The book is not written in an academic critical style. It does not provide research based argument and bibliography. The index is also not comprehensive. Moreover, there are many composing mistakes. The book contains several images and snaps without mentioning their sources. The book also carries reviews on some other books of the author without mentioning their sources.

Mujeeb Ahmad

--------


Saudi Arabia is a unique state in many ways. It is a monarchy which claims itself to be “a monotheist state that upholds Sharia and Islamic values, in addition to being the protector of the most sacred Islamic shrines” surviving in a world dominated by alien concepts of democracy, secularism and human rights. “The regime, together with a mushrooming religious bureaucracy, created a world that insisted on complete submission to political authority while preaching total submission to God.”

Madawi Al-Rasheed, a Professor of Anthropology of Religion at King’s College, University of London, who specializes in Saudi history, society, politics and religion, has written this fascinating book as she realized that “despite being subject to authoritarian rule, Saudis today are engaged in a fierce debate about religion and politics.” According to her, “Saudi authoritarianism has led to consent and confrontation at the same time.” She has thus made a serious attempt to capture this ongoing debate, which she terms as ‘Wahhabi religio-political discourse.’

Capturing this debate was by no means an easy task, as Saudi Arabia is not an open society with a reasonable extent of freedom of expression. Dissenting views, both on religion and state management, and their relationship had been and are still a taboo, and are usually met with “blind and indiscriminate violence” by “a state that demands complete surrender to its will and by a minority that challenges this surrender.” The local media only gives the official version, and rarely acknowledges the differing views. The
debate is thus carried on mainly through public forums, international press and the internet. Many contributors to this debate use pseudo names to hide their identity, and often change their places. It is therefore perhaps for the first time that a concerted attempt has been made to “unveil the debate” in a concise and meaningful manner.

While undertaking this difficult and sensitive exercise, Madawi clarifies her own position in the debate. She maintains that she continues “to retain one aspect of Wahhabiyya, namely worshipping God without mediators but strongly rejects its claim that obeying the Al-Saud rulers and Wahhabi ‘ulama is part of obeying God and the Prophet.” This not only makes the analysis more candid and thought-provoking but also helps in understanding the presentation.

Madawi begins with the profile of the official Wahhabi ‘ulamā’ and shows that Wahhabi legitimacy today rests on a myth that “claims that Muslims in Arabia were and are blasphemous and their salvation is entirely dependant on the message of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and the political power that endorsed his message, the Al-Saud family.”

She has selected ‘Ibn Bāz’ as a representative of this group. Shaykh ‘Abd al-‘Aziz ‘Ibn Bāz issued the fatwās justifying the invitation of foreign troops to Saudi Arabia during the 1990-91 Gulf war and legitimizing peace with Israel in 1993. In her opinion, Ibn Bāz and other official ‘ulamā’ ceased to be independent mediators between the government and the governed after the issuance of such fatwās, and confined themselves to only being the guardians of public morality.

She maintains that in the Wahhabi worldview, three levels of obedience have equal status: obedience to God, obedience to Prophet, and obedience to those who are charged with authority, defined as the princes (umarā’) and the people of knowledge (‘ulamā’) and as a result, official Wahhabi discourse produced consenting subjects rather than citizens.

She also observed that “official Wahhabis accepted and endorsed aspects of modernity only if these fell under their control,” but they “have failed to deal with political and ethical aspects of modernity.... The Saudi ‘ulama accepted the de facto separation between religion and politics, while adopting a narrow definition of religion as all matters relating to personal conduct and ‘ibādah (worship). The Wahhabi ‘ulama (thus) contributed to the consolidation of a state that is politically secular and socially religious.”

She concludes that “official ‘ulama were far removed from urgent issues that dominated the intellectual scene in the Arab and Islamic world such as
questions of social justice, political participation (and) the rights of the women and minorities.”

After deliberating on the role and viewpoint of official ‘ulamā’, Madawi discusses another important group of participants in the discourse, known as ‘Ṣaḥwīs’ [Ṣaḥwī’s]. The Ṣaḥwīs are a “...loose and fluid sub-group within the community of faithful who are striving from 1970s to establish a distinct identity for themselves.” All Ṣaḥwī intellectuals subscribe to the view that the world can be changed and improved by communal human effort. They “strongly believe in their right to issue public advice on current affairs and openly to criticize government policies, thus violating an important Wahhabi dogma.”

“With the arrival of the internet in 1998, Saudi Ṣaḥwis made the most of this new communication technology to create virtual communities that share similar religious and ideological orientation.” They differ in their attitude to political authority, and can be divided into two main groups: those who accept Saudi rulers as a legitimate government but in need of reform, and those who reject it altogether as an illegitimate authority. Famous Ṣaḥwīs, Shaykh Safar al-Hawālī and Salmān al-‘Awdah, who were released from the prison in 1999, after prolonged imprisonment, belong to the first group, while Sa‘d al-Faqīh and Muhammad al-Masari, who fled from the country in early 1990s and constituted their separate movements in exile, belong to the second.

Ṣaḥwīs’ relationship with the government and the Wahhabi establishment went through a period of contestation (1990-2004) imprisonment (1994-2009) and co-optation (from 1999).

