

Chapter 1

Introduction

This study is an exploratory study into the situation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and its foreign policy, esp., the religious aspect. The study at hand is neither a political studies analysis nor an attempt in legal studies. It consciously opts for a cultural studies approach crossing disciplinary boundaries and not obeying the rules of the existing disciplinary field. Being aware that the society of Saudi Arabia is more complex than usually described in studies on Saudi foreign policy and slowly evolving into a new society. This aspect of Saudi Arabia is not covered in this study. Recent studies on Saudi Arabian foreign policy focus on institutional factors in Saudi Arabia in a very general way, on overviews of the Islamic aspects of Saudi society, and the influence of oil, adding several country studies looking at the relations of other states to Saudi Arabia.¹ We will follow a four-step approach. Starting with an introduction into Saudi history from the 18th century until the 21st century, we will turn to a more general reflection of the idea of the state in non-European contexts. This will set the frame for a study of the Saudi Cables archive helping us to rethink the conventional framing. This will lead us to a conceptualization of the Saudi state and the contemporary state in general as to be perceived in a globalized society. This book is not a comprehensive study of Saudi Arabia, be it politically or sociologically. There have been recent studies on the attitudes of

¹See, e. g., Partrick, Neil (ed.), *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy: Conflict and Cooperation*, London/New York: I. B. Tauris 2018 or Schauta, Markus, *Saudi-Arabien als Großmacht*, in *Matin Baraki/Fritz Edlinger (eds.), Krise am Golf. Hintergründe, Analysen, Berichte*, Wien: Promedia, 2020, pp.45-57.

Saudi women², Saudi youth³, Saudi art⁴, Saudi public opinion⁵, Islamic activism in Saudi Arabia⁶, the role of tribal affiliation⁷ or Saudi elites⁸ that will inform us about the background of the present study, but will not be part of this study.⁹ A thorough study of the Saudi economy is not part of this study. Economic aspects, however, will be touched from time to time. A historical introduction will provide a framework for the contemporary situation. The overall structure of this book can be described as rhizomatic¹⁰, taking up the diverse connections visible in the archive of the Saudi Cables to analyze the drivers of Saudi foreign policy. The overall view of the Saudi foreign policy rhizome will allow for a new look at contemporary statehood – at least at one variety of it. A comprehensive study of Saudi foreign policy based on the Saudi Cables material is still a desideratum to be fulfilled. The present study is an exploration of this material.

²A well researched study is Al-Rasheed, Madawi, *Gender, Politics, and Religion in Saudi Arabia*, Cambridge et al. 2013.

³E. g., Rodriguez, Clarence, *Arabie Saoudite 3.0: Paroles de la jeunesse saoudienne*, Pris: Éditions Erick Bonnier, 2017 and Fadaak, Talha H/Roberts, Ken, *Youth in Saudi Arabia*, Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019.

⁴E. g., Gronlund, Melissa, *Reconstructing Saudi: A Look into the Short Window of Artid-Led Spaces and the Organisations in a Country on the Verge of Change*, in *Afterall 49* (Spring/Summer 2020), pp.68-77.

⁵El Kurd, Dana, *US Policy in Arab Gulf Opinion: Data from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait*, in *AlMuntaqa 3i* (2020), pp.87-89.

⁶Cf. Menoret, Pascal, *Graveyard of Clerics: Everyday Activism in Saudi Arabia*, Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2020,

⁷Samin, Nadav, *Of Sand and Soil: Genealogy and Tribal Belonging in Saudi Arabia*, Princeton, NJ/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015.

⁸E. g., Sunaitan, Muhammad b., *al-Nukhab al-sa'udiyya: Dirasa fi l-tahawwulat wa'l-ikhfaqat*, Beirut: Markaz Dirasat al-Wahda al-'Arabiyya 2005.

⁹For recent developments cf. Steinberg, Guido, *Saudi Arabien, die Pandemie und das Öl* (<https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/saudi-arabien-die-pandemie-und-das-oel/>) (retrieved September 21, 2020; posted July 2020)) and for the outlook of the development in the energy sector <https://www.bp.com/content/dam/bp/business-sites/en/global/corporate/pdfs/energy-economics/energy-outlook/bp-energy-outlook-2020-region-insight-middle-east.pdf> (retrieved September 21, 2020). For the background of the Saudi economy cf. Ramady, Mohamed A., *The Saudi Arabian Economy: Policies, Achievements, and Challenges*, New York et al.: Springer, 2010. Gerlach Press offers several informative studies about the economies of the Arab Gulf states.

