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# DIVINE POLITICS RECONSIDERED SAUDI ISLAMISTS ON PEACEFUL REVOLUTION

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## About the Author

Madawi Al-Rasheed is Visiting Professor at the LSE Middle East Centre and Research Fellow at the Open Society Foundation. Al-Rasheed is the author of several books on Saudi Arabia, including *A Most Masculine State* (Cambridge University Press 2011), *A History of Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge University Press 2011), and *Contesting the Saudi State* (Cambridge University Press 2007). She has edited several volumes including *Dying for Faith* (I.B. Tauris 2009), *Kingdom without Borders* (Hurst & Co. 2009), and *Demystifying the Caliphate* (Hurst & Co. 2012). Since joining the MEC, Madawi Al-Rasheed has been conducting research on mutations among Saudi Islamists after the 2011 Arab Uprisings. This research focuses on the new reinterpretations of Islamic texts prevalent among a small minority of Saudi reformers and the activism in the pursuit of democratic governance and civil society. The result of this research project will appear in a monograph entitled *Muted Modernists: The Struggle Over Divine Politics in Saudi Arabia* (2015, Hurst & OUP).

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## Abstract

Focusing on mutations of Saudi Islamism during the Arab uprisings, this paper examines the responses of Salman al-Awdah, one of the most influential Saudi Islamist scholars. As he reflects on peaceful revolution in the Arab world, al-Awdah combines his Salafi heritage with insights from western thought, thus producing a hybrid discourse that engages with the inevitability of political change. I argue that al-Awdah goes beyond the two now well-known Islamist strategies, namely jihadi militant struggle and Salafi acquiescent positions, that dominated debate in Saudi Arabia for several decades. His treatise on peaceful revolution offers a 'third way' between these two binary opposites. I assess whether a new Islamism that values peaceful action and mobilisation in the pursuit of political change has already reached maturity in Saudi Arabia.

## Introduction

With the Arab uprisings of 2011, many outspoken Saudi Islamist ideologues and activists began to adopt a hybrid position that draws on new interpretations of classical Islamic texts and fuses those with the global discourse on democracy, human rights, dignity and social justice. The Arab uprisings had an important impact, thus accelerating this fusion. Most importantly, they demonstrated a new type of mobilisation that goes beyond both the militant strategies of Islamists and their previous participation in elections under authoritarian conditions in several Arab countries.<sup>1</sup> But the uprisings only helped push certain Saudi Islamists to delve further into their own texts in an attempt to overcome the impasse that followed the events of 9/11. I analyse the position of Salman al-Awdah, a veteran of the Saudi Islamist movement that became strong in the early 1990s. His reflections on peaceful revolutions promote what I call a ‘third way Islamism’, situated between violent jihadism and acquiescent official Salafism, the religio-political movement prevalent in Saudi Arabia since its foundation.<sup>2</sup> This third way had been a product of both the dead end of jihadi violence on the one hand and state insistence on the depoliticised obedient citizen on the other hand. The latter position became more urgent during the Arab uprisings as the regime feared a domino effect.

In its struggle to rule over a pacified citizenry, the Saudi regime relies heavily on a type of Salafism that rejects collective political action as a strategy to put pressure on rulers to grant more rights or correct specific policies. Drawing on vague Islamic notions such as obedience to rulers, secret advice and consultation, the Saudi official Salafism fulfils the important task of delivering an apolitical citizen, totally obedient to rulers and unwilling to engage in any collective action that may undermine the existing government, thus allegedly threatening the foundation of Islam itself.<sup>3</sup>

Without venturing too far from their original Salafi positions and revered texts, contemporary Islamists such as al-Awdah devise new meanings and attribute them to old Islamic concepts in order to justify the peaceful mobilisation that overthrew several authoritarian regimes in the Arab world. This new Islamist discourse does not inevitably make its advocates Islamo-liberals, opportunistic, moderate or compromising. It simply means that Islamists such as al-Awdah are constantly engaged in an Islamic discursive tradition the debates and controversies of which remain totally grounded in the present conditions of a specific historical moment. With the exception of militants such as al-Qaida and the ideologues of the recently established Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, the vast majority of Islamists were challenged

<sup>1</sup> On recent resistance to power in the Middle East, see Charles Tripp, *The Power and the People: Paths of Resistance in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). On Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring, see Madawi Al-Rasheed, ‘Saudi Arabia: Local and Regional Challenges’, *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 6/1 (2013), pp. 28–40. On Saudi Islamists and the Arab Spring, see Stéphane Lacroix, *Saudi Islamists and the Arab Spring*, Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States, Research Paper No. 36 (London: London School of Economics, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> See Nabile Mouline, *Les Clercs de l’Islam: Autorité Religieuse et Pouvoir Politique en Arabie Saoudite, XVIIIe–XXIe Siècle* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Madawi Al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State: Islamic Voices from a New Generation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

by the Arab peaceful protests in Tunisia and Egypt. They were enchanted by peaceful mobilisation and the alternative strategies of protestors. Islamists contributed to these new forms of protest but perhaps without being the first among a wide and diverse Arab public who coalesced to call for the peaceful overthrow of authoritarian regimes in countries such as Tunisia and Egypt.<sup>4</sup> Despite the unfortunate turn of events and violence that have followed this protest since 2011, many Islamists including al-Awdah, discussed in this paper, remained convinced that peaceful mobilisation is anchored in an Islamic tradition and can be the only way forward to change the politics of the region and save lives.