Madawi maintains that “one outcome of 11 September is the fact that Wahhabiyya became a contested religious discourse in its own home and among those who have been brought on its teachings,” and that “the official ‘ulama seem to have lost their monopoly not only over religious interpretation but also on the hearts and minds of many young Saudis.”

Madawi then moves on to the impact of the first phase of the Afghan War on the Wahhabi religious discourse. According to her, “Afghanistan became the land where one sought martyrdom,” but “for the (Saudi) regime jihad in Afghanistan was a political strategy rather than a religious obligation...In addition to wealth, globalization, easy travel and communication technology created a religious effervescence that was difficult to control even by those who had initially planned the process.” Afghan war opened a new and unprecedented opportunity for Saudi youths to review and debate the Wahhabi discourse in an open environment, and to question the non-participation of the people in political decision-making. “The withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan in 1989 closed the gates of jihad in
Afghanistan for both Saudis and other Muslims but Saudi Arabia had no exit strategy to facilitate the re-integration of the Saudi Afghans in its society.”

Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990 and this was perhaps the most dangerous period for Saudi Arabia. At this juncture, the regime preferred an international coalition, over the Jihādīs, to liberate Kuwait and to protect the Kingdom. Kuwait was liberated, but the foreign, mainly the American troops stayed back in Saudi Arabia. Their presence became the “axis around which the Islamist opposition to the Saudi regime revolved in all its shades and orientation.” “The young Saudi Afghans became fugitives, a pariah group searching for shelter or another jihad destination.” As a result, London became one of the most important centres of debate on Saudi religious-political discourse.

“Saudi involvement in Afghanistan was only one context of the transnationalization of its religious discourse. A cross-fertilization of religious discourse in Afghanistan, London and many other places — which allowed greater freedom, the same discourse was interpreted and reinterpreted to condemn those umara and ‘ulama who claim to be guided by such discourse.”

“In the 21st century, Saudi society is struggling over religious interpretation... (the struggle) is accompanied by strife among various groups and the confrontation between these groups and the state.” Since 1990s violence had become the dark side of the Saudi religio-political debate, and a strong indigenous jihādī trend took place, while the famous Ṣaḥwī ‘ulamā’ were behind the bars. “The jihādī trend is often seen as the logical conclusion of the Ṣaḥwī movement.”

Madawi maintains that while jihādī and Ṣaḥwī interpretations are both grounded in Salafī religious discourse, three key positions differentiate them from mainstream Salafī Ṣaḥwīs:

- An uncompromising rejection of Saudi regime;
- A belief in violent resistance against Western domination; and
- The choice of legitimate means and targets for jihād.

She feels that modernity has not only “brought alien trappings of material goods, consumerism and literacy (to Saudi society), it has also consolidated a centralized authoritarian state... While it silenced the traditional religious diversity within Islam, it allocated massive resources for the propagation of one interpretation of religious discourse... (but) with the centralization of religious institutions came the decentralization — and even fragmentation — of religious discourse... The old religious monopoly of Salafī Wahhabi consenting tradition began to be gradually eroded by various groups of which Jihadis are
but one... The debate between those who support jihad and those who
denounce it continues.” The debate is not “simply about removing infidels
from the land of Islam or toppling despotic regime, it is about the agonizing
journey of Muslim men and women, through a changing world.”

Madawi al-Rasheed, draws certain important inferences from her study of
Wahhabi religio-political discourse, which can be summarized as under:

- ‘The Saudi state is not a Wahhabi state... (It) is a hybrid formation that
  subjects religion to political will;’
- ‘Saudi Arabia is undergoing a transformation rather than a reformation
  under the impact of authoritarianism and modernity, as official Wahhabi
  ulama enforced the outward appearances of Islam while the regime
  conducted its policy on the basis of pragmatism and survival. The state itself
  created the conditions that allowed mutations of the Wahhabi tradition;
- Wahhabiyya has become ‘a religious discourse used by political authority
  against society. It has therefore led to contestation;’
- Saudi Islamists are presently ‘searching for the unmediated word of God’ by
  ‘dismantling religious monopolies and intellectual cartels.’ Saudis now have
  ‘direct access to religious knowledge and alternative sources of
  interpretation — as such they are less dependent on traditional transmission
  of religious knowledge;’
- ‘Jihadis did not import a new religious tradition. They simply revisited
  Wahhabi interpretations. Jihadi activists used the internet to spread the
  message, which led to the privatization of jihad in the age of globalization.’
  and
- Saudi state and Wahhabi ‘ulama’ had used ‘three mechanisms to consolidate
  their political realm and to enforce the boundaries of the pious state: Hijrah
  (Migration), Takfir (excommunication) and Jihad (struggle in the way of
  God). All the three concepts, which were conducive to political
  centralization and domination, are currently being used to denounce it and
  even destroy it. Saudis are beginning to deconstruct the three pillars of
  authoritarianism;’

One may agree or disagree with all or some of the conclusions drawn by the
author as a result of the comprehensive survey of the differing voices of Saudi
Islamists, but it can not be denied that it is a thought-provoking effort, which
will interest all those who want to study the role of Saudi Arabia in the
regional or international context.

The book also includes a comprehensive and interesting case study of one
of the most popular of the jihadi Islamist internet writers Lewis Atiyat Allah.

Ather Zaidi