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## Can Religion Stand in the Way of Globalization? The Phenomenon of XXI Century Saudi Arabia

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Anna Odrowąż-Coates\*

## CAN RELIGION SURVIVE GLOBALIZATION? THE PHENOMENON OF XXI CENTURY SAUDI ARABIA

### Abstract

This paper is based on the author's two-year sociological field research in Saudi Arabia, where Islam has a major influence on every aspect of life. For example, the need for specialists and affordable manual labor from abroad is a direct result of the dysfunctional education system, which is heavily influenced by the cultural and sociological consequences of the *Wahhabi* interpretation of the *Qur'an*. The author demonstrates that the *Wahhabi* vision of Islam is the key factor responsible for preserving traditional customs, the maintenance of power by the Royal family, and that it holds back the sociological effects of globalization.

### Keywords

social control, faith, tradition, system reproduction



### 1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is not to criticize Islam, but to provide an analysis of the situation presently prevailing in Sunni-dominated Saudi Arabia, where the legal and political system is based on *Shari'a* law, and how it affects the culture. The influence of the *Wahhabist*<sup>1</sup> interpre-

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<sup>1</sup> Wahhabism is a socio-political, religious movement which started in the eighteenth century to enforce strict codes of behavior; ban public entertainment, music, dancing, smoking and drinking alcohol, as well as mixing of genders and praying to Saints, or visiting graves. It is one of the Sunni schools for interpretation of the *Qur'an*.

tation of the *Qur'an* on the social system, customs and tradition will be described with reference to public institutions, the educational system, the media and mosques. The discourse from local mass media (especially the daily newspapers “Arab News” and “Saudi Gazette”), international publications and school textbooks used in Saudi public schools will be considered. A part of the results of author’s own ethnographic research will complete the picture. The data collected is contained in an ethnographic diary, which is the outcome of a two-year anthropological-sociological field study in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (2010–2012). The study was carried out by immersion in the cultural environment of Saudi Arabia, which allowed the author to mingle with indigenous people and gain first-hand experience through the use of qualitative research tools. These included participant observation as well as in-depth interviews with local people and immigrants of both sexes. The core of the sample comprised of 124 Saudi female respondents of diverse age and marital status, who were interviewed *in vivo* in everyday life situations in Taif (93) (Mecca province) and in Jeddah (31). Taif is considered to be one of the most conservative, whilst Jeddah is viewed as the most progressive city in the Kingdom.

## 2. *Wahhabi* influence on social order in Saudi Arabia

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The Saudi Kingdom is a fast developing, technologically advanced and wealthy absolute monarchy. Since 2005 until the present (June 2013) it has been ruled by King Abdullah Al Saud, who uses religious credentials for the preservation of his reign. He bears the self-proclaimed title of “Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques” [*wali al-amr*’ (in Arabic)], which makes him a defender of faith and his position is unquestionable. Revolt against him would be seen as an attack on religion. He is seen as a generous founder of Hajj for people from the poorest countries in the world (he personally funds approximately 2000 pilgrimages a year). He also encourages vast spending on the promotion of the *Wahhabi* vision of Islam abroad, in Saudi-founded schools and through a variety of literature promoting the message of Islam. The lack of a secular separation of the state from the mosque means that since 1927 the absolute monarchy has been ruling using the *Wahhabi* interpretation of the *Qur'an*. *Shari'a* law, where *Shari'a* in translation means “the way” (signifying “the only right way”), derives solely from the *Qur'an*, *Hadith* and *Sunnah*, which contain the teachings and sayings of the prophet Muhammad (El Fadl K. A. 2005). *Wahhabism* strengthened in Saudi Arabia in the nineteen sixties due to the ideological efforts of Sheikh Abdul Ibn Baz, who was Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia

and whose teachings will be mentioned on multiple occasions in this text. Furthermore, *Wahhabism* replaced all the other schools of Islamic thought in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution in 1979, when the Saudi royal family, who were concerned about the potential for religious unrest in the country, placed more power in the hands of *Wahhabi* scholars to secure their senior feudal position and ensure peace. The *Wahhabi* social order meant stricter control over all aspects of life. This began with the segregation of genders in public and increased restrictions placed on women. Women now need to cover themselves, wearing a black *hijab* (a thin robe called an *abaya*, a face covering *niquab* and a scarf for their hair); they are forbidden to drive and may not leave the country without their legal guardian's knowledge and permission. Until 2011 women were not allowed to work in a mixed gender environment. It is only recently that they gained permission to work in 'family only' lingerie and cosmetics stores, or 'family only' sections of supermarkets (family means women and their children, which discriminates men, preventing them from entering such premises). Enormous progress was made in January 2013, when despite the outrage from religious conservatives, thirty women were appointed as advisors to the *Shura*: a council - an advisory board on religious matters concerning all aspects of life and politics. It is primarily comprised of Muslim clerics but also includes some US-educated intellectuals (Shura.gov.sa, 2014).

