



## The Crisis of the Wahhabi Regime. Surprising developments in Saudi Arabia

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Long accustomed to abusing their power with impunity, the Saudi *mutawiyin* or "religious police" (more on that misleading translation in a moment) suddenly find themselves on the defensive. Increasingly challenged by critics, they felt compelled early this year to go through the motions of announcing a "modernization": Warrants would be required for searches, the use of force for moral violations would be banned. In practice, however, nothing changed. And when, this spring, two Saudi men died in custody, events took an unprecedented turn: Controversy erupted in the Saudi media; several *mutawiyin* members were dragged into court; and the boldest reformers called for dismantling altogether this hated institution.

But to make the story intelligible, it is necessary to begin at the beginning--with the uniqueness of Saudi Arabia. In addition to being the only state named after its rulers, and having no constitution except the Koran, this is the homeland of the radical Wahhabi form of Sunni Islam. Wahhabism, the official sect of the kingdom, is a patched-together, relatively recent expression of the faith of Muhammad, and the Wahhabi institutions that support the Saudi order often seem amorphous and opaque. Given the general absence of transparency in the kingdom, this should come as no surprise.

But there is no Wahhabi institution more difficult to define than the Commission for the Promotion of

Virtue and Prevention of Vice. Founded in the 1920s, when the Saudi state came into being, as an enforcer of collective morals, this body of at least 10,000 individuals is known to Saudi and other Muslims as the *mutawiyin*, or "devotees." Although often described in Western media as the "religious police," the *mutawiyin* have little in common with a police force--they wear no uniform and receive no salary--and are better described as an Islamofascist militia, something akin to the Nazi and Communist rank-and-file party members in lands ruled by those movements. Their mission includes ideological indoctrination in the dangers of "imitating the West" (such as watching television), but they mainly enforce Wahhabi standards of behavior in public. Their constant and degrading interference with ordinary people has brought about growing discontent. If judicial scrutiny is imposed on the *mutawiyin*, Saudi Arabia will undergo a profound change in its social life.

A kind of adjunct to the tens of thousands of state-subsidized clerics, the *mutawiyin* are a pillar of Wahhabism in the kingdom. They prowl the streets of the main Saudi cities day and night. Jeddah, the commercial capital on the Red Sea, is the notable exception: Local residents claim to have run the *mutawiyin* out of town. Elsewhere, however, they seek out people they suspect of violating the Wahhabi code of conduct. If a woman walks outside her home in the full body covering known as the *abaya* but allows a fold of cloth to slip, exposing her

ankle or face, the *mutawiyin* may scold her or strike her. If they suspect that an unrelated man and woman are meeting in public places, the patrollers may detain and harass them, insulting the female for alleged lewdness, and beating the male. If people keep walking when the call to prayer is heard and do not rush into the nearest mosque, the *mutawiyin* may swarm and assault them for impiety. Given the Islamic ban on intoxication, if the militia are informed that alcoholic drinks or drugs are being used in a private home, they may raid the house and beat and even kill people. If Muslim pilgrims violate the Wahhabi understanding of monotheism by praying at the shrine of Muhammad in Medina, they are likely to be taken aside and roughed up and, if they are foreign, deported.

Until now, the *mutawiyin* have not been called to account for their sometimes drastic deeds. They have no professional standards or training. They are free to assault people and then shove them on their way, making no record of the encounter, having carried out no official arrest, and making no provision for any hearing or further punishment, although offenses deemed particularly grave--alleged adultery, say--may land the suspect before a *sharia* court.

Members enter the *mutawiyin* from the kingdom's strictest schools and mosques. They are not paid, but are assigned to regular patrols. They wear no identifying uniform except a red-checkered headscarf. They

travel in unmarked cars. Instead of a firearm, they carry an *asaa*, a long stick resembling a riding crop. But they have offices and detention centers, and both the chief Islamic cleric in the kingdom, grand mufti Abdulaziz bin Abdullah al-Sheik, and interior minister Prince Nayef bin Abdul-Aziz (notorious for asserting that 9/11 was the handiwork of Israel), say the *mutawiyin* are supported by the state. The Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice has a chief, Sheikh Ibrahim Al-Ghaith, and has lately appointed public-relations representatives, still unpaid.

The *mutawiyin* have benefited from the secrecy surrounding their internal functioning, and their "surprise" tactics help them maintain an atmosphere of intimidation. Their defenders claim the *mutawiyin* follow a precedent in the strictest school of Sunni *sharia*, identified with the 9th-century jurist Ahmad ibn Hanbal, whose followers organized patrols for "prevention of sin." But such patrols remained a marginal phenomenon in Islamic history, often condemned, until the emergence of the Saudi state in the 20th century.

### The Mutawiyin in Court

On July 1, three Saudi judges began a court inquiry into the death last month of a Saudi citizen, Ahmed Al-Bulawi, 50, who had been detained by the *mutawiyin* in the northwestern town of Tabuk. On July 2, however, four members of the religious militia accused of responsibility for the death, and whose trial had already been postponed once, were released on bail; the previous Fri-

day, mosques in Tabuk had broadcast sermons calling on local Muslims to defend the accused.

