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Islam in Saudi Arabia's Politics

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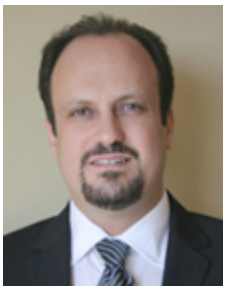
Bernard Haykel


Joanne J. Myers

Introduction

Good afternoon. I'm Joanne Myers, Director of Public Affairs Programs. On behalf of the Carnegie Council, I want to welcome our members and guests, and thank you for joining us.

Today our speaker is Bernard Haykel. He will be discussing **Islam in Saudi Arabia's Politics**.

In recent years, the influence of religion in politics has become an extremely charged topic. Ever since the news that 15 of the 19 men who hijacked four airplanes on September 11th were from Saudi Arabia and the mastermind of the plot, Osama bin Laden, was a Saudi citizen, the role that religion plays in the politics of the kingdom has been of paramount interest to us all. But for the Saudis, ever since its inception as a nation in 1932, religion for them has been of necessary interest, as it has played a central role in their country's politics. This is attributed to several things.

First of all, not only is Saudi Arabia the birthplace of Islam, it is also the location of two of Islam's holiest sites: Mecca and Medina. Perhaps more importantly, the Wahhabi religious warriors played a very important role in helping to establish the country and, in return for their assistance, every Saudi leader since 1932 has allowed the ultraconservative Wahhabi sect to play a role in almost all areas of Saudi society.

Although the Basic Law of Government, which was adopted in 1992, declared that Saudi Arabia is a monarchy to be ruled by the sons and grandsons of the first king, Abdul Aziz Al-Saud, it also claims that the Qur'an and the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad underpin the kingdom's constitution. As a result, the country is governed on the basis of Sharia law, which theoretically limits the king's powers.

Today, the ruling family, headed by King Abdullah, is struggling to balance sharply conflicting pressures as it fights to retain its hold on power in the kingdom. But as decision-making has always occurred through consensus between the royal family and the country's religious leaders, only a few changes have come about at the behest of the royal family, while others have occurred for reasons outside their control.

Many Saudis have said that King Abdullah sincerely seeks to move the realm toward a greater degree of religious tolerance and away from the archaic judicial system of Sharia based on rulings dispensed by stern Wahhabi clerics. One recent example was the pardon he granted to a girl from Qatif last December.

As you may recall, she was gang-raped and then sentenced to 200 lashes and a prison term for being alone in a car with a young man.

I think it's fair to say that the regime is aware that a considerable number of Saudis resent the sway that the religious establishment has over their daily lives, but they are also aware that not all Islamic fundamentalists support the tradition of obeying its rulers. The family is left with the challenge of bolstering its traditional religious base while trying to encourage tolerant voices as well.

To address the questions about the role Islam plays in the politics of Saudi Arabia and the role it is likely to have in the future, I am really delighted to welcome Professor Haykel to our podium this afternoon.

Professor Haykel is a notable scholar, whose research and teaching interests lie at the juncture of Islamic law and political and social history. He considers himself a historian, but, like all accomplished historians, he is not restricted by disciplinary boundaries or by historical timeframes. He draws inspiration from anthropology, politics, history, and philosophy. His specialties include Islamic law, politics, and history.

In July 2007, Professor Haykel was named Professor of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University. He is the author of *Revival and Reform in Islam: The Legacy of Muhammad al-Shawkani*, which is about one of the founding fathers of modern Islamic reformism.

In 2005, Professor Haykel was one of 16 people across the country selected as a Carnegie Scholar by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, which at the time had launched a major effort to support the study of Islam. Recently, Professor Haykel has been studying the Salafi movement from the 1960s to the present from its base in Saudi Arabia.

Please join me in giving a very warm welcome to our speaker this afternoon. We are really delighted to have you here. Thank you.

Remarks

BERNARD HAYKEL: Thank you very much for the kind introduction. Also, I would like to thank you for inviting me to the Carnegie Council, and, of course, the Carnegie Corporation, of which I'm a very grateful recipient of an award.

This is part of a book project. It is near completion and will be published by Cambridge University Press. It comes out of field work that I conducted in Saudi Arabia, where I lived for over a year and moved around in many different circles—royal, Islamist, *jihadi*, women, and so on.

What I would like to talk to you about today is really to give you a picture of Saudi Arabia, the relationship between the government and the various Islamic groups and Islamic tendencies within the country, and, as it were, try to make you see the place through my eyes and complicate the picture that has very often come across in the press here in the United States and in many writings in a two-dimensional way.

So let me begin with some misconceptions and the great ignorance that abounds about both Saudi Arabia and about Islam in Saudi Arabia.

