Juhayman and the King: Saudi Arabia's Support for the Afghan Mujahidin Following the 1979 Grand Mosque Seizure

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Abstract

This paper examines how the Saudi state responded to the 1979 Grand Mosque Seizure and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan by co-opting Islamist discourse, rather than opposing Islamism in its totality. By applying securitization theory with critical discourse analysis, this paper explores how the Saudi state securitized Islamism in the midst of a serious legitimacy crisis in the aftermath of the Grand Mosque Seizure and rhetorical attacks from revolutionary Iran. Using declassified documents, media reports and government sources, this paper argues that the Saudi royal family chose to divert domestic Islamist enthusiasm into transnational jihad in order to placate domestic actors – namely the 'ulema – through its support for the Afghan Mujahidin. Through the use of securitization theory in this case study, this paper contributes a novel perspective to existing literature on Saudi foreign and domestic politics and policy. It concludes that the Saudi state did not necessarily oppose Islamism as-a-whole, but rather competing versions of Islamism that threatened royal authority. This paper will term 'royalist Wahhabism' as the state-endorsed and propagated version of Islam and argues that this form of Islam was promoted as both a domestic control mechanism and a foreign policy instrument.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Islamism, securitization, international relations, Ikhwan, Grand Mosque Seizure, Juhayman al-Otaibi, 'ulema, royalist Wahhabism, religion and the state

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Before the advent of modern telecommunications, embassies around the world communicated with their capitals through landlines and fax machines. In the early morning of November 20th, 1979, at the headquarters of the Danish foreign ministry in Copenhagen, employees reached out to their embassy in Saudi Arabia as part of a routine phone call. But to their surprise, the phone operator in that country told them that the link was out of order and that they should try again in five hours' time.[1] Around the same time, the British foreign ministry in London tried to do the same with their embassy in Jeddah but received a similar reply.[2] To circumvent the problem, both countries reached out to the American embassy in Jeddah, because they knew that American embassies have a secure link that connects them to Washington directly without interference from any state or local authorities. The Americans in Jeddah tried to phone the State Department through the Saudi telecommunications network, but were like the Danish and British before them, unable to be patched through. As the news of an apparent communications blackout reached the American embassy, diplomats frantically tried to find out information about what is going on from their contacts within the Saudi government. They were told radically diverging stories: 'It's a training exercise', 'there's a typhoid outbreak in Mecca', or 'there is nothing going on in Mecca' were common replies from the authorities. But once the embassy received a tip from one of their Yemeni employees who commuted from Mecca to Jeddah on a daily basis that he heard gunshots in the Mecca city center, their confusion changed into a state of acute alarm. Eventually, it became clear that something nefarious was going on in Mecca.[3]

As it turned out, a group of radical Islamists forcibly seized the Grand Mosque in Mecca, the holiest place in the Islamic religion. Although the United States blamed Iran for the unrest on the same day, and Iran accused the United States of the same thing, the truth was more nuanced: the leaders of this renegade group of militants were born and raised Saudi nationals. Its leader, Juhayman al-Otaibi[4], led a seemingly ordinary life. Although he came from a religious background, few expected Juhayman of leading a violent insurrection against the

[1] Yaroslav Trofimov, "*The Siege of Mecca: The Forgotten Uprising in Islam's Holiest Shrine*" (Penguin Books, 2007), 89.
[2] At the time, all foreign embassies accredited to Saudi Arabia were operating out of Jeddah instead of in the capital city Riyadh. See Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca*, 88.
[3] Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca*, 89-90.
[4] جهيمان بن محمد بن سيف العتيبي in written Arabic.

House of Saud in the heart of Islam. About 300 of his men seized control of the mosque in the early morning hours of November 20th. The first statement Juhayman uttered after assuming control of the microphone was that the 3000-or-so attendants must recognize him as the Mahdi, the figure who will appear on Earth when the End of Times are near.[5] For 14 days, the Grand Mosque was in control of these militants. Ultimately, after several failed attempts to regain control of the mosque, help from French special forces was called in by the Saudis, which led them to defeat the rebels on December 4th, 1979. The 63 surviving militants were executed on January 9th of the next year.

Although the rebellion was quelled and its partakers executed, what followed was highly unusual for an authoritarian state like Saudi Arabia. Instead of retaliating against the Islamists or against Islamism as an ideology for directly opposing their rule, the royal family seemed to paradoxically co-opt Islamist discourse instead. In the years that followed, the Saudi kingdom proceeded to gradually introduce Islamist reforms by harshening Sharia law and by exporting the state's core ideology: Wahhabism. This is especially reflected in how Saudi Arabia responded to the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan, which occurred about two weeks after the end of the seizure of the Grand Mosque. Saudi Arabia, in collaboration with Pakistan and the United States, poured billions of dollars into supporting the Afghan Mujahidin in their battle against the Soviet-backed communist regime in Kabul. The research puzzle thus becomes prevalent: if Islamism was the biggest threat to Saudi rule over their kingdom in 1979, why did the Saudi state decide to instead co-opt and pacify the Islamists?

The reason I question the link is the trajectory that Saudi Arabia followed after the two events: rampant Islamization in both domestic and foreign policy was prevalent. Yaroslav Trofimov describes how in the direct aftermath of Seizure, "Prince Nayef ordered women announcers removed from Saudi TV", and "a parallel crackdown began on the employment of women, until then tacitly accepted by authorities. Even Western companies operating in the kingdom, including the Saudi branch of Lockheed, were forced to dismiss female personnel".[6] Moreover, controls on alcohol, which was already illegal in the country, harshened, raising the black market rate from USD $75 to more than $120.[7] Aside from domestic policy, power was also rebalanced in favor of the religious class, with the religious police being granted greater autonomy, which led them to be able to "raid Western enclaves that until then had been

[5] Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca,* 69.
[6] Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca,* 242.
[7] Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca,* 242.

exempted from such visits".[8] I started to wonder why these reforms occurred at this particular moment in time. Upon reading more about what happened in 1979, I started to believe that there was a link between the Islamist reforms of the 1980s, the sudden assertiveness of Saudi foreign policy towards Afghanistan, and the Seizure of 1979.

This thesis aims to provide insights into the Saudi royal family's decision-making processes and motivations. As will be discussed in the literature review, only limited academic research has been done on this specific topic previously. This paper also aims to provide new insights and new details to the Grand Mosque Seizure, including its prelude and aftermath through the use of newly declassified documents as provided by the U.K. Foreign Office and CIA media analyses. What this thesis also provides is insight into how decisions were made in the highest echelons of the Saudi royal family. It also provides an insight into the political interests the royal family had to square, at least those of the 1970s and '80s. It seems like regional and global opposition to the Saudi form of Islamism was securitized by the Saudi state. The question this paper therefore tries to answer is: How did the Saudi state securitize Islam following the Grand Mosque Seizure and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan?

This paper begins with an overview of the literature on the topic that is already available on the possible link between the two events and on securitization theory and Saudi Arabia. After getting the lay of the land, this paper will move on to the theoretical framework, whereby I elaborate on the previously mentioned research question, and which methods I intend to use to answer this question. The question requires a definition of the securitization theory, which is the theory used throughout the paper to answer the main question. The next chapter will concern the methodology, in which the method in which securitization theory will be applied, namely critical discourse analysis. Furthermore, the sources that are used in this paper are elaborated on. Chapter 5 contextualizes the two events within the geopolitical and socioeconomic situation Saudi Arabia found itself in in the lead-up to the two events. It also covers the application of securitization theory on our case study based on what has been discussed until that point, upon which this paper arrives at a conclusion in the last chapter. This conclusion will state that Saudi Arabia securitized Islam by co-opting Islamist narratives because the Saudi state had severe legitimacy issues in light of the Grand Mosque Seizure, regional developments and domestic unrest. The reason why Saudi authorities did not retaliate against Islamists wholesale after the Seizure was because the state did not oppose Islamism in its totality. Rather, it opposed

[8] Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca,* 242.

competing versions of Islamism, like the one that Juhayman al-Otaibi adhered to, which is a form of Wahhabism that is opposed to the rule of the House of Saud. The religious ideology that the Saudi state adhered to instead is what this paper calls ‘royalist Wahhabism’: Wahhabism whereby loyalty to Islam does not supersede loyalty to the Kingdom and its rulers.

