

EVOLUTIONARY AND ACQUIESCENT ULAMA:

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE ULAMA IN SAUDI ARABIA AND PRE- REVOLUTIONARY IRAN

ERIC FREEMAN

In Saudi Arabia between the mid-1950s to the mid-1990s and in Iran between the mid-1950s to the late-1970s, the respective dynastic monarchies both embarked on policies designed to diminish the power and influence of the *ulama* - the religious elite.^{1/2} In both countries, the *ulama* have traditionally been important political actors, able to exert considerable influence throughout society. In Iran, these policies culminated in the 1979 revolution, while in Saudi Arabia, the Saudi *ulama* have not, to date, mounted any significant opposition to the regime. This paper will elucidate why the *ulama* in Saudi Arabia have continued to support the Saudi regime, while the Iranian *ulama* revolted against the Pahlavi regime. I argue that there have been two principal causes for the contrasting responses of the *ulama* in Saudi Arabia and the *ulama* in Iran. First, there are organizational and doctrinal differences between the *ulama* in the two countries, and these differences endowed the *ulama* in Iran more independence from the regime, as well as more power, than their counterparts in Saudi Arabia. Second, unlike Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in Iran, the Saudi royal family has incorporated the *ulama* within the regime. Consequently, although the power of the Saudi *ulama* has diminished, the Saudi royal family has not isolated and antagonized the *ulama* to any significant extent.

This paper is divided into two sections. The first section will highlight several structural differences between the *ulama* in Saudi Arabia and in Iran. This section will establish how these structural differences endowed the Iranian *ulama* with greater independence and power, enhancing their ability to revolt. The second section will highlight how the Saudi regime has been more prudent in its management of the *ulama*. This section will demonstrate that by incorporat-

ing the *ulama* within the regime, the Saudis have secured continued religious legitimization and have not alienated or antagonized the *ulama* to any significant extent.

ORGANIZATIONAL AND STRUCTURAL DIFFERENCES: POWER AND INDEPENDENCE

In both Iran and Saudi Arabia, the *ulama* have historically played a significant role in providing political elites with religious legitimization.^{3/4} However, the relationship between the *ulama* in Saudi Arabia and the Saudi royal family is unique and is significantly different from that which has existed in Iran between the Iranian *ulama* and the Shah. The origins of the Saudi state are rooted in a religious and political alliance from 1744, between Muhammad Ibn al-Wahhab and Muhammad Ibn Saud.⁵ Indeed, the current Saudi state is the third manifestation of the Wahhabi state, emerging in 1902 and consolidated in 1932, in which Abdul-Aziz Ibn Saud invoked the alliance between the Al Saud and the al-Shaykh family - the descendants of al-Wahhab - in order to legitimize his rule.⁶ The unique religious-political alliance that exists within Saudi Arabia is important because the Saudi "*ulama* have, since the alliance in the eighteenth century, remained intimately tied to... the Saudi state."⁷ Conversely, the *ulama* in Iran have functioned as an independent social institution, and have lived through multiple regimes - such as the Safavid dynasty, the Qajar dynasty, and Pahlavi dynasty.⁸

The *ulama* in Saudi Arabia have also been much more financially dependent on the Saudi state than the *ulama* in Iran have been on the Iranian state. This is partially a result of the fact that the Saudi *ulama* are Sunni, while the Iranian *ulama* are Shi'a. Sunni *ulama* have traditionally been much

¹ Joseph A. Kechinchian, "The Role of the Ulama in the politics of an Islamic State: The Case of Saudi Arabia" *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 18, no. 1 (February 1986): 60,

² Shahrough Akhavi, *Religion and Politics in Contemporary Iran: Clergy-State Relations in the Pahlavi Period* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1980), 132

³ Alexander Bligh, "The Saudi Religious Elite (Ulama) as Participant in the Political System of the Kingdom." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 17, no. 1 (February 1985): 39.