First of all, the term "Wahhabi" or "Wahhabism"—I will explain this in a moment—is synonymous with jihadism and terrorism to most of us today. We know that the Wahhabis are "bad guys" and they are out to kill us. This, in fact, is not true.

We also are told that the Saudis export religious extremism and that much of what we see with al Qaeda is really largely due to the Saudi policy of projecting Islam outward. In fact, one of the things that I argue is that what the Saudis have been doing is not so much as exporting jihadism, but rather exporting a form of intolerance largely, and almost exclusively, directed towards other Muslims and not necessarily

towards Westerners and non-Muslims.

The picture that has been depicted, however, in the press begs a number of questions that remain unanswered. If, indeed, the Saudis have produced jihadism in the form of al Qaeda, why is it that al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden target the Saudi regime, calling the Saudi rulers apostates? Why is it that the so-called Wahhabis only became violent in the late 1980s and anti-Saudi only in the beginning of the 1990s? These are questions that I think largely remain unanswered.

The picture that has been given to us is a rather uncomplicated one. Here what I try to do is complicate it a bit and to explain to you some of the context for what the Saudis have been up to and what Islam is about within the kingdom.

A note on history. This is specifically to do with the relationship between Saudi Arabia and the United States.

- It is not contested that the Saudis played a very supportive role to the United States during the Cold War. They were complicit with us in funding the Mujahideen in Afghanistan, as well as many other anti-communist movements. This is now well documented.
- The Saudis also played a very important role as producers of oil. They were called the "swing" producers, where they basically were able to manipulate the supply of oil to moderate the wild fluctuations in the global price of oil. This has helped, over time, the Western economies and has allowed for the prosperity, some would argue, of Western economies.
- The third point that I would like to make is that the Saudis, as I have said already, have been targeted by al Qaeda and have fought against al Qaeda, to the point where today al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia has been defeated in its organized forms. While there is still some sentiment for al Qaeda within the kingdom and within the Muslim world more broadly, because it really is about a set of ideas, its organized forms have been crushed. I think a lesson can be drawn from the Saudis in that respect.

So let me move to the third broad point that I would like to make. This is to explain to you a bit about Wahhabism and the many different kinds of Wahhabis that I found in the kingdom. I counted at least 10 different groups in the kingdom, all vying with each other, competing with each other, engaged polemically with each other, in written form, on the Internet, and in mosques. This shows, hopefully, some of the complexity of this religious movement.

Essentially, however, and despite the many differences within the Wahhabi umbrella, or what is called the Salafi umbrella, these groups are united on matters of theology. They basically focus on three creedal principles that are quite technical and complicated. I don't want to get into Islamic theology here, because it would put you to sleep right away, I'm sure.

But, essentially, this is a theological movement that focuses largely on Muslim purity of both belief and practice, and devoting all worship exclusively to God, and God alone. They constantly point fingers at other Muslims, who, they feel, derogate from these creedal principles, and Wahhabis often engage in the practice of "anathemization," or what is called in Arabic *takfir*—that is, declaring other Muslims to be non-Muslims.

And in political terms, which I think is the more interesting part for our talk today, these different groups, these 10-plus groups, can be categorized into three broad tendencies.

- First you have Wahhabis who are apolitical, or quietists. These are people who are totally obedient to the Saudi royal family, the so-called Al-Saud, and they consider the Al-Saud to be the legitimate Muslim rulers. The corollary of this is that rebellion or fighting against the Al-Saud is not

permissible. In fact, to rebel against the Al-Saud constitutes a sin for this one group. By far the majority of Wahhabis fall into this apolitical, quietist group. This group is—I call it apolitical, but in fact its posture is very much a political one: it is just one of obedience.

- The second group of Wahhabis, or Salafis—and these are interchangeable terms—are the activists, or what are called in Arabic the *harakis*. The activists are people who are not necessarily violent but who wish to Islamize Saudi society. The Saudi rulers have Islamized Saudi Arabia, let's say, 95 percent of the way. They claim that they want to do it 100 percent or 99 percent. They try to outflank the Saudi rulers by saying that you have to push the process of Islamization to create a more thorough Islamic system than the existing order. These activists are inspired by and directly imitate the Muslim Brotherhood. The Muslim Brotherhood is a movement that started in Egypt in 1928. The *harakis* are basically opportunists who are interested in political power and are not principled or doctrinaire ideologues. So you have this second group of activists. They have, by and large, been co-opted today by the Saudi rulers.
- The third group—and this is a very small minority—are the al Qaeda types, the so-called Takfiri *jihadis*. They engage in *takfir*, this process of pointing fingers at other Muslims and calling them infidels. They also argue that the rulers are apostates, they are not Muslim rulers, because they don't fully implement Islamic law; and, therefore, rebellion against the Saudi rulers is legitimate—in fact mandated; it becomes an obligation that is incumbent on every Muslim to fight against the Saudi rulers. They target the Saudis, but also other rulers in the Muslim world. Their aim is to create what they call emirates. These are small Muslim states that would ultimately join up in one single unitary, global state under a caliph, under a Muslim ruler.