Al-Bulawi's case represents a microcosm of the *mutawiyin*'s history. His alleged crime consisted of inviting a Moroccan woman who was not his relative and was unchaperoned by another male into his car. His relatives demand that those who caused his death be executed. Local authorities claim that Al-Bulawi died of natural causes, although the lawyer for his family told the media that the victim's remains showed he had been beaten in the face and head. The official medical report has not been released. For what it's worth, the unnamed Moroccan woman has revealed that Al-Bulawi formerly worked as her driver.

A little before Al-Bulawi's death, in May, Salman Al-Huraisi, aged 28, died in *mutawiyin* hands in Riyadh. His home had been raided by militia members looking for alcohol and drugs. The Saudi daily *al-Watan* (*The Nation*) reported on June 28 that a lawyer for Al-Huraisi's family had been denied access to a medical report on the fatality, but that Al-Huraisi had died after blows to the eye and head.

Some 18 *mutawiyin* participated in the raid on Al-Huraisi's home, and one of them is now due for trial. Local authorities initially sought to absolve the *mutawiyin* in the case by throwing a blanket of equivocation over them. Representatives of the governor of Riyadh claimed that the as-yet-unidentified individual accused of the killing was not on pa-

trol when the victim died. The pro-Al-Qaeda media enterprise *Al-Sahat (The Battlefields)* praised this attempt to deflect blame from the *mutawiyin* as appropriately protecting the militia's status. But some Arabic media insist Al-Huraisi's assailant was a leader of the *mutawiyin*. As in the past, vagueness about how the *mutawiyin* operate enables their alleged misconduct.

Finally, a 50-year-old Saudi woman known as Umm Faisal ("mother of Faisal"--her full name is undisclosed) has filed suit against the *mutawiyin* for an incident in 2003 when she, her daughter, and a foreign maid were verbally and physically harassed while waiting in a car for her two sons. The three women were charged with public immorality, in line with Wahhabi teaching that the presence of women in cars amounts to solicitation of prostitution. On July 3, the complaint of Umm Faisal became the first ever civil action in which a representative of the *mutawiyin* was summoned to court, although, again, the trial was postponed, this time until September.

With all this, the kingdom is atwitter about the *mutawiyin*. It is proof of the entrenched totalitarianism of Saudi society that such small steps as the charging of four militia members for Al-Bulawi's death and the court appearance of a militia member in the Umm Faisal matter are seen by ordinary Saudis as significant developments, potentially heralding a new epoch in the kingdom's life.

Naturally, the defenders of the Wahhabi order are intent on the *mutawiyin*'s survival. Prince Nayef has publicly reaffirmed his support, though not loudly enough for *Al-Sahat*, which complains that the all-male Shura Council appointed by the king has failed to open more *mutawiyin* centers and authorize payment of members. The Shura Council seems to walk a fine line between popular disaffection with the *mutawiyin* and extremist pressure; it also rejected reform proposals that the *mutawiyin* wear uniforms and include female personnel.

Predictably protective of the institution is the Wahhabi establishment. On June 21, the newspaper *Al-Madina* reported that the grand mufti had denounced "unfair" media criticism of the religious militia and called for repression of the critics. The grand mufti is a descendant of Muhammad Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab (1703-1792), originator of the Wahhabi sect. His position has been hereditary since the Al-Wahhab family contracted a permanent alliance with the Saud clan, who leave religious affairs to the Wahhabi offspring while keeping the reins of state power for themselves.

Amid these investigations and declamations, other sporadic and confusing measures have been proposed to ameliorate public dissatisfaction with the *mutawiyin*. When the case of Al-Bulawi first came to light, it was announced that 380 members of the militia would be trained in "interpersonal skills," surely one of the most bizarre statements yet from the Saudi au-

thorities. The *mutawiyin* further promised to create a review process for their members' practices. At the same time, however, they rejected questions about their activities put forward by Saudi human rights activists.

Moreover, recent examples of outrageous behavior by the *mutawiyin* abound. At the beginning of June, a certain Fahd Al-Bishi of Riyadh complained to the media that the militia had crashed their vehicle into his family car and harassed him on his daughter's wedding day because they suspected his son of drinking or traveling in the company of women unrelated to him. In March, the *mutawiyin* burst into Prince Salman Hospital in Riyadh and fought with security personnel while ostensibly chasing a drug dealer. A few days before that, the *mutawiyin* had been taught a lesson in the restive Eastern Province, whose large Shia Muslim population is subject to continual discrimination. A patrol detained a man who was listening to music, a prime offense in Wahhabi eyes. After the individual was released, he returned with several friends and beat up the *mutawiyin*.

Indeed, by early this year, criticism of the institution had become so frequent that the militia refrained from its usual practice of violently interrupting the Riyadh International Book Fair, which opened in February, to search for banned literature. Many Saudis saw this as another small, positive step by the circle around King Abdullah, who is at odds with Prince Nayef, and is widely believed to seek a break with the past.

Throughout this chronicle one sees the contradictory symptoms of a deepening, as yet hidden crisis of the Saudi regime. The state defends the *mutawiyin* while promising change, but not too much change. People speak out more candidly, but a primitive institution like the *mutawiyin* continues to get away with shocking acts. Trials are promised, and begin, and then are put off, under the sinister gaze of Nayef. Precisely how events will unfold is impossible to foretell, but it is not too much to say that if the *mutawiyin* are ever finally held to answer for their long career of oppression, the entire Wahhabi establishment may begin to crumble.

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