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[www.invisible-dog.com](http://www.invisible-dog.com)

[invisibledog@email.com](mailto:invisibledog@email.com)

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## **SAUDI ARABIA. THE PILLARS OF POWER**

In Saudi Arabia, power is based on three essential elements:

- The royal family
- The clergy
- The tribes

Each one of these three powers legitimizes the others in a connected system of cause and effect. The stability of the Saudi Arabia monarchy depends on the quality of the blend between these three elements.

### **The Royal Family**

The Saudi reign began around the year 1750. It was a product of the alliance between a tribal chief and a preacher. The chief was Mohammed al Saud, the preacher Mohammed bin Abd al Wahab. The former constituted a kingdom made of tribes, the latter gave him religious legitimization. It also seems that the two were related, since al Saud had married one of al Wahab's daughters. This was the basis for the mix of temporal power with religious legitimization that upholds the reign in Saudi Arabia today.

Initially the Wahabite's radical beliefs did not find room among many of the tribes, nor had they had much success among the Egyptians or the Ottoman empire, whom had alternatively occupied the area of the Arabic peninsula. The hardships of the Saudi reign and dynasty find their conclusion in the early '900's with the renaissance of the so-called Third Reign, under the leadership of Abdul Aziz bin Abdul Rahman bin Saud. The year 1932, with the designation of Abdul Aziz as King marks the birth of the Saudi dynasty as it is today.

Abdul Aziz was at the head of an large army and thanks to the religious fanaticism of his troops (they were called "Ikhwan" - which represents the first parallelism, albeit semantic, with the "Ikhwan Muslemin", the "Muslim Brothers") he conquered Riyadh. In 1924 he chased the Hashemite monarchy from the Mecca and Medina thus sealing, through the control of Islam's sacred cities, the pact between political and religious power.

Abdul Aziz was a prolific patriarch: 22 "official" wives (in groups of 4, according to Islamic law) which bore 44 children (36 males and 8 females, only 35 outlived their father) coupled with an innumerable flock of concubines and slave-girls (they would be 200, in groups of 4)

with a number of natural children (about 100). The patriarch's children were the foundation of the royal family that today includes from 6 to 7 thousand princes and tens of thousands of their family members.

These princes all play a part – some more than others – in the political, commercial or military structures of the country. They uphold the centrality of dynastic power and its intrinsic support.

It must also be noted that all the members of the royal family, according to their ranking, are given “public contributions”. These benefits are extended to their family, associates and subordinates. It is a web of privileges that will hold as long as the kingdom has the financial means to support it. This system promotes a parasitic relationship with the state and the spread of corruption in general.

### **The Wahabite clergy**

Unlike in Iran, the Saudi Wahabite hierarchy has no aims of becoming a theocracy.

In its initial form, the Wahabite doctrine did not aspire to cover a political role within society, but just a religious one. It was the founder of the Muslim Brothers, Hassan al Banna whom, initially inspired by Wahabism, introduced the political use of Islam. The same was true of his successor at the helm of the Egyptian confraternity, Sayed al Qutb, who was eliminated by Gamal Nasser in 1966.

The Wahabite clergy plays an important role in legitimizing the power of the ruling Saudi dynasty. The King governs in observance of the laws of Islam and the clergy has the role of certifying the conformity of every law or initiative with the Sharia, the Islamic law. This puts the King in a relationship of inferiority with respect to the clergy and its critique. Another important detail: The King also has a role of “Custodian of the two sacred places” (Mecca and Medina), thus concentrating upon himself both the political power and the religious legitimacy.

The cohabitation of the dynastic power and the clergy will exist as long as every part respects the boundaries of its sphere of influence and does not oppose the other. The temporal power of the King has always contrasted the extremism of orthodox Wahabism when it out-stepped its boundaries.

The existence, within the royal court of the “Supreme Council of the Ulemas”, with its members appointed by the King, is an attempt to subdue the clergy to the needs of the monarchy. In Saudi Arabia the minister of justice is traditionally chosen among the descendants of Abd al Wahab. In 1993 a Ministry of Religious Affairs was founded, which checks upon the clergy, the charitable organizations and the Universities.