## Islamism Reconsidered

Despite the proliferation of studies, some scholars remain critical of the concept of Islamism. Bowen claims that Islamism remains an unquestioned category of instant political analysis. The term lumps together movements seeking to change everyday behaviour with those seeking the violent overthrow of regimes.<sup>5</sup> This general critique does not take note of scholarly work and policy reports that highlight the diversity of the politicised groups within Islamism. Scholars view Islamism as a movement that includes a spectrum of positions, political trends and political parties. Scholars distinguish between radical global jihadi groups that mushroomed after the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1979 and moderate local trends seeking accommodation with both the realities of politics and their local regimes, adopting peaceful strategies to Islamise both society and politics, such as the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>6</sup> Yet others consider global jihadis as an offshoot of the original Muslim Brotherhood movement without identifying any serious differences.<sup>7</sup> The limitations of some of these classifications have led to focusing on how Islamism is embedded in everyday life. The Islamists who remain embedded in material conditions of class are classified as militant (lower middle class), and conservative and moderates (both middle class).<sup>8</sup>

Since 9/11, scholarly classifications of Islamism are often grounded in a desire to distinguish between good and bad Muslims, itself a normative position improvised to separate friends from foes, especially from the perspectives of legitimate security concerns.<sup>9</sup> While classifications offer clear categories to be understood by policy makers and others, they are by no means sufficient to understand Islamism as theory and practice in the diverse societies of the

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<sup>4</sup> Several studies have demonstrated how Tunisian and Egyptian Islamists were not at the forefront of the mobilisation that took place in December 2010 and January 2011. For further details, see Jean-Pierre Filiu, *The Arab Revolution: Ten Lessons from the Democratic Uprisings* (London: Hurst, 2011). Marc Lynch, *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East* (New York: Public Affairs, 2012). Bassam Haddad, Rosie Basheer and Ziad Abu Rish (eds), *The Dawn of the Arab Uprisings: End of an Old Order?* (London: Pluto Press, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> John Bowen, *A New Anthropology of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Fawaz Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Salwa Ismail, *Political Life in Cairo's New Quarters: Encountering the Everyday State* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Mahmood Mamdani, 'Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: A Political Perspective on Culture and Terrorism', *American Anthropologist* 104/3 (2002), pp. 766–75.

Muslim world and among Muslims in non-Muslim-majority countries. This specific scholarship has become hostage to policy agendas to the detriment of clear, rigorous interpretive frameworks that allow an assessment of social, religious and political movements at specific historical moments. The focus only on Islamists' strategies that oscillate between 'quietist' and 'activist' positions may be justified in security and terrorism studies but it can obscure the assessment of Islamism as a complex and diverse moral, religious and political trend.

In general, classifications of Islamism remain grounded in theoretical positions emerging from Enlightenment intellectual categories specific to their western historical contexts. These categories fix religion and politics in separate spheres of human action and thought, marked by a priori, clear-cut distinctions between two realms that should remain forever separate lest they create the chaotic conditions that Europe had experienced centuries ago. This rigid approach to the study of Islamism has been challenged by recent approaches that capture complex debates on religion, secularisation and secularity, all a product of the return of religion as an important factor in the public sphere and even international relations.<sup>10</sup>

The separation between religion and politics may have become an illusion even in societies that pride themselves on pursuing secular disenchanted politics, such as the USA, Russia and countries in post-communist eastern Europe. A previous generation of scholars hoped that the unique historical transformation of European politics and Christianity, considered a universal model to be replicated in other societies with different religious histories and contemporary trajectories, would prevail in countries far removed from this specific history. The intellectual heritage of the Enlightenment insists that politics is a secular domain emerging from the need for disenchanted decisions in which the management of resources, competition, confrontation and policy are formulated on the basis of a set of humanist values that one may argue remain grounded in belief, a survival of a Christian age yet without clear acknowledgement.<sup>11</sup>

Like Christian, Jewish and Hindu fundamentalisms, Islamism, the ultimate fusion between religion and politics, becomes an aberration, deviating from the expected allegedly universal and historical norm. Islamists call for an enchantment of politics while the expectation is now to persevere in the disenchantment of public life. With few exceptions, the understanding of Islamism, therefore, continues to be framed within the prism of Christian historical lenses and the microscopic intellectual landscapes and wishful thinking of the European Enlightenment.

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<sup>10</sup> See Bruce Lawrence, *Defenders of God: The Fundamentalist Revolt against the Modern Age* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006). For the general debate on religion in modern society, see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

<sup>11</sup> John Gray, *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia* (London: Penguin, 2007).

Interpretations of Saudi Islamism have not been detached from this intellectual heritage. Historical and contemporary studies highlight the role of militant Islamists in state-formation, as a security threat, or as a failed challenge to the state.<sup>12</sup> Those categorised as moderate Islamists are perceived through the prism of ‘liberalism’, no matter how loosely defined the concept is or how relevant it is to the Saudi context.<sup>13</sup> The resort to western terminology to capture a ‘liberal’ impulse within a certain Islamist trend illustrates the challenge that Islamism itself poses to a minority among scholars who cannot go beyond the theoretical frameworks of the founding fathers of western social sciences, themselves a product of late nineteenth-century European disenchantment of knowledge.

Past and current Islamism is better understood as part and parcel of that Islamic discursive tradition, defined by Talal Asad as seeking to instruct practitioners about the correct form and purpose of a given practice in an ever-changing world.<sup>14</sup> Like Islam, Islamism is embedded in controversy, debate and transformation, each of which is grounded in specific historical contexts and power relations. This theoretical position allows us to move away from imposing terminologies and classifications that obscure rather than illuminate our understanding of Islamism. In addition to being a moral worldview that draws on specific interpretations of Islamic texts and history, Islamism is also a blueprint for personal and political action as well as utopian visions. Like all blueprints, it experiences internal tensions arising from trying to reconcile community and individual, theory and practice, aspiration and reality, men and women, past and present, and rhetoric and practice, not to mention the negotiations, compromises and contradictions that activists with utopian visions encounter in pursuing their agendas.