Chapter 2. Literature review

The aim of this literature review is to establish how existing academic literature has covered Saudi Arabia's response to the two events of 1979 – the Grand Mosque Seizure and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan – with an ultimate aim to lay the groundwork on understanding how these events influenced the securitization of Islam by the Saudi state. The literary gap that this paper aims to fill, or at least narrow, is the gap on the lack of scholarly literature on the link between the Grand Mosque Seizure of 1979 and Saudi Arabia's support for the Afghan Mujahidin using securitization theory. This review examines the academic literature available on Saudi support for the Mujahidin first, and then moves on to literature on the Grand Mosque seizure, for which there is fewer literature available than on the Soviet-Afghan war. What is especially lacking in literature on the Seizure is how the event influenced Saudi foreign policy, particularly in regard to their support for the Mujahidin. It highlights a major gap in the literature: the lack of analysis connecting the regime's internal crisis in 1979 with its subsequent external actions, such as the promotion of transnational jihadism in Afghanistan. This chapter will also uncover how securitization theory has been applied to Saudi foreign and domestic policy by scholars in the past. As it turns out, this theory has been used before in foreign policy analysis, but only to modern-day foreign policy issues regarding Saudi Arabia such as the Houthi movement in Yemen, the Saudi-Iranian proxy conflict and Shiites as a securitized object. By identifying the gaps that will be uncovered in the process, the review underscores the need for a more integrated understanding of how domestic threats prompted the Saudi state to strategically manage, co-opt, or externalize Islamist movements as part of its broader security doctrine following 1979.

2.1. The link between the Grand Mosque seizure and Saudi Mujahidin support

The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan exactly three weeks after the end of the Seizure. This timing was no coincidence, as the Soviets likely wanted to bury the news about its invasion by doing it on Christmas Eve 1979.[9] However, that these two events happened so close to one another *is* a coincidence. The Ikhwan planned their attacks for months in advance but were apparently not found out by Saudi authorities, nor by any foreign intelligence agency. An argument could be made that both events happened because the West was distracted by the

[9] (Prince) Turki al-Faisal al-Saud, *The Afghanistan File* (Arabian Publishing, 2021), 1.

unfolding events in Iran, which may have been true for the Soviet Union deciding to invade Afghanistan, but that does not explain why the Ikhwan specifically sought out the first day of the Islamic year 1400: there is thus simply no *direct* connection between the two events.

But Saudi support for the Mujahidin is *not* a coincidence. Unfortunately, there is little academic literature that either confirms or denies possible causality between the Seizure and Saudi Arabia's support for the Mujahidin. Outsider accounts describe the authorities' response to the Seizure as secretive and opaque to the outside world from the very start of the crisis. As I mentioned in the introduction, after the Danish and British embassies in Jeddah were not able to call their respective capitals on the morning of the Seizure, they were being told by Saudi phone operators that the phone lines were out of order, another operator told them that there were training exercises, and another said that there was a typhoid outbreak in Mecca.[10] As this raised suspicions, the Americans managed to fully assess the situation in Mecca within hours, but news to the public travelled slowly and deliberately so: There was a complete and forced communication blackout throughout the country.[11] Saudi state media did not utter a word about the events until 24 hours after the event, when a four-sentence statement was shown on state TV which was vague at best.[12] Saudi Arabia's borders were closed to non-Saudis,[13] foreign journalists were not allowed in the country during the entire ordeal, and state media was, as is typical for a country with little freedom of the press, careful not to frame the event as a stain on the House of Saud's authority, if they reported on the event at all.[14] Moreover, in the aftermath of the Seizure, Saudi authorities tried to exude calmness by publicly stating that the event would not affect their foreign policy.[15] Taken together, Saudi authorities did their absolute best to prevent the news from spreading to the outside world through massive censorship, downplaying, denial, and outright lying, even to foreign diplomats.

It is therefore no surprise that this embarrassing episode to the Saudi monarchy has been, and is still, removed from state-narrated memory. If one browses through the Saudi National Center for Archives and Records, which is an official Saudi government agency, and searches for all decrees and government edicts that were announced between one month before and one

[10] Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca,* 89-90.
[11] Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca,* 89.
[12] Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca,* 101. Ghattas (*Black Wave*) mentions 36 hours as a timeframe (pp. 64), and the FBIS Daily Report of November 26, 1979, mentions a timeframe of 20 hours (see the report called "*U.S. Reportage Analyzed*").
[13] Kim Ghattas, *Black Wave* (Henry Holt and Company, 2020, 1st ed.), 62.
[14] Ghattas, *Black Wave*, 69.
[15] Unknown author, "20 November 1979", in *Foreign Office Files for the Middle East, 1979-1981*, 25. Declassified documents: not publicly accessible.

month after the Seizure, not a single one mentions anything about Mecca, the Seizure, dissent or anything remotely political at all.[16] Moreover, Saudi state-sanctioned history websites also do not refer to this incident. The website of the Saudi foreign ministry has a history page, which only mentions that King Fahd re-adopted[17] the title of Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques,[18] but does not mention why he did that. It was after being disputed as the Muslim world's leader that King Fahd adopted the title in 1986, as a response to verbal attacks from the newly-minted leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.[19] The re-adoption came in the midst of Islamist reforms that followed the Seizure.[20] Although there is no evidence to indicate a direct link with the Grand Mosque Seizure, some academic literature exists – especially in Trofimov's book – that directly links the Seizure to the subsequent Islamist reforms of the 1980s.[21] Therefore, the adoption of this title is at least partially linked to the Seizure, which this official website understandably and unsurprisingly leaves out. Lastly, Prince Turki al-Faisal al-Saud, who wrote about Saudi intelligence operations in Afghanistan and was the head of the General Intelligence Directorate (GID) between 1979 and 2001, only mentioned the Grand Mosque Seizure twice in his entire 195-page book, and only in passing.[22] The only thing he mentions about the event was that 'it was accepted [by the royals] that religious fanatics appear from time to time in any society',[23] thereby dismissing the event as something normal and unremarkable. He said this in spite of being actively involved and physically present in the operation to shut down the seizure, according to declassified British intelligence reports.[24] He is thus preferring not to talk about the event. Downplaying and censoring the event by Saudi authorities and royals seem to be the go-to approach for dealing with the historical reverberations of the event to this very day. Therefore, the Seizure is a taboo topic in Saudi political circles and likely its society as well.

Thusly, literature that specifically discusses any direct link between the two events is absent. But breaking with the lack of scholarly discussion of the link thus far, Roger Warren does see the link, writing: "As a result of the [Grand Mosque Seizure], the Saudi regime felt

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[16] *National Center for Archives and Records* website. Search query: advanced → document date from 1399-12-01, document date to 1400-09-30. https://ncar.gov.sa/global-search?type=rules

[17] Re-adopted, because King Faisal (1964-1975) did use the title, but his successor, King Khalid (1975-1982) did not. See Arab News, "Story behind the king's title" (January 27, 2015). https://www.arabnews.com/saudi-arabia/news/695351

[18] "*KSA History*", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. https://www.mofa.gov.sa/en/ksa/Pages/history.aspx

[19] Ghattas, *Black Wave*, 169.

[20] Hrair Dekmejian, "The Rise of Political Islamism in Saudi Arabia," *Middle East Journal* 48, no. 4 (1994), 629.