Now, how has the Saudi state dealt with these different groups and with Wahhabism generally?

As was already alluded to in the introduction, Islam, as interpreted by the Wahhabis or by the Salafis—and this is an interpretation of Islam that in Saudi Arabia goes back to the 18th century—is not a modern invention. It is deeply rooted in the Najd in central Saudi Arabia. It is a legitimate interpretation of Islam. It is the ideology of the Saudi state. It is, in fact, the very raison d'être of the Saudi state.

Islam, as promoted by the Saudi rulers, is the basis for unifying the kingdom. This is a country that is the size of Western Europe, some 2.2 million square kilometers, and that is divided and riven by regional, tribal, and sectarian identities and groups. Islam, in this particular interpretation, is basically the glue that keeps the place together and that gives legitimacy to the rulers.

There have been three such Saudi states since the 18th century. We are living today in the third Saudi state.

So Islam, in this particular interpretation of Islam, is constitutive of the very making of the Saudi state. So for the Saudis to abandon this interpretation would be—the analogy would be difficult to make here, but it would be like giving up the First Amendment of the Constitution or some very important principle in our U.S. constitutional order.

Now, this ideology has been described by some scholars as producing consenting subjects, people who are basically obedient to the ruler, and disallowing all forms of collective association or action. As such you don't see any organized groups, clubs, civic societies, or organizations in Saudi Arabia, because this particular interpretation of Islam does not allow it. It disallows it. It argues that if Muslims as groups were to organize, this would lead to dissension, or to what is called *fitna* in Arabic, and that this would threaten the unity of the religious body, of the *ummah*, that is constituted by Saudi Arabia. So you can't organize. You can't have a butterfly-collecting club in Saudi Arabia, or have a bicycle club or a political party. It's not permitted; it's religiously not permitted.

Now, this form of Islam that the Saudis promote, and have promoted for two and a half centuries, is

represented by scholars who have increasingly, over time, been co-opted by the Saudi state. They have been turned into civil servants of the Saudi state. If you look over this history of two and a half centuries, you will see that these religious scholars—typically jurists, legal scholars, by and large; some of them are theologians—have accepted this co-optation because it provides a cover and a protection for them, and they have ceded always to the rulers, the political authority, on questions of religious principle that are very dear to the Wahhabis. They have always ceded on these issues because the state has decided, for pragmatic reasons, that they should do so. So the religious types in Saudi Arabia have always, as a majority group, said that Wahhabi religious principles can be ignored or fall into abeyance so that the pragmatic reasons of the Saudi state trump religious doctrine.

Some—a few—have refused to do so, have refused to say that principle can be abandoned for pragmatism. These few groups have existed over time and, by and large, have been either punished, physically coerced by the state, imprisoned, tortured, what have you, or have been ostracized from the society.

One such group, for instance, just for your curiosity, exists in Saudi Arabia, a very small group, that is very much like the Amish. They are so doctrinaire in their Wahhabi beliefs that they believe that electricity, the use of cars, photographs, are not permissible in Islamic law, and therefore refuse to use these. They ride horses, they live in mud-brick homes, and will not allow fans and electric light bulbs and so on into their mosques. They are an irritant in society, because they are constantly pointing the finger at others who are giving in on such so-called innovations. This is one of the 10 groups that I was talking about. But this one group, this Amish-like group, is apolitical. It chooses not to engage in politics. They just live off in their communes.

Now, the thing to keep in mind about Saudi Arabia is that religion, whether in its radical form, in its activist form, or in its quietist, obedient form, has always been a tool in the hands of the state to promote its legitimacy, to silence dissent, and to attack the enemies of the Saudi state. The enemies of the Saudi state have been, historically and traditionally, Shiites, Iran, Sufis—people who are in disagreement with the Saudis for either theological or political reasons. Al Qaeda is one such group as well. Al Qaeda is referred to as the "errant group"—the group that is in error—by the Saudi authorities, and they have used a number of measures to ostracize them, and have been quite effective at doing so. I can get into why and how in the question-and-answer period.

Now, let me talk a bit about the Saudi state. The Saudi state is not a monolithic entity. It is nothing like the idea of a state that we have in the West. But, rather, it's a set of parallel fiefdoms, dependent on different power constellations led by princes. There are 2,500 male princes and roughly about 5,000—I counted them once; actually, there were 5,132 six months ago or so—princes and princesses. Of these 2,500 male princes, there are only about 10 or 20 who really matter and count. From each of these important princes you have cascades—sort of waterfalls, if you like—of clients and dependents who are loyal and who accept patronage from these princes.