Islamism is, therefore, multiple texts, contexts and practices, each of which is embedded in real historical and political situations. Its ideologues, practitioners and followers may insist on the unity and single interpretation of a set of revered textual sources – among the Salafi variant of Islamism, these are the Qur’an, Hadith (sayings and deeds of the Prophet) and the tradition of the pious ancestors. But the exploration of the interpretations and reinterpretations of Islamists over time reveals that even their supposedly monolithic and limited textual sources are in fact diverse, multiple and, instead of being consensual, contradictory. Islamists are above all political actors who draw on a wide range of old and new texts to seek an enchantment of their personal life and the world. They draw on that discursive tradition that is Islam but also on their own manuals and pamphlets, produced by writers and thinkers who are grounded in specific contexts. They are modern practitioners and visionaries who want to change the world by action to gain certain positions, from Islamising societies to overthrowing regimes by peaceful means or military struggles. Like other Muslims, Islamists seek conceptually to link a past and a future through a present.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Many scholars consider Islamists as a failed challenge to the Saudi state. See Mamoun Fandy, *Saudi Arabia and the Politics of Dissent* (New York: St Martins Press, 1999). Stéphane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2011). Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> Stéphane Lacroix, ‘Between Islamists and Liberals: Saudi Arabia’s New Islamo-Liberal Reformists’, *Middle East Journal* 58/3 (2004), pp. 345–64.

<sup>14</sup> Talal Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam* (Washington DC: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1986), p. 14.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 14–15.

To continue to see the diversity of Islamism through the prism of radicalism on the one hand and moderation or liberalism on the other hand aims above all to fix and frame Islamism in eternal ambiguous categories against the fluidity of social and political life. Scholars can only identify Islamist transformations and mutations by focusing on the underlying conditions that prompt one Islamism to change its discourse, interpretations and strategies in the pursuit of specific goals, which are themselves situational and in a state of flux. We can identify which grand Islamist projects are abandoned, failed, delayed or replaced by immediate ones in an attempt to trace how specific actors who are committed to religio-political visions interact with this messy reality of everyday politics. Islamists may become dogmatic, opportunists or oblivious to pressing changing realities. It is the reaction of Islamists to these realities and their engagement with them that should become the field of scholarly reflections.

## Mutations of Saudi Islamists

On the eve of the Arab uprisings, the majority of Saudi Islamists had already reinvented themselves as peaceful activists seeking the reform of the regime from within and by working closely within the parameters of acceptable activism. By doing so, Islamists reclaimed their space on the religio-political map of Saudi Arabia after a period of friction with the regime that began in the 1990s. They developed new strategies to remain relevant and central to any debate about the future of the country, its political development and its public policy. The Arab uprisings reinvigorated them as two Islamist parties – al-Nahda in Tunisia, and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt – came to power. Peaceful mobilisation, in the form of demonstrations, sit-ins, pamphlets and critical statements publicised on the new forums of internet social networking sites, increased among Saudi Islamists with a view to pressing their discourse in the public sphere and enlisting new followers. At the same time, they closely followed developments in the Arab world and supported the struggle of Tunisian, Egyptian, Libyan, Yemeni and Syrian rebels, which they inaccurately dubbed *sahwa islamiyya*, an Islamic awakening. This description, however, obscured the fact that Islamists in Arab countries had not been the first or the only groups to mobilise people against the authoritarian regimes in 2010–11. Many but not all Saudi Islamists saw the Syrian uprising through the lens of sectarian politics, and considered the Syrian rebels as defenders of Sunni revival against the hegemony of a minority Alawite regime.<sup>16</sup> On the Bahraini uprising, Saudi Islamists remained silent as they adopted the regime's description of this ongoing conflict, which was dubbed a Shi'i-Iranian conspiracy to undermine the security of the Gulf, spread Iranian hegemony and unsettle the Shi'i Eastern Region of Saudi Arabia.<sup>17</sup> Close to home, the majority of Saudi Islamists condemned the 2011 Saudi Shi'i uprising in Qatif and Awamiyya, which had resulted in the death of more than 20 young activists at the time of writing this paper.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics and Religion in Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>17</sup> Madawi Al-Rasheed, 'Sectarianism as Counter-Revolution: Saudi Responses to the Arab Spring', *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 11/3 (2011), pp. 513–26. Madawi Al-Rasheed, 'No Saudi Spring: Anatomy of a Failed Revolution', *Boston Review* March/April (2012), pp. 33–9.

<sup>18</sup> Toby Matthiesen, 'A "Saudi Spring": The Shi'a Movement in the Eastern Province 2011–2012', *Middle East Journal* 66/4 (2012), pp. 628–59.

In fact this majority blamed the Shi'a for delaying their own Islamist mobilisation and increased state oppression and arrest among their own Sunni activists. Since 2011, the Saudi authorities have reinforced surveillance of the public sphere and tightened control over dissenting voices, especially after calls to demonstrate were issued on the internet in March 2011 under what was called the 'Day of Rage'.