124 women from the cities of Taif and Jeddah, who were interviewed by the author of this paper on a variety of cultural topics, were of the opinion that many of the laws and customs that Westerners see as discriminatory and disadvantageous to women, are natural and fully acceptable to them. All of the respondents despite age, marital status, or exposure to Western culture, claimed that the obligatory Islamic dress code is a religious necessity and as such is not questioned by any decent Muslim woman. In addition, they claimed that the seclusion makes them feel safe. One could observe complete internalization of rules and codes programmed into Saudi women during the socialization process. The restricted life choices available to them were perceived as 'Allah's will' and therefore unquestioned. This set of powerful religious convictions is inculcated in Saudi citizens through the united message coming from the family, the social environment, the local media, the education system and mosques, as a process of ongoing socialization and permanent indoctrination. Religious programming goes beyond faith, with strong social control, placing great importance on visible participation at prayer times and dress code adherence. This can be proved by not breaking fast in Ramadan during daily hours, avoiding blasphemy, not befriending Christians or Jews and most of all, not questioning the religion or the *Qur'an*. Changing one's religion of birth or becoming an atheist is punishable by death. The obligatory clo-

sure of businesses for five daily prayers enforces religious rituals and combines religious ablutions and visits to the mosque into a daily routine, particularly for men. There is also a high degree of fatalism amongst average Saudi people, who trust that all that happens to them through their earthly lives is in God's hands, leading some to dangerous behaviors observed on the road, or in a passive approach to problems and challenges. The religious message is visible in everyday life situations, starting with the exchange of greetings, where 'peace be upon you' – *Al salamu alaykum* – shows communing in faith. The commonly used exclamation '*Inshallah*' means 'if God permits' and '*Mashallah*', which means 'thanks to God' or 'what Allah wishes' can be heard even from the youngest children.

'Islam' literally means 'submission' (Ali A. H. 2006). Lissan al-Arab, states that the word 'Islam' is derived from the root verb *istaslama* which means 'to submit' or 'surrender'. It is hard to write about religious propaganda, when at the same time one admires the strength of faith and religious conviction of people who dedicate their lives to God. However, institutionalized religion (rather than faith) can be seen as a powerful tool of control and an institution of collective good, similar to Durkheim's writings on *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (Bellah R. N. 1973), and in this respect, Saudi Arabia is a perfect example of his view on the social functions of religion.

### 3. State enforcement of the message

There are several *Salafi* offshoots of the *Wahhabi* movement, however, for the purpose of this paper, it will be considered more or less homogenous, since in this way it is easier to follow for the Western recipient of the study. *Salafi* is the term used by *Wahhabis* to differentiate themselves from orthodox Sunnis, by claiming to follow in the footsteps of the early Muslims. The term '*salaf*' describes the time period in the first 300 years after the *Hijra* (the emigration of the Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina in 622 A.D.). Being a '*Salafi*' also implies a certain level of theological knowledge. For decades, the House of Al Saud kept *Wahhabiyya* (the community of strict followers of early Muslims) under control by granting them a significant say in the educational curriculum, law and the internal politics of the Kingdom. Along with *Wahhabism*, the institution of religious police called the '*Mutawa*'<sup>2</sup> was developed as a guard of public morals. Initially it

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<sup>2</sup> Religious police, employed by the Committee for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice to preserve religious observance and morality.

wielded great power until the 2002 fire in a girls' school in Mecca. Fourteen girls were burned alive because the religious police did not allow them to leave the school without a veil in order to protect public decency. Members of the religious police are often recruited from among former prisoners. The purpose of membership is to earn the grace of Allah and to regain the respect of the society.