⁴ Willem M. Floor, "The Revolutionary Character of the Ulama: Wishful Thinking or Reality?" In *Religion and Politics in Iran*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 74

⁵ Kechinchian, "The Role of the Ulama," 53

⁶ Ayman Al-Yassini, *Religion and State in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*. (Boulder: Westview Press Inc., 1985), 43

⁷ Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 154

⁸ Nikki Keddie, "The Roots of the Ulama's Power in Modern Iran" *Studia Islamica* no. 29 (1969), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1595086>.

more financially dependent on the political elite.⁹ Indeed, *ulama* in Saudi Arabia are salaried employees of the state.¹⁰ The financial dependence of the *ulama* on the state is actually rooted in a Wahhabbi doctrine, which stipulates that the political elite is responsible for collection of *zakat* – a mandatory religious tax.¹¹ Furthermore, Wahhabism prohibits the *ulama* “from receiving gifts and donations or surviving on *awqaf* (religious endowments) revenues.”¹² Ultimately, because the *ulama* in Saudi Arabia are so dependent on the royal family, they are more beholden to them, and this reduces their ability to protest or rebel against the regime.

Conversely, the Iranian *ulama* were financially independent of the Pahlavi regime. The financial independence of the Iranian *ulama* from the Pahlavi regime has its roots in both historic practice, which dates back to the Safavid dynasty, as well as Shi’a religious doctrine, which assures the *ulama* administration over religiously mandated taxes.¹³ Mandatory religious taxes – such as the *zakat* and *khums* – have historically been administered and collected directly by the *ulama*, and this practice has continued throughout both the Qajar and Pahlavi dynasties.¹⁴ By collecting the religious taxes independently of the state, the Iranian *ulama* have been able to maintain a level of independence from the state. This financial independence has enabled the Iranian *ulama* to oppose the ruling elite on multiple occasions, such as in the Tobacco Concession (1891-1892) as well as in the Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911).¹⁵ Both of these instances of *ulama* opposition against the ruling elite resulted in political victories for the *ulama*. Ultimately, the *ulama*-led oppositional movements underscore the way in which the financial independence of the Iranian *ulama* has enabled them, more so than their Saudi counterparts, to oppose the political elite.

Finally, there are doctrinal and structural differences between the *ulama* in Iran and the *ulama* in Saudi Arabia, which endow leaders of the Iranian *ulama* with more pow-

er and influence than their counterparts in Saudi Arabia. Doctrinally, it is important to note the emphasis placed on ritual within Shi’a Islam. In the Usuli branch of Shi’a Islam, which is the dominant religious affiliation in Iran, people are divided into either laypeople or experts, and laypeople are required to emulate the leaders.¹⁶ Furthermore, in the mid-nineteenth century, a religious position emerged in Shi’a Islam, called the *marja al-taqlid*. A *marja al-taqlid* is a pre-eminent religious authority, of which there could be one or multiple in existence, who ultimately served as the “source of emulation.”¹⁷ The centrality of ritual and sources of emulation in Shi’a Islam is a significant factor that enables the Iranian *ulama* to rebel. Akhavi notes that “the informal network of assistants, religious students, bazaar merchants and common believers that these individuals [sources of emulation] came to supervise provided a social base of support.”¹⁸ As well, ritual and sources of emulation create a clear hierarchy with the Shi’a clergy, and it is a hierarchy that is once again independent of the political elite.¹⁹ This is important because it enabled prominent religious leaders, such as Ayatollah Khomeini, to mobilize their followers.²⁰ As well, it is important to note that the Shi’a position of *marja al-taqlid* provided the foundation for Khomeini’s *valayat i-faqih*, which ultimately gave the *ulama* in Iran justification to hold political power.²¹ Although *valayat i-faqih* did not particularly empower the Iranian *ulama* before the revolution, it did establish a viable clergy-based alternative to the Shah. In this sense, it did provide more incentive to rebel and is thus noteworthy.