## The Third Way: Between Acquiescent Salafism and Jihadism

After 9/11 Saudi Islamists of all shades were subjected to a campaign of demonisation and co-optation by the regime. A substantial group amongst them began to develop a new discourse that remains anchored in the general wide framework of Salafism while stretching the boundaries of human interpretation to allow for a new vision of the polity, application of *shari'a*, and relationship between ruler and ruled. In addition, those amongst them who had been anchored in traditional Salafi education and knowledge, such as the *ulama* of the 1990s, began to produce a discourse that is truly hybrid, reflecting syncretism rather than simply reiterating the discourse about Islamic authenticity. Today most Saudi Salafis often avoid controversial terminology such as 'democracy' and 'militant jihad'. Instead, they highlight Islamic concepts that are now endowed with new meanings, such as consultation, justice, freedom from oppression, individual and collective human rights, *umma* sovereignty, and peaceful jihad, all drawing on a syncretic approach combining Islamic interpretations with modern western usage of such concepts. The discourse of 'rebellion against the unjust ruler' (*khuruj 'ala al-hakim*), common in both radical jihadi propaganda and regime accusation of all those who struggle against it, which covers not only the violence of jihadis but also the peaceful activism of other Islamists, subsided in the writings of many old Islamists and the new generation of activists. With the Arab uprisings, a new discourse about peaceful revolution began to emerge among important Islamists such as veteran sheikh Salman al-Awdah.

## On Peaceful Revolution

Salman al-Awdah (b. 1956) was a veteran of the religio-political movement best known in Saudi Arabia as Sahwa, the Islamic Awakening or Renaissance, that came to dominate the Saudi Islamist scene after the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.<sup>19</sup> The Sahwa was born out of a Salafi–Ikhwani fusion, although this was not the only discernible trend within its activists and followers.<sup>20</sup> Al-Awdah’s career as a religious scholar started in his home town, Buraiyadah, where he trained in its religious institute, following the study circles of famous Saudi Salafi *ulama* such as Abd al-Aziz Ibn Baz and Muhammad al-Uthaymin.<sup>21</sup> Al-Awdah became a lecturer at Imam Muhammad ibn Saud University, until he was dismissed in 1993 after delivering a series of critical political lectures, deemed revolutionary in the Saudi context at the time of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990–91. His mosque sermons, initially circulated on cassette during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, thus inflaming the imagination of a young generation of followers opposed to the American intervention in what was seen as an internal Islamic crisis, led to four years in prison.<sup>22</sup> He was released in 1999. While al-Awdah’s religious education was grounded in the traditional Salafi scholarship of the Najdi region in Saudi Arabia, he was influenced by modern Islamist thought, mainly that of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, Hasan al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb, and the late Syrian scholar Muhammad Surur Zayn al-Abdin.<sup>23</sup> Al-Awdah has always denied membership in an Islamist party or political trend, but his endorsement of the Muslim Brotherhood attests to his intimate relationship with mainstream Islamism. In fact al-Awdah does not need to belong to a party, as this might limit his popularity and lead to further discrimination or imprisonment in a country such as Saudi Arabia, which bans independent associations and political parties. It seems that al-Awdah is anchored nowhere, but he is in fact influential among a wide circle of Islamists not only in Saudi Arabia but also in the Arab and Muslim world. After prison, he retreated into his religious scholarship, intensifying his preaching on moral and social issues, which shielded him against controversial political debates. He remains one of the most influential pillars of Saudi Islamism.

After al-Awdah was released from prison in 1999, he went through a short period of hibernation. He was later rehabilitated by the regime as part of its strategy to use Islamists in its struggle with a more violent jihadi trend, which brought the battle to Saudi cities in 2003.

<sup>19</sup> The Sahwa included diverse groups such as the radical messianic movement known as al-Salafiyya al-Muhtasiba, whose leader, Juhaiyman, occupied the Mecca mosque in 1979; Hizb al-Tahrir, led by Muhammad al-Masari; the so-called Sururis, followers of a Syrian Ikhwani–Salafi preacher; revolutionary Salafi radicals; and the Muslim Brotherhood; in addition to Tablighi preaching groups. This vast terrain of Islamisms was hardly unified in its goals, strategies and outlook.

<sup>20</sup> Fandy, *Saudi Arabia*. Al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State*. Lacroix, *Awakening Islam*.

<sup>21</sup> Fandy, *Saudi Arabia*, p. 89. Turki al-Dakhil, Salman al-Awdah: min al-sijn ila al-tanwir [*Salam al-Awdah: From Prison to Enlightenment*] (Beirut: Madarik, 2011), p. 45.

<sup>22</sup> Al-Awdah’s supporters documented their reaction to his imprisonment when they marched in Buraiyadah in support of him. However, they were not able to put pressure on the minister of interior at the time, Prince Nayif, to release him and other Islamists. The London-based Movement of Islamic Reform in Arabia circulated the video of his arrest and supported his cause throughout his time in prison. This changed as al-Awdah began to denounce the exiled Islamist opposition in London after 9/11.

<sup>23</sup> Al-Rasheed *Contesting the Saudi State*, pp. 59–101.

The regime capitalised on al-Awdah's popularity as a charismatic public figure who combined traditional religious scholarship with an ability to reach beyond the circles of scholastic *ulama*, especially among young Saudis, in order to enlist him in its battle against violence. He started appearing first on the Arabic satellite television channel Al Jazeera, where he dissociated himself from previous positions and called upon jihadis to repent and abandon military struggle against Muslim rulers. He emphasised that he never supported the regime in calling upon Saudis to fight in Afghanistan and reiterated that he continued to oppose their flight to other destination such as Iraq after its occupation in 2003.<sup>24</sup> In these appearances, al-Awdah denounced jihadis and exposed their misunderstanding of the body of Islamic texts on legitimate jihad, emphasising the illegitimacy of globalising the struggle or localising it where it had killed Muslims and non-Muslims. While his televised ad hoc media appearances were meant to target all Arabic-speaking audiences, his emphasis was on the illegitimate armed struggle of Osama bin Laden and on dissociating himself from al-Qaida and its thought, which by 2003 may have reached its climax, after 9/11 and the invasion of both Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003.