¹⁰“The key to the rhizome, and the reason Deleuze and Guattari take it up as a way of thinking about not only books but things in general, is that the rhizome continually creates the new. It is not predictable. It does not follow a linear pattern of growth and reproduction. Its connections are lateral not hierarchical. What this means for *A Thousand Plateaus* is that "each plateau can be read starting anywhere and can be related to any other plateau" (TP 22). Not only do Deleuze and Guattari want to create new concepts in this book, they want to enable readers to create their own new concepts by making new connections.” (Adkins, Brent, *Deleuze and Guattari's A Thousand Plateaus: A Critical Introduction and Guide*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015: 23. Cf. Lohlker, Rüdiger, *Islamische Texte – Bewegungen der Deterritorialisierung und Umordnung der Dinge*, in Kurt Appel et al. (eds.), *Religion in Europa heute: Sozialwissenschaftliche, rechtswissenschaftliche, hermeneutisch-religionsphilosophische Perspektiven*, Göttingen: Vienna University Press, 2012, pp.193-208).

History of Saudi Arabia

Talking about the history of Saudi Arabia means talking about an entity evolving during the 18th century CE. It may be regarded as useful to talk about the eighteenth century CE of the Islamic world, but we have to restrict ourselves to some general remarks about the characteristics of the discussions among Islamic scholars. One important aspect of the Islamic discussions of this time was the focus on *ijtihad* and the renaissance of the study of hadith. As Ahmad S. Dallal puts it

“eighteenth century discussions on the theory of *ijtihad* relied on the standard taxonomies elaborated in classical Islamic writings on this subject. The novelty in these discussions, however, was in the widening of the scope of *ijtihad* and in the deliberate and systematic effort to make its tools accessible to wider segments or even a majority of Muslims. In effect, therefore, the significance of eighteenth century *ijtihad* is in deploying it to loosen the disciplinary hold of authoritative intellectual and cultural traditions and institutions. The not-so-hidden agenda of this deployment was to subvert traditional structures of intellectual authority by opening up ordered traditions to multiplicity. One of the main tools for reviving *ijtihad* was hadith, and the primary discipline of this novel deployment of hadith was the discipline of *usul al-hadith* or *’ilm mustalah al-hadith* (the theory of hadith or the science of the conventions of hadith).”¹¹

One of the proponents of this revival was a scholar of the Arab Peninsula - not the most outstanding one - who became the eponym of the strand of Islamic thought and action to be called Wahhabiyya¹²: Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab.¹³

“Though they initially rejected the word with all their strength, the ulama of the Najdi predication—an expression that I provisionally use to designate the corporation—seem to have eventually accepted it as a fait accompli, even referring to themselves with the term “wahhabiyya” from the turn of the twentieth century. In the absence of sources on this question, we do not know what caused this

¹¹Dallal, Ahmad S., *Islam without Europe: Traditions of Reform in Eighteenth-Century Islamic Thought*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018: 155.

¹²Although Wahhabi scholars called themselves monotheists (*al-muwahhidun* or *ahl al-tawhid*), the scholars of the call to Islam (*’ulama’ al-da’wa al-islamiyya*) or the scholars of the Najdi call (*’ulama’ al-da’wa al-najdiyya*); they called their creed the Islamic call (*al-da’wa al-islamiyya*), the way of Muhammad (*al-tariqa al-muhammadiyya*), the way of the pious forefathers (*al-tariqa al-salafiyya*) and, last but not least, Hanbalites or Muslim. (Mouline, Nabile, *Les prétensions hégémonique du wahhabisme*, in Sabrina Mervin/Nabil Mouline (eds.), *Islam politiques: Courants, doctrines, idéologies*, Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2017, pp.49-99: 60; cf. Lohlker, Rüdiger, *Die Salafisten: Aufstand der Frommen, Saudi-Arabien und Gewalt*, München: C. H. Beck, 2017: 33-34).