To maintain the balance between the strict *Wahhabi* vision and the need for international relations, Al Saud has ensured minimal contact between expatriates and Saudi society. Separate residential compounds with high walls function in two ways. Foreigners are allowed an enclave of their own culture and customs, provided they do not take it outside, and locals feel protected against the influx of 'infidels' (compare with Al-Rasheed 2007:7). Al Rasheed writes that 'it was a defensive reaction to the sudden inundation of 'aliens' with whom there were no common or linguistic grounds'. She claims that a small number of Saudis considered these compounds a desired form of escape for 'infidels' from rigid morality and surveillance, whilst the majority thought of it as a ghetto of moral bankruptcy, debauchery, corruption and sin, as well as a symbol of the undesired Western domination and 'colonial settlements'. This may be one of the reasons for terrorist acts against such facilities (idem, p. 8). Al Saud provides military assistance for guarding these liminal spaces, not only conscious of the need for an expatriate, specialist workforce but also of the *Qur'anic* protective message that one shall not harm the guests of a Muslim in a Muslim state, even if they are of a different faith. Some *Wahhabi* scholars believe that their Imam, the Saudi King, follows the example of ancient wisdom that allowed for the making of alliances with 'infidels' - Christians, Jews and so on, to buy time and to grow in power. *Wahhabi* chose not to interfere as long as they were granted complete control of the domestic social sphere and kept it uncontaminated from blasphemy (idem, p. 11).

Public attention is focused on the principles of religious observance and the fulfillment of the recommendations of the *Ulama* (the religious body issuing regulations based on the laws of the *Qur'an*). There is significant control of potential social deviances by family and by public opinion, together with the law through the ubiquitous police state (check points manned by police and army, and a conspicuous presence of the religious police). Well-developed computer systems facilitate the tracking of citizens and the monitoring of phone calls and Internet communication. Both the indigenous population and the temporary newcomers (migrants and pilgrims) must obtain entry and exit visas in order to enter or leave the country, and there is strict control at all borders. The high

degree of State scrutiny of religious communities, mosques, businesses and tribal clans, allows for rapid intervention in the event of any disagreement with the monarchist or religious mainstream. The occasional and weak forms of resistance to authority are met with an immediate counter-attack by the security authorities.

*Qur'anic* law allows death penalty for a wide range of offences against morality: adultery, abandonment of Islam, the public practice of other religions or proselytizing, prostitution, drug possession or the sale of alcohol. Along with murderers and rapists, at risk of the death penalty are also persons accused of witchcraft, divination and possession. In the past, death by sword was reserved for men. Female convicts were shot or stoned instead, depending on the character of their crime, however, since 1999 they can be also beheaded.

Abdulaziz O. Sager, when considering the political makeup of contemporary Saudi society, divided Sunni Islamists, (who unquestionably form a countrywide majority with considerable influence) into following categories:

- a. Conservative, non-violent *Wahhabism* being the largest most powerful group;
- b. Violent *jihadi* trend amongst radicalized youth;
- c. *Ulama* of the center;
- d. Pro-reform, liberal or new Islamists;
- e. Sunni Islamists outside the Kingdom, who lobby against the ruling elite;
- f. The Muslim brotherhood, popular amongst urban, educated Saudis (Sager A. O. 2006:242–243).

An outside observer will notice that this classification has religious grounds. One can easily say that all aspects of life and politics in KSA have a religious foundation.

#### **4. The rituals and the repetition. The influence of public education on the religious development of children**

Initially *Wahhabi Ulama* were literate men in an illiterate society. Development of state education changed that and challenged their monopoly of knowledge. According to Al Rasheed, *Wahhabi* clerics have accepted only the aspects of modernity that fell under their control and therefore were given significant power over many of hi-tech developments. They opposed the education of girls until they were put in charge of the female curriculum and schools. They fought against television until



they were given the power to control transmission. They only accepted satellite dishes after they were given considerable airtime on religious programs and two channels of their own: *al-Majd* and *Iqra*. They use modern media to propagate their message abroad, but the message has remained unchanged and does not accommodate the demands of the changing society (Al-Rasheed 2007:55–58). Pierre Bourdieu's (1996) concept of schools as a weapon of the state that reproduce social order and ensure the position and status of the state's nobility can be applied to the Saudi example. The involvement of the *Ulama* (who are revered as highly respected religious scholars) in education creates religious nobility with high level of credibility, which drives average citizens to follow their lead. As a result, they are able to control people's minds because of the monopoly on and the unification of the educational curriculum.