In Saudi Arabia, the *ulama* do not achieve the same degree of influence and power that their counterparts do in Iran. Indeed, there is no position within Sunni Islam which is analogous to the power and influence of the *marja al-taqlid* in Shi’a Islam.²² Furthermore, as will be elaborated upon in the next section, the high-ranking religious establishment

⁹ Fuad I. Khuri, “The Ulama: A Comparative Study of Sunni and Shi’a Religious Officials,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 23, no. 3 (July 1987): 308.

¹⁰ Ayman Al-Yassini, *Religion and State in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*. (Boulder: Westview Press Inc., 1985), 48.

¹¹ Al-Yassini, *Religion and State in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*, 30.

¹² Al-Yassini, *Religion and State in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*, 48.

¹³ Keddie, “The Roots of the Ulama’s Power,” 48

¹⁴ Glenn E. Perry, “The Islamic World: Egypt and Iran,” in *Politics and Religion in the Modern World*, ed. George Moyser, (New York: Routledge, 1991), 116.

¹⁵ Mohammad H. Faghfoory, “The Ulama-Sate Relations in Iran 1941” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 19, no. 4 (November 1987): 413.

¹⁶ Juan R. Cole, “Imami Jurisprudence and the Role of the Ulama: Mortaza Ansari on Emulating the Supreme Exemplar” In *Religion and Politics in Iran*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 33.

¹⁷ W.G. Millward, “Political dimensions of the Marja’iate in Ithna’Ashari Shi’ism: Recent Developments.” (paper presented at the annual meeting of The Middle East Studies Association, Phoenix, Arizona, November 19-22, 1994), 7.

¹⁸ Akhavi, *Religion and Politics in Contemporary Iran*, 12.

¹⁹ Millward, “Political dimensions of the Marja’iate,” 4-5.

²⁰ Behrooz Moazami, “The Islamization of the Social Movements and the Revolution, 1963-1979” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 29, no.1 (2009): 48.

²¹ Millward, “Political dimensions of the Marja’iate,” 14.

²² Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 144.

is government appointed, and this is a significant source of their political power and social status.²³ However, this is not to say that the *ulama* in Saudi Arabia do not have influence and power. The Saudi *ulama* do serve as intermediaries between the royal family and different groups within the Saudi state.²⁴ Through their control of the mosques, the Saudi *ulama* are able to reach and influence the population at large, and this remains an important element of their power.²⁵ Nevertheless, although the *ulama* in Saudi Arabia are able to influence the public and do have power, they have not had the same level of influence or independence that the high-ranking Shi'a clergy in Iran have possessed.

Ultimately, there are several structural and doctrinal differences between the *ulama* in Iran and the *ulama* in Saudi Arabia. These differences are significant because they endowed the *ulama* in Iran with substantially more independence from the political elites and with more power and social influence. The additional independence and power that the Iranian *ulama* possessed were important factors that helped to facilitate their rebellion against the Shah. Conversely, the Saudi *ulama* have not had the same degree of independence from the royal family nor have they had the same social base of support that the Iranian *ulama* have possessed. Consequently, they have not had the same ability to instigate a revolt against the political elite.

MANAGING THE ULAMA: INCORPORATION INTO THE REGIME

In both Saudi Arabia and in Iran, the *ulama* have witnessed the implementation of policies that have defied their religious beliefs, as well as policies that were designed to diminish their power. In Saudi Arabia, the royal family has embarked on numerous policies that have angered many of the *ulama*, such as the introduction of the television in 1963.²⁶ As well, the Saudi royal family has embarked on numerous policies designed to diminish the power of the *ulama*, such as the establishment of a Ministry of Justice, which the *ulama* viewed as a threat to their religious prerogatives.²⁷ Similarly, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi embarked on modernization policies that both incensed the Iranian *ulama* and threatened their power and traditional

roles.²⁸ However, although both the Saudi royal family and the Shah embarked on measures that angered the *ulama* and were designed to diminish their influence and power, the Saudis have succeeded in doing this in a manner that has not provoked widespread dissent or revolution. A significant reason for this success is that although the *ulama* in Saudi Arabia historically had stronger ties to the Saudi royal family than the *ulama* in Iran had to the pre-revolutionary Iranian state, the Saudi royal family has also taken steps to further incorporate the *ulama* into the regime. There have been two significant consequences of this difference. First, by incorporating the *ulama* into the state, the Saudi royal family has been able to secure continued religious legitimization. Second, by giving the *ulama* a stake in the regime, the Saudis have succeeded in diminishing the *ulama*'s power without antagonizing them.