[21] For example, Dekmejian, *Political Islamism in Saudi Arabia*, 629 or Ghattas, *Black Wave,* 73-75.

[22] On pages 62 and 76.

[23] Al-Saud, *Afghanistan File*, 76.

[24] Foreign Office Files, *Seizure of the Grand Mosque*, 8.

their legitimacy being challenged, thus by overtly supporting the Afghan Mujahideen resistance to the Soviet military invasion and occupation, it implicitly permitted and indeed supported, the involvement of Saudi youth in the Afghan jihad".[25] He is thereby the first to clearly acknowledge a link between the two events. But out of all the literature on Islamism in the 1980s and late-1970s, Warren is the only one that saw the link. He mentions the link only in passing, unfortunately, and does not discuss it further. This is disappointing, as scholars on Islamism could have and should have linked the two events.

Another author who did see the link is Shivan Mahendrarajah. In his 2015 article on the link between the Afghan Taliban and Saudi Wahhabism, he wrote that "the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan […] offered the Saudi rulers a 'two-for-one' deal: support for the Afghan mujahidin to prove their 'piety' [to the 'ulema]" and another deal in limiting Iran's influence in the region by bolstering Sunni extremist groups fighting the Soviets.[26] Most importantly, he draws the link between the Islamist reforms initiated directly after the Seizure in order to co-opt the 'ulema and the subsequent support for the Mujahidin. Although he draws no direct link, it is indirect at least. Similarly, Thomas Hegghammer and Stephane Lacroix's article on Juhayman al-Otaibi do in fact contextualize the two events together by noting that: "the occurrence of two internal uprisings in the space of a few months in 1979, as well as key international events such as the Iranian Revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, certainly affected the outlook of the Saudi political leadership",[27] who "never expected its foes to come from religious circles. [The royal leadership] decided, however, that only a reinforcement of the powers of the religious establishment and its control on Saudi society would prevent such unrest from happening again".[28] Hegghammer and Lacroix thereby indirectly linked the two events together from a holistic perspective, but they did not discuss the two events as potential causal incidents any further.

In addition, other literature that could have drawn on the potential link do not do so at all. Ali Imran and Dong Xiaochuan's paper on foreign involvement in the Soviet-Afghan covers the Arab involvement in that war extensively, but do not mention the Grand Mosque Seizure in

[25] Roger Warren, *Terrorist Movements and the Recruitment of Arab Foreign Fighters: A History from 1980s Afghanistan to ISIS* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), 18.
[26] Shivan Mahendrarajah, "Saudi Arabia, Wahhabism, and the Taliban of Afghanistan: 'Puritanical reform' as a 'revoultionary war' program," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 26, no. 3 (2015), 393-94.
[27] Thomas Hegghammer, Stephane Lacroix, "Rejectionist Islamism in Saudi Arabia: The Story of Juhayman al-'Utaybi Revisited," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39 (2007), 112.
[28] Hegghammer et al, *Rejectionist Islamism in Saudi Arabia*, 113.

any shape or form.[29] Conversely, Cole M. Bunzel's detailed analysis of Juhayman al-Otaibi's ideology and personal history covers how the Saudi royal family responded to the aftermath of his actions in 1979 extensively, but he curiously does not draw a link to the subsequent Soviet-Afghan war.[30] A similar article written by Ali al-Kandari and Theyab al-Buraas on Juhayman's ideological foundations also does not mention Afghanistan and the events that transpired there in the 1980s even once.[31] In another frustrating episode, Ibrahim Warde, who wrote on the political economy of Islamic sectarianism, wrote about the Seizure in one sentence and about the Soviet invasion in the next, but still did not link the two events together.[32] Rather, he used the two events descriptively in order to describe how chaotic the region was in late-1979. In sum, it seems that a number of scholars on both sides of the topics do not see much logic in connecting the one event to the other.

2.2. Literature on the securitization of Islam by Saudi Arabia

What also needs to be discussed is how academic literature has previously covered how Islam has been securitized by the Saudi state. Since securitization theory is a relatively new theory, most applications of it on Saudi domestic and foreign policy have been on present-day political issues. Writing about the tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the mid-2010s, Simon Mabon argues that Saudi Arabia has securitized sectarianism by framing the Shia as 'the other'.[33] Ric Neo argues the same, writing that "the securitization of Shi'ism serves [as] a crucial part in Saudi Arabia's political project to maintain the Sunni-Islamic monarchy and [to] protect its status as a hegemonic power in the Middle East".[34] The Shia in Saudi Arabia have a long history of being prosecuted, and these authors used securitization theory to explain this phenomenon. Aside from the socio-cultural aspects of the securitization of Shiism by the Saudi state, Iran as a political actor itself has been securitized by Saudi Arabia as well, as some authors argue. Tom Walsh argues that during the Saudi intervention into the Yemeni civil war (2014-

[29] Ali Imran, Dong Xiaochuan, "The Hidden Hands Soviet-Afghan War 1979-89, U.S Policy, and External Actors," *American International Journal of Social Science Research* 6, no. 3 (2016), 151-53.
[30] Cole M. Bunzel, "Toward the Seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca: The Writing and Ideology of Juhayman al-Utaybi and the Ikhwan," *Die Welt des Islams* 63 (2023), 383-417.
[31] Ali A. al-Kandari, Theyab al-Buraas, "Juhayman al-Otaibi and the interpretation of the first violent Islamic movement in contemporary Saudi Arabia," *Middle Eastern Studies* 59, no. 2 (2023), 333-52.
[32] Ibrahim Warde, "Wagering on Sectarianism: The Political Economy of Extremism," *The Muslim World* 106, no. 1 (2016), 205-16.
[33] Simon Mabon, "Muting the trumpets of sabotage: Saudi Arabia, the US and the quest to securitize Iran," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 45, no. 5 (2018), 749.
[34] Ric Neo, "Religious securitization and institutionalized sectarianism in Saudi Arabia," *Critical Studies on Security* 8, no. 3 (2020), 217.

2015), Saudi Arabia exaggerated Iranian influence on the Houthi rebel movement in order to prevent Iranian-American rapprochement, thereby effectively securitizing Iran's influence in the region.[35] Another, more relevant, aspect of securitization of Islam by the Saudi state has been observed by Oleksandr Aulin, who argued that Islam is selectively securitized by the Saudi state by projecting to the outside world that the Kingdom is the main guardian of Islam through its custodianship of the two holy mosques, whereas domestically, "the narrative is aimed at identifying the danger to the state and society [originating] from opposition [to] Islam".[36] Essentially, he is arguing that narratives that are Islamist but object to the state-induced narrative of Islam are dangerous to the state and are therefore securitized by the state.

Taken together, securitization theory as applied to Saudi domestic and foreign policy has been written about before by several scholars, specifically Walsh, Mabon, Neo and Aulin. Their application of the theory has mostly revolved around Saudi Arabia's securitization of Iran, Shiites and the Houthi rebel movement. However, all of these case studies are set in the modern era, and none of them are applied to Saudi Arabia in the 1980s or earlier.

