# Salafism and Saudi Arabia's Middle East Policy Towards Iran (2011-2020)

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## Abstract

This article has chosen the theoretical framework of ontological security to explain the impact of Salafism on Saudi Arabia's Middle East policy. The question is why Saudi Arabia has moved towards more support for the Taqlidi Salafist movement over the past decade, and what the identity and security implications of this support have been? The argument of the article is that the role and position of Salafism in Saudi Arabia's Middle East policy should be considered as a continuation of the historical alliance between Al-Saud and Al-Sheikh, which has played an important role in maintaining the identity and security of this actor. But the internal dynamism of the Salafi discourse, the emergence of regional rivalries, and the emergence of the so-called global counter-terrorism literature have shifted the discourse into Saudi Arabia's Middle East policy, leading to differences in identity and security with other Salafi, Sunni, and Islamism currents. The findings of the article show that between 2011 and 2020, Saudi Arabia placed Taqlidi Salafism as a pragmatic current with a conservative reading and close to the official institution of Wahhabism at the center of its Middle East policy, especially in Yemen and Libya. The present article is based on explanatory -analytical approach

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and the required information has been collected by library method and internet sources.

## Introduction

The role of Salafi discourse elements in Saudi Arabia's Middle East policy should be considered as a continuation of the historical alliance of Al-Saud and Al-Sheikh in 1744, which played an important role in shaping the identity, security and, interests of this actor. Abdul Wahab, the founder of the Wahhabi movement - a form of Saudi Salafism - and Mohammed bin Saud, the founder of the first Saudi government in the mid-18th century, laid the foundations of an alliance that lasted more than two and a half centuries. It has given Saudi Arabia legitimacy, political power, security, and identity. (Al-Rasheed, 2010).

By segregating Wahhabism internally by Muhammad Ibn-Wahab and controlling foreign policy by Muhammad ibn Saud, Saudi Arabia was able to quickly oust domestic territory in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by uniting domestic tribes and launching military campaigns. Justify control of the legitimate Ottoman caliphate. The result of the union of Al-Saud and Al-Sheikh; The third Saudi government, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, was established in 1932 and has been able to expand Wahhabi Salafism to various parts of the world over the past century while maintaining the legitimacy of the regime and consolidating the power of the ruling dynasty.

To explain the role and position of Salafism in Saudi Arabia's Middle East policy from 2011 to 2020, the article has chosen the theoretical framework of ontological security. The theoretical contribution of this framework is related to the issue of resolving the conflict between the security and the identity of the Saudi government and the fact that Saudi Arabia is a security-seeking or

identity-oriented state. Most of the existing research literature has analyzed one of the concepts of identity and security as the axis of Saudi Arabia's Middle East policy, while Saudi Arabia's support for the imitative Salafist movement has the ability to analyze these two categories in one context.

There are also questions about how the position of Salafi discourse and groups in Saudi Arabia's Middle East policy from 2011 to 2020 can be explained by ontological security statements. It is also necessary to answer the question of why Saudi Arabia has moved towards more support for the imitative Salafist movement in the last decade, and what are the identity and security effects of this support?

The authors argue that despite Saudi Arabia's continued support for Salafism, due to the internal dynamics of this discourse and the emergence and activation of rival sects, jihadists and the Brotherhood, regional rivalries in the Middle East, and the emergence of the so-called global struggle literature. Against terrorism, the ground was prepared for a change in Saudi Arabia's supportive approach to the integrated Salafist movement.

The findings of the article show that the imitative Salafism - also known by other titles such as Jamia and Mudakhli - due to its adherence to the official institution of Wahhabism and political pragmatism, has been able to play the simultaneous role of identity, i.e. the continuation of Salafi identity for the Saudi government and security. Balance the regional role and neutralize regional and international pressures and find a special place in Saudi Arabia's Middle East policy.

