

THE KINGDOM AND THE CALIPHATE: DUEL OF THE ISLAMIC STATES

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Since late 2014 the Islamic State has declared war on Saudi Arabia and launched a series of terrorist attacks on Saudi soil intended to start an uprising. In a further attack on the Saudi kingdom, the self-declared caliphate has claimed to be the true representative of the severe form of Islam indigenous to Saudi Arabia, Wahhabism. These two very different versions of an Islamic state are at war over a shared religious heritage and territory.

Heritage and Homeland Under Siege

- The Islamic State, which draws on the teachings of the Wahhabi school of Islam, finds inspiration in the example of the first Saudi-Wahhabi state (1744–1818), which engaged in expansionary jihad and cultivated a sectarian animus toward the Shia.
- The Islamic State has declared three so-called provinces in Saudi Arabia and carried out some fifteen attacks there since November 2014.
- The Islamic State's rise has reignited a debate in Saudi Arabia over the intolerant and aggressive nature of Wahhabism. Liberals have called for a revisionist movement, as they describe it, to expunge certain doctrines from Wahhabism.

Conclusions

- In some ways the Islamic State's claim to the Wahhabi heritage is not unfounded. The early Wahhabis advanced an exclusivist version of Sunni Islam that was universally seen as a heresy, founded a state that waged expansionary jihad against fellow Sunni Muslims, and killed Shia Muslims because they were seen as hopeless idolaters. The Islamic State has done the same on all three counts.
- Other features of the Islamic State's ideology—from the declaration of a caliphate to the use of extraordinary violence to the group's apocalyptic fervor—do not find a mainstream Wahhabi precedent.
- The Islamic State's campaign in Saudi Arabia has slowed considerably since October 2015. Despite concerted propaganda efforts, the group appears to be making little headway against a state outfitted with one of the most advanced counterterrorism infrastructures in the world. But given the substantial Islamic State following in Saudi Arabia, more attacks, however occasional, can be expected.
- Saudi Arabia is a long way from pursuing meaningful reforms of Wahhabi doctrine. Saudi liberals' criticism of Wahhabism is tolerated as of early 2016 more than ever before, despite the kingdom's religious scholars who would prefer the government silence them. But the new political leadership is busy consolidating power, while the religious leadership is defensive and mired in conspiracy theories.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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