### **The tribes**

The Saudi dynasty originates in an eastern region of the Arabic peninsula called Hasa.

A tribal confederation that initially resided in an area called Daryah (near Riyadh) began conquering other tribes and territories. It is upon these tribal characteristics that the Saudi society is based today.

It must be said that Saudi Arabia does not have a homogeneous population. The internal part of the country, the Nejad, is inhabited by beduins, whom remain closed to the outside world and isolated. The part of the country called Hejaz, on the other hand, which is wetted by the Red sea, and Gedda, where the pilgrims transit to reach the Mecca and Medina, are inhabited by more "open" and cosmopolitan tribes. Another important region of Saudi Arabia is the Eastern Province, where the oil production is concentrated. It is inhabited by tribes that are predominantly Shiite.

Within the Saudi tribal system there exists a hierarchy of power between the various tribal confederations that support the reigning dynasty. There are the Oteiba that inhabit central Arabia and that are associated with the Saud from the reign's beginning. Then there are the Shammar, the tribe of the mother of the present King, Abdallah. Then come the Mutayr, the Qahtan and the Dawasir. The hierarchical order translated into money, powerful offices, and authority.

The tribal system is still a very important component of society. It conditions the relationships within the tribes and the ones with other tribes. The Bedouin tribes still fight over water wells and pastures. Their belligerence is often controlled by including them within the ranks of the National Guard. Yet the important aspect is that the tribal system feeds a conservative society and thus frees room for radical Islamic ideology, Wahabism.

### **The weak spots**

The first problem of the institutional Saudi system is that of regulating and insuring the passage of the dynastic power in an automatic fashion, avoiding what has often happened in the past (suffice to recall the past frictions and juxtapositions between the Sudairi clan – those born from Mohammed al Saud's favorite wife Hanna – and the other brethren).

Abdallah, the present King, is old and sick (he was born, it seems, in 1921). After the death of Sultan in 2011 and of Nayef in 2012, there are not many brothers and half-brothers left alive that he could bestow his power upon. There is Salman (77 years old), appointed inheriting Prince and vice-prime minister in June 2012. Salman is also quite ill. Then there is Muqrin, the youngest of the lot, born in 1945. Muqrin is the son of a Yemenite, probably a slave-girl, and this would imply handing the crown over to the natural son of a woman who was not married to the founder. Muqrin had been sacked from guiding the General Intelligence Department in July 2012, but lately he was designated Second Vice-Prime Minister, which theoretically puts him in the race for the dynastic succession. In fact, in the Saudi system the King is also the Prime Minister, the inheriting Prince is Vice-Prime Minister and is immediately followed by the Second Vice-Prime Minister. Muqrin has also been Governor of Medina in the past, which means that he is liked by the Wahabite clergy.

But we cannot exclude the possibility that King Abdallah might be succeeded by one of his many nephews. Among these, the one first in line seems to be Mohammed al Nayef, 53 years of age, designated Interior Minister in November 2012 (he is the nephew of Muqrin). Or perhaps Mutaibi, the son of Abdallah who heads the National Guard, which has recently been elevated to the rank of Ministry (and thus equals the rank of the Interior Ministry or of the Defense Ministry, headed by the hereditary Prince Salman). The competition is tight among the over-100 nephews of the King.

King Abdallah is well aware of the risk that contrasts might start among the pretenders to the throne, so in 2006 he constituted the so-called Council of Faithfulness (to the King) with 35 members appointed by the King (among whom sit the members of the royal court, jurists and Ulemas) that would be responsible, if need arise, for appointing the King's successor. Yet in principle, the King is still the only person that can appoint the next King. Will it be enough to avoid clashes? We do not know because this Council has never been used this far, not even for the appointment of the various hereditary Princes (Sultan and Nayef).