You can think of the system, or of the state, as a set of multiple pyramids, with princes of course at the apex, but these pyramids are of different sizes. They compete with each other. Each of these different apexes or princes at the top of the pyramid has a different reputation, different qualities. They are a topic of discussion amongst the people.

They often compete with each other. At times, they form alliances; at other times, they do not. What creates alliances often has to do with blood, whether the princes are full brothers or half brothers. The women are very important; the mothers are very important.

Studying them is a bit like "Kremlinology," in the good old days of the Cold War. This study of the princes offers much material for discussion around desert campfires and urban salons.

Now, some of these princes are extremely smart and able, and they are engaged in a very complicated and highly personalized form of politics—all politics is face-to-face here. There are no institutions—I

mean, there are institutions, but they don't matter. It's all about face-to-face politics, and it's all about a set of, if you like, dyadic, or one-to-one, relationships that are often described as, or often take the form of, paternalistic relationships and clientelist relationships. I can tell you a bit about this. I know a number of these princes personally, and I can tell you a bit about how it works, how they manage the society and juggle the different elements of society.

Now, before concluding, let me talk about the constituencies that really matter in Saudi Arabia. This is really the crux of the matter when you think of Saudi politics.

The Wahhabis, whether of the official establishment, whether the quietist or the activist or the *jihadi* types, are really the only organized social force outside the state in Saudi Arabia. They have a social base. They can mobilize overnight. Because many of them control mosques, they can organize demonstrations or groups of people coming into the streets—200,000, maybe more, some of them armed. So they are a force that needs to be accounted for and contended with by the rulers. They cannot be ignored.

Liberals, by contrast, are utterly insignificant in Saudi Arabia. They form no social base. The people that we tend to like and we tend to promote are insignificant. It's just a fact. They can't mobilize people. They are not a threat to the regime.

Businesspeople also are not a threat; they are fungible and can be replaced quite easily. Technocrats also are not a threat to the regime. And, unfortunately, also women don't count for much here. I can talk about women in the question-and-answer period as well.

The royal family is an institution and it does matter. Its internal regulation is a source of much speculation. A good Saudi friend once told me that if anyone talks to you openly about the Saudi royal family, that invariably means he or she knows nothing about them. The people who really know don't say much; they stay tightlipped. I'm actually tempted not to speak about them so that you can think I'm terribly erudite and know a lot about them. But let me tell you what I do know.

If this royal family were to malfunction, if they were to fight with each other, that represents the one great threat to the stability and the continuation of this regime. It's unlikely to happen. They will cut deals. These deals take various forms. But it's unlikely to malfunction, because I think they are committed—there is a consensus—regarding the survival of this regime amongst the 10 or 20 top princes.

But this is the most significant threat, especially now, as the issue and question of succession is in question—the top tier of princes is now well into their eighties. So the question of succession over the next decade, from the sons of the founder to the grandsons of the founder, will be a source of contestation. They are trying to regulate this form of succession as I speak.

The other group and constituency in Saudi society that really does matter are the tribes. We don't hear much about them. But they very much are controlled by the regime. They form an important element of the military, of one arm of the military forces, and they can be mobilized. They are largely from the central region of Arabia. They form the backbone of the regime. They need to be appeased constantly in order to remain loyal. They have remained that way.

Finally, and this is just a rule of thumb—again, this is how I see things; and I think I'm right, of course—as long as oil remains where it is, namely, well above $60 a barrel—now, in fact, I think it's past $100—the Saudis have nothing to worry about. Oil has this kind of sedative effect on the politics of the country. They are able to spend it and distribute it so that people are satisfied. It is really the main tool at the disposal of the regime, both for domestic and international policy. As long as the price of oil is very high, you are unlikely to see a destabilization of the regime, certainly not from any domestic constituencies. If oil were to come down, however, in price or, let's say, we were to find an alternative to oil, then you would have a very serious threat to this regime and to the stability of this country.

In conclusion, I am—maybe "awed" is perhaps too strong a word—but I am very impressed, profoundly impressed, by the ability of the Saudi royal family to really juggle and patronize and co-opt virtually every social force and political force in the country. There is no internal opposition that exists to displace the Saudi royal family today, especially given the turbulence and the chaos that Saudis see in Iraq. The Saudis, like all good authoritarian regimes, have been able to convince their people that there is no alternative to the Saudi royal family, and, as long as the people remain convinced of that, this regime will remain with us for a very long time.

Thank you.

JOANNE MYERS: Thank you.

You said oil may be a sedative, but I think your comments are a stimulant to open up the discussion.

Questions and Answers

QUESTION: I wonder if you would comment on two topics that you have not yet really addressed.

One is the economy beyond oil. Would you say something about the extent to which the Saudi regime is developing a modern economy and a broader-based economy, so that if there were, let's say, a decline in the price of oil, a disastrous decline, would there be an economy in place that could replace it? Just over the long run, could it do it?