## Theoretical Framework

Regarding the use of an appropriate theoretical framework to analyze the position of Salafism in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, two frameworks have always been used in research. The first framework is realist theories that highlight security and interests and explain the position of Salafism in Saudi Middle East politics as a tool in the service of the security and interests of the Saudi

government. The argument of realist theories is that if these two factors threaten, support for this discourse and groups will be affected. The second framework is identity-oriented theories, which are mainly influenced by the school of constructivism, emphasizing identity, discourse, and ideological factors, and explaining Saudi Arabia's foreign policy as identity structures.

The present study has chosen the framework of "ontological security". This theory is one of the new theories in the field of political science and international relations that has been proposed in recent years after the structural transformation to explain the behavior of countries in the international arena. In many cases, instead of seeking physical security, countries seek ontological security in the sense of security of self, existence, and identity (Mitzen, 2006). Ontological security, like the need of countries for physical security, is induced and inferred from the individual level, so that ontological security also requires the character of the government as a wise agent. In fact, cognitive security, like physical security, is a fundamental behavioral motivation of countries in the field of foreign and international policy (Steel, 2013: 12-7).

The theory of ontological security has been used by some international relations researchers such as Jennifer Mitzen and Brent Steele to analyze the motivation of countries' behavior in the field of foreign policy and international politics. These researchers have tried to promote the concept of ontological security from the individual to the national level. In fact, these researchers have extracted the theory of ontological security from Anthony Giddens and his theory of construction.

Giddens developed this concept in his theory of constructivism, defining ontological security as follows: "Such a feeling is reflected in the behavior of government officials and officials." "Ontological security is not just about securing the body, it is about securing itself," says Giddens. (Giddens, 1991: 92)

Although, according to the Saudi realist literature, it is essentially a security-seeking and balancing actor, and has

generally followed realist logic (Ataee and Mansouri Moghadam, 2013) it has not necessarily done so at times. This means that the Saudi government has not deviated from its principles of identity at a time when its material security is at stake. In fact, this simultaneous attention to the two fundamental categories of security and identity can be seen during the last two decades, at times such as 9/11, the 2003 occupation of Iraq, the 2011 Arab uprisings, and in areas such as Syria and Yemen. Libya and Egypt observed.

In this context, ontological security helps to resolve the conflict between security and identity and the issue of whether Saudi Arabia is a security-seeking or identity-oriented state. Because Saudi Arabia, by supporting the Salafi conservative current, i.e. the imitative Salafists, who are politically compromising and do not pose a challenge to the Saudi political system, and consider obedience to the guardian as an inseparable part of their principles, while distinguishing themselves from other groups. Radical Salafists, including the jihadists in the global counter-terrorism system, in addition to providing security for the regime and the survival of the monarchy, have maintained their identity as an important and inviolable issue.

Another contribution that the theoretical framework of ontological security provides to better understand and explain Saudi foreign policy compared to conventional frameworks is the Saudi regime's distinctions from similarities within the framework of Salafist discourse. Some researchers have suggested that the existence of commonalities and interests can be the most decisive cause of hostility and tension. "Convergence between individuals and groups can lead to divergence over time," says Axelord. The factors that build a common identity - such as pan-Arabism, pan-Islamism, or European identity - can raise feelings of difference" (Axelrod, 1997: 65).

## I- The link between Salafism and Wahhabism

Salafism is one of the currents of thought and politics that has

spread over a wide area of the subcontinent, Central Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa over the past few decades and has played an important role in regional politics. Lexically, the term Salafiyya goes back to the roots of Salaf and in the Arabic lexicon from the word Salaf and Salf in the previous meaning, and it refers to the early periods of Islam and the first three centuries of the history of the Islamic Ummah, as-Sahabah, Tabi'un and Tabi'un Tabi'un. The common historical term Salafi refers to a tendency that calls for following the righteous predecessor and setting him as a role model in the present age (Abu-Rumman, 2017: 36-28).