There are no unique regulations to designate the one who will replace Abdallah. In the past, power could be passed on depending on age and capacities among the brothers. The basic law of 1992 only says that the power should be handed down to the sons of the founder and then to the sons of the sons, etc. No more and no less. This makes it so that every succession becomes a traumatic even in the power struggle within the royal court.

The second problem is that a new generation of Saudi's could take power. A generation more open to the outside world, one that has studied and lived abroad. Men and women who know the world of internet and facebook. This would inevitably lead to a reform of Saudi society that is still frozen by the religious fanaticism of the Wahabite creed. There are strong impulses to free the country from these social bonds, even among the members of the royal court. Then there are, on the opposite front within the royal court, those that support religious orthodoxy. The succession will be a fight between reformers and conservatives (the hereditary Prince Salman is one of the latter).

Saudi society has already asked for change, regardless of who will sit in King Abdallah's throne. There have been protests and demands for more liberty. The issue has been faced – quite timidly – by the present King as well (he made slight changes in the role and functions allowed to women members of society). Yet like all other subversions of a society that is archaic, anachronistic and closed in its religious dogma, it is not possible to predict the effects of new social parameters in the Saudi context.

It is here that the second pillar of power, the religious hierarchy, comes into play. Every liberalization of society implies automatically a regression in the power of the clergy. The Wahabites have always had two different souls: one more moderate and the other more orthodox. The latter has often been in contrast with the royal court and has undergone, depending on the circumstances, its repression. The role of the clergy has been that of conditioning the royal court.

The clergy has been legitimated in this by the fact that the Sharia, the Islamic law, is the basis for Saudi law and that Wahabism is its faithful interpreter. It is among the radical wings of Wahabism that a good part of the present Islamic terrorism has proliferated (it is not a hazard that Osama Bin Laden was a Saudi). It could be hypothesized that a liberalization of society could be coupled with a decline in the power of the clergy, a condition that could hinder the stability of the reign.

Another factor is the absence of democracy in Saudi Arabia, a country without a constitution (implicitly, it would be the Koran). There are no political parties, there are no political oppositions (and those that emerge are systematically repressed). The conditioning power of the public opinion does not exist, there is no liberty of thought, if not that of obeying a royal court and an orthodox clergy. How long can this last in a world where the globalization of ideas has no more territorial bounds?

Up to today, the so-called Arab Spring did not affect the Saudi reign, but it could. Up to today, the three pillars of power have survived the impact with the changing world. In Saudi Arabia, novelties run very slowly, yet they still run.

## **THE SAUDI WORLD. WAHABISM AND SALAFISM**

Saudi Arabia is unknown to many. Hardly any news coming from Ryad makes global headlines. But regardless of this aura of mystery and silence, some of the most important social and religious issues of the Arab world are at stake within its borders.

The first issue, probably the most important one, is Wahabism, the State religion in Saudi Arabia. As many already know, Islam – if compared to Catholicism for instance – does not have a prevailing clerical structure guiding followers through the interpretation of the sacred books. This circumstance has allowed different people and competing schools of thought the possibility of interpreting, in the most diverse ways and with the most varying consequences, the words of the Koran and of Prophet Mohamed. It was on these basis that, besides from the division between Sunnis and Shiites, the different currents of Islam were born: the Sufi moderates on one side, the radical Salafists on the other.

### **The origins of Salafism and Wahabism**

Salafism preaches a return to pure Islam, as it was in the days following the death of the Prophet, in the belief that foreign occupations and collusions with the Western world had pushed religion away from its original characteristics. Its main dogma is on the uniqueness of God (“tawhid”). It was on this basis that, over the course of time, the worshipping of saints and religious leaders was fought.

The war against the deviations from the right path, that has also taken an iconoclastic form (like recently against the tombs of Sufi saints in Timbuktu in Mali), is central to Salafi doctrine. Salafism begins with the religious theories of Ibn Taymiyah and then, later in time, with those of Mohammed Ibn Abel Wahab.

