Conclusions
Our study leads us to the fact that the Saudi state which emerged as kingdom in the first half of the 19th century through the fruitful efforts of the House of Saud, today, ranks among the most powerful countries of the Muslim world. The history of Saudi Arabia is actually a religio-political history of the origins and development of the so-called ‘Wahhabiyya’, in real terms. It was in essence a ‘revival’ of the purity of early Islam.

The puritanical but appealing approach to Islam prompted Muhammad ibn Saud and his successors to rapidly conquer much of Central Arabia, and establish the first Saudi State in the 18th century. It is also evident that since the first Saudi State, Shari’a (Islamic Law) has been the pillar and source of the basic system of the Saudi government, which identifies the nature of the state, its goals, responsibilities as well as the relationship between the government and citizens.

Ever since the eighteenth century, Wahhabism contributed to the power of Al Saud through religious, educational and legal institutions. The risk of giving Wahhabism a role in foreign relations stemmed from its doctrine toward others.

Historically, Saudi Arabia has occupied a special place in the Islamic world. An appreciation of Islamic history and culture makes a genuine understanding of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, its Islamic heritage and its
role as leaders of the Arab as well as the Muslim world. Islam occupies the central position in Saudi Arabia as it not only guides the lives of people but also the policies and functions of the government. The Holy Quran is the constitution of the Kingdom. It serves as the basis of the Shari'a system and of the state.

Thus, it is the heartland of Islam, the birthplace of its history, is committed to preserving the Islamic traditions in all areas of government and society. It is a leader in the pursuit of worldwide Islamic solidarity. It hosts the Muslim World League, the Organization of the Islamic Conference, and other such bodies dedicated to the preserving of Islamic interests. Saudi Arabia, flush with oil revenue, and increasingly the most influential player among Arab countries, has long respted changing its ultra traditional ways. Now the intrusions of global economics and technology have begun to challenge some traditions in ways that the country’s idealists could not envisage. And the strain that this is causing is showing in the form of surprisingly open debate about how much Saudis really want to modernize. With oil wealth and consumerism, Wahhabi ulama, the ruling group and society were capable of a great degree of material indulgence, consumption, and the fulfillment of all worldly desires, within the limits prescribed in the holy book and the traditions of the Prophet.
From the very beginning, Wahhabi teachings were not only religious but also had political leanings. To be a good Muslim, one needs to strive towards establishing a Muslim state that upholds the shari’a and enforces the obligation to command the virtue and prohibit the vice. It has always maintained that Muslims owe obedience to a ruler, no matter how that ruler might have gained power, as long as he did not command a subject to violate the basic commands and prohibitions of the Islamic law.

The majority of Saudis regarded the Salafi-Wahhabi reformist movement a perfect solution to heterodoxy, religious laxity, saint veneration, immorality and superstition. Wahhabiyya claimed to safeguard the souls against the misguided Islam of others, for example Shia, Sufis, Zaydis, Ismailis, grave worshippers, known as quburis, and many others. It was also a shield against ‘corrupting’ Western influences, undesirable social behavior, immoral and unacceptable alien ideas such as secularism, nationalism, communism, and liberalism.

Islam and politics in Saudi Arabia are closely intertwined and mutually interdependent. Saudi Arabia was built with the support and approval of the ulama, thus their historical relationship gives them direct access to the monarchy. Muhammad ibn Saud was able to weaken and overcome diverse tribal affiliations and establish the kingdom by allying himself with Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab. The ulama operate as part
and parcel of the state apparatus in Saudi Arabia contributing to the stability of the country and support to the rulers in their efforts at change and development. The ulama hold a variety of positions in Saudi institutions as judges (qadis), lawyers (muhama), and prayer leaders (imams) though only a few of them wield real power. An attempt to introduce secular politics gave way to accepting the inevitability of Islam playing a significant role in the stability of the country. Successive governments looked to the ulama for support and legitimacy.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Wahhabism reached new heights of influence. Wahhabi ulama became less combative toward the rest of the Muslim world: Having given up violence against fellow Muslims in early 19th century, Wahhabi views have become much more acceptable internationally, partly because the doctrine gained converts beyond the peninsula and partly because it has served well as a platform to confront the challenge of the West.

During King Faisal’s period the influx of oil wealth amplified those efforts, funding mosques, Islamic centres, publications and staff dedicated to spreading the Wahhabi influence. Within Saudi Arabia, official religious institutions under Wahhabi control multiplied but at the same time the ulama maintained their hold on religious law courts, presided over the
creation of Islamic universities and ensured that children in public schools received a heavy dose of religious instruction.