Thomas Friedman claimed in 2004 that the 9/11 terrorists learned intolerance and discrimination in Saudi public schools and through the religious education program (Friedman 2004). What did the education system look like in 2010–2012, at the time of the author's ethnographic study?

The main religious subjects taught at all education levels, including university, are: the *Qur'an*, *Tawhid*, *Tajwid* (recitation), *Tafsir* (commentary on the *Qur'an*), *Hadith* (the life and sayings of the Prophet) and *Fiqh* (*Qur'anic* law). They comprise 14–35% of all subjects and 30% at the level of primary education. At university level they form 45% of the humanities and about 15% of the science subjects<sup>3</sup>. These proportions are consistent with Denzin's (2003) observation that culture and power are two sides of the same coin, and that both are local, contextual, performative, and relate to existing social structures and to specific relations with authority. The education system is one of the pillars of cultural and religious preservation and the prevailing distribution of power. One of the most important concepts taught in schools is obedience, especially, civil obedience of authorities i.e. Allah, the Prophet Muhammad and the Royal Family. In school books there can be found references to the fact that lack of obedience equates betrayal and the creation of schism (*'Fitna'*), which puts a person on par with dissidents (Al-Hadith 2002:23, 58). The sacralization of royalty, combined with a strong belief among Saudis that princes are above the law or are subject to a law of their own, fuels interests in their personal conduct. There is a sense amongst the Saudi public that royals are above the Shari'a Islamic law that they claim to guard and uphold

<sup>3</sup> Data obtained through interviews with 64 students, teachers and parents (2012).



(Al-Rasheed 2007:197–198). Unquestioning obedience towards the rulers is one of the basic tenets taught at school and therefore the dubious conduct of some royals is difficult to challenge.

Fear and obedience are increased through teaching methods such as memorizing and repetition, leading to the suppression of creativity, or initiative. One should take things for granted and never challenge the teacher. There is no interaction with the teacher, who distances himself from his pupils; there is no dialogue, discussion, or learning through deduction. The Socratic Method is anathema to education in Saudi Arabia. The only indisputable and irrefutable sources of knowledge are the ‘*Qur’an*’ and the ‘*Sunnah*’. The aim is to produce passive and dependent individuals, lacking the desire to question anything. Mosques are the only permitted houses of worship and entry is completely prohibited to infidels, who are defined as Christians, Jews, atheists, and any other non-Muslim faiths. Furthermore, a non-Muslim is not allowed to enter Islam’s holy cities of Mecca and major parts of Medina. There are also separate highways for “non-Muslims”. The ever present police check points on the roads and the *Mutawa* (religious police) ensure that this is adhered to and one may be arrested and at the very least vanish from the country for crossing these boundaries.

The worship of other religions in public is completely forbidden and even home gatherings may have fatal consequences. Officially the import of any non-Islamic religious publications and artifacts is not permitted. Occasionally, customs officials turn a blind eye to a small cross or to discrete copy of the Bible for personal use, but on other occasions a person carrying it may be at least fined and have their ‘offensive’ possession confiscated. There are officially no priests in Saudi Arabia; however they do enter the country unofficially. To disguise their presence some have visa documents with permits to work as physical laborers or administrative personnel. Occasionally they have to do some actual work to cover for their spiritual activities but at other times an embassy work permit will suffice. Official contacts also exist between Saudi politicians and the Vatican (2010)<sup>4</sup>. Prince Saud Al-Faisal repeatedly had audiences with Pope John Paul II, but these are not revealed to the general public, being divulged only to representatives of other faiths as manifestations of dialogue and good will. Religious communications regarding ‘others’ that express anti-Western attitudes are not only repeated in the media and in mosques, but also by the legally sanctioned and state sponsored religious authorities.

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<sup>4</sup> “*The Kingdom of Humanity and the King of Peace.*” Riyadh, 2010.

Sheikh Ibn Baz, the former Grand Mufti, has repeatedly spoken publicly about the presence of foreigners in the Kingdom. A quote from one of his statements: “We should not permit the employment of non-Muslim workers, regardless of whether they are women or men. In the Gulf states we should not hire a non-Muslim driver, or any other non-Muslim employee as the Prophet, peace be upon him, ordered the removal of all Jews and Christians, and forbade the presence in the land of other religions... This is because the introduction of infidels holds a danger for Muslim beliefs, morality, and for the education of Moslem children, so it should be banned! ... (Riyadh 2001:260)”. Paradoxically, in 2004, 55% of all workers in KSA were foreign (uis.unesco.org 2004), creating huge religious diversity.