The second topic I would ask you to comment on is Saudi foreign policy. Would you just kind of outline the regime's views with respect to providing stability in the Middle East and its relations with the rest of the world?

Thank you.

BERNARD HAYKEL: There is really no economy beyond oil so far. The Saudi rulers and the regime are groping for possible solutions, alternatives. So they look to Dubai, mostly to Singapore, now as a model that is both economically successful but yet still authoritarian. So refining and the various industries that derive from oil are things that they are focusing on.

One of the latest initiatives of the King is to set up a university with, I believe, a $10 billion endowment, called the King Abdullah University for Science and Technology, very active, trying to establish links with the top Western universities, to develop a cadre of Saudis who are trained in the sciences, in the hope that they will move the economy into areas beyond oil.

But this is a very long-term process. I mean it's not something—you can't create such a cohort of people in 10 years even. I think it will take much longer.

So they are groping, but not with much success. The idea of having an entrepôt-type state, a globalized city—to have a globalized city like Dubai, that works for a small place like Dubai. It doesn't work for a country like Saudi Arabia, where you have maybe 17 million people now, and with the guest workers the total reaches 23 million. It is much larger.

To answer your second question about Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, I am actually quite bullish about Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, because they are a source of great stability. They are a group of people who are highly consensual in the way they think. They do want stability in the region.

They were against the invasion of Iraq. They are against the invasion or attack on Iran. They want to come to some sort of accommodation with Iran.

Typically, the way they have solved their problems is by spending money. The fact of the matter today is that in the Arab and Muslim world, the wealth and power has moved from Egypt, Syria, the area of the Levant, into the Persian Gulf. The Saudis are being asked to step up to the plate and take the leadership. They are very reticent to do this. It's not in their character to lead in that way. So they are very tentative, very reticent to come up.

Their initiative on the Arab-Israeli peace process, which to my mind is the only really valid initiative and valid offer on the table today, is one that was rebuffed a number of times and rejected. So they have shied away. They have this reticence. That's how I would describe it.

QUESTION: First of all, thank you very much.

I wonder if you could characterize U.S.-Saudi relations. On the one hand, the Bush family has historically been very close to the royal family for a long time, apparently got them out quickly right after 9/11, and so on. On the other hand, when President Bush was just there and he wanted them to bring down the price of oil or increase production, they turned that down. When he wanted them to lead a coalition against Iran, they turned him down. When the United States has promoted democratization in the Middle East, they have turned that down. And, from what you said, they have absolutely zero interest in ever promoting democratization in the Middle East.

So what is this relationship, besides the price of oil, based on? Would it change were the Democrats to come to power? What are the Saudis' interests in their relationship with the United States?

BERNARD HAYKEL: That's an excellent question. I will try to be brief.

Basically, the relationship during the Cold War was a relatively unproblematic one, because it was centered on fighting communism on the one hand, fighting Arab nationalism and socialism in the Arab world, and keeping a stable supply of oil.

Since the end of the Cold War, however, the United States and Saudi Arabia have both had to reinvent their relationship. I think they haven't quite come to a consensus on what the nature of the relationship is.

The Saudis regard—I mean here it's difficult to generalize. There are at least two camps within the Saudi royal family on this issue. But, broadly speaking, they know they cannot survive without American protection, the umbrella that America provides in the region, to protect the regime and the oilfields.

On the other hand, they are extremely angry with President Bush's policies on Iraq, especially also on the Arab-Israeli conflict, and just think he is—I mean his style is so unlike theirs. They would never engage in this preemptive way, as he has.

However, personally they like him a lot. They love the fact that he wore the Saudi garb, that he danced with the sword; that he looked them in the eye, and they seemed to think he was one of them; that he spent three days in Saudi Arabia, the first time a U.S. president ever did so, and only three hours in Egypt, which shows you that Saudi is now very important whereas Egypt is not.

But I think they are both groping. The Saudis often talk about China, Russia, India—alternatives to the U.S. But there is no alternative, in terms of the protection that the United States provides them.

They are hoping, I think, for an administration much like Bush father rather than Bush son. They don't like Hillary Clinton.

They want a direct line. They want access to—the Saudis have always insisted on having a U.S. ambassador who doesn't have to go through the State Department, but rather can pick up the phone and call the White House directly. That's their style. That's how they rule themselves in their own country.

QUESTION: I'm a little bit confused. Jim Woolsey, our former director of the CIA, and Nina Shea did a study in 2005, published by the Freedom House in Washington, which collected a bunch of information from the Saudi mosques, mostly Wahhabist, here in the United States. It was filled with anti-American propaganda—don't cooperate with the authorities, and the like. Jim also has made a lot of public speeches where he has cited the Saudi Ministry of Information and the Friday broadcast to the *imams*, which has been filled—this is the stuff that he quoted—with very anti-Jewish and also anti-Christian speech.