However the underpinnings of Wahhabi influence were shaky in two respects. First, its dependence on the Saudi government leading Wahhabi clerics to support its policies. Second, the relationship with Muslim revivalist movements was based on sharing a common adversary (western influence), not a common doctrine.¹

In fact, the ulama exercise their sway in subtle and silent ways. While their input varies depending on the domestic circumstances and the strength of the Saud family, the king can never completely ignore them but must take their views into consideration in every choice he makes.

Since the 1970s, it has been commonplace to speculate the legitimacy and longevity of Al Saud rule. True, the kingdom has endured a prolonged stretch of unrest since 1990. In the 1990s, however, the Saudi/Wahhabi-revivalist alliance unraveled because of Riyadh’s decision to solicit United States military intervention against Iraq. The same issue divided the kingdom’s religious camp between traditional Wahhabs loyal to the monarchy and recruits to the reviveralist outlook.

Both inside and outside of Wahhabism’s homeland, its alliance with Al Saud, hitherto a source of power diminished its credibility.
The gradual erosion of Wahhabi credibility has been punctuated by three major crises [that struck Saudi Arabia between 1979 and 2001]: First, millenarian zealots seizure and brief holding of Mecca’s Grand Mosque in November 1979 in their bid to overthrow Al Saud. Second, the kingdom confronted its most serious external threat of the twentieth century when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990–1991, and third, al-Qaeda’s 11 September 2001 attacks on the USA which unleashed unprecedented strains in relations between Riyadh and Washington.

The crisis over Kuwait did, however, set off an unprecedented, intense and public debate inside the kingdom that included challenges to senior Wahhabi ulama from radical clerics and liberal reformers. A number of influential popular preachers, known as the sheikhs of the awakening (sahwa, in Arabic), found the fatwa utterly unpersuasive. They denounced the decision to invite infidel soldiers into the kingdom, essentially rejecting the authority of the Wahhabi leadership.²

Due to its authoritarian and theocratic rule, the House of Saud has attracted much criticism during its rule of Saudi Arabia. Its opponents generally refer to the Saudi monarchy as totalitarians or dictators. There have been numerous incidents of demonstrations and other forms of resistance against them.³
The Islamist’s criticism of the monarchy grew dramatically following the Gulf War. The presence of thousands of Western, non-Muslim troops in close proximity to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina was seen as heretical.

The Saudi regime’s decision to rely on American military forces during the 1990-91 Gulf War to defend the Peninsula against potential Iraqi aggression radicalized the leading figures of the sahwa, particularly the two clerics who have come to be known as the movement’s chief activists and ideologues, Salman al-Awdah and Safar al-Hawali. They gained widespread popularity criticizing the regime by circulating taped audiocassettes of their fiery sermons around the kingdom. Their radicalization was further fueled by the emergence of more liberal minded dissidents, who called on the regime to embark on an ambitious political reform program, one that would open both the political and social fields to more diverse actors and thoughts. With competing calls for the reform of the political system—the liberals petitioned for a more open system, while the sahwa implored for its complete Islamization, the regime responded by partially placating the former, cracking down on the latter, and attempting to outmaneuver both.

The ‘ulama’s support for the regime is not unconditional. They remain controversial, provocative and confrontational. The sahwa have
consistently agitated against the regime's close relationship with the United States as well as what they perceive to be aggression against religious beliefs and rituals in the Kingdom. Deep distrust of American foreign policy and the suspicion that the U.S. seeks to remould Saudi religious institutions and relationships in its own image, form the substance of a popular anti-Americanism and sermonizing against Westernization. While anger and cynicism regarding the U.S. has led to criticism of Saudi domestic liberal reformers as well as reform efforts that are deemed to be West-oriented, direct anger with the U.S. as well as its close relationship with the Saudi regime has manifested in conflicts that have little to do with reform.  

A group of former government officials, Aramco technocrats, university professors and businessmen articulated the outlook of Saudi Arabia's liberal tendency and submitted a petition in December 1990, addressing King Khalid that the authorities should create a consultative council, with members from all regions, which would draft laws and oversee government bodies to ensure that they were performing their functions properly. In addition, the petitioners wished to see the restoration of municipal councils, the implementation of lapsed regulations for provincial administration and permission for professions to create associations like the chambers of commerce. Further, the government should do more to ensure
equality among citizens so there would be no discrimination based on tribe, sect, social class, or ethnicity.

Early in the twenty-first century, the truly novel element in the Arabian kingdom is not the dynasty’s troubles but the debasement of Wahhabism’s credibility. By recognizing religious pluralism in the 2003 National Dialogues, Al Saud demonstrated and possessed the power to subordinate the Wahhabi mission to dynastic interest.

From this vantage point the religious field in Saudi Arabia appears to be in flux, its horizons hazy and the destiny of the eighteenth-century call from Najd uncertain.
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