A Syrian, Ibn Taymiyah was a jurist and a theologian who lived in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and was a disciple of the Hanbalist school (founded by Ahmad Ibn Hanbali in the 9<sup>th</sup> century). His theory was that the sacred books of the Koran and the Sunna could and should have been individually interpreted (in what is known as “itjihad”). This theological approach, by extending to virtually anybody the possibility of attributing meanings and interpreting the sacred books of Islam, paved the way to what later will become the exploitation of religion for subversive goals.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Mohammed Ibn Abdel Wahab (1703-1792, the founder of Wahabism) also joined Hanbalism to return to pure Islam. The latest relevant Salafist movement was the one founded by Hassan al Banna in 1928: the association of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Egyptian cleric added a new element to the formula used by his predecessors: the use of Islam as a political tool to guide the masses.

In the 50s another Egyptian and member of the Muslim Brotherhood, Sayyed Qutb (1906-1966), theorized that political Salafism take up arms against impious Arabic leaders to return to an Islamic State. Qutb has become the ideological reference for several terrorist groups, including Al Qaeda. He was put to death for his extremism by Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1966.

Salafist movements follow a strict interpretation of the Koran and of the Sunna, they oppose all those traditions and customs that – in their eyes – have nothing to do with Prophet Mohamed's teachings and, above all, they stress the need for the uniqueness of God, absolute monotheism (“al ahwad”). This is one of the reasons why Salafi movements are often referred to with the appellation of “mowahiddun”, the unitary.

What is the most interesting is that this approach to Islam has taken different meanings and forms over time: it has been irredentism, Arab nationalism, fight against Western consumerism and lax habits, until becoming jihad and islamic terrorism.

The negative evolution of Salafism has transformed what had begun as a reformist and modernist approach to religion (that freed the interpretation of the sacred books from the clergy) into a radical and fundamentalist approach. Today its main representatives, besides from the numerous organizations that spring out on the Middle Eastern landscape, are both the Muslim Brotherhood and Wahabism. If we were to trace a line in the struggle between the reformist and modernist souls of Islam and the fundamentalists, the latter would bring it home.

Wahab's Salafism historically served the purpose, especially during colonialism, of confronting and contrasting Western habits and culture. But it then turned against all those other Sunni movements that were not as dogmatic and rigid in applying the precepts of Islam. In the present day as in the past, the first to be targeted were Sufi confraternities and their moderate approach to religion. There was then yet another evolution in the doctrine: Salafism became the element justifying subversion (against apostates and impious rulers) and, as a consequence, terrorism. It was in the name of this radical stance on Islam that killings, attacks, coups, destructions and vendettas through fatwas and edicts were carried out.

### **Saudi Arabia and Wahabism**

Although initially Wahabism was more of a movement of public opinion and a religious doctrine, its collusion with the secular power of Mohamed al Saud and the successive development of the Saudi monarchy in Saudi Arabia have submitted religious precepts to political goals and vice-versa. It is emblematic that in Saudi Arabia the oath of loyalty to the leader (“al bayah”) follows a religious scheme dear to Wahabism. And since Islam is also a faith with a strong social impact, likewise has been Wahabism's role in forging both Saudi society and, thanks to the revenues granted by oil, a good portion of Sunni muslim Arab world.

As already stated, Wahabism has developed along Salafi beliefs and preaches a return to primordial Islam; traditions and customs as they were supposed to be before being infected by time. A purism that has turned into radicalism and has then been exported thanks to the strength of the petrodollars. Followers of Wahabism refuse being labelled as “wahabis”, but only as “muslims” in the belief of being the unique bearers of Islamic doctrine. The most dangerous aspect of Wahabism is it fueling a religious culture of intolerance and it waging a borderless endogenous war against other muslim “infidels” and basically on anyone who is not a Salafist (the worshipping of saints and pious men is

considered along the same lines as polytheism). On the external and exogenous front, Wahabism fights non-believers, like Christians and Jews. A war against the infidels (“kufur” in Arabic) is theologically justified by what wahabists consider the sole true and inescapable right path of Islam. In their view, there is no room offered to the unification of the different Islamic schools of thought (“madhahib”). Anyone not following the “true” teachings of Islam (as identified by Wahabism of course) is a “jahili”, an infidel.