¹³For a biography and a sketch of his teachings see Crawford, Michael, *Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab*, London: Oneworld, 2014.

change of attitude or how it occurred. Whatever the case, Sulayman ibn Sahman (d. 1930), one of the most active ‘alim in the service of the Najdi predication, titled two of his most important works *The Sublime Present and the Najdi Wahhabi Jewel* and *Wahhabi Thunderbolts Launched against the Lying Syrian Assertions*. In his other works, he abundantly used “Wahhabi” with approbation. A verse that appears in one of his poems nicely illustrates this process of appropriation: “Yes, we are Wahhabis, the true monotheists who make our enemies suffer.”¹⁴

There are examples we could quote, e. g., supporters of the nascent third Saudi kingdom (see below) used the word “Wahhabiyya” in their apologetic works. Rashid Rida (d. 1935 CE) is a prominent writer using this word. End of the 1920s prohibited the use of this work for political reasons, preferring the term “al-Salafiyya”.¹⁵

Emirate of Dir’iyya (1744-1818)

The cradle of the Saudi reign was a small settlement in Najd populated by farmers, merchants, artisans, minor Islamic scholars, and slaves: Dir’iyya. Probably the settlement of Dir’iyya was founded by the Al Sa’ud and the settlement recognized the Saudi amir as the legitimate authority.

“It seems that the Al Sa’ud were originally of the landholding merchant class of Najd. Muhammad ibn Sa’ud (died 1765) was a landowner and a broker, financing the journey of long-distance merchants [...]. Political skills of mediation and the ability to defend the settlement against raids by other oasis amirs and tribal confederations were important complementary attributes. In return for tribute from members of the settlement, the oasis amir became the defender of the inhabitants who served as his military force, enhanced by his own slaves. Collection of this tribute strengthened political leadership; it distinguished the amir and his lineage from that of other residents in the settlement.”¹⁶

The Saudi *amir* enjoyed limited and weak authority in Dir’iyya except collecting tribute and exercising some legal and other authority.

“It seems that the Saudi leadership was lacking in two respects: first, it lacked an identifiable tribal origin that would have guaranteed a strong association with a tribal confederation, similar, for example, to that of their contemporaries, Banu Khalid of Hasa. Second, the Saudi leadership lacked any great surplus of wealth. The

¹⁴Mouline, Nabil, *The Clerics of Islam: Religion, Authority, and Political Power in Saudi Arabia*, New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2014: 9.)

¹⁵Ibid.: 9-10.

¹⁶Al-Rasheed, Madawi, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, Cambridge et al.: Cambridge University Press, 2010 (2nd edition), p.14.

Al Sa'ud may have had some due to the collection of tribute from the settlement and involvement in trade, but this does not seem to have been a distinguishing characteristic. Their commercial interests at that time were not developed enough to ensure an income sufficiently substantial to enable them to expand their authority over other settlements or control a large network of caravan routes.

Giving these limitations, it is not surprising that their authority remained confined to the small settlement of Dir'iyyah. The fortunes of the Al Sa'ud began to change with their adoption of the Wahhabi movement, associated with the reformer Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792). Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab belonged to Banu Tamim, a Najdi sedentary tribe whose members were inhabitants of several oases in Najd [...] His family produced several religious scholars, but was not distinguished by wealth. According to one source, Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab lived 'in poverty with his three wives. He owned a *bustan*, date garden and ten or twenty cows' [...] Following the path of his ancestors, Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab traveled to Madina, Basra and Hasa to pursue religious education and probably wealth [...] He returned to 'Uyaynah, where his father was a judge, to preach a new message."¹⁷

Although the *amir* of 'Uyayna welcomed the message of Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab at first, he then was forced to leave the settlement:

"The reformer's severe punishment of those who were reluctant to perform communal prayers, his personal involvement in enforcing a rigid interpretation of the shari'a and his stoning in public of a local woman accused of fornication antagonised the inhabitants of Uyaynah and their chief. It seems that the Banu Khalid chiefs of Hasa and overlords of Najd at the time also resented the reformer and feared the spread of his message. They ordered Uthman ibn Muammar to kill Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, but Uthman decided to expel him rather than risk fitna (dissent) among the people who came under his authority. Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and his family were asked to leave Uyaynah. The reformer arrived in Diriyah, forty miles away from Uyaynah, with the hope of convincing its Saudi amir to adopt his message."¹⁸

The pact between Muhammad ibn Sa'ud and Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab is considered the beginning of the expansion of the first Saudi entity on the Arabian Peninsula, the Emirate of Dir'iyya. The sedentary inhabitants of the oasis towns of the southern Najd region in central Arabia were the first to respond to the call of Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab and to accept his religious teachings and the political leadership of Muhammad ibn Sa'ud. The way to join the

¹⁷ibid., p.15.

