troops. Those who resisted the imposition of Saudi religious nationalism and the political submission it entailed were fought and defeated by specially formed military units by the name of *jund al-tawhid*, the soldiers of monotheism, or *ikhwan man ta’ allah*, the brothers of those who obey God, better known in the literature on Saudi Arabia as the Ikhwan. The unification of Arabia under the leadership of the Al-Saud was a political project in religious guise. New territories were incorporated in the Saudi realm, losing all local autonomy and independence. They were turned into provinces ruled through governors and representatives sent from Riyadh. Their rudimentary local educational institutions and judiciary were abolished and replaced by ones that were administered by the central authority and under the guidance of the specialist religious scholars.

Sunni legal schools such as the Hanafis, Shafi’is, and Malikis were all suppressed, while the Hanbali legal tradition, from which Wahhabiyya arose, was promoted. While Wahhabism succeeded in homogenising Sunni Muslims, it failed to achieve its ultimate goal, namely mass conversion from Shiism or Ismailism to Wahhabi Islam. It ensured for several decades, however, that no signs of non-Wahhabi worship and ritual practices appeared in the public sphere. Non-Wahhabi communities have continued to be denounced in regular *fatwas* and publications. Wahhabi religious nationalism provided a narrow definition of who belongs to the polity and moral community, while at the same time it posited itself as the only possible universal path to salvation.

THE FUSION OF GENDER, RELIGION, AND POLITICS IN RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM

As the Wahhabi revival movement became religious nationalism under the banner of the contemporary state, it aspired towards transforming Arabian society from tribally, culturally, and regionally fragmented entities into a religiously homogeneous society, thus changing the criteria according to which people belonged to community. This involved a dissemination of the religious propriety of an urban class of religious scholars throughout the whole of Saudi Arabia. This religious nationalism returned to the texts, religious opinions, and *fatwas* of pre-modern times.
in order to imbue the new nation with piety, propriety, and conformity. Through their religious texts, the *ulama* reconfigured the newly emerging Saudi Arabia as one pious nation. Their narrative aspired towards fixing the boundaries between good and evil, faith and blasphemy, insiders and outsiders, pious and impious, and moral and immoral subjects. In this project, women became moral symbols. Like all forms of religious nationalism, Wahhabiyya sought to restore the family, not the autonomous individual, as the elemental unit of which the social is composed, hence its constant preoccupation with public modesty, purifying the public sphere, and limiting the potential threat of mingling binary opposites, mainly men and women.

The Wahhabi *ulama* endeavoured to generalise its perceptions and constructions of gender on the nation, constructed as a moral and pious abstraction. Women became a religious and ethical subject rather than a social agency, and were required to be at the service of a masculine religious state. However, the female religious subject was not an individual citizen, but an important pillar of the family under the patriarchal authority of its male members.

The Wahhabi movement was turned into an overarching religious culture that promised to unify not only fragmented people, practices, and appearances, but also legal codes and institutions. In this project, women were central. Their early invisibility in the public sphere distinguished the newly created realm not only from previous polities but from other Arab states, which were beginning to define themselves by drawing on secular nationalism at the beginning of the twentieth century. Wahhabi religious nationalism defined the newly emerging religious nation in opposition to other Arab nations and the world, hence the birth of the so-called and much-celebrated Saudi *khususiyya*: exceptionalism. No other country in the Arab region espoused, propagated, or capitalised on exceptionalism to mark its difference, while the Saudi claims remain a solid disposition manifested at all levels of public discourse.

To produce the homogeneous polity that imagines itself as having a unique common religious culture/sacred space, women were the cornerstone of differentiating the nation from other nations in its environs. Controlling women’s religiosity, appearance, movement, education, work, economic activity, property, and the social aspects of their lives – for example, marriage – are the most cherished devotions of Saudi religious nationalism, its priesthood, and the state.

After the consolidation of the state, legislation keeping women in their approved place in the private family sphere was maintained and defended.
Consequently, women were denied individual legal personality, and were placed under the authority of their male guardians and the state, each reinforcing the other’s patriarchy. Women became important not only for the physical reproduction of the new pious nation but also as the repository of its morality, ethics, and religious purity. This required that they should then be controlled lest they undermine national piety and morality. Also, their marriages should be regulated according to a strict policy of national endogamy, whereby women’s marriages with outsiders, even Arab Muslims, became controversial and in need of special permission from the highest state authority, the Ministry of Interior.