Wahabism's iconoclastic fury lead the followers of Al Wahab to destroy all muslim burial sites they encountered when conquering new territories. The same happened to the tomb and worshipping site of Prophet Mohamed when al Wahab conquered Mecca and Medina. Until now, the devout of Wahab refuse being buried in tombs, they forbid all celebrations for the birth of Prophet Mohamed and any other Islamic feast. God is unique and every form of devotion should be addressed at him only.

The end result is a world frozen in the past, with no space for the evolution of society and its habits. Wahabism has prevented from the start any chance of going along a path leading to a modernization of intentions and of ideas. Until today in Saudi Arabia apostasy is punished with death, the cult of other religions and the displaying of their symbols is forbidden and persecuted by the Saudi reign. Religious crimes can even be punished with crucifixion.

Wahabism also imposes precise behavioral norms: those common to all muslims (no alcohol or pork meat), plus more specific ones (no exhibition of wealth and jewels, no silk, beard no shorter than a designated length and the hair no longer than another). The strictest rules are for women who have to dress with dark cloths covering them from head to toes. It is the application of a somewhat medieval Wahabism that forbids women from driving a car, going to study abroad, traveling unaccompanied, taking certain jobs and being admitted to hospital without the tutorial consent of a husband or a relative. In Saudi Arabia women are to all effects second class citizens.

All of this inevitably leads to the internal diatribe between the Wahabi clergy and its unswerving radical vision of society and a good portion of Saudi public opinion that demands the emancipation of the country. King Abdallah has introduced limited concessions to improve the condition of women: the right to vote in local elections from 2015, their membership in the Consultative Council (“Shura”) with a minimum 20% of representation (30 out of 150 members in a hardly relevant organism. Women will access the premises from a separate entrance, will seat in a separate part of the assembly and will have to wear the hijab), the right to become lawyers, participate in the olympics and be part of the General Intelligence Department. All of these initiatives have been met with protests and reluctance by the clergy, hostile to any emancipation of women.

### **The doctrine of terrorism**

Such closed society system and its annexed religious vision that accepts no compromises or concessions are taught from an early age to the youth through a network of islamic schools (“madrasse”). There is currently a strong competition in the Salafist field between wahabis and the members of the Muslim Brotherhood. It is a competition played over

ideological and theological extremisms, the politics of religion and the influence over Arab societies. This circumstance provides wide space for religious extremism that then turns into terrorism and holy war against the impious and the infidels.

Among the muslim and Arab countries, Saudi Arabia is the only country where Salafism in its wahabi interpretation has become the dogmatic inspiration of the State. The financial strength of the Saudis grants Salafism and Wahabism the possibility of expanding their doctrine to other muslim countries. And if one were to look for a common ideological denominator for global islamic terrorism and jibab this would be Wahabism. Osama bin Laden, Ayman al Zawahiri, the Somali al Shabaab, the irredentist movements in northern Mali, the Nigerian Boko Haram, the talebans in Afghanistan all share this common doctrinal approach.

## **SAUDI ARABIA AND THE POLITICS OF RELIGION**

The role picked up by Saudi Arabia of defending Sunni orthodoxy has led the country to developing a foreign policy influenced by such a religious premise. Without technically being one, when it comes to foreign policy, the Saudi regime is more like a theocracy than like an oligarchy. In practice and in the context of the Arab and muslim world, foreign policy and religious proselytism walk hand in hand. In Saudi Arabia, both are favored by the huge financial resources provided by the reign. They both support one another, but at the same time each influences and limits its counterpart.

In general terms, Saudi foreign policy and, as a consequence, its national security policy are based on two main pillars:

the political and strategic cooperation with the United States (on an international level),

the role played by the Gulf Cooperation Council (on a regional level).

To these two elements we have to add the already mentioned religious policy, the impact of which is mainly on a regional level.