¹⁸ibid., p.16

new movement was to swear allegiance (*bay'a*)¹⁹ to its religious and political leadership. According to the historical narrative

“the Saudi ruler agreed to support the reformer’s demand for jihad, a war against non-Muslims and those Muslims whose Islam did not conform to the reformer’s teachings. In return the Saudi amir was acknowledged as political leader of the Muslim community Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab was guaranteed control over religious interpretation. The reformer started teaching his religious message in a mosque, specially built for him. He insisted on the attendance of men and children. Men who did not attend his special *dars* (teaching sessions) were required to pay a fine or shave their beards [...]. It is difficult to assess why the reformer had success in Diriyyah, although the Wahhabi reform movement certainly provided an alternative source of legitimacy for the Al Saud. Muhammad ibn Saud adopted a religious message that promised an opportunity to compensate for the limitations of his rule. More specifically, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab promised him wealth, in the form of zakat and expansion under his religious guidance. It is also probable that rivalry between the amirs of Uyaynah and Diriyyah contributed to the success of a small settlement without particular political or economic significance. Uyaynah enjoyed far more prestige and importance than Diriyyah at that time.”²⁰

The Sa’udi-Wahhabi alliance was sealed in 1744 and set the scene for the emergence of a religious emirate. The Al Sa’ud would not have been able to enable the expansion in the years to follow. The crucial factor supporting the new Saudi quasi-tribal confederation: was the submission to the tenets of the Islam of Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab.²¹

“Wahhabism provided a novel impetus for political centralisation. Expansion by conquest was the only mechanism that would permit the emirate to rise above the limited confines of a specific settlement. With the importance of jihad in Wahhabi teachings, conquests of new territories became possible. The spread of the Wahhabi *da’wa* (call), the purification of Arabia of unorthodox forms of religiosity and the enforcement of the sharia among Arabian society were fundamental demands of the Wahhabi movement. The amir of Diriyyah took the Wahhabi reformer, recently expelled from Uyaynah, under his wing, and accepted these demands. Wahhabism impregnated the Saudi leadership with a new force, which proved to be crucial for the consolidation and expansion of Saudi rule.”

¹⁹The prevalence of the concept of *bay'a* in Jihadism reminds us of the Wahhabi genealogy of contemporary Jihadism.

²⁰Al-Rasheed, Madawi, A History of Saudi Arabia, Cambridge et al.: Cambridge University Press, 2010 (2nd edition), p.16-17.

²¹Ibid., p.17.

In the beginning, Sa'udi-Wahhabi *jihad* mainly took the form of raids against communities, which had not yet accepted the Sa'udi-Wahhabi leadership. Alliances with tribal federations, who were not only attracted by the promise of religious salvation but also the expectation of a share of the booty, soon provided the new state with a flexible body of warriors for new raids. In addition, adopting the new religious doctrine and accepting the new political leadership meant that one was safe from the raids of the new Saudi state. The emirate of Muhammad ibn Sa'ud and his descendants expanded very quickly. By 1792, most of central Arabia, which until then had been governed by many different independent rulers and tribes, had been subjugated by the new Saudi entity. By 1797, it had expanded eastwards to the Arabian Gulf. By 1804, the Saudi warriors had reached the Red Sea in the West of the Arabian Peninsula and conquered the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, which had formally belonged to the Ottoman Empire. The Saudi ruler at first tried to promote the Wahhabi creed in these cities. Burckhardt in his *Materials* writes:

