Sarajevo

Sebastian Sons

For decades, Saudi foreign policy was based on two pillars: 1) *Safeguarding the domestic power of the Saudi royal family as the only legitimate ruler of the kingdom:* Since King Abdulaziz Ibn Saud founded the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932, diverse struggles have tested the power legitimacy of the ruling family. However, the Al Saud always showed its ability to preserve its leadership. In alliance with the Wahhabi clergy, an apparatus of technocrats, and several clienteles of merchant elite, the Saudi leadership has asserted its leadership until now.

2) *Safeguarding the supremacy of religious leadership based on Wahhabism with strong anti-Shia tendencies:* The Saudi stability is also based on the strong alliance of the ruling family with the Wahhabi establishment which was established in the middle of the 18th century. In this regard, Saudi foreign policy political decision makers need to take the interests of religious leaders into consideration not only in order to satisfy them but also to legitimize their political decisions ideologically. As »Guardians of the Two Holy Shrines« – Mecca and Medina – the Saudi royal family presents itself as a role model of Sunni Islam within the Middle East and beyond. In this regard, Saudi Arabia has supported charities and welfare organizations to spread Wahhabism across the region and beyond. Thus, institutions such as the Muslim World League or the Organization of Islamic Cooperation or Saudi universities such as the Islamic University in Medina invested tremendous financial and human capacities in religious education, infrastructure and indoctrination in South Asia, the Arab world and former Yugoslavia.

In times of contestation with ultra-conservative opposition, the leaders have to present themselves as pious role models by strengthening the impact on the religious state elite and expanding the religious activities abroad. In doing so, Saudi Wahhabism also inspired jihadist ideologies such as al-Qaida. Members of the Al Saud have been alleged of being directly involved in the attacks of 9/11. Thus, the spread of Wahhabism on a global level is perceived as one root for the spread of Jihadism.

One ideological similarity is the hatred against Shiites who are denounced as infidels in both Wahhabism and Jihadism. Furthermore, both ideologies are based on a strong »Who is not with us, is against us« mentality. In recent years, the Saudi leadership has instrumentalized the anti-Shia stance in order to target Iran, the Saudi archrival and competitor for regional hegemony since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. This rivalry has further intensified since 2011 and especially after the new King Salman came to power in 2015. This anti-Iran foreign policy is strongly driven by »Iranoia«, an anti-Iran obsession. As a consequence, Saudi Arabia waged a military campaign in Yemen and supported Sunni radical groups in Syria which has resulted in further regional destabilization. Of course, proselytization is one important instrument in order to escalate the sectarian strife between Sunnis and Shiites across the region and beyond.

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