Over the last 70 years, the relationship with the United States has been a constant in the reign's foreign policy. Since the 14<sup>th</sup> of January 1945 when U.S. president Franklin D. Roosevelt and king Abdul Aziz signed a secret agreement, the USA have taken over the strategic defense of the Saudi reign in exchange for oil supplies (Ryad currently trades 25% of global black gold). Washington provides Ryad with security, weapons, political support in the quarrels with other regional powers and receives in exchange, besides from energy supplies, the support for any action or initiative they might undertake in both the muslim and arab world.

Think of the Saudi bases supplied to the U.S. for their attack on Iraq in 1991, the support provided – always against Saddam Hussein – for the attack in 2003 and the assistance granted for operation “Enduring Freedom” in Afghanistan. The Saudi Arabia-United States relationship has been so close and so apparently indissoluble until religion has started influencing Saudi foreign policy and has lead to frictions (for instance, there has been increasing hostility to having U.S. bases on Saudi soil and there have been terrorist attack).

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), founded in 1981 and composed by the countries bordering the Arabian gulf (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Bahrein, Qatar and Oman), promotes and applies military, commercial and political cooperation among member countries. This does not mean there are no contrasts or disagreements among the members of the GCC. Firstly the hegemonic role Ryad tries to impose is put into question. Saudi Arabia would also want to enlarge the Gulf Cooperation Council to other countries, recently Jordan and Morocco were both invited to join. Overall, the GCC fulfills the minimal coordination and cooperation role that the repeated turbulences in the region request.

### **The Iranian rival and Syria**

Saudi Arabia's main rival, both as a regional power and as a religious power, is Iran. A power and religious struggle confronting Sunnis and Shiites. Shiism and Sunnism are Islam's two main theological currents in historical competition amongst them. Saudi foreign policy should be observed and analyzed along the lines of this political, military and religious dualism.

Currently the competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia has taken the form of a proxy war, like the one ongoing in Syria. The fact that Iran could soon have an atomic bomb worries Ryad more than Tel Aviv. The Saudis feel their hegemony over the Persian Gulf could be at stake in what is a sectarian war between the two main branches of Islam. We should all remember that during Saddam Hussein's war against Iran in 1979 it was Ryad who was financing the Iraqi dictator. The Saudis also fear that the shiite minority in the Eastern Province could soon become the fifth column undermining the Saud dynasty (15% of Saudi are shiites).

The future balance in the Middle East is at stake over the fate of Bashar al Assad's alawite regime (in Saudi eyes the alawites are an heretic sect close to Shiism). The current leadership in Syria is supported by Tehran, while the rebels – or at least some of their groups – benefit from Saudi support. The loss of influence suffered by Ryad in Lebanon (with the killing of Sunni leader Rafiq Hariri in 2005) and in Iraq following Saddam Hussein's overthrow (with a new shiite leadership supported by Iran in power) could be compensated – at least in Saudi hopes – by the toppling of the alawite regime and the rise of a new Sunni leadership in Damascus. But even in this case, Saudi foreign policy and religion collide both on a tactical and strategic level. This is because in the Syrian crisis advantages and draw backs of any political initiative often overlap and elide. A good dose of prudence is needed, something religious fanaticism often doesn't have.

In helping out the Syrian rebellion Saudi Arabia should also take into account U.S. worries. Money and weapons should not go to those groups linked to islamic radicalism and to what is now a jihad. But Saudi Wahabi movements and organizations – even outside institutional channels – seem to be behaving otherwise. In other words, they act outside Saudi official national interest and out of its context. They provide resources, fuel and support extremists in practical collusion with those groups linked to Al Qaeda. If Saudi foreign policy and religious lobbies diverge, the real issue is that the reign's authorities can do very little to block this process.

Lastly, probably the main obstacle faced by Saudi foreign policy in Syria is on the national security level. The war against Assad has brought together masses of radical islamists coming from several countries in the region and a good portion of them are Saudis. These war veterans are a menace to the reign's stability. Non official statistics have estimated that as many as 15 thousand veterans have returned home following the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. The prospect of having a new generation of jihadists returning from Syria is not something the Saudis are looking forward to.

### **The discord with the Brotherhood**

There is also another problem in Syria. And that is the possibility, not that remote as a matter of fact, that following Assad's fall the Muslim Brotherhood, which thanks to the massacres in Homs and Hama suffered in the 80s are considered the sole true opposition to the Baathist regime, could take over.

The relationship between Wahabism and the Muslim Brotherhood have not been that idyllic lately. They both preach a radical form of Islam and are thus potentially in competition with one another. They also compete through the various charitable organizations, hospitals and schools that are spread all over the arab world with equal support and financial weight. When King Fahd was at the helm, Saudi Arabia granted asylum to the leadership of the Brotherhood, at that time persecuted by Gamal Nasser in Egypt, in the name of pan-islamic solidarity. But the Saudis had never allowed them carry out any activities or proselytism in their country. Ever since toppled Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi has renewed his ties with Iran (together with the Sudanese branch of the Brotherhood), the Saudis have increasingly looked to the Muslim Brotherhood with suspicion.

The Saudis perceive the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood as potentially dangerous because it advocates a political Islam, a concept opposed by the wahabis. An Islam that is not used to legitimate those in power, but it is used to exercise power.

### **The Arab Springs**

Even in countries like Tunisia and Egypt, where the Arab Spring has paved the way to the rise of Islamic rulers, their relationship with wahabism has not improved. The former Tunisian dictator Ben Ali is now hosted in Saudi Arabia. Hosni Mubarak was a staunch ally of Ryad in the Middle East. For one main reason: the Muslim Brotherhood. The evidence of such a claim is that when Morsi was toppled, Saudi Arabia was one of the first countries to pledge economic support (5 billion USD) to the new military rulers. Also other GCC countries like Kuwait (4 bln USD) and the United Arab Emirates (3 bln USD) behaved similarly.

It is true that the Saudi stance reflects the reluctance to even remotely accepting the possibility of an Arab spring. Which translated means the overthrowing of those in power in the name of Islam and the introduction of democracy.

Aside from Syria, part of the Saudi anti-Iranian struggle, the other revolutions in the Middle East are not looked upon with sympathy by Ryad. It wasn't only for Tunisia and Egypt, but also for Libya where the Saudis hardly accepted the international military intervention toppling Muammar Gaddafi. In the region's social turbulences, at the end of the day Saudi Arabia was on the side of restoration – as in Yemen and Bahrein – rather than revolution. In Bahrein, for example, they sided with a Sunni emir ruling over a country inhabited by a shiite majority.

After all, the Sunni dilemma is the trade off between the propagation, even at a political level, of a religious orthodoxy (thus modifying their foreign policy accordingly) and the fact

that the exportation of radicalism could backfire home and undermine the stability of the reign. We should not forget that 15 out of the 19 911 attackers were Saudi.

### **The match with Qatar**

The last instance of religious competition affecting Saudi foreign policy is currently the confrontation with Qatar. And this is all played on the Sunni field. Qatar does not have the Saudi influence or military strength in the Arab world. But it does have money, owns one of the most influential Tv channels in the world, hosts a U.S. base on its territory and has good press in the West. It is lead by an ambitious emir. And Qatar also has the advantage – if compared to all other countries in the Gulf – of not having a Shiite community on its soil. As a matter of fact, the little State in the Gulf is to all effects Saudi Arabia's alter ego in the role of U.S. strategic partner on the Arabian peninsula. Qatar has also recently hosted talks between the USA and the Afghan talibans. Also in this case, the foreign policy of both countries is played along religious lines: Qatar supports the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Saudi Arabia opposes them. Doha supports Hamas, Ryad is for the PLO. The same happens with the rebel factions fighting Bashar al Assad.

Religion is a key component of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy. A unbreakable binomial orienting the choices of the Saudi regime in the Middle East. A foreign policy founded not only on Wahabist dogmatism, but that can also rely on the tools on the ground provided by this Sunni orthodox branch of Islam: wahabi preachers and imams with their proselytism, the charitable organizations, the money channeled through the thousands of Islamic rivulets that support schools, hospitals and islamic communities worldwide.