In 2005 al-Awdah regularly appeared on the Saudi-owned television channel MBC to spread arguments grounded in new interpretations of Islam that would eventually undermine jihadi theories on armed struggle against both the West and the local regimes in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere.<sup>25</sup> He succeeded in developing his own exclusive weekly programme on MBC, *hajar al-zawiya* (Corner Stone), which had run for around 150 episodes by the time it was suspended in 2011.<sup>26</sup> In these successive televised episodes he exposed the misguided interpretations of jihadis and offered Islamic interpretations on a wide range of topics including social and political issues from personal piety to gender inequality. It is on these programmes that al-Awdah adopted a new approach, thus deviating from his earlier robust and revolutionary sermons and pamphlets of the 1990s.<sup>27</sup>

After dissociating himself from jihadism<sup>28</sup> and offering a middle-ground position between jihadi violence and traditional Salafi acquiescence associated with the official Salafi religious

<sup>24</sup> The Saudi press continues to claim that al-Awdah supported the Afghan jihad, and once reported that his son left a note stating his intention to go to Iraq to fight against American occupation. Al-Awdah took *al-Watan* newspaper to court and won the case against it for false representation and libel. In 2013, when he issued a statement in support of political prisoners, the Saudi press restarted a campaign against him. This is not surprising as the press is owned by members of the regime and plays the role of defending the government's point of view.

<sup>25</sup> Al-Dakhil, *Salman al-Awdah*.

<sup>26</sup> The television programme was suspended allegedly under pressure from the regime as al-Awdah expressed his support for the Egyptian revolution, which the regime denounced.

<sup>27</sup> Al-Dakhil, *Salamm al-Awdah*, p. 84.

<sup>28</sup> The first episode of *hajar al-zawiya* was aired on 5 October 2005 and the topic was the meaning of jihad, two years after the occupation of Iraq by American forces. Al-Awdah was one of 26 Saudi *ulama* who signed a petition explaining the legitimacy of jihad against foreign occupation. He announced later that he was against Saudi youth joining jihad in Iraq, which seems in accord with his previous position on jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Al-Awdah argued that military jihad against occupation in Iraq is legitimate and has a limited purpose, namely ending occupation. As such it should not be expanded into indiscriminate killing of both Muslims and others on the basis of their position in this occupation – thus an obvious denunciation of the civil war that raged in Iraq until 2007. For further details on the many topics that al-Awdah discussed in *hajar al-zawiya*, see Al-Dakhil, *Salamm al-Awdah*, p. 98.

establishment, headed by Saudi Mufti Sheikh Abd al-Aziz Al-Sheikh, al-Awdah appealed to new followers who appreciated his innovative discourse, now articulated and presented in his popular mosque sermons, Islam Today web pages and Saudi and pan-Arab media. Al-Awdah resumed his preaching in his home town and reached new students, followers and sympathisers both in Saudi Arabia and the Arab and Muslim world and among Muslims in non-Muslim-majority countries. His early popularity among these audiences was tremendously expanded with the advent of Saudi and Qatari pan-Arab media, in which he became a regular preacher holding his own discussion programmes. While his audiovisual sermons and discussion programmes since 2005 have been analysed,<sup>29</sup> here I focus on his most recent assessment and endorsement of the peaceful Arab revolutions of 2011.

As the Arab uprisings gathered momentum in 2011 and led to the deposing of two Arab leaders, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia, al-Awdah was one of the first Saudi *ulama* activists to publish his reflections on peaceful revolution from an Islamic point of view, yet impregnating these reflections with clear references to western scholarship, an unusual combination that Saudi *ulama* had avoided in the past. While Saudi official *ulama* remained anchored in the traditional Sunni scholastic tradition that denounced any action that may result in instability and precipitate *fitna* (chaos), al-Awdah clearly deviated from this position and offered his praise for peaceful revolution in a language that resonated with a wider public than that usually reached by traditional *ulama*. Saudi *ulama* had always opposed collective action, in both its armed and peaceful manifestations – for example, demonstrations, strikes, hunger strikes, sit-ins and civil disobedience – and continued to adopt the concept of secret and private *nasihah* (advice) to the ruler, with a view to reforming him and changing those of his policies that they deem to be diverging from correct Islamic tradition. During the early months of the Arab revolutions they increased the frequency of their *fatwas* (non-binding religious rulings) that prohibited peaceful collective action, especially after Saudi activists issued calls for a Day of Rage, envisaged as culminating in demonstrations across Saudi cities on 11 March 2011. Official Saudi *ulama* watched the changes that swept the Arab world, and augmented their condemnation of peaceful collective action, the driving force behind the Arab uprisings at least in 2011. These *ulama* issued *fatwas* to this effect, which were circulated in mosques and published in official media.<sup>30</sup>

Unlike the majority of official Salafi *ulama*, al-Awdah anchored peaceful collective revolutionary action in an Islamic framework and reached out for humanist interpretations that assimilate western intellectual positions with this Salafi background. He surprised his audiences as he analysed revolution, an abhorrent term that most Saudi Sunni *ulama* dismiss and outlaw as a leap into chaos and dissent. When his new book *As'ilat al-Thawra* (Questions of Revolution)<sup>31</sup> was published in 2012, al-Awdah dared to rehabilitate the concept of revolution, always associated with instability, chaos and danger in official Saudi Salafi discourse. This book fixed him in a position different from both traditional official Saudi *ulama* and jihadi ideologues.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Saudi Mufti Abd al-Aziz Al-Sheikh continues to denounce Facebook and Twitter and accuse those using them of telling lies.

