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Can the Saudis Break Up With Wahhabism?

July 3, 2018

By Nabil Mouline

Mr. Mouline is a historian of the Saudi clergy and monarchy.

Portraits of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, left, King Salman bin Abdulaziz and former Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Nayef on the wall of a restaurant in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Jordan Pix/Getty Images

The speed and magnitude of change in Saudi Arabia <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/03/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-photos-women-gender.html>> has accelerated considerably after the consecration of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. To legitimize his ascent, fulfill his absolutist ambitions and face various internal and external challenges, Prince Mohammed has presented and positioned himself as the champion of “modernization.”

Several of the crown prince’s statements and initiatives

<<https://mobile.nytimes.com/2018/07/03/opinion/hhttps://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/10/opinion/mohammed-bin-salman-saudi-arabia.html>> — calling for a moderate Islam, authorizing women to drive, reopening cinemas — have been interpreted as his desire to break the historic pact between the House of Saud and the Wahhabi religious establishment.

In the mid-18th century the Saud embraced Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, a revivalist preacher who advocated a narrow reading of the Quran and the Hadith and attacked any deviations from or accretions to the original practice. People who deviated from the Wahhabi doctrine were excluded from Islam, and jihad was considered the only way to bring them back to the right path.

The compact with Wahhab and his disciples helped the Saud to legitimize an expansionist policy and create a durable state in the early 20th century. The Saudi monarchy monopolized political and military action; the Wahhabi clerics took charge of the religious, legal and social spheres.

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Regards,
Aziza

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