“If farther proof were required that the Wahabys are very orthodox Muselmans, their catechism would furnish it. When Saoud took possession of Mekka, he distributed copies of this catechism among the inhabitants, and ordered that the pupils in public schools should learn it by heart. Its contents are nothing more than what the most orthodox Turk must admit to be true. Saoud entertained an absurd notion, that the townspeople were brought up in entire ignorance of their religion, and therefore wished to instruct those of Mekka in its first principles. Nothing, however, was contained in this catechism which the Mekkans had not already learned; and when Saoud found that they were better informed than his own people, he desisted from further disseminating it among them.”²²

In the north, the Saudi armies entered Syria and Iraq and plundered Kerbela, but the Saudi state did not establish a permanent presence there. The southward expansion was stopped by the unfamiliar terrain in the mountains of Yemen. Raids were the main drivers of territorial expansion. The Saudi leadership installed Wahhabi judges and preachers in conquered cities and places of worship which were deemed “un-Islamic” by the Wahhabi scholars were often demolished, including the magnificent shrines above the graves of the prophet Muhammad and the first four caliphs in Medina. In Mecca and Medina, libraries were pillaged and books about “un-Islamic” topics like mystic practices were burnt. Partly in response to these controversial acts, and partly to destroy a potential political threat before it grew more dangerous, the Ottoman leadership finally reacted in 1811 and ordered the destruction of the Emirate of Dir'iyya. Muhammad 'Ali, the Ottoman governor of Egypt, was instructed to crush the Saudi state. With the help of some tribal confederations, which had switched sides, the Egyptian-Ottoman troops managed to defeat the Saudi armies and in 1818

²²Burckhardt, John Lewis, *Materials for a History of the Wahabys*, in William Ouseley (ed.), *Notes on the Bedouins and Wahabys: Collected During His Travels in the East*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp.95-358: 104-105.

they took Dir'iyya, the capital of the Saudi state. The last leader of the first Saudi state, 'Abd Allah ibn Sa'ud was forced to surrender, brought to Istanbul, and beheaded. Thus, the emirate of Dir'iyya, which at its peak had ruled the territories of modern day-Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and the northwest of Oman, was destroyed, and most of the Arabian Peninsula went back to being ruled by local notables and tribal leaders. One European traveler who lived in Greater Syria 1819 and 1819 gives a fine description of the situation between the fall of the first Saudi-Wahhabi entity and the rise of the second one since 1824, a time not studied yet sufficiently.²³

Emirate of Najd (1824-1891)

From 1824 to 1891, members of the Al Sa'ud family ruled over a second Saudi entity on the Arabian Peninsula, the Emirate of Najd. Like the first, it relied on scholars of the Wahhabi tradition to fill religious and judicial positions and give its political rule a religious legitimization. As the Egyptian-Ottoman troops withdrew from the Najd region in central Arabia, a descendant of the former rulers of the destroyed Saudi emirate made a successful attempt to restore Saudi rule there. Turki ibn 'Abd Allah, a grandson of the first ruler of the emirate of Dir'iyya managed to gather a group of warriors and conquer the city of Riyadh in 1824. The city became the capital of the second Saudi state, the so-called Emirate of Najd. By 1830, he had regained control of most of central Arabia and the territories of modern-day Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. However, the territory of the second Saudi state remained much smaller than that of the first and it did not seem to be able to stimulate the same religious impetus as the emirate of Dir'iyya in its first years. The Hijaz in the West of the Peninsula with the cities of Mecca and Medina remained well outside its area of influence. Large parts of the sedentary population seemed wary of a new wave of Saudi-Wahhabi jihad. Because of internal differences within the ruling Al Sa'ud family and the remaining Egyptian-Ottoman military presence in the West of the Arabian Peninsula, the rule of the second Saudi state remained fragile. After the death of Emir Faysal ibn Turki, a vicious civil war broke out between his three sons Abd Allah, Saud, and 'Abd al-Rahman, who all claimed the right of succession for themselves. The Saudi emirate was weakened by years and years of infighting. Finally, the Al Rashid family, the rulers of the rival emirate of al-Ha'il, a rising independent realm in the northern Najd, took the opportunity to extend their influence. In 1891, they drove the Al Sa'ud family out of Riyadh, thereby ending the emirate of Najd, the second Saudi state on the Arabian Peninsula. Most members of the Al Sa'ud went into exile in neighboring Kuwait. The deep impact of the fall of the Emirate of Najd created a feeling among Wahhabi scholars that internal dissent has to be avoided, by all means, a feeling influencing the mainstream Wahhabi stance against any