First, the Saudi royal family has incorporated the *ulama* into the regime by bureaucratizing the high-ranking religious officials into state-appointed positions. In 1953, the government established the state-appointed Institute for the Issue of Religio-Legal Opinion and in 1971 it established the state-appointed Council of Senior *ulama*, who pronounce religious and legal judgments.²⁹ Moreover, as of 1993, the head of the Council of Senior Ulama held the position of Grand Mufti, who constitutes the top-ranking member in the religious establishment.³⁰ On the other hand, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi did not try to incorporate the *ulama* into the regime, but rather attempted to assert his own religious leadership.³¹ Indeed, throughout the modernizing Pahlavi dynasty, even more so than in preceding dynasties, there was a clear segregation between the state and the religious elite.³² The bureaucratization of the *ulama* within the state has been a significant factor in helping to ensure that the Saudi regime continues to receive religious legitimization for their rule as well as religious legitimization for their modernization policies. The creation of the Senior Council of *ulama*, in particular, established a permanent institution of elite religious officials who could subsequently be used to provide religious legitimization for the Saudi royal family as well as their modernization policies.³³ The Saudi regime has been able to use the Senior Council of *ulama* in order to delegitimize and assuage religious opposi-

²³ Aharon Layish, "'Ulama' and Politics in Saudi Arabia" In *Islam and the Politics in the Middle East*, ed. Metin Heper and Raphael Israeli, (Sydney: Croom Held Lmt, 1984), 31.

²⁴ Layish, "'Ulama' and Politics in Saudi Arabia," 50

²⁵ Layish, "'Ulama' and Politics in Saudi Arabia," 40

²⁶ Kechinchian, "The Role of the Ulama," 57

²⁷ Kechinchian, "The Role of the Ulama," 60

²⁸ Akhavi, *Religion and Politics in Contemporary Iran*, 132

²⁹ Layish, "'Ulama' and Politics in Saudi Arabia," 30

³⁰ Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 153

³¹ Perry, "The Islamic World," 107

³² Mansoor Moaddel, "The Shi'i Ulama and the State in Iran" *Theory and Society* 15, no. 4 (July 1986): 533.

³³ Bligh, "The Saudi Religious Elite," 39

tion. In 1979, the Council of Senior *ulama* issued a fatwa (legal ruling) denouncing the seizure of the Grand Mosque by religious rebels.³⁴ During the Gulf War in 1990, the Council supported the King's decision to allow the deployment of foreign troops within Saudi Arabia.³⁵ Finally, in 1991, a group of *ulama* sent a petition, called the Memorandum of Advice, to the regime, which called for the regime to enhance the authority of the *ulama*.³⁶ With pressure from the regime, the Council of Senior *ulama* strongly denounced the Memorandum of Advice. However, seven of the seventeen members on the Council abstained, claiming ill health, and were subsequently dismissed from the Council by the King. This demonstrates the institutional subordination of the Saudi *ulama* to the Saudi royal family.³⁷ Ultimately, the bureaucratization of *ulama* within the Saudi regime is important because it has "routinized the use of religion and the religious establishment as a source of legitimization."³⁸ By contrast, the failure of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi to incorporate the *ulama* within the regime mitigated his ability to receive religious legitimization. The Shah attempted to obtain religious legitimization, independent from the *ulama*, by asserting his own religious leadership; however, as argued by Perry, he failed to secure religious legitimization, and often "the religious scholars that he tried to undermine were perceived much more as the true spokesmen for the faith than was the Shah."³⁹