The priesthood of Saudi religious nationalism was preoccupied not only with women’s public modesty and morality but also with their private purity, ritual performance, and religious compliance with prescribed teachings and preaching. Since the 1930s, the surveillance of the public sphere – streets, shopping centres, restaurants, hotels, schools, universities, workplaces, conferences, book fairs, car parks, and festivals – has been notorious. Religious education in schools and in media forums has ensured that even the private lives of women – ritual performances, purity, and pollution – attains conformity in the intimate confines of home and family. This surveillance of the public and private spheres sent an important signal to the population, mainly that there was no space that could not be penetrated by the state and its religious vigilantes. All was under the gaze of the state and its priesthood. The household itself was penetrated – first by preaching in the public sphere, for example mosque and school, and later in the media with the television becoming the main tool to influence the private family domain.

Fear of being watched and monitored was therefore a natural outcome, a deterrent against disloyalty, resistance, and transgression. The fusion between religion and politics led to the monitoring of intimacy between men and women – not only in public but also in the private context of family, marriage, and conjugal life. The state surveillance agencies strove towards the separation of men and women in the public sphere, thus keeping gender boundaries clearly defined and controlled. They preferred not to have women going outside private houses; such ventures were a threat to family and nation. The confinement of women became important for controlling marriage choices. It subverted possibilities that threatened not only family purity and tribal endogamy but also national endogamy, especially after the nation became host to a huge expatriate community as a result of the massive oil revenues that are the entitlement of those who belong to the nation. Women’s work outside the house not
only threatened the reproduction of the future pious generation but also exposed them to a large pool of potential marriage candidates, especially in spaces that are now less segregated, for example the public sphere with its growing shopping centres, parks, and entertainment and recreation facilities. The obsession with women as religious and ethical subjects is a reflection of the increasing need to symbolise the uniqueness of the pious nation and guard against its contamination by non-indigenous elements.

Although the emerging state initially denied women any presence or role in the public sphere, it nevertheless remained gendered – that is, a state whose legitimacy derived from the perpetuation of control over and exclusion of women, who were believed to threaten its integrity and morality. Its national narrative propagated contradictory images of women. It constructed both acceptable and rejected gender roles. In fact, the foundation of the state depended on the perpetuation of a social order in which the pious woman was celebrated while the defiant one was subject to punishment, control, and purgation. Religious nationalism dictated how women should be treated, controlled, and talked about in the public sphere. The norms, rules, and regulations that sprang from the imagination of men in the oases of Najd became mechanisms for controlling all Arabian women, a heterogeneous category that included tribal elite women, slave women, traders, peddlers, healers, peasants, and herdsmen. The religious nation was dependent on submerging all categories of women into an undifferentiated mass, aided by the imposition of a single dress code, legal framework, and religious education.

Religious nationalism needed state institutions in order to meet its aspirations, namely the creation of a homogeneous moral and pious community in which women define the boundaries. The 1928 committee that promoted commanding right and forbidding wrong in the Hijaz was the first institution that aspired to achieve this goal. Furthermore, the network of religious scholars who were dispatched to all regions, oases, and deserts were instrumental in establishing networks that connected the Najdi religious elite with grassroots communities. They facilitated the integration of the periphery with a centre based in Riyadh. They also removed regional religious authorities from their old historical monopoly over their own local communities. The Wahhabi religious networks aspired to make the regional and cultural fragments one religious nation, abiding by their religious doctrine, interpretation, and practices. This aspiration was before the advent of oil, and as such it remained a futuristic project.

For the first half of the twentieth century, the religious nation remained an abstraction. The complete success of the project was dependent on
resources, mainly surplus that would be invested in the establishment of institutions and infrastructures that homogenised and connected the fragments. The state had to wait for oil wealth in the second half of the twentieth century in order to effectively bind fragments of the population through educational institutions. Its educational resources, religious institutions, media empire (newspapers, radio, and television), and the infrastructure of roads, airports, and, later on, surveillance cameras and communication tools were mechanisms whose use and application embodied the vision of religious nationalism in which women were central.

Gender relations and the status of women in Saudi Arabia became hostages to the political project of the state and its religious nationalism; the first was by nature a contingent and evolving project, while the second was an unbounded vision, which drew on the divine and aspired to create the Kingdom of God on earth, in which women were the most visible signs. The tension between changing state politics and universal religious nationalism continued to haunt Saudi women in the decades that followed the establishment of the modern state. Wahhabi religious nationalism invented an ‘ideology of order’ in an attempt to link religion and nation state. In this fusion of religion and nation, women were integrated as fundamental symbols.