To conclude, it is established that the topic is very sensitive to the Saudi state, and since freedom of speech is not guaranteed for its citizens, it is also likely a taboo within Saudi society. That is probably why there is little that has been written about the topic from those who experienced it first-hand and by the Saudis who were involved in the operation to re-take the mosque. The literature that *is* available on the topic is mostly based on American and British declassified intelligence reports, interviews with diplomats who served in the country at the time and the GIGN operatives that helped execute the plan to retake the mosque.[37] The lack of a Saudi perspective on the Seizure is why it is especially difficult to create the potential link the event had with the Saudi support for the Mujahidin. In terms of literature that covers Islamism as-a-whole during this timeframe, only Roger Warren explicitly acknowledges the link between the events. Other literature dealing with this topic, specifically Trofimov's, Lacey's and al-Saud's, either skip over the event, preferring to focus on the Iranian Revolution or the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, or do discuss the Grand Mosque Seizure but do not link it to the subsequent Soviet-Afghan war. Lastly, securitization theory has been applied to Saudi securitization of religion in the past by several scholars, however these case studies are more in

[35] Tom Walsh, "Securitization imperatives and the exaggeration of Iranian involvement with the Houthi movement by international actors," *Global Policy* 14 (2023), 393.
[36] Oleksandr Aulin, "Islam in the State Security Policy of Muslim Countries: Problems and Trends," Public *Administration and Law Review* 4 (2010), 45.
[37] I am referring to the books by Lacey and Trofimov.

line with modern-day issues regarding Saudi Arabia, namely the Houthi insurgency in Yemen, the Iran-Saudi proxy conflict and the othering of Saudi Shias. Securitization theory has not been applied to Saudi foreign policy in the 1980s yet, which means that this paper will add to existing knowledge because of its use of securitization theory as this has not been done before in regard to this specific time period.

Chapter 3. Theoretical framework

As this paper established in the previous chapter, the link between the Seizure and the invasion of Afghanistan has only been covered in passing in a limited amount of academic literature, and without notable depth of analysis. Securitization theory links domestic legitimacy crises to foreign policy shifts and helps demonstrate how the Saudi state redefined Islamism as a tool for their own political purposes. Furthermore, this paper brings attention to the archival silence and active erasure of the Seizure's political consequences from official Saudi state-narrated memory, further explaining the lack of literature on the topic.

Securitization as a concept was originally coined by Ole Wæver as part of the Copenhagen School of IR theory in 1993 and is defined as when an issue or ideology "is presented as an existential threat, requiring emergency measures and justifying actions outside the normal bounds of political procedure".[38] Simply put, securitization is a more extreme version of politicization[39] whereby a group of people, a culture, a religion, a country or other nodes of collective identities are not being cast as merely a political issue, but as a an existential threat to the status quo of a state. In a political context, securitization refers to the defense of the sovereignty and/or ideology of the state, which is in turn cast as paramount for a people to survive.[40] Securitization consists of three steps. The first being the identification of existential threats; the second being emergency action; and the third being breaking free of rules.[41] A securitizing actor can present an issue as an existential threat by following a narrative of: "If we do not tackle this problem, everything else will be irrelevant (because we will not be here or will not be free to deal with it in our own way)".[42] As how Rita Taureck eloquently explains securitization theory: "The main argument of securitization theory is that security is a (illocutionary) speech act, that solely by uttering 'security' something is being done", in other words: "it is labelling something a security issue that it becomes one. […] By stating that a particular referent object is threatened in its existence, a securitizing actor claims a right to extraordinary measures to ensure the referent object's survival".[43]

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[38] Ole Wæver, Barry Buzan, Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2022), 22.
[39] Wæver et al, *Security*, 23.
[40] Wæver et al, *Security*, 22.
[41] Rita Taureck, "Securitization theory and securitization studies," *Journal of International Relations and Development* 9 (2006), 55.
[42] Taureck, *Securitization theory*, 55.
[43] Taureck, *Securitization theory*, 54.

The securitization theory has been applied to a diverse array of IR issues, to, for example, international energy politics, religion and foreign policy, and gender and war. For the first topic, Jeffrey D. Wilson argues that realist-inspired geopolitical approaches to global energy politics insufficiently explain the maneuverings by states vis-à-vis energy policy. He argues that some states – Russia and Australia in his example – securitize energy issues by framing threats to their energy supply as an existential threat to the security of the state.[44] In another article, Carsten Laustsen and Ole Wæver argue how foreign policy analysis insufficiently takes into account securitized objects in religion within the context of Islamic fundamentalism in Muslim countries and Christian nationalism in the United States.[45] Matthew Kearns wrote an article on how Afghan women became the object of securitization during the 2001 Afghan war, arguing that these women became a legitimacy matter of security for a domestic American audience.[46]

Since the main question this paper will answer revolves around how Saudi Arabia securitized Islam following the 1979 events, securitization theory is what is used in this paper to help us in answering the main question. There are several reasons for why I chose this particular theory. First, the main question requires a theory that connects domestic threat perception to foreign policy behavior. Securitization theory does just that, as it theorizes how a state can rally domestic support for foreign intervention. Secondly, the question requires a discursive analysis of what is considered a threat according to the Saudi state. Securitization is discursive in nature: threat perception is, according to this theory, whatever leaders *say* a threat is. Third, this theory bridges domestic and foreign policy. In this case study, domestic unrest – in the form of the Grand Mosque Seizure – may have contributed to a certain change in foreign policy – Saudi support for the Mujahidin – and makes the theory therefore suitable to demonstrate how Saudi Arabia externalized a domestic problem by redirecting Islamist energy towards a foreign battleground.

[44] Jeffrey D. Wilson, "A securitization approach to international energy politics," *Energy Research & Social Science* 49 (2019), 114.
[45] Carsten Bagge Laustsen and Ole Wæver, "In Defense of Religion: Sacred Referent Objects for Securitization," *Journal of International Studies* 29, no. 3 (2000), 705.
[46] Matthew Kearns, "Gender, visuality and violence: visual securitization and the 2001 war in Afghanistan," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 19, no. 4 (2017), 491.

Chapter 4. Methodology

In order to identify which securitization moves the Saudi state made, critical discourse analysis (CDA) is used. CDA is useful considering Wæver's assertion that security is a speech act by labeling something to be a threat. Through CDA, I examine how Saudi state media and how official statements by senior government officials portrayed existential threats to Saudi Arabia and how the object of ire changed before, during and after the Grand Mosque Seizure. This leads to the construction of a threat narrative in chapter 5.1.2, which I then use to answer the main question in the final chapter of this paper. CDA is key to answering the main question of this paper as it helps us understand how the Saudi state framed foreign threats to Islam as an existential threat through official language. According to securitization theory, security is not what a threat is objectively, but subjectively: by declaring something to be a security threat, state actors are thereby automatically creating it to be a threat in the public and political imagination. This aligns with the paper's central aim of understanding *how* the Saudi state securitized Islam after the 1979 events.

4.1. Critical discourse analysis

Norman Fairclough, one of the founders of CDA, described its aim as: "to systematically explore often opaque relationship of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power".[47] He explains that discourse analysis views "a prevailing social order as historically situated and therefore relative, socially constructed and changeable" which is constructed by versions of reality and are products of ideology. In other words, CDA considers texts to contain a deeper meaning than what the text says on the surface. CDA views speech acts as discursive productions of culture and ideology, rather than mere statements.

In our case study, CDA is applied to analyze the deeper meanings behind statements made by Saudi government officials and by Saudi news media, which this paper considers to be a mouthpiece for the Saudi state-led narrative. A deeper meaning behind these statements and

[47] Terry Locke, *Critical Discourse Analysis* (Continuum Research Methods Series, 2004), 1.

texts can be found when taking into consideration the ideological and historical contexts in which these texts are placed.

4.2. Sources

The sources which this paper uses to answer the main question are a hybrid of secondary and primary sources. The secondary sources are primarily the books on Saudi policy towards Afghanistan in the 1980s by Prince Turki al-Faisal al-Saud, who provides an excellent first-hand insight into the role Saudi Arabia had in the Soviet-Afghan war. Yaroslav Trofimov's book about the Seizure is by far the most extensive work on the topic, providing a chronological overview of the event, including its prelude and aftermath. Robert Lacey's book about Saudi Arabian political history provides for a detailed account of the changes the country underwent in the 1970s, and aptly placed Juhayman as a political actor within this context. David Commins's book about Wahhabi power within the Saudi political arena describes how the royal family and the 'ulema have interacted from the inception of the first Saudi state to the modern Kingdom. Lastly, Kim Ghattas's book about the regional developments that occurred in 1979 places both the Seizure and the Arab world's response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan into the wider context of regional Sunni-Shia rivalry after the Iranian Revolution. In terms of secondary sources, a vast array of literature is called upon from various authors who wrote about Islamism, the history or politics of Saudi Arabia, transnational jihadism and/or Saudi-U.S. relations.