<sup>31</sup> As al-Awdah's book was banned, the copy used here is downloaded from the internet. See Salman al-Awdah, *As'ilat al-Thawra* (Beirut: Markaz Inma lil-Buhuth wa al-Dirasat, 2012).

Al-Awdah's book was immediately banned in Saudi Arabia, thus prompting the author to circulate it freely on the internet. After the publication of the book, the Saudi regime subjected al-Awdah to restrictions, as he was banned from leaving the country to attend conferences in Egypt and other Arab capitals. Occasionally, higher authorities cancelled his lectures without explanations. He was also banned from delivering mosque sermons. In *As'ilat al-Thawra*, al-Awdah's engagement with questions on revolution and revolutionary questions from theological and political perspectives brought him back as a relevant figure at a critical moment in the Saudi and Arab public sphere. The eruption of unforeseen and unexpected revolutions needed an Islamic endorsement, interpretation and justification. Al-Awdah swiftly seized the opportunity and improvised a text that moves away from the duality of the permissible and prohibited in Islamic political theology.

Al-Awdah fuses western political thinking on revolutionary change from Marx, Popper, Fanon and Tocqueville with his own Islamic heritage. Relying on world examples of revolutionary change in France, Russia and China, in addition to Islamic revolutionary moments such as the medieval Abbasid revolution, he defines revolution as building on the past, reform and reconstruction rather than destruction. It always starts peacefully, as in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011, but may later become militarised, as in Libya, when confronted with oppression and terror. Revolution is therefore a social phenomenon seeking political change as a result of collective action.<sup>32</sup> It is born out of preconditions that combine political, social, psychological and economic determinants. Politically, systematic oppression, coupled with absolute rule that combines the legislative, judiciary and executive powers in the ruler's person, triggers people to seek an alternative model of governance that is now the democratic alternative, currently the best option, with variants that spring out of each country's context. Such absolute power is often plagued by internal rivalries that spread to society in an attempt to co-opt groups and activists, thus delaying unity.

Economically, the deterioration in people's standards of living, coupled with rising youth aspirations and unemployment, lead to collective action, the purpose of which is to change the situation. Socially, authoritarian regimes deliberately alter the historical identity of their constituency to cause a break from its own heritage, such as the Tunisian attempts to disentangle Tunisia from its natural Arabo-Islamic heritage.<sup>33</sup> The cumulative fermenting impact of these conditions erupts at the right moment (the event) that triggers off the revolution. Al-Awdah describes revolution as a fruit: 'There is no law that determines when revolution is going to erupt. It is like a fruit that may ripen, dry, prematurely or belatedly get harvested.'<sup>34</sup>

Al-Awdah situates his analysis of revolution in *siyasa shar'ia* (political theology), which he considers in need of revisionist reading. This project requires two components: clear, revealed Islamic textual sources, such as the Qur'an and Hadith, and human *ijihad* (reasoning). According to al-Awdah, Muslims have confounded *siyasa shar'ia* and its theorisation by the likes of al-Mawardi, who justified absolute rule and rendered unconditional obedience to rulers a religious obligation at a critical historical moment with the divine textual sources on Islamic governance that are embedded in the Qur'an and the tradition of the Prophet. Al-Awdah rejects rule by the victorious party, *hukm al-ghalaba*, on the basis of seizing power by military conquest. When such rule is established, the solution is to go beyond the duality

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., pp. 41–5.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

of responses, namely total obedience to rulers or military revolt. His third way centres on organised collective action that unites opposition, calls for accountability and seeks change, all seen to have been ignored by a previous generation of Muslim theologians.

Al-Awdah demonstrates the importance of civil society as the mechanism for collective peaceful action. He does not think that civil society is a western invention. Instead, he searches for it in Islamic history. He resorts to orientalist scholars who explored the historical presence of such independent associations in Muslim history, from Bernard Lewis to Louis Massignon. Islamic governance for al-Awdah is grounded in *shura*, consultation. Unlike official Saudi treatises on consultation that limits its circles to a selected elite referred to as *ahl al-hal wa al-aqd*, al-Awdah widens the circle of those consulted to incorporate the *umma*, the collective body through its elected representatives. The social contract exemplified by the English Magna Carta represents in al-Awdah's thinking an early example of limiting monarchical powers and asserting individual rights; both have inspired generations of writers including, it seems, al-Awdah himself. The strategy that collective action requires is not always violent. Peaceful demonstrations, revolutionary attire, slogans, graffiti, art and hunger strikes prove to be efficient and justified in the Islamic tradition according to al-Awdah. He identifies the actors who participated in and enacted the Arab revolutions as the people, *al-jamahir*, in all their diversity. He acknowledges that the Islamists did not ignite these revolts. On *shari'a* in a post-revolutionary phase, al-Awdah calls for gradual application in an attempt not to impose a sudden burden on societies emerging from revolutionary upheaval, thus precipitating its total rejection. He argues that post-revolutionary justice may overlook the immediate application of *huddud*, Islamic punishment – for example, cutting off the hands of thieves – as economic conditions may not be suitable for such drastic measures. Flexibility in punishment means that *shari'a* must be contextualised and applied with careful consideration of the current conditions of specific societies. Consequently, he rejects raising the slogan of applying *shari'a* as a political strategy playing on people's emotional dispositions. *Shari'a* is built to establish justice, protecting property and people's lives with an initial selective application that articulates its spirit.