You painted a very benign approach of the Saudis. It seems quite in conflict. I don't know that I really understand that very much. Would you comment?

BERNARD HAYKEL: I most certainly do comment.

The Muslim sources and texts, whether Wahhabi or non-Wahhabi, are full of references to infidels and to Jews and Christians as not being good people, people to shun and avoid and fight and so on. So, first of all, this is not exclusive to the Wahhabis.

If you want to expurgate Muslim religious texts, then perhaps the Bible also ought to be expurgated in the same way, because religious texts are, by their very nature, religious and there is speech there that is uncomfortable to a post-Enlightenment mentality.

Now, the Saudis do promote a form of intolerance—there is no doubt about it—especially against other Muslims who don't agree with them. The stuff that they say about Jews and Christians is, I think, common to all Muslims; it's not exclusive to them.

As far as references specifically to the United States and to Americans, that I have not seen in their textbooks. I have seen lots of stuff against Christians and Jews, yes, without a doubt. But you will find it in the Qur'an itself.

So where does one draw the line, and what is our role vis-à-vis not just the Saudis, but Muslims, about their own texts? If we were to start telling them "remove these citations here and there," perhaps they could ask us the same about the Bible and the Torah. I don't think that's an area that we should get into.

QUESTION: I have a question about the funding of the madrassas outside of Saudi Arabia by the Saudis. It's kind of assumed, or portrayed in the press, that the madrassas in other countries are breeding grounds for jihadism. The question is: Are the Saudis actively promoting that? If they are not promoting jihadism internally in their own country because it's against their own interests, are they supportive of the exportation of jihadism by reason of the funding of these madrassas?

BERNARD HAYKEL: First of all, the term "madrassa" just means "school." It's not just a Muslim school.

There is no question that the Saudis have spent a lot of money since the 1960s on the building of mosques and the building of schools all over the world, and where they have promoted their own version of Islam, the Salafi version of Islam, that is intolerant—but largely intolerant of other Muslims.

Typically, what happens is this. Let's say an African from Mali or the Ivory Coast comes to Saudi Arabia and studies at a university in Saudi Arabia. He imbibes this particular version of Islam at the Islamic University in Medina, for example. Then he goes back to his home country. He sees local forms of Islam, typically Sufi Islam, a mystical form of Islam—which, by the way, has violent manifestations as well. If you look at history, the people who fought the Italians in Libya and the people who fought the British in India were often Sufis.

In any case, this chap goes back to West Africa and he sees this local form of Islam that is in contradiction with the Islam that he saw and was inculcated in in Saudi Arabia. So he starts attacking the

local imams, the local mosques, the local practices.

Then he goes back to Saudi Arabia and he says, "You know, back home there is all this bad innovation, this bad Islam. Give me money so I can build a mosque where true Islam is taught." The Saudis, before 9/11, would give him money.

And it's not just the state, by the way. You have very wealthy private individuals who spend and have resources just like a state and would give money to such individuals. But also imams and religious scholars and so on would have their own slush funds to give these people. And yes, they did promote this form of Wahhabism.

Since 9/11, however, the Saudis have really reined in this form of expenditure and have tried very hard to centralize it and to control it, with varying success. More recently, they have been quite successful.

And yes, it is intolerant. The people who are at the receiving end of this intolerance, as I said, are often other Muslims. They are not necessarily *jihadis*. This form of Islam is not necessarily *jihadi*.

By the way, I should also say that *jihad*, which means "struggle"—and it can mean "armed struggle" and it can mean "non-armed struggle," but typically it means "armed struggle"; it's often translated as "holy war"—is fundamentally a part of the Muslim religion. It's not something that is, again, exclusive to the Wahhabis. They did promote it in Afghanistan when they were fighting the Russians. By the way, we did promote it as well—the United States, that is.

To get rid of *jihad* as a doctrine is, I think, the biggest challenge for moderate Muslims, because it is embedded in the religion and in the legal practice.

QUESTION: My question is about institutions. You mentioned that they are always insignificant. But how about the so-called Shura Council, where all the princes have to come to consensus on the issues before a decision can be made? Are there disagreements between them sometimes? How do they resolve those differences if they occur?

BERNARD HAYKEL: The Shura Council is a consultative council. It's not actually composed of princes. It's people who are appointed by the king, and most of them are not princes or members of the royal family.

You have a cabinet, ministers, a number of whom are princes and a number of whom are not princes. On really important matters, in the ministerial cabinet, when they meet with the king—if there is a really important issue that is being discussed that doesn't concern the peripheral, unimportant ministries, the non-princely ministers leave the room and then the discussion takes place among the members of the royal family.

The royal family also has a council that is separate from this ministerial council where also things get hashed out. Then they have intermediaries between them. High-ranking princes will send interlocutors between them to discuss and hash out matters, to form a consensus, which takes a very long time to form.