But what is most important to this paper is the synergy the secondary sources have with the primary sources. This paper consults primary sources from a couple of resources, the first being the Foreign Broadcasting Intelligence Service (FBIS) archive. The FBIS was formed in 1941 as part of the Office of Strategic Services, the predecessor of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).[48] Since 2006, the agency has been renamed the Open Source Enterprise (OSE), which is now part of the CIA's Directorate of Digital Innovation (DDI).[49] The original task of the FBIS was to analyze Axis propaganda during World War II. After the War, the agency retained its main task during the Cold War: analyzing foreign media and translating this media

[48] Joseph E. Roop, *Foreign Broadcast Information Service History. Part I: 1941-1947* (Central Intelligence Agency, 1969), 1.
[49] "Organization – Directorate of Digital Innovation," Central Intelligence Agency website, https://www.cia.gov/about/organization/directorate-of-digital-innovation/

into English with the intent of further analysis by experts.[50] Most of these documents have been declassified and were published online after 2002. The documents that this paper draws upon have been declassified since 2006.

Another source that this paper draws upon are official government reports as provided for by the website of the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library. Jimmy Carter served as President of the United States between 1977 and 1981 and was thereby President during the crucial year of 1979. The conferences and meetings he held with senior staff and foreign diplomats, and the public statements he made – or did not make – are highly useful to this paper and are used for contextual analysis.

Aside from American sources, this paper also intends to use sources originating from the United Kingdom. The Foreign Office Files are limitedly available to those who have access to it. They provide for a chronological narrative and excellent insider accounts into the events of 1979 from the perspective of Western diplomats serving in Saudi Arabia. These documents have only recently been declassified. Since Trofimov's book was published in 2007, it means that the book with the most in-depth analysis of the Seizure has not had the opportunity to use this valuable trove of information at the time of the book's publication.

Other primary sources this paper uses include, but are not limited to, archives of the U.S. State Department, the National Center for Archives and Records (NCAR), which is the official online archival database of the Saudi government, newspaper articles, official websites of Saudi state ministries, raw economic data from the World Bank, and official human rights reports by both NGOs and the U.S. State Department.

4.3. Limitations

One specific type of primary source material this paper uses extensively are the reports by the FBIS. Although these reports provide an excellent insight into what local media is saying about certain events and on how they are framing it, FBIS's reports have its limitations as well. For one, these news reports could be biased. FBIS only covers news reports that are relevant to the CIA, not necessarily *all* of them: selection bias may therefore be present. In addition, the Arabic language is notoriously difficult to translate into English when it comes to describing the

[50] Heather J. Williams, Ilana Blum, *Defining Second Generation Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) for the Defense Enterprise* (RAND Corporation, 2018), 4.

emotional load that certain Arabic terms bear. The subtleties and the deeper meanings behind certain Arabic words, especially in context, may not have been translated into English entirely correctly. These two limitations should be kept in the back of one's mind when analyzing FBIS sources.

This paper is the first in applying securitization theory to two events that have, as it has discussed before, barely been linked together before in academic literature. This novelty means that it adds to existing knowledge on the events of 1979, but it comes with limitations too. Yes, this paper uses a vast array of primary sources, some of which have only become available relatively recently, but in spite of these opportunities, the answer to the main question is unlikely to be definitively answered at this juncture in history. As this paper discussed in the literature review, the Saudi government has put up a concerted effort to keep the internal decision-making during the Grand Mosque Seizure secret. The topic is a taboo within the country and government officials seem to be unwilling to talk about it. That is in contrast to the Saudi involvement in the Soviet-Afghan war, for which government officials, especially Prince Turki, are more than willing to talk about. Perhaps this is because in that war, the Saudis' ultimate goals were achieved and their side – the Mujahidin – ended up victorious, whereas the Seizure was a massive embarrassment to the royal family. What is necessary for these limitations to be broken is for the Saudi government to become more transparent into their decision-making during the fourteen days of late-November 1979. Aside from this – admittedly unrealistic – wish, another aspect that may help significantly in exploring the true extent of the events of 1979 is the declassification of more documents by Western intelligence agencies. The CIA is allowed to keep its documents classified until a maximum of fifty years, meaning that all documents regarding CIA observations on the Seizure may be declassified somewhere in the year 2029 or 2030. It is unclear when MI5 allows for a full release of its classified documents.

In terms of the generalizability of the case study at hand, some limitations are prevalent. For one, this paper has a single-case focus, meaning that what is being discussed are two separate events which are unique to any other historical event. Moreover, this paper discusses this case study from the Saudi perspective, a country that is unique in its political culture and historical formation. Also, these findings specifically apply to the Saudi Arabia of the 1980s and '90s but may not be explicitly relevant to the Saudi Arabia of the present day. On both fronts, it means that the generalizability of the case study is limited due to its highly specific geographic and historical focus.

With regard to replicability, critical discourse analysis has its limitations too. CDA is discursive by nature, meaning that whatever is being researched through CDA is based on someone's personal interpretation of the source that is being researched. Different researchers may land on different conclusions using the same method. Therefore, the replicability of this methodological approach may be limited.

Lastly, as briefly touched upon previously, some of the secondary sources that this paper uses may be slightly outdated. Most books on the Seizure were written in the late-1990s and early-2000s, which means that not all authors of these books have had the opportunity to use the primary sources from the declassified MI5 documents, which were released in 2022, or Prince Turki's first-hand account of Saudi Arabia's involvement in the Soviet-Afghan war.

Chapter 5. Analysis

On the basis of the findings of the literature review, this chapter uses the methodological framework and methodology to answer the main question. It starts off by contextualizing the events of 1979. In order to do that, one must address the major sociopolitical changes Saudi Arabia was going through after the oil boom of the early 1970s and the country's subsequent liberalization. After that, this paper then looks at a biography of Juhayman al-Otaibi, his political beliefs and where these beliefs originated from. It will then have an in-depth look at what transpired at the Grand Mosque between November 20th and December 4th, 1979, by compiling what scholars have written about the topic, and by looking at what state and global media was reporting about the event at the time. In chapter 5.3, I discuss the extent of Saudi Arabia's response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and its involvement in supporting the Mujahidin in Afghanistan.

5.1. Historical context

5.1.1. Islamism and the formation of the Saudi state

Saudi Arabia's relationship to Islamism is heavily intertwined with the country's history, but as the Seizure has demonstrated, the Kingdom's modern relationship with Islamism is more complex. But to understand the true dynamics between the state and the Islamist movement, one has to look at Saudi Arabia's history. The predecessor state to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Emirate of Diriyah, was formed out of an alliance between Mohammed ibn Saud (1687-1765) and Mohammed Ibn Abdul Wahhab (1703-1792). The Wahhabi movement forged an alliance with Muhammad ibn Saud, the leader of the al-Saud family in 1744, known as the Diriyah Pact, although the religious movement itself started years before the pact.[51] At the time, the Ottoman Empire occupied the coastal areas of the Peninsula in the shape of a two-pronged fork: from the Sinai to Western Yemen – including the two holy cities of Mecca and Medina – and from Iraq to what is currently known as Qatar. The inland areas – mostly desert – that were not occupied by the Ottomans were inhabited by Bedouins including the al-Saud and al-Wahhab families. The Diriyah Pact stipulated that the al-Sauds would conquer the entire Arabian

[51] M. J. Crawford, "The Da'wa of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab before the al-Sa'ud", *Journal of Arabian Studies* 1, no. 2 (2011-2012), 147.