According to al-Awdah, there is no scope for a theocracy, ruled by theologians, in Islam. The Islamic state is a contractual project between people on the basis of civil contract (*madani*). Democracy as it manifests itself in many countries proves to be better than autocracy, according to al-Awdah, who defends the concept of the representation of the people, freedom and civil society. Rhetorically, he asks why Muslims should accept autocracy and reject democracy on the basis of its being a western import, if it proves to be the best option available. Democracy promises to be inclusive, as no *umma* can experience a renaissance by relying on the opinion of one constituency. Inclusive pluralism proves to be a precondition for just government. He warns against alienating sectarian and ethnic minorities, which he considers as a misguided and potentially dangerous strategy inviting foreign intervention, death and schisms within society. He calls for respect of minority rights within a democratic framework. Revolutionary justice requires reconciliation with all sectors in society, even supporters of deposed regimes, as the Prophet said 'go, you are free'.<sup>35</sup> Revolutions will become a necessary strategy if followed by democratic contractual government and without a utilitarian deployment of religion. Al-Awdah pre-emptively warns against revolutions leading to religious dictatorship.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 172.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 207.

Has this book reinstated al-Awdah in his position, which has been described as that of a revolutionary zealot-encouraging mobilisation against injustice and political authority? He remains cautious, as he avoids discussing the Saudi case, but his comments, whose applicability in the Saudi context will not escape the attention of his followers inside Saudi Arabia itself, challenge the Saudi regime. Had his book been totally irrelevant to Saudi Arabia, the authorities would not have rushed to ban its sale there and impose a travel ban on the author. Two factors have prompted the rush to ban the book. First, the grounding of al-Awdah's discourse in the Islamic tradition that invokes the Qur'an, Hadith and Islamic history resonates among Saudi audiences that have been immersed in religious education under the auspices of state education institutions. After all, al-Awdah was trained by revered Saudi religious scholars from his childhood years in Buraydah and later became a teacher and lecturer in Saudi religious institutes and universities. Consequently, his reflections on revolution remain an indigenous attempt to reinterpret political and social history within the normative framework of Salafi thought. His fusion of this Salafi heritage with western political theory and historical case studies makes him appeal to a wider, non-Salafi audience, thus bridging the divide between the so-called authentic Islamic tradition and imported liberal concepts, often pejoratively conceived as *taghrib* (westernisation). Second, al-Awdah's new syncretism promises to bridge the gap between two competing trends that the regime had diligently tried to separate, and to position as two parallel conflicting visions, in an attempt to divide the Saudi public along ideological lines; namely the allegedly separate religious and secular impulses that have struggled to coexist in Saudi society since the 1960s. The hybridity of his discourse, together with the easy and simple style of the book, make it reach not only Salafis but also those non-ideologically committed Saudis who are searching for new paradigms within which to imagine political change and reform, and engage with global world debates on democracy, without totally abandoning their fixation on the authenticity of the Islamic heritage and its continuous relevance to the contemporary crisis in governance.

Despite al-Awdah's attempt to pre-empt the reaction of Saudi official censorship authorities by avoiding any reference to his own Saudi context, he once again became a person to be watched by the regime. In a defiant move, he made his book available in Saudi Arabia as a PDF file posted on his Islam Today news web page, which he himself has authorised and propagated on his Twitter account.

The fusion that al-Awdah promotes is destined to create intellectual mutations, promising to learn from the experience of non-Muslims and search for equivalent interpretations in his own Salafi heritage. On democracy, pluralism and the sovereignty of the *umma*, concepts that have dominated the public sphere during the Arab uprisings, al-Awdah reinstates Islam as a political treatise still relevant to the debate on the future of societies after they have dismantled one-party rule and authoritarianism in its presidential, military and monarchical forms.

However, al-Awdah does not seem to be ready to break away fully from Salafi principles and audiences, so that he does not alienate his wider Salafi base. On sectarian minorities such as the Shi'a and on gender issues, he treads a careful path that moves back and forth between silence and reconciliation.

While his book celebrates the Sunni Arab revolutionary publics in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya (despite the NATO intervention on behalf of the rebels) and Syria, he is silent on the revolt in Bahrain with its 70 per cent Shi'i majority. In his media appearances, he warns against what he calls a Shi'i political project (*al-islam al-shi'i*) but distinguishes this project from the

Shi'a as a sect among other sects within the Muslim *umma*. He asserts that Sunnis are fundamentally different from the Shi'a in their creed and calls the latter *rafidha* (rejectionists), a term pejoratively used by Salafis to refer to the Shi'a.<sup>37</sup> In his book on revolution, he prefers to avoid serious interrogation of the question of the Shi'a in both Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. However, al-Awdah is committed to the unity of the Islamic *umma* and may not be prepared to deepen the schisms between the Sunni majority and the Shi'i minority on the basis of credal differences. While he was involved in carefully orchestrated meetings with important Shi'i religious scholars such as Hasan al-Safar, under the auspices of the regime's national Dialogue Forums after 2001,<sup>38</sup> he prefers to discuss the Shi'i question from a political position, denouncing the struggle of Iran to penetrate the Sunni-majority countries and promote its own political hegemony, perceived as a political threat to security and peaceful coexistence among the different sects of the Muslim world. Salafi penetration into this world is not considered worthy of discussion, as it is taken for granted as the right path to strengthen national and transnational connections among a predominantly Sunni *umma*.