Simultaneously with the end of the Abbasid caliphate and after the fall of Baghdad in 656 A.H, we are witnessing the emergence of a second Salafi tendency at the hands of Ahmad ibn Taymiyyah al-Harrani and his school with more maturity and enlightenment. This period represents an important change in the formation of the doctrinal and cognitive framework of the Salafi school, so that in this period, conflicts spread between the great Islamic schools as well as within the Sunnis themselves. The books of this team, including the two key books "Minhaj al-Sunnah" and "Al-Aqeedah al-Wasitiyah" and his fatwas, as well as his school of thought, including his students Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, al-Dhahabi, Ibn Kathir, and others, became the intellectual compass of the previous and later Salafi currents (lohlker ,2018: 33-26).

This line of thought in the contemporary period led to the emergence of the Wahhabi Salafis and continued in the early 18th century until the middle of the 19th century by Sheikh Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab in the Arabian Peninsula. Abdul Wahab's booklet of Tawhid is considered as the main source of most followers of the Salafi school (Jones, 2018: 15). From this perspective, the stages of formation of the Salafi current can be divided into four stages:

The first stage is "theoretical formation" which starts from Imam Ahmad Ibn Hanbal in the third century AH and in the seventh century AH is theorized by Ibn Taymiyyah and then his students and its foundations and intellectual forms are established. Be. The

second stage is "implementation" by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and his disciples, which spread throughout the Arabian Peninsula and then to India, Iraq, Yemen, and Africa. The third stage is the "development and promotion" and becoming a powerful and influential current that begins from the beginning of the twentieth century, especially with the fall and collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the division of this state, and the beginning of confrontation with the West by the beginning of the colonial period. Continues in the early seventies. And the fourth stage is the "ideology and jihad" and the emergence of the phenomenon of the formation of Salafi political-jihadi groups, which begins with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and then enters the offensive phase with the formation of al-Qaeda and the 9/11 attacks (Lacroix, 2010: 147-111). The 2011 Arab uprisings and the establishment of ISIS, which is still present in the Middle East, are a continuation of this phase.

## II- Salafism and Saudi Arabia Middle East Policy

From the founding of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932 until a decade ago, when the Arab uprisings in the Arab world changed the actor's environment and changed Riyadh's foreign policy, the principles of Saudi foreign diplomacy were based on the policy of maintaining the status quo. According to Sebastian Michel, Saudi national and foreign security policies focus on four main goals: the survival of the regime, maintaining the Islamic way of life at home and abroad, confronting external threats to internal and regional security, and ensuring national welfare and expanding economic influence. in the Islamic world and the Arab world (Gasiorowski, 2015: 176). In the debates over the stability of the Saudi monarchy, Islam has often been involved (Bligh, 1985).

Madawi al-Rasheed emphasizes that religion is the backbone of the Saudi regime's ideology and its influence everywhere. Religion has been used throughout the history of this country to establish legitimacy and maintain the ruling political order. The Islam of Wahhabi scholars has been instrumental in the nation-

building process and has given legitimacy to the royal family of Al-Saud (Al-Rasheed, 2010).

The same view of Wahhabi Islam also spread to the security and identity contexts of Saudi Arabia and turned its foreign policy to a large extent a combination of pragmatism and Salafism (Ebrahimi, 2015).

Gregory Goss also argues that Islam defines Saudi Arabia's role in the world, from hosting the Hajj to playing a role in the formation of Islamic organizations such as the Islamic Conference, the World Union of Muslims, the World Union of Muslim Youth, and financial support for charities. Welfare, establishing mosques and religious schools, and supporting Islamic political groups throughout the Islamic and Arab world. Meanwhile, the Saudi regime relies on religious leaders to validate and approve important decisions in foreign policy (Bush and Ehteshami, 2011: 372-351).

In this context, the role of cultural, ideological and discourse components based on the principles and teachings of the Salafist school, considering Wahhabism, has a special place in the regulation of foreign policy and foreign relations, especially in the Middle East. In fact, the impact of the merger between the Wahhabi Salafis and the Saudi government and the division of the public sphere into religious and political aspects in the second half of the twentieth century, and especially in the seventies of the twentieth century, coincided with the oil eruption and mutual use of the Salafi school (Mandeville, 2021).