Through informal discussions with 53 youngsters between 12 and 16 years old, it was confirmed that Christians and Jews are perceived as infidels, therefore one should not exchange the salutation of peace ‘*Salam Alaykum*’ with them whenever possible. Befriending them is not permitted, neither is socializing with them, unless with the clear purpose of converting them to Islam. Surprisingly, the young, whom one expects to be more moderate, as noted, exhibited a level of conservatism, even deeper than their parents’ generation. Officialdom holds Israel and the “Jewish conspiracy” to be the cause of many historical events (e.g., the French Revolution, Marxism), making them a target (Al-hadith 2002:105), while the Yemeni Jew Abdullah bin Saba is blamed for the split of the Muslim community into *Sunnis and Shiites* (Al-tawhid 2002:102). The aim is to unite the king’s subjects in their mission to “ethnic purity” and to unify the Sunnis against anyone who is not, by Jihad. This consists of three aspects (Doumato 2003:235): 1) One’s own internal struggle against sin, 2) The struggle using words and ideas with the help of eloquence and diplomacy and 3) As a last resort, armed struggle. Multiple passages in school books discuss Jihad as holy war and often such rhetoric ends with the claims of Islam being a religion of love and peace (Al-hadith 2002:36, Al-tarbiyya al Wataniyya 2002:27).

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## **5. The role of Saudi media and the “mosque” in propagating a united religious message**

In research conducted in 2010–2012, the majority of 124 Saudi women and 20 Saudi men interviewed by the author recounted the same belief that the majority of local and traditional customs that outsiders view

as cultural, originate from a religious message. They firmly believe that sticking to these customs is an element of future salvation. For example, both men and women felt strongly about dress code adherence as a requirement for being a 'good Muslim'. Cultural codes relating to weddings and funerals were also perceived in terms of religious duty and concern. Similar evidence can be found in autobiographical materials such as Rajaa Alsanea's (a Saudi) "Girls of Riyadh", Quanta Ahmed's "In the Land of Invisible Women" and Carmen Bin Laden's "In the Veiled Kingdom". All of them are Muslim, all of them critical of the Saudi approach to other religions, other ethnic groups and other customs. They all challenged the religious observance practiced in KSA and the religious justification of social order and social traditions. They all personally experienced racism, prejudice and discrimination that they blamed openly on religiously driven propaganda.

Many authors, including Stephane Marchand in "Arabie Saoudite: La Menace" (2003), refer to Saudi Arabian religious ideology as dangerous. The themes of discrimination of other faiths, anti-Western propaganda, the jihadist message and strict Shari'a ruling, continues to be found in more up-to-date sources by credible scientific writers, such as British historian Robert Lacey, Saudi social scientist Madawi Al Rasheed and others.

The religious authority, Sheikh Ibn Baz saw great danger in sending the youth of the country to study in the West and the establishment of commercial networks outside Muslim territories. He ordered local people to only employ 'infidels' if a Muslim cannot be found to do the job. He maintained that one should not initiate the exchange of peace with any person of another faith. He also encouraged locals to nourish hatred rather than affection towards the infidels<sup>5</sup>. These messages coming from the top of the religious authority might have inspired some of the fanatic activity in the Kingdom. When analyzing terrorist cells in KSA, Roel Meijer (2006:271–306) stressed that all groups consist of *Shari'a* theoreticians, specializing in religious studies, highly educated intellectuals and foot soldiers with strong religious convictions but with a low level of education. From 2004/2005, radical clerics were warned to tone down their fiery sermons and many found themselves undergoing compulsory re-education in rehabilitation centers (Bronson 2006:392–393). The results of these measures are yet to be explored.

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<sup>5</sup> "Majmu fatawi." vol. V, p. 342.