Gender questions that began to dominate the Saudi public sphere after 9/11 are central to al-Awdah's revisionist and interpretive attempts to reconcile Islam with modernity, in which gender is problematised as a platform for debate and controversy.<sup>39</sup> But he dismisses the problematisation of gender in Saudi Arabia under the rubric of *qadiyat al-mar'a* and absolves Islam from any discrimination against women. While he celebrates women's role and contribution to society, he anchors persistent discrimination in social and cultural practices. In his opinion, the call for the liberation of women is flawed, as in Islam they are considered full believers with rights and responsibilities, held responsible for their actions and entitled to be consulted in the formulation of public policy. While he is critical of social norms that confirm women in a position of subordination, he asserts that women's emancipation should not undermine society's norms. So in societies where women are expected to cover their faces, women should abide by this tradition in order to prevent a backlash. In other societies where this is not the custom, women should be free to remove face coverings, while upholding modest dress as prescribed by Islam. However, al-Awdah does not go as far as claiming that the veil should become a personal choice. In this respect, societal norms rather than personal choices are respected. On the hot debate about lifting the ban on women driving in Saudi Arabia, here again al-Awdah asserts that there is nothing in Islam that prohibits driving. The ban is sustained by societal pressure that continues to consider this as a threat to patriarchal authority, and until these social conditions change, it is better not to provoke society to the extent of driving becoming a threat to women's security and safety.

Al-Awdah tries to humanise himself as a father when he circulates his own photos in which he is playing with his young daughter, who caresses his hair with her little decorative ribbons; a revolutionary step not only for a religious scholar but also for all Saudi men, who prefer to be seen in situations of authority rather than playful paternity. Al-Awdah capitalises on the power of photography in the age of audiovisualism to alter society's perception of women and young girls by promoting a different understanding of parental authority, moving from control and discipline to protective paternalism.

<sup>37</sup> Hazem Sagiyeh, *Nawasib wa Rawafidh* (Beirut: Saqi, 2009), p. 159.

<sup>38</sup> See Mark Thompson, *Saudi Arabia and the Path to Political Change: National Dialogue and Civil Society* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014).

<sup>39</sup> Al-Rasheed, *A Most Masculine State*.

There are fundamental unanswered questions within Islamic debates on the legitimacy of women assuming public roles such as political leadership and becoming integrated into the judiciary as lawyers and judges, which Saudi *ulama* have rejected. Al-Awdah has not spoken on these important debates that have intensified with the Arab uprisings as women who participated in the overthrow of the regimes began forcibly to demand greater roles at the top level of government. Neither has he commented on the appointment of 30 women to the Saudi Consultative Council in February 2013, perhaps because of his doubts about the limitations of an unelected forum. King Abdullah (d. January 2015) claimed to empower women, increase their participation in decision-making and implement measures in support of gradual social reform.

Can we predict what al-Awdah's position would be if mass demonstrations were to sweep the streets of Saudi cities, especially among the Sunni majority? So far he has not joined calls for demonstrations in Saudi Arabia, which with the exception of the Shi'a have been initially confined to the virtual world but later became sporadic, failing to gather momentum. However, in 2012–13, increasing numbers of women relatives of prisoners took to the streets where else but in Buraiydah, al-Awdah's home town. While he did not encourage such regular demonstrations, he defended the right of prisoners to fair, open trials, and condemned the arrest of women demonstrators. After the arrest of several women activists, al-Awdah issued a statement on the danger of suppressing civil society and putting activists and women protestors in prison. He addressed the minister of interior, Prince Muhammad ibn Nayif, and warned against excessive, violent reaction to demonstrations by the security forces. He invoked the *midan* (public square) as the place where activists would eventually go if their demands to free political prisoners were not met, thus reminding his audiences of *midan* politics in places such as Egypt and Tunisia.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Al-Awdah spread these statement on his Twitter account.

## Conclusion

It is too simplistic to argue that Saudi Islamists such as Salman al-Awdah moved from radicalism to moderation or liberalism as an opportunistic position in the context of the Arab uprisings. It is more accurate to describe the process that the case study of al-Awdah illustrates as a mutation under real historical, political and social conditions. Islamism in Saudi Arabia reached an impasse after 9/11, yet remained a relevant religio-political trend despite regime efforts to co-opt and undermine it. Al-Awdah propagates a new discourse that has mutated under specific conditions, one of which is the transformation of the Arab world since 2011. In his publications and media appearances, he has fused his Salafi intellectual heritage with modern concepts, while keeping this heritage anchored in Islam. While he has not openly identified himself with a specific political party or association, he is certainly laying the foundation for a hybrid discourse that can inspire new politics.

Whether al-Awdah's new hybrid and mutated discourse on peaceful revolution develops in the direction of peaceful collective action is dependent on how the Saudi regime responds to such innovations. So far, the regime has banned al-Awdah's book and punished those who acted on his ideas. While repression of peaceful activists has continued under the reign of King Salman, al-Awdah seems to have benefited from the decision of the new king to lift the travel ban on him. In March 2015, al-Awdah tweeted that he was on his way to Istanbul for the first time after the travel ban was lifted. It is not without significance that his first destination was Istanbul, the capital that has become a magnet for all those Islamists searching for a haven where they can engage in conversations about Islam, politics and democracy. At the time of writing this paper, it is not clear whether al-Awdah has been asked by the regime to play a role in the new fight against the Islamic State, in which Saudis have participated as fighters and suicide bombers. He may also come to play a role in the official Saudi search for a so-called Sunni alliance against Iran, in which multiple Islamists of different ideological positions may take part.

The Saudi regime recognises that al-Awdah's third way is more dangerous than violent Islamism. The regime continues to enforce the idea that Islamists offer radical alternatives that are deemed more dangerous than the perpetuation of absolute monarchy. In reality, neither Islamists nor secular forces are inherently democratic. They are often forced into positions by their historical and political contexts. As long as a regime resists the overtures of others, there is always the risk of societies drifting towards radical solutions. Al-Awdah has summed up this danger when he said 'there is nothing that prompts us to encourage revolution as it is enshrined in danger ... It just comes when profound reform has stumbled.'<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Al-Awdah, *Asilat al-Thawra*, p. 11.

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