Peninsula with the support of the Wahhabis, with the latter granting the former religious legitimacy to a military campaign against the Ottomans.[52]

The alliance was a success: they ultimately conquered a large part of the Peninsula, forming the Emirate of Diriyah, forcing out the Ottomans in 1803.[53] The bond between the two families lasted for several centuries after, overcoming several regional crises, internal threats, invasions by the Ottomans, modernization and ideological splits successfully every time they appeared. The success of the Kingdom is therefore that it is no ordinary autocracy whereby one person or family rules the country alone: its political structure is far more complex. Saudi Arabia is essentially ruled by two families: the al-Saud and the Al Ash-Sheikh families, with the latter giving religious credence to the al-Sauds by being direct descendants of Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab. Although the al-Sauds are first among equals when deciding the fate of the country as the country bears their name, ruling the country is still a constant pull-and-tug exercise resulting in an equilibrium of power between the two families. If one of the two political actors steps out of line too far, conflict would result, but this has never happened in the Kingdom before. Aside from the 1992 Basic Law, a document that is similar to a constitution but not an actual one, the true power dynamics within the Saudi kingdom have remained essentially the same for almost 300 years after the Diriyah Pact.

5.1.2. Saudi Arabia's sociopolitical culture after the 1973 oil boom

Around 257 years after the signing of the Diriyah Pact, on September 11, 2001, many newspaper articles came out trying to enlighten the American public on what life in the native country of 15 out of the 19 hijackers is like. Was it a coincidence that nearly all hijackers came from Saudi Arabia, a supposed close ally of the United States? What is so unique about this country that made these seemingly unremarkable young men commit to such a depraved ideology? One such article answered this question through an interesting prism: modernity came to Saudi Arabia

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[52] Semiramis Çavuşoğlu, "The Kadizadeli movement: An attempt of seri'at-minded reform in the Ottoman Empire" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1990), 19, ProQuest (9024521).

[53] 1803 was not the date in which the al-Sauds permanently gained control of the Arabian Peninsula: successive wars between the Ottomans and the al-Sauds meant that territorial control changed hands frequently. The Ottoman Empire disintegrated in 1922, after which the al-Sauds battled several other local kingdoms to ultimately end up victorious in 1933, after which the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was proclaimed.
The preceding part of this paragraph before this reference mark is self-plagiarized from a previous essay made by the same author: Bas van Driel, "The Kadizadelis, the Wahhabis, and the Ottoman State: An Anatomy of Two Pioneering Islamic Puritanical Movements" (Social and Cultural History of the Middle East: The Ottoman Empire (1300-1922) essay, Leiden University, 2025), 3-4. Note: minor grammatical variations between the original essay text and the one in this paper may exist.

with such speed that it frightened many and alienated large sections of society: "After the oil embargo of 1973, […] undreamed-of wealth flooded the kingdom. In the desert, Toyota pickups became as plentiful as camels. It seemed to happen overnight. Virtually any young Saudi man who wanted to might study abroad, [could do so for] free. Thousands of Christians from America and Europe arrived to work in oil, education and healthcare […]. For many Saudis, traditionally cautious of outsiders, the hordes of newcomers were the first non-Muslims in their experience".[54] Other observers also noted the rapid pace of modernity being cast upon the country around that time: "Construction became frenetic, and cranes appeared everywhere. Neighborhoods were being transformed or built almost overnight. […] The Americans used the model they knew best. Small urban settlements in the middle of the desert, like Riyadh, began to grow into cities that looked like Arabia's answer to Houston: urban grids of wide streets with massive shopping centers and no public transportation. [….] Everyone was dazzled by the unimaginable wealth that had descended on them".[55] But not everyone was excited about this progress. Sami Angawi, a religious man from a wealthy background, "was deeply unsettled by how the new oil wealth was leveling the country's heritage. Sami's childhood home in Mecca had already disappeared. […] The Holy Mosque had been preserved and renovated with utter devotion; its shape and size, but mostly the history imprinted in its walls and floors, had been left unperturbed – until the arrival of its new moneyed custodians".[56] Changes in the public sphere in the country was readily apparent, and the political sphere was not spared either.

The massive influx of oil wealth led King Faisal to lead his country on a path to bureaucratic modernization, too. He expanded "education and health services, improved transport and communication facilities, implemented Bedouin sedentarisation schemes and, most importantly, increased Saudi military capabilities through the purchase of arms from the United States".[57] Social change was also in progress, with girls' education becoming available with the steady stream of oil wealth.[58] For a 'famine-prone backwater for centuries'[59] that was widely considered to be merely a unhospitable desert roamed by Bedouins that was ruled by an ennobled warlord until the arrival of oil wealth in the early 1970s, Saudi Arabia had economically developed itself massively within a very short timeframe. With a GDP of only

[54] Mary Jo McConahay, "Modern world rushed in on Saudi Arabia," *National Catholic Reporter*, November 16, 2001, 17.
[55] Ghattas, *Black Wave*, 52.
[56] Ghattas, *Black Wave*, 54.
[57] Mawai al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 133.
[58] Al-Rasheed, *History of Saudi Arabia*, 117-118.
[59] Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca,* 18.

USD $5.38 billion in 1970, Saudi Arabia's GDP grew to a staggering USD $111.86 billion in 1979,[60] a twentyfold increase in 9 years' time.[61] Taken together, Saudi Arabia was in the middle of progressing to modernity at breakneck speed. Up to that point, many Saudis never knew what wealth meant, as they were used to leading a nomadic lifestyle for hundreds of years. Seeing their country transform to modernity so quickly was bewildering to many, and controversial to some. Prince Turki described this feeling to be 'widespread'.[62] This progress did not go unnoticed to a then-unremarkable man named Juhayman al-Otaibi.

5.1.3. Background on Juhayman al-Otaibi and his political beliefs

Little is known about Juhayman's early life, but what is known is that he joined the Saudi National Guard at age 19.[63] The Guard is tasked with quelling internal unrest and is the formalized successor to the rag-tag militia that led Ibn Saud to unify the Arabian Peninsula, called the '*Ikhwan'*, or 'brothers'[64] in Arabic.[65] This militia was made up of Bedouins that roamed the Najdi desert. One of the tribes that were prominent in this militia were the al-Otaibi tribe, of which Juhayman was a member.[66] These warriors, known as the 'White Army' for using the traditional Arab cloak during combat,[67] were hardened Wahhabists, which is a ultraconservative strand of Sunni Islam, and were fanatical in the spreading of puritanical Islam to the peninsula.[68] However, the relationship between ibn Saud and the Ikhwan deteriorated from the 1910s onward.[69] Confrontation came to a head after Ibn Saud conquered the relatively modernist Hijaz, which, spreading along the Red Sea coastline, was much more used to interactions with foreigners, in 1925.[70] As the Ikhwan wanted Ibn Saud to impose their puritanic view of Islam on the newly-incorporated Hijaz region, Ibn Saud resisted as he was more focused on achieving unity, in line with his ambition to unify the peninsula into a kingdom.[71]

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[60] "*GDP (current US$) – Saudi Arabia*", World Bank website, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=SA
[61] As of 2023, Saudi Arabia's GDP stands at USD $1.07 trillion, according to the World Bank website.
[62] Al-Saud, *The Afghanistan File*, 76.
[63] Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca*, 25.
[64] Other sources transliterate 'Ikhwan' (الإخوان) into '*brethren'*, such as Kostiner (1985).
[65] Robert Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom: Kings, Clerics, Modernists, Terrorists, and the Struggle for Saudi Arabia* (Penguin Books, 2009), 14-16.
[66] Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom*, 16.
[67] Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca*, 26.
[68] Joseph Kostiner, "On Instruments and Their Designers: The Ikhwan of Najd and the Emergence of the Saudi State," *Middle Eastern Studies* 21, no. 3 (1985), 298.
[69] Kostiner, *Instruments and Their Designers,* 309.
[70] Kostiner, *Instruments and Their Designers,* 313.
[71] Kostiner, *Instruments and Their Designers,* 314-16.