*Wahhabi* scholars and the *Ulama* were initially against television, Internet and satellite transmissions, until they were granted control over those facilities and time on air to propagate the *Wahhabi* message (Al-Rasheed 2007:56–57). Modern channels of communication are a powerful tool for propaganda that they clearly have now embraced for their own causes. The ‘*Tawhid*’ handbook informs children that the *Ulama* places great emphasis on the use of the mass media and the mosque’s Friday sermon, to emphasize the importance of discarding inventions and innovations, and of eliminating innovators, or stifling them. The same handbook accuses infidel countries of inciting and encouraging change in order to injure the image of religion (Al-Tawhid 1992:79–107). Demonstrations and riots in neighboring Muslim countries, the “Arab Spring”, are presented in the media as being initiated by Jewish and American secret services. The Jews (never Israel) and the Americans are blamed for provoking the conflict between Arabs and for “agitating” in order to gain control of the oil and wealth of Arab countries. This was particularly evident in the reports of the unrest in Libya in the Saudi Gazette and Arab News. The Internet was legalized in 1998<sup>6</sup>. A large number of web pages are blocked by the government, particularly political, pornographic and websites of religions other than Islam, although one of the reasons given is the fight with terrorism.

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The late *Grand Mufti* of Saudi Arabia issued a fatwa, which reminds followers that Islam is the only true religion. The rest are heretics and infidels and are neither entitled to Saudi citizenship nor to erect shrines of worship of their own religion on the kingdom’s territory. At the entrance to the highway linking Jeddah with Mecca there is a sign which warns that disbelievers are not permitted. Religious leaders are concerned about children’s access to Western television which in their opinion is a corrupting influence. There is a cultural gap between what they are taught at schools and what they learn from Western cartoons and this is seen as a threat to the existing traditions and social mores. After familiarizing oneself with the school curriculum, the statements of religious scholars and the general discourse of the state towards the followers of other religions, one should not be surprised that the Saudis do not tolerate religions other than their own. A degree of dichotomy can be found in state promotion of the English language at school, as it has become widely used in the street and at home. This is one of the signs of globalization. As of June 29,

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<sup>6</sup> “Steps of the Devil” 2012 Human Rights Watch Report Saudi Arabia HRW.

2013 KSA has moved their weekend to match other Gulf countries, from Thursday - Friday, to Friday - Saturday, which also shows a degree of adjustment (arabia.msn.com 2013). Maps and globes sold in KSA, do not reflect the existence of Israel. The Saudi media is controlled and censored by the religious authorities and by the security services, who safeguard the royal family's image and the consistency of the religious message.

Public opinion seeded by imams blamed U.S. forces involved in the conflict with Iraq for propagating harmful cultural practices. For example, US female military personnel wearing T-shirts and uniforms with trousers, repairing and driving military vehicles and flying fighter aircraft concern the Saudi public to this day and are seen as emasculating Saudi men. The dread of granting rights to women, based on what Westerners see as an irrational fear, unites the masses in the fight against "potential liberalization" and maintains public support for royal power and the religion (Le Bon 1895, Kenrick 1995). The cultural divide between the Saudis and the Westerners confirms Huntington's view on conflicting religious ideologies (1996).

The blinkered education of isolated masses can only go so far. Global and local processes can be found in places that are both local and global in their context, for example, in the cities of Mecca and Medina - the religious heartland of Saudi Arabia, but also the heart of the Muslim world. The transcendental significance of local and global can be seen in the pilgrimages of *Hajj* and *Umra* - religious pilgrimages. Modernization, made possible by globalized capital that brings in money to the state, has allowed for the lavish use of technology. A good example is that of water. Sea water is desalinated at great expense and transferred to remote parts of the country and can be found in displays of wealth and prosperity in the form of water fountains, green grass, flowers and plants, all alive in the desert. On the other hand, pilgrims and local people believe that '*Zamzam*' water from the holy source in Mecca (discovered by Hagar during Abraham's times) has healing properties and may entice a person who drinks it for the first time to convert to Islam. Rapid electrification and digitalization, together with the construction boom and ever-growing network infrastructure, has delivered global brands, the Internet and the latest globalized technology, but beliefs in the miraculous properties of Zamzam water remain unchanged. Advanced armaments and the fast development of health and education infrastructure have been successful in creating the image of a high tech, modern state. The building of large numbers of mosques has been funded by the state to ensure that there is a Muslim house of worship in close proximity to any

settlement. This promotes local and traditional customs, but at the same time uses advanced technology and specialist manpower from abroad.

## 6. The power of religious tradition – conclusions

Some writers describe KSA as a 'Theocratic Unitarian State (Barber, Benjamin 1996)'. All Saudi Ministries, particularly the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, operate under the supervision of the royal family supported by Muslim scholars to ensure a united, untainted religious message present at school, mosque and in the media. The masses follow uncritically. Most Saudis unwittingly cooperate with the regime through strict social and family control as they fear deviation from accepted standards. The media is strictly censored, with no room for freedom of expression, breaches of faith or questioning of the authority of the King. There is no outlet for seemingly harmless political satire unless directed at Israel or America. Western magazines or publications from neighboring Arab countries are highly censored and are often sold with pages torn out or with stickers glued over the fragments of photographs or text that was considered inappropriate by the censors. Banned books cannot be purchased in Saudi and are confiscated or destroyed by customs officers. Technological advances and the oil-based financial resources are used to promote an image of Saudi as a moderate, but conservatively religious and prosperous state. At the same time there is significant opposition towards modernization from the clerics and also towards 'Western style' globalization by the majority of the Saudi public. The national education system promotes xenophobia, homophobia, racism and discrimination toward ethnic minorities as well as socially deprived groups, such as Shiites, or females lacking a male guardian. One of the side effects of the national educational system's emphasis on religion (rather than on practical and general knowledge) is the high rate of unemployment among graduates, despite government emphasis on gradual Saudization (now rebranded as 'nationalization') of all industries. The main reason for the high level of unemployment of Saudi citizens is, as demonstrated earlier, the lack of relevant skills, which has driven employers to hire skilled foreigners. The unemployed rely on the generous state social welfare programs and as a result become even more susceptible to social manipulation. Subsidies to reduce the prices of basic foods, particularly for

bakeries<sup>7</sup>, mean that even the dramatically poor will not starve to death. At the same time, the number of women and children begging on the streets (not only of African origin or of slave descent<sup>8</sup>), contradicts the image of Saudi Arabia as a country of great wealth. There is also a high number of immigrants from poorer parts of the world who, after attending Umra or Hajj, stay illegally in Saudi Arabia in an attempt to generate funds for the repayment of the debts incurred in funding their pilgrimage. The desire of illegal immigrants to remain in the Kingdom confirms the citizens' belief that the immigrants want to stay there permanently, due to the holiness, wealth and splendor of their country as opposed to other realities.

Saudi educational policy, the media and the mosque, place group mentality and clan solidarity over the individual. Although this assessment opens one up to accusations of ethnocentrism, it is nevertheless impossible to avoid value judgments, if only in the light of universal human rights. Denzin, like Malinowski, would certainly not consider cultural questioning to be a mistake. He writes: "I seek an existential, interpretive social science that offers a blueprint for cultural criticism. The criticism is grounded in the specific worlds made visible in the writing process. I understand that ethnography is never theory – or value free." (2003:129). The strength of religious convictions and faith based practices can be admirable. Saudi Arabia is certainly one of a few countries in the world that is not only a religious state but where full religious participation has been preserved due to the Wahhabi enforcement. Although rapid technological progress can be observed, it does not seem to weaken clan loyalties, social ties, or the faith of the people. Saudis oppose secularization, which they see as a direct result of Western style globalization. They feel they cannot stop it, but by isolation and preservation of conservative traditions, they can slow it down to buy time to look for alternative ways (Islamic ways) to benefit from the globalised world<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> For example, six wheat bread rolls cost 15 U.S. cents.

<sup>8</sup> Slavery in Saudi Arabia was officially abolished in 1962, although it is considered to be acceptable in the Qur'an, and therefore unofficially still exists. There is a strict social hierarchy in the national mentality based on the lightness of skin colour.

<sup>9</sup> See the final statements in: "Inside the Kingdom" 2008, BBC Two documentary on Prince Saud bin Abdul Mohsen's everyday life in KSA, first transmitted on 8 November 2008 by BBC Two, UK.



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## Abstrakt

Przedstawiony esej jest wynikiem dwuletnich badań terenowych w Arabii Saudyjskiej, gdzie Islam ma głęboki wpływ na każdy aspekt życia. Na przykład, zapotrzebowanie na wykwalifikowanych zagranicznych pracowników fizycznych w osiągalnej cenie wynika w prostej linii z dysfunkcyjnego systemu edukacji, który pozostaje pod silnym wpływem wahhabistycznej interpretacji Koranu. Autorka wykazuje, iż wahhabistyczna wizja Koranu jest kluczowym czynnikiem odpowiedzialnym za zachowanie tradycji, pozostanie królewskiej rodziny przy władzy, oraz że powstrzymuje ona społeczne efekty globalizacji.

## Słowa kluczowe

kontrola społeczna, wiara, tradycja, reprodukcja systemów