It emerged, where the Saudis used the Salafis to serve the goals of the government and the country, and the Salafis also used this relationship specifically in all domestic areas of the country to impose their religious views on society and individuals (Al-Rasheed, 2014: 24)

Almost all contemporary Salafi groups agree on the general lines of Islamic belief and specific jurisprudential-historical authorities from the beginning of the emergence of Hadith in the Middle Ages and then Ibn Taymiyyah to the period of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab in the new period. The groups differ from the

heritage and literature of the mentioned authorities (Houshangi and Paktchi, 2011: 116-107).

Considering the differences, branches and tendencies, as well as the emergence of various readings in the Salafi school, in general, the four main tendencies of this contemporary thought can be distinguished at least in the political arena of the Arab countries.

The first tendency is the "conservative Salafi or scientific and propagandistic Salafi" who chooses the call to Islam and education and does not accept political participation and focuses his efforts on reforming the doctrinal and scientific aspects and responding to the ideas of other deviant Islamic religions. The second tendency is the "imitation Salafi", which is close to the conservative and courtly Salafis of Saudi Arabia and is much more extremist towards other Islamic parties. The party is stable. The third tendency is called "Salafi jihadi", which is completely opposed to other currents, and its political attitude is based on the excommunication of contemporary secular Arab states and takes action for radical and armed change. And the fourth tendency is called "moderate and reformist Salafism", which on the one hand has a combination of Salafi religious beliefs and thoughts, and on the other hand has a movement, organized and even political activity, and believes in political reform and peaceful change (Shihadeh, 2016: 80-57).

## III- Taqlidi Salafism in Saudi Arabia's Middle East Policy

Taqlidi Salafism is one of the tendencies within the Salafist movement, which is politically on the right side of the conservative, propagandistic and courtly Salafi line of thought, and is much more radical towards other Islamic parties, and its political attitude is based on the principle of obedience, But the order and non-acceptance of political opposition is strong against them, whether violently or peacefully. The activities of Taqlidi Salafis are focused on propagating, teaching, correcting hadith works, and writing denials on opponents such as Sayyid Qutb, jihadi Salafis, non-Salafi Sunnis, Sufis and Shiites; They oppose any demand for a share from the ruler, oppositional activities ranging from writing an

open letter, a peaceful march and strike to an armed uprising against the ruler, and believe that Muslim rulers are the first to be obeyed. Any remarks or objections to the ruler must be passed on to the ruler secretly and out of desperation. This group has always taken a pro-government stance against other Islamic movements and political opponents, and almost in response to other Islamist groups, specifically the Salafis, who are active or discourse. They have specialized in anti-government politics (Al-Daghashi, 2014: 38-29).

Followers of Muhammad ibn Aman al-Jami and Rabi bin Hadi al-Madakhli in Saudi Arabia, Muqbel bin Hadi al-Wadi'i and his followers in Yemen, followers of Nasser al-Din al-Albani in Jordan, Abdul Malik ibn Ramadan al-Jazairi in Algeria, such as Mohammed Saeed Raslan, Osama al Quasi, Hesham al Bialy and Talaat Zahran in Egypt and Abdul Hadi Wahbi, Saad al-Din al-Kabi in Lebanon, Majdi Hafela, Ashraf Miar, Ayman al-Saadi, Abdul Hakim al-Masri, and Tariq Darman al-Zantani in Libya represent and highlight this line of thought (Al- mushawah, 2012: 116-111).

This school of thought was first established in Medina in the 1990s by Sheikh Muhammad Aman al-Jami, an Abyssinian scholar, and after Al-Jami's death, Sheikh Rabi 'ibn Hadi al-Madkhali, a professor at the Faculty of Hadith at the University of Medina, became the ideologue of this school of thought. Among the ideological features of this current are defending the Saudi government and intellectual confrontation with government opponents such as the jihadist and takfiri Salafis, and confronting partisan currents such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Sayyid Qutb's thoughts and denouncing democracy (Al-Salafiya Al-Jamiyah, 2012: 113-85).

In fact, today, the Taqlidi Salafi current, which includes a range of characters with sometimes different interpretations, is more commonly known as Jamieh, and especially Madkhali. In this context, the incoming current in Saudi Arabia appeared as an anti-ideology against the current of "Du'a al-Sahwa" or Islamic

Awakening. "Prayer of Sahwa" in the war with Iraq condemned the help of US-led forces; Because they saw Iraq as a Muslim nation. The interlocutors took a stand against them and legitimized the entry of foreign forces into Saudi Arabia and their assistance against Iraq; A position that was close to that of official scholars. The interlocutors further warned of the danger of prominent figures of the Sahwa movement in Saudi Arabia, such as Salman al-Ouda, Muhammad Saeed al-Qahtani, Aid al-Qarni, and Safar al-Hawali.

The Jamies try to advance the goals of the government by issuing fatwas if necessary, and in fact provide a kind of relative acceptance for accepting the unusual behaviors of the government. For example, the fatwa of Abdul Aziz bin Baz, one of the supporters of this group, is very significant in order to normalize the Arab-Israeli relationship (Mirahmadi and Valedbeigi, 2014).

Regardless of the position that the historical alliance between Al-Saud and Al-Sheikh has attained which, in turn, has led to its position in the sources of Saudi foreign policy, the role of ideological and discourse elements in Saudi foreign policy of this actor must also be examined in the regional and International environment.

The rise of Jamal Abdel Nasser's pan-Arabism in Egypt and the rise of Arab nationalism in the streets of the Arab world, influenced by decolonization and the Arab-Israeli issue, left Saudi Arabia without ethnic and nationalist elements within its territory. Was to highlight Islam as a unifying element internally and especially externally. Meanwhile, in the mid-1960s and 1970s, Saudi Arabia launched another wave, the Islamic Ummah, to discredit the pan-Arab wave of Nasserism, advocating cohesion and unity among Muslims. But with the demise of the Pan-Arab project, the issue of pan-Islamism spread among the Arab masses. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia introduced itself as the representative of the Muslims of the world and declared that it is the only Islamic country that is governed according to Islamic law (Sindi, 1986: 72).

In other words, Saudi Pan-Islamism emerged with the aim of overcoming national territorial differences and uniting different

entities in the region, but as a macro-ideology, it became a point of contention with rival identities such as Shiite Pan-Islamism and Brotherhood Pan-Islamism in the 1970s. AD and later (Wehrey, 2017). In fact, this development paved the way for a shift in the direction of Saudi Islamic foreign policy towards differentiation from other discourse and ideological rivals (Lacroix, 2014).

In order to make this distinction, Saudi Arabia provided special support to Salafi groups with different readings, which after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, these groups to other regions, including Chechnya, Kosovo and their countries, including Saudi Arabia returned (Darwich, 2014) which again provided the source of changes in Saudi Arabia's strategy. The source of this change was the second Gulf War in 1991. With the outbreak of the crisis and the invasion of Iraq by coalition forces and the liberation of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, fearing for the surrounding developments, allowed the presence of foreign forces in its territory. This permission, which was obtained with the jurisprudential approval of Sheikh Abdul Aziz bin Baz, the head of the Kebar AlUlama Board, angered other Salafi movements, including the jihadists, who accused Saudi Arabia and the Council of Senior Ulama of collaborating with infidels in the land of revelation. These developments also led to the emergence of another Salafi current, the Sahwa al-Islami, which later created the reformist and moderate Salafism. The current criticism of the Saudi rulers and the practical actions of the jihadists led the Saudi domestic arena to radicalism, with the 1995 al-Khobar bombings a turning point in the process. The establishment of al-Qaeda in 1998 and the subsequent attacks of September 11, 2001, in which 15 of the 19 assailants who attacked the World Trade Center were Saudi nationals, led to widespread pressure on Saudi Arabia.

In fact, a trend that began in the early 1990s and culminated in the late 1990s led to two major shifts in Saudi Arabia's pro-Salafist strategy: First, Saudi Arabia's participation in the US-led International Counter-Terrorism Coalition. And second, the shift in Saudi support for Salafi groups to screening. In fact, these two

changes caused Saudi Arabia, while cooperating with the United States to fight terrorist groups, especially inside its territory and also in the region, to cross the border with the jihadist Salafis who legitimized Al-Saud and ruled over the two holy shrines. They were hesitant to make it more specific.