Moreover, Ibn Saud was frustrated with the Ikhwan for their continuous raiding of villages, which was not in line with his vision for 'tranquility' in his kingdom.[72] With the help of the British, ibn Saud launched an attack against the Ikhwan during the Battle of Sibillah in 1929.[73] The al-Sauds came out victorious, and the Ikhwan were disbanded and merged into the newly-formed Saudi National Guard.[74]

One of the survivors of the final defeat of the Ikhwan was Mohammed bin Sayf al-Otaibi, who became the father of Juhayman in 1936. Juhayman was at first ambivalent about the Ikhwan's activities, being a non-devout Muslim early on in his life: he was "publicly flogged for drinking" while serving in the National Guard.[75] Most of his direct family members, including his father and grandfather, fought in the Ikhwan.[76] He left the National Guard in the early 1970s "to participate in the more stimulating activities of Medina's Salafi Group"[77], which was funded by Abdulaziz ibn Abdullah al-Baz, commonly referred to as Ibn Baz, a Salafi cleric with close links to the royal family.[78] Juhayman's views became more radicalized during this period, slowly expressing his puritanic views in public, which was a dangerous endeavor in an authoritarian country like Saudi Arabia. Juhayman's progression into religious fanaticism occurred right around the time of the oil boom, whereby Saudi Arabia modernized rapidly, as this paper discussed previously. '*Bid'ah'*[79], or 'innovations', were 'dangerous and regrettable', according to Juhayman.[80] Innovations such as the display of women in media, work reform for women, the permission of soccer matches, the shorts that these soccer players wore, displaying of the faces of Saudi Arabia's rulers on banknotes, and the issuance of passports and ID cards that displayed some sort of loyalty to an entity that is not God, were things that he considered to be heretical and sinful.[81] Although Juhayman did not directly criticize the royal family at first, he did espouse these views openly, leading to state operatives being sent out to Juhayman and his followers to 'push them back on the correct path'[82]. After a contentious argument erupted between the radicals and the royalists, the royalists left the hostel where the meeting took place and a new radical, puritanic group under the leadership of Juhayman was formed.

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[72] Daniel Silverfarb, "Great Britain, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia: The Revolt of the Ikhwan, 1927-1930", *The International History Review* 4, no 2 (1982), 227-28.
[73] Silverfarb, *Revolt of the Ikhwan*, 244.
[74] Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom*, 15.
[75] Foreign Office files, *Seizure of the Grand Mosque,* 25.
[76] Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom*, 16.
[77] Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom*, 17.
[78] Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom*, 17.
[79] بدعة in written Arabic.
[80] Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom*, 12.
[81] Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom*, 12.
[82] Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom*, 13.

The hostel, located east of the holy city of Medina, was primarily a getaway for young, poor pilgrims. Ironically, the hostel was named 'The Bayt al-Ikhwan',[83] meaning the House of Brothers. Partially because of that and partially out of honor for his family's service to the Ikhwan in the early 20th century, Juhayman came to lead a re-established Ikhwan, a neo-Ikhwan if you will.

By the late 1970s, Juhayman had a sizeable following, much to the chagrin of the authorities.[84] As the authorities became aware of Juhayman's tirades against the alleged religious betrayal of the Saudi royals and after illegally spreading an anti-royalist book in tandem with an obscure Iraqi nationalist group,[85] the authorities came to arrest Juhayman and his followers.[86] After being jailed for a few days in the spring of 1978, Juhayman and his followers were released after pressure from Ibn Baz, who was now in royal circles as a member of the *'ulema*[87], to Prince Nayef.[88] Emboldened by the support of the '*ulema* and by being imprisoned in a state-run jail,[89] the Ikhwan were ready to take revenge.

5.1.4. The Grand Mosque Seizure

After describing the events leading up to the Grand Mosque Seizure and the Seizure itself, this paper now sheds a light on its ties to the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan which began in 1979. November 20th, 1979, started as a day like any other in the holiest city in Islam. Sheikh Mohammad bin Abdullah al-Subail, the preacher of the Grand Mosque, was ending his daily sermon on the eve of the Islamic New Year, 1400 AH. Suddenly, shots rang out. The sheikh was pushed aside as Juhayman took over control of the microphone.[90] It became clear to the bewildered estimated 3 thousand[91] pilgrims that something nefarious was going on. With some help from co-conspirators within the Grand Mosque and the construction company that was

[83] Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom*, 8.
[84] Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca*, 39.
[85] Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca*, 39-40.
[86] Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca*, 40-41.
[87] 'Ulema (علماء) refers to a congregation of Islamic scholars. In the Saudi context, it refers to the clerical class of the al ash-Sheikh family who are descendants of Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab and directly advise the royal family in matters of religion. I will expand on that in chapter 4.1.1.
[88] Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca*, 42,
[89] Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca*, 42.
[90] Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca*, 2-5.
[91] Foreign Office files, *Seizure of the Grand Mosque*, 7

renovating the mosque at the time, the Saudi bin Laden Group,[92] Juhayman and his men managed to fully seize control over the Grand Mosque within a matter of minutes.

But before the Saudis could take any action to retake the holiest mosque in Islam, the royal family had to consult the 'ulema. Hours after the mosque was seized, senior 'ulema were 'rounded up' in the king's palace in Riyadh to discuss how to deal with the militants inside the mosque.[93] The 'ulema were obstinate: some scholars even expressed sympathy for Juhayman after years of the 'ulema feeling being cast aside by the al-Saud during the period of social liberalization.[94] But eventually, a compromise was reached: the 'ulema will sign a fatwa endorsing military action in the mosque to eject the militants in exchange for "the Saudi rulers [having] to live up to their Islamic obligations. There should be no more women on TV, no more licentious movies, no more alcohol. The social liberalization that had begun under King Faisal should be halted, and where possible, rolled back. And billions of Saudi petrodollars should be put to good use, spreading the rigid Wahhabi Islam around the planet".[95] Some Saudi princes described outcome of the meeting being that "the ulema essentially asked al-Saud to adopt Juhayman's agenda in exchange for their help in getting rid of Juhayman himself".[96] The ultimately highly consequential November 20 meeting was successful: the royal family accepted the proposal.[97]

What followed changed the course of Saudi, and arguably, global history. For almost two weeks, the Saudis pondered on how to take back control of the mosque as their international reputation as the guardians of the two Holy Mosques got ever more tarnished by the day. With the Americans being distracted by the ongoing revolution and hostage crisis in Iran, and with their own military operations against the militants being unsuccessful,[98] the Saudis were desperate for help. Ultimately, Prince Nayef settled on help from the French, who had a secretive tactical unit considered one of the best in the world, the *Groupe d'intervention de la Gendarmerie nationale*, or GIGN.[99] After the unit flew into Saudi Arabia on November 29th under deep secrecy, the GIGN decided to use a type of tear gas[100] against the militants, which

[92] Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca*, 67.
[93] Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca*, 98-99.
[94] Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca*, 100.
[95] Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca*, 100.
[96] Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca*, 100.
[97] Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca*, 101.
[98] Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom*, 28-29.
[99] Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca*, 188.
[100] Dichlorobenzylidene-malonotrile (abbreviated as DS) to be exact, according to Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca*, 192.

is nonlethal but inhibits aggression and blocks respiration.[101] As the GIGN directed the National Guard into the Grand Mosque, the Guard sprayed the gas into the areas where the militants were believed to be hiding.[102] After an 18 hour-long battle between the Guard and the Ikhwan, in which no rebel surrendered, the remaining Ikhwan were finally captured.[103] Juhayman's words, in response to why he committed to seizing the mosque, were reportedly: "This was God's will".[104] A total of around 60-65 Saudi soldiers, around 20 pilgrims and some 300 rebels were killed during the Seizure.[105] Juhayman's seizure took months of planning[106] and was well-thought out: weapons were smuggled into the Grand Mosque three days before the event and stored into the mosque's basement, and some militants even "obliterated their fingerprints in order to avoid identification".[107] About 80 percent of the militants were Saudis, with some Yemeni, Egyptian, Pakistani, Kuwaiti[108] and Moroccan nationals comprising the rest.[109]