Again, it's not institutionalized. It is about personal relationships, even though it takes the form of an institution.

QUESTION: There were two items in the press fairly recently that have at least a tangential relationship to your topic. One was a headlined, front-page article in *The Times* about the large number of Egyptians who are finding their situation hopeless—they can't get an education; when they do, they can't get a job—they are turning increasingly to religion.

So the question in relation to that is: How does one reconcile the fact that the impoverished, hopeless

members of that society are turning to religion; and yet the Saudis who were involved in 9/11, including, most particularly, Mr. bin Laden, are people of means, who certainly are not hopeless, and yet they were the ones who became the most militant?

The second item was one about this individual who was freed from the Yemeni prison. He had been instrumental in the attack on the American battleship USS COLE. There was a great deal of upset about the fact that the Yemenis released him. The comment was made by the Yemenis that he had agreed to help them, and, besides, he was undergoing a reeducation. The comment was made that reeducation was something that the Saudis are also picking up.

How are they reeducating? What are they reeducating people to? And what does that mean in terms of Islam in general, for not only the Saudis, but other countries?

BERNARD HAYKEL: These are very good questions.

Let me answer the second one first, the rehabilitation or reeducation process. Both the Yemenis and the Saudis are involved in this. It's hard to know how effective they are.

Typically, the form that it takes is the following. Let's say a member of al Qaeda comes back, whether from Guantanamo or elsewhere, and he will have debates with religious scholars about how his views or his understanding of specific verses of the Qur'an or traditions of the Prophet are incorrect. This religious scholar will try to "correct" his understanding of these religious texts.

In conjunction with this correction, or reeducation process, the Saudis will say, "We will give you money to set up a house. We will find you a job. We will buy you a car. We will even pay the money for the dowry or the bride price for a wife." It comes with lots of goodies. And some have agreed to this.

I am very skeptical about this reeducation process. I think the way *jihadis* typically desist or back down from their views is when their views are no longer considered legitimate by the majority of Muslim society.

In Saudi Arabia, what happened was, once the *jihadis*—in May and November of 2003, they attacked housing compounds in which many Muslims were killed. In the November attacks, there were Muslims who were fasting who were killed. This really created a sense of revulsion in Saudi society.

Then they attacked some institutions of the state—in other words, I think it was a police or a Ministry of the Interior building—and the vast majority of the Saudi citizens actually work for the state. When you attack the state, you are attacking the citizenry, in terms of where their income comes from.

So the Saudi citizens, once the violence came home, turned against it. That mood swing, which is very difficult to gauge, but you can kind of sense it on the street—you can sense it in Internet chat rooms and so on—is what I think has led to many people informing on the *jihadis* and informing on al Qaeda and helping the state really clamp down and crack down on them.

Your first question was about Egypt. I don't worry about poor people turning to Islam. The people who are really dangerous are typically the middle-class educated people—engineers and doctors and that sort of thing.

QUESTIONER: Why?

BERNARD HAYKEL: Why is that?

QUESTIONER: There is an inconsistency there, that they are turning to religion and yet [inaudible] the middle class and upper middle class.

BERNARD HAYKEL: It's because the middle class and upper middle class are the ones who have this ideology. They are amenable to being "ideologized," if that's a verb. Therefore, they can then be mobilized. Whereas I think the poor are really concerned with getting daily sustenance; they can't think about big things.

QUESTION: What is your explanation as to why 15 of the 19 hijackers on September 11th were Saudi?

BERNARD HAYKEL: It was a deliberate decision by al Qaeda, and specifically by bin Laden, to create a rift between the Saudi regime and the United States.

Bin Laden is a really smart guy. The movement has strategic—they have a media outfit. They have a think-tank that produces strategic documents that you can download off the Web that discuss issues of tactics and strategy.

It was a deliberate strategy to create a rift between our two countries and to frighten the Saudi rulers and regime into thinking that there was a really serious threat, an enemy, within the kingdom that they were not aware of.

But the thing about *jihadis*, by the way, that we should always keep in mind—there are 1.2 billion Muslims out there. The number of *jihadis* is what—20,000, 30,000? It is statistically kind of—certainly, if they are suicide bombers, they can be very damaging and they cause a lot of problems, but statistically we are talking about an insignificant number of people.

QUESTION: There is a very substantial Shiite population in the eastern part of Saudi Arabia. To what extent do they represent a potential antigovernment force?

BERNARD HAYKEL: Again, a very good question.

In fact, there are Shiites in three areas of Saudi Arabia. In the Eastern Province, they are about 40 percent of the population; in Qatif and Hasa, those are the two areas they are located in. You also have Shiites in Medina, the second holiest city in Islam. And you have Shiites also on the Yemeni border, in a place called Najran.