In other words, widespread criticism and, more importantly, jihadist suicide operations inside Saudi Arabia, which at the same time targeted Saudi security and identity, paved the way for a reconsideration of support for the movement (Athanasoulia, 2020: 86-90).

## IV- Solving the Problem of Security and Identity in Saudi Middl East Policy

Widespread criticism of the Saudi approach and more importantly, the jihadist suicide operations inside Saudi Arabia, which at the same time targeted Saudi security and identity, paved the way for a reconsideration of support for the movement. It is from this time that the ground is prepared for widespread domestic and regional support for the Taqlidi Salafist movement.

For at least the past decade, the imitative Salafist movement has been able to establish a more effective position and link with Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, especially in the Middle East, in the context of the balance between the security components (maintaining the regime's security) and identity (maintaining the monarchy's identity). The reason for this role-playing must be considered at both the discourse and operational levels: At the discourse level, Taqlidi Salafism is a conservative current close to the Saudi senior ulama, emphasizing obedience to the guardian and not allowing the ruler to leave. At the operational level, too, the Taqlidi Salafist has been able to confront rival currents through military and political means.

Over the past decade, Saudi foreign policy has highlighted the role of imitative Salafis in Yemen, Libya, Egypt, and Syria, while distinguishing themselves from jihadist Salafis while playing a role in the Counter-Terrorism Coalition. To continue. a wide range of

tools, such as financial, media, and weapons support from Saudi Arabia, have been used to strengthen the imitation movement against other rival jihadist, Brotherhood, and reform movements (International Crisis Group 2019: 25-33)

## Conclusion

The role and position of Salafism in Saudi Arabia's Middle East policy should be considered along with the historical alliance of Al-Saud and Al-Sheikh, which, despite the ups and downs of this relationship, still plays a decisive role in shaping the identity and security of Saudi Arabia. However, the internal dynamics of the Salafist discourse and the escalation of the crisis at the regional level have changed Saudi Arabia's confrontation with this discourse and led Saudi Arabia to differentiate its identity and security with other Salafi, Sunni and Islamist currents.

In this context, Saudi Arabia is trying to combine the security of the regime with the identity of the government, which has always faced significant challenges and crises and is facing the type of considerations, orientations and policies of Saudi foreign policy Over the past few decades it has made a huge impact, from an Islamist state in the 1960s and 1970s to a Sunni state in the 1980s and 1990s and then a Salafi state supporting a particular conservative reading in the two decades. Twenty-first has changed direction. in other words, the growing support for Salafism in the 21st century, which entered a new phase after 9/11 and then continued with the occupation of Afghanistan, Iraq, and the 2011 Arab uprisings, shows that Saudi Arabia, although seeking to maintain its security and survival as a balancing state in the Middle East system, but it has also manifested its ontological security, that is, its special identity, in the face of Islamist currents.

Hence, the Saudi government has been able to take advantage of the Taqlidi Salafi current and its material and spiritual support; while managing it, within the framework of its strategy, it strives to neutralize the dangers posed by the rise of the jihadist and reformist Salafists, who have many supporters inside Saudi Arabia. Thus,

over the past decade, the Taqlidi Salafist movement has been able to establish a more effective position and link with Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, especially in the Middle East, in the context of the balance between the security components (maintaining the regime's security) and identity (maintaining the monarchy's identity).

Manifestations of Saudi support for Taqlidi Salafism in Yemen and Libya have been prominent over the past decade. The Madkhalies in Yemen and Libya, who are in fact the students of Rabi bin Hadi al-Madkhali, have been able to play their role well within the framework of two levels of identity and security for Saudi Arabia. Despite the Saudi leaders' insistence on a return to moderate Islam domestically and regionally, it seems that support for the Salafi discourse will continue to grow stronger with an emphasis on Taqlidi and pro-Wahhabi readings. However, this support is as long as this current can continue to act in accordance with the security and identity components desired by the kingdom.

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