By incorporating the *ulama* into the regime, the Saudi royal family has also largely avoided alienating and antagonizing the *ulama*. Although the *ulama* have experienced a decline in their power since the 1950s, they have not mounted any serious resistance to the Saudi monarchy.⁴⁰ One significant reason for this is that, by incorporating the *ulama* into the regime, the Saudi royal family has succeeded in providing the *ulama* with channels to affect the policies of the regime, especially policies that are religiously important. Layish notes that the Saudi "royal house, aware of the importance of the *ulama*, does its utmost to institutionalize them, to integrate them into the ruling elite and give them due honour in matters of protocol so that they feel full partners in responsibility for policy and political deci-

sions."⁴¹ By giving the *ulama* a stake within the regime, the Saudi royal family has managed to avoid provoking them. Bligh notes that the *ulama* meet weekly with the Saudi royal family and that they maintain significant control over certain issues – such as education and justice – that are viewed as religiously important.⁴² Indeed, since 1960, the *ulama* have been represented in every government Cabinet. Moreover, members of the *ulama*, and specifically the members of the al-Shaykh family, have occupied the religiously important ministerial positions – such as Minister of Education and Minister of Justice.⁴³ As well, the *ulama* control the Council for Exhortation to Good and Interdiction of Evil, otherwise known as the religious police, and this allows them to influence public behaviour.⁴⁴

In Iran, the Shah did not try to incorporate the *ulama* within the state, nor to give them any influence over policy. Rather, the Shah embarked on numerous policies designed to eliminate their power as well as their traditional religious roles within Iranian society. In the early 1970s, the Shah announced the creation of the Religious Corps, which would be comprised of young university students rather than graduates of the *ulama*-run madrassas, as well as the creation of a Department of Religious Propaganda in the Endowments Organization.⁴⁵ The functions of these two organizations paralleled the functions of *ulama*, and as such represented an attempt to segregate the *ulama* from the regime while simultaneously eliminating their power and traditional roles.⁴⁶ As well, in 1976, the Shah changed the Iranian calendar to match the Zoroastrian calendar, which led many in the *ulama* to fear that the Shah might revitalize the Zoroastrian religion and declare Iran to be a Zoroastrian state.⁴⁷ It is important to note that not only was the Shah threatening the power of the *ulama*, but the modernization policies of the White Revolution also threatened many of the *ulama*'s traditional allies, such as the bazaar – the merchants of the bazaar. In the White Revolution, the Shah introduced land reform and endorsed the destruction of the physical bazaar markets, and these actions angered the bazaar and, as argued by Moaddel, this "provided favorable conditions for the

³⁴ Kechinchian, "The Role of the Ulama," 60-63

³⁵ Tim Niblock, *Saudi Arabia: Power, Legitimacy and Survival* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 89.

³⁶ Michael Herb, *All in the Family: Absolutism, Revolution, and Democracy in the Middle Eastern Monarchies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 171.

³⁷ Herb, *All in the Family*, 173.

³⁸ Al-Yassini, *Religion and State*, 67.

³⁹ Perry, "The Islamic World," 107.

⁴⁰ Al-Yassini, *Religion and State*, 59.

⁴¹ Layish, "'Ulama' and Politics in Saudi Arabia," 56.

⁴² Bligh, "The Saudi Religious Elite," 42-43.

⁴³ Bligh, "The Saudi Religious Elite," 42-43.

⁴⁴ Layish, "'Ulama' and Politics in Saudi Arabia," 35.

⁴⁵ Perry, "The Islamic World," 125.

⁴⁶ Akhavi, *Religion and Politics in Contemporary Iran*, 140.

⁴⁷ William O. Beeman, "Images of the Great Satan: Representations of the United States in the Iranian Revolution" in *Religion and Politics in Iran*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 210.

growth in *ulama* power in their opposition to the state.”⁴⁸

Finally, not only did the Shah fail to incorporate the *ulama* into the regime, but he also employed state violence as a means to repress them. This violent strategy to repress the *ulama* is significant because it consolidated the *ulama* in opposition to the regime.⁴⁹ Before the revolution the majority of the Shi’a clergy were dormant, and it was only a radical minority, led by Khomeini, that were overtly opposing the regime. However, as noted by Perry, the Shah used secret police to infiltrate the *ulama*, he placed shrines under military control, and he imprisoned, expelled, and executed leading oppositional *ulama*; this excessive use of violence caused the “quiescent, conservative *ulama* such as Ayatollah Shari’atmadari to call for an end to the [S]hah’s dictatorship and to recognize Ayatollah Khomeini as the representative of the popular will.”⁵⁰ Ultimately, the Saudi royal family attempted to integrate and subordinate the *ulama* to the regime, while the Shah attempted to exclude the *ulama* and to eliminate their power.

In conclusion, although both the Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and the Saudi royal family have attempted to diminish the power of the religious elite within their respective countries, the Saudis have enjoyed much greater success in this respect. The cause of this has been twofold. First, the *ulama* in the two countries differ in several significant ways. These differences ultimately endowed the Iranian *ulama* with more power and influence, therefore enhancing their ability to revolt. Second, unlike the Shah, whose attempt to undermine the influence of the *ulama* culminated in a revolution, the Saudi royal family has successfully employed a “carrot-and-stick policy” regarding the *ulama*: they have rewarded them with influence and control over areas of religious importance – such as the ministries of education and justice – while simultaneously eliminating the influence of members of the *ulama* who dissented from the regime, such as those *ulama* who abstained from the condemnation of the Memorandum of Advice. Overall, although there are many parallels between the strategies of the Shah and the Saudi royal family as well as similarities between the *ulama* in the two countries, the *ulama* in both Saudi Arabia and Iran, as well as the strategies employed by the two regimes, have many significant differences. Understanding these differences is critical to understanding why the *ulama* revolted in Iran but not in Saudi Arabia.

CUBAN MEDICAL INTERNATIONALISM: BUILDING SOUTH-SOUTH COOPERATION AND ALTERNATIVE HEALTH SYSTEMS

CAROLINE WHIDDEN

Since the Revolution, Cuba has devoted much of its energy and resources to developmental assistance in countries that have had similar historical struggles, with health care at the forefront of such efforts. Cuba’s international medical aid efforts since the 1960s have involved various dimensions, the most prominent of which are Havana’s Comprehensive Healthcare Delivery Program (CHDP) agreements, in-country medical training programs, bringing foreign patients to Cuba for free surgery and other medical procedures, awarding scholarship to foreign students for full-time medical education, and extending short-term disaster relief. As a result, the Cuban Revolution has succeeded in establishing its position as a major player in international medical diplomacy and its contributions to improving global health are truly commendable. While neo-liberalism frames development in terms of economic growth, Cuba has recognized that the health of a country, particularly of its most vulnerable populations, plays a very fundamental role in development, and has framed domestic and foreign policy accordingly.

The emergence of leftist governments in Latin America and the strengthening of Cuba’s regional identity coincide with increasing recognition of the need for an alternative development model. Cuba has demonstrated a shift away from aid and towards solidarity and the potential for strong South-South cooperation in achieving developmental aims, providing the framework for a promising alternative to the predominant North-South flow of assistance. The argument presented in this paper is two-fold. First, given that the leading causes of death and illness in the global South continue to be preventable diseases caused by a lack of access to basic primary care and poor health promotion, the Cuban model is undoubtedly more suitable to addressing the global public health crisis than the West’s model of health based on hospital medicine and high technology. Secondly, although it is important to build capacity and exchange knowledge within and between nation states rather than maintaining dependency on aid, the most valuable lesson to be drawn from the Cuban experience of medical internationalism is for countries to

⁴⁸ Moaddel, “The Shi’i Ulama and the State in Iran,” 541.

⁴⁹ Millward, “Political dimensions of the Marja’iate,” 9.

⁵⁰ Perry, “The Islamic World,” 125.