²³For an overview see Zdanowski, Jerzy, *The Middle East at the Turn of the 18th and 19th Century*, in Tadeusz Majda (ed.), *Waclaw Seweryn Rzewuski, Concerning the Horses of the Orient and those from Oriental Breeds. Volume III: Essays*, Warsaw: National Library of Poland, 2017, pp.241-263.

opposition in Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Kingdom (1932-)

Eleven years after the fall of the second Saudi entity, another descendant of the Al Saud family started to lay the foundations of a third Saudi state on the Arabian Peninsula, which would later become the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In 1902 CE, a member of the Al Sa'ud family by the name of 'Abd al-'Aziz ibn Sa'ud returned to central Arabia to reclaim his family's power. Supported by the Al Sabah family in Kuwait he managed to drive out of the Al Rashid troops who controlled most of the Najd from Riyadh. Through a series of military campaigns, 'Abd al-'Aziz ibn Sa'ud was able to considerably expand his realm and wrestled control of most of Central Arabia from the Al Rashid by 1906 CE. Having signed a treaty with Britain in 1915 CE as allies against the Ottoman Empire, 'Abd al-Aziz ibn Sa'ud was able to conquer the territories of the Al Rashid in 1921 CE. After the victory, he turned to the West and conquered the kingdom of Hijaz in 1925 CE driving out the former ruling family. Thus, 'Abd al-Aziz ibn Sa'ud became the king of Najd and Hijaz. In 1932 CE he formally merged the two kingdoms and established the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia existing until today. This quick expansion was made possible by the volunteers preaching Wahhabi Islam²⁴ and the Ikhwan (literally *brothers*) who were the core fighting force spreading Wahhabism by their military efforts.

'Abd al-Aziz ibn Sa'ud was able to renew the alliance with the Wahhabi scholars although the Ikhwan have been crushed in 1929 CE as a rebellious force and surrendered in January 1930 CE.²⁵ We will not follow the development of the Saudi state and conclude this historical overview with two remarks.

Religion and the Saudi State

From the armed revolt of the Ikhwan, the occupation of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979 to the deployment of US troops on Saudi soil during the Gulf War of 1990/91 and the efforts to counter the Arab rebellions after 2011 the Saudi leadership always sought the approval of the leading religious scholars for political decisions of the leadership. Wahhabis, however, became a dynamic and fragmented universe of discourse using Wahhabi language and re-interpreting elements of the Wahhabi doctrine. Nevertheless, there is a core group of leading scholars led by the descendants of Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, the Al Shaykh, forming a kind of Wahhabi mainstream that is called here Wahhabism incorporating a monopoly of symbolic violence (see below).

²⁴For the role of the Wahhabi scholars until the 1950s CE cf. Steinberg, Guido, Religion und Staat in Saudi-Arabien: die wahhabitischen Gelehrten 1902-1953, Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2002.

²⁵For this period until 1936 cf. Kostiner, Joseph, The Making of Saud Arabia 1919-1936: From Chieftaincy to Monarchical State, Oxford et al.: Oxford University Press, 1993.

and beyond

Since the rise to power of Muhammad ibn Salman ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz Al Sa'ud (b. 1985), as crown prince in 2018, and the beginning of the reign of Salman ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz in 2015 the Saudi system slowly changed. Internal reforms - no fundamental ones - and a reorientation of foreign policy, esp., the war in Yemen, touched upon many pressing issues arising after the Arab Spring. Nevertheless, any predictions are futile, since too many factors influence the Saudi political process. But, Saudi Arabia is part of the Arab world and the Gulf region and its future has to be read in these contexts. It is not an enigma as Madawi Al-Rasheed stated: "But there is nothing exceptional about Saudi Arabia."²⁶

Thus, the following studies are not to be read as revealing the hidden core, the essence of the Saudi regime. It is a study of a specific modern state allowing for reflections on the modern state and the role of religion. We are not looking for the secrets of a "Saudi terror machine" as one author put it, but into the working of an entity claiming global influence by force of its economic power and its religious legitimacy. Now, let's turn to the state of Saudi Arabia!

Statehood and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy. According to the Saudi Basic Law adopted by royal decree in 1992 has to comply with the Islamic law (*shari'a*) and the Qur'an. The Qur'an and the Sunna, the corpus of Hadith, are declared to be the constitution of the kingdom.²⁷ As described in the previous notes on the history of Saudi Arabia it is easy to be understood that there is no history of a permanent of Saudi Arabia, but several attempts to establish and expand the territory reigned by the Al Sa'ud: from the Emirate of Dir'iyya, the Emirate of Najd to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia turned into a global a-state. Since it is historically an entity without a well-defined territory and an emerging polity, it is difficult to discuss Saudi Arabia as a nation-state following the definitions of political studies or international law. As a recent article stated:

"In many respects, Saudi Arabia is a special case in the Middle East. Its ruling elite, the House of Saud, almost exclusively draws its legitimacy from the claim of serving the Holy Cities of Islam in particular, and the Islamic religion in general. The Saudi monarchy officially supports Wahhabism as the main religious doctrine for [...] Saudi Arabia. Although a variation of the global Salafi movement, the Wahhabi version supports the state and monarchy of Saudi Arabia."²⁸

²⁶Al-Rasheed, Madawi, Introduction: The Dilemmas of a New Era, in ead. (ed.), *Salman's Legacy: The Dilemma of a New Era in Saudi Arabia*, Oxford et al.: Oxford University Press, 2018, pp.1-28: 26.

²⁷Basic Law of Governance in Robbers, Gerhard (ed.) (2007), *Encyclopedia of World Constitutions*, Vol. 1, New York: Facts on File: 791.

²⁸Gharaibeh, Mohammad, "Religious Legitimation and Political Pragmatism in a Changing Society: Saudi Arabia and its Religious Elite," in *Frankfurter Zeitschrift für Islamisch-*

Thus, it may be futile to ask, if the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia can be regarded not as a remnant from pre-modern times, but as a truly modern – for those who prefer this idea: post-modern – state. As Pierre Bourdieu put it:

„By a procedural reflex, a professional effect, each time I have tackled a new object what I was doing appeared to me to be perfectly justified, and I would say that the further I advance in my work on the state, the more convinced I am that, if we have a particular difficulty in thinking this object, it is because it is - and I weigh my words - almost unthinkable. If it is so easy to say easy things about this object, that is precisely because we are in a certain sense penetrated by the very thing we have to study.“²⁹

We may start to think one aspect of the unthinkable: the post-colonial, in the Saudi case: non-colonial, state outside of Western Europe is (and has been) different from the framework of European politico-juridical history.³⁰ It is an a-state (see below). To accept this unthinkable idea, would mean to move beyond the world order dominated by ideas born in Europe and North America and beyond the idea of a nation-state in general. This would mean to move beyond an idea of state emerging in this context:

„If I had to give a provisional definition of what is called 'the state', I would say that the sector of the field of power, which may be called 'administrative field' or 'field of public office', this sector that we particularly have in mind when we speak of 'state' without further precision, is defined by possession of the monopoly of legitimate physical and symbolic violence. Already several years ago, I made an addition to the famous definition of Max Weber, who defined the state [as the] 'monopoly of legitimate violence', which I corrected by adding 'monopoly of legitimate physical and symbolic violence', inasmuch as the monopoly of symbolic violence is the condition for possession of the exercise of the monopoly of physical violence itself. In other words, my definition, as I see it, underlies Weber's definition.“³¹

Although Bourdieu includes some non-European cases, he fails to include the colonial/imperial state European and North American style into his analysis. He tells us:

„People [...] have a state identity. The functions of the state clearly include the production of legitimate social identity; in other

Theologische Studien Special Issue 2 (2019), pp.81-104: 81.

²⁹Bourdieu, Pierre, *On the State: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1989-1992*, ed. by Patrick Champagne et al., Cambridge/Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2014: 3.

³⁰For the need of a new theory of statehood in the global south see the contributions in *Journal für Entwicklungspolitik* 24ii (2008): *Periphere Staatlichkeit: Kritische Staatstheorie des globalen Südens*.

³¹Bourdieu, Pierre, *On the State: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1989-1992*, ed. by Patrick Champagne et al., Cambridge/Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2014: 3-4.