Some of the Shiites of the Eastern Province were very affected and influenced by the 1979 Iranian revolution and became mobilized. Some subscribed to the ideology of Khomeini and of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

However, the Saudis since the 1990s cut a deal with them and have spent a lot of money co-opting them. The Shiites of Saudi Arabia know that the Saudi state has these dogs that it can unleash on them—I mean these really nasty Wahhabi types. So they are given a choice: "Which do you want? Do you want to partake of the largesse of the government and the country, or do you want to deal with these nasty guys?" I think, by and large, the Shiites have decided on the former, for good reason.

QUESTION: I'm the Legal Advisor of the Egyptian Mission to the United Nations, but I am speaking in my personal capacity not in my professional capacity.

First, I would like to comment on the issue of the Qur'an and the incitement towards Jews and Christians, because I think I have read the Qur'an pretty well so many times in my life. The verses themselves, if they are speaking about history, they are stating facts. But there are no verses, as far as I recollect, that do incite against Christians or Jews. Even the early history of Islam actually gave them refuge in the Arab territories at the time, or the Muslim lands. I don't know if I get you right or wrong when you say that.

BERNARD HAYKEL: I don't want to get into a discussion about which interpretation of Islam is correct.

QUESTIONER: No, no, I'm not talking about interpretation. I'm talking about the verses of the Qur'an.

BERNARD HAYKEL: Well, I mean, "slay the unbelievers wherever you may find them." Who are the unbelievers? Jews and Christians in this context.

We can get into this legal and theological debate. But there are many different interpretations of the Qur'an. There are many different interpretations of *hadith*. If you want to find violent texts, you will find them.

If you like, give me your email; I will send you a long list of them. I can also send you a long list from the Bible, by the way, as well. So this is not something that is exclusive, and it is not directed as an attack on the Qur'an or on Muslims.

But there are many different interpretations. Many Muslims interpret away some of these verses. But these verses exist, these hadiths exist, and Muslims have to deal with them.

QUESTION: As a woman, I'm interested in the subjugation of the women generally in the Muslim area. Now, Saudi Arabia, for a time I thought was getting a little more liberal towards them. As a matter of fact, in some respects, it's quite hypocritical, because I have seen them shopping at Chanel in Paris, quite unashamedly.

Is it that the upper classes don't have to and the lower classes have to cover up and become non-persons?

BERNARD HAYKEL: You can shop at Chanel in Riyadh if you want to, by the way. You don't have to go to Paris.

Everyone covers up in public, no matter what class you belong to.

The question of women in Saudi Arabia is a very important one and is a sensitive one. Let me try to explain it to you this way.

In most polls—and most of these are informal; I don't know if there has ever been a really formal poll on this issue—but in most discussions amongst ordinary Saudis, when asked the question of women driving, "should women be allowed to drive or not?"—there are legal reasons why the Wahhabi religious scholars say they should not be allowed to drive. By the way, this is unique to Saudi Arabia. Women drive in Yemen; they drive in Egypt; they drive in Lebanon. This is something specific to Saudi Arabia.

When Saudis are asked whether women should be allowed to drive, 70 percent of them say "No." Men and women asked say "No." So if you are a ruler in Saudi Arabia and you are confronted with that reality, would you change things and allow women to drive? I'm not sure you would, for very practical reasons.

QUESTIONER: [inaudible]

BERNARD HAYKEL: Yes, and 30 percent of Saudi women would as well—and men, by the way, would as well—would want to change this. But this is a very conservative society.

JOANNE MYERS: We'll take the last question over there.

QUESTION: May I just follow up? The Qur'an really does not—

BERNARD HAYKEL: It doesn't talk about women driving, no. [Laughter]

QUESTION: Young people, teenagers, people in their twenties, both men and women, how disenfranchised might they feel if they are not in university or unable to go to university—unemployment, their concerns for the future, things like that?

BERNARD HAYKEL: That's a terribly important question.

The worst social ill in Saudi Arabia is boredom. Young people are terribly, terribly bored there, because there are no cinemas, there is no place for young people to congregate. There is a remarkable degree of gender segregation. Lots of social ills result from this.

There is a huge unemployment rate as well. This is a problem that is not just specific to Saudi Arabia. It exists in most Arab countries. I don't know what the solution to it is. You could employ most of them if you wanted to, but you would have to get rid of the migrant workers and you would have to ask Saudis to do menial jobs, which they are not willing to do, many of them. They all want to work in banks and have white-collar jobs.

So I don't think there is a ready answer. It is a very major problem in this society.

QUESTIONER: And the Internet doesn't help.

BERNARD HAYKEL: No, it doesn't. Or satellite television, for that matter, as well.

JOANNE MYERS: Thank you so much. I think we are all very hungry to know more about Saudi Arabia and you have fed us so well. Now it's our turn to invite you to join us in refreshments and continue the conversation.

Thank you.