Saudi authorities then went on to ruthlessly root out the Ikhwan by executing all of its surviving members, including a few non-Saudis they suspected of being involved. In true Roman fashion, the Saudis elected to hold the executions in public in cities that were spread across the country, in order to maximize the number of citizens being able to see the consequences of rebelling against the state.[110] On the morning of January 9th, 1980, 63 men were executed by beheading.[111]

5.1.5. The Islamist reforms of the 1980s

The country subsequently embarked on a series of Islamist reforms throughout the 1980s under pressure from the 'ulema, harshening Sharia law, especially after the enthronement of King Fahd in 1982. In exchange for the 'ulema's support for military action within the Grand Mosque during the meeting of November 20th, the royals promised the 'ulema to implement more

[101] Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca*, 190-192.
[102] Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca*, 209-210.
[103] Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca*, 212.
[104] Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca*, 213.
[105] Foreign Office Files, *Seizure of the Grand Mosque*, 25.
[106] Foreign Office Files, *Seizure of the Grand Mosque*, 25.
[107] Foreign Office Files, *Seizure of the Grand Mosque*, 23.
[108] Foreign Office Files, *Seizure of the Grand Mosque*, 39.
[109] Foreign Office Files, *Seizure of the Grand Mosque*, 25. On page 45, one declassified British diplomatic cable notes that they were informed by the Indonesian embassy in the United Arab Emirates that one Iranian and one Egyptian national were arrested for their involvement in the Seizure. They were, curiously enough, left-wing activists. Lawrence Wright *(Looming Tower)* mentions the involvement of Muslim African Americans in the Seizure on page 104, and so does Trofimov *(The Siege of Mecca)* on page 240.
[110] Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom*, 35.
[111] Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom*, 35.

religious domestic policies after the crisis was over. The time came to honor these promises in early 1980: women were not allowed to be shown on television anymore,[112] and were forbidden from working, leading to mass-firings for women, the religious police were granted broader authority and alcohol became nearly impossible to obtain.[113] The religious police started to punish shopkeepers who did not close their stores five times a day during prayer time, and dog food, dolls and teddy bears were removed from supermarkets. Swimming pools were closed down to prevent gender mixing.[114] The 'ulema were also given greater power, their financial allowances were increased and funding for Islamic universities expanded greatly.[115] It therefore seems that instead of clamping down on the religious extremism that led to the Grand Mosque Seizure, the royal family decided to appease the extremists by doing exactly what they asked for: the Islamist reforms of the 1980s would have made Juhayman satisfied for sure.[116] Perhaps he did achieve his goals after all: he lost the battle in Mecca, but won the war in the grander scheme of things.

5.2. Historical context of the Grand Mosque Seizure

Now that this paper has covered the events leading up to the Grand Mosque Seizure, the Seizure itself, and the aftermath, one is probably wondering what all of this information has to do with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. By shedding light on the political situation in the region around the time of the Seizure, this chapter discusses the zeitgeist surrounding both events. It will first look at what the global response to the Seizure was, especially from revolutionary Iran, Saudi Arabia's main nemesis. We then discuss the Saudi response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which happened three weeks after the conclusion of the Grand Mosque Seizure.

[112] It included censuring the faces of non-veiled women. The practice still occurs today on certain Saudi news outlets.
[113] Trofimov, 241-242.
[114] Robin Wright, "*Sacred Rage: The Wrath of Militant Islam*", Simon & Schuster (2001). Pp. 155.
[115] Trofimov, 242.
[116] Trofimov, 244.

5.2.1. Saudi Arabia, the Iranian Revolution and the Qatif Uprisings

Saudi Arabia and Iran used to be close diplomatic allies, as they were both close allies of the United States. Both countries were united in their opposition to the spread of Arab nationalism and communism through the region, which led them to receive extensive military and financial support from the West.[117] That all changed when the Shah of Iran fell from power in late-1979 during the Iranian Revolution which brough Ayatollah Khomeini to power. Khomeini shaped his newly-found Islamic Republic into a vehemently anti-Western and anti-Zionist project that lasts to this very day. Khomeini also had a bone to pick with Saudi Arabia, as he saw the Kingdom as nothing more than a puppet of the United States and Israel. In 1980, Iranian pilgrims were encouraged to openly oppose the Saudi royal family whilst on pilgrimage to Mecca, which they did while shouting derisive slogans such as: "[King] Fahd, the Israeli Shah", or "Allahu Akbar, Khomeini is leader".[118] Hundreds of Iranian pilgrims were killed in subsequent arrests by Saudi security forces.[119] Further confronting Saudi political sensitivities head-on, Khomeini openly disputed the House of Saud's legitimacy of being guardians of the Two Holy Mosques, viewing them as 'corrupt' and 'disbelieving' tyrants who had 'usurped the holy mosque of Mecca'.[120]

Far more dangerous to the House of Saud was the unrest that Khomeini was stoking among the Shia population of Saudi Arabia. Shia Muslims account for 25 to 30% of the Eastern Province's population,[121] which happens to be the province where virtually all oil deposits are located. And Saudi Shias were receptive to the rhetoric coming from their northern neighbors. The Eastern Province was neglected during the economic boom of the early 1970s. Its citizens felt discriminated against by the House of Saud, believing that they were purposefully ignored because of their Shiism.[122] Whereas the rest of the country developed in rapid pace, parts of the Eastern Province did not have running water or electricity until "as late as 1979".[123] Although the Saudi government promised to increase development in the area in 1975, their citizens

[117] Ibrahim Fraihat, *Iran and Saudi Arabia: Taming a Chaotic Conflict* (Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 20.
[118] Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom*, 101-02.
[119] Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom*, 102.
[120] Kasra Aarabi, "The Fundamentals of Iran's Islamic Revolution," *Tony Blair Institute for Global Change* (2019). https://institute.global/insights/geopolitics-and-security/fundamentals-irans-islamic-revolution
[121] Unknown author, "Saudi Arabia 2022 International Religious Freedom Report," *U.S. Department of State* (2023). https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/441219-SAUDI-ARABIA-2022-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf
[122] Tobey Craig Jones, "Rebellion on the Saudi Periphery: Modernity, Marginalization and the Shia Uprising of 1979", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 38 (2006), 214.
[123] Jones, *Rebellion on the Saudi Periphery,* 217.

believed they failed to deliver.[124] In the midst of the ongoing Iranian Revolution, the Saudi authorities allowed Ashura celebrations to proceed for the first time in history in the Eastern Province, in order for the Shia to "blow off some steam".[125] The Shia were warned by the authorities that these celebrations should be religious in nature only: if they turned political, security forces would move in.[126] And that is exactly what happened: violence erupted in the region in November 1979, leading to a heavy-handed response by Saudi security forces.[127] At least 20 Shiites were killed on November 28th, eight days after the start of the seizure of the Grand Mosque on the other side of the country.[128] Several public protests were held in the weeks after, but peace returned to the province relatively quickly. The events made the royal family extremely nervous now that their country was being attacked politically from both Sunni extremists on the one side and disgruntled Shias on the other in the midst of regional turmoil.

The hostile rhetoric from Khomeini and the subsequent Shia uprisings were one of the many reasons Saudi Arabia saw the Iranian Revolution as an existential threat. Saudi Arabia's main international ally, the United States, welcomed Saudi Arabia's hostility towards the new regime in Iran: it meant that the two could work together to curb Iranian influence and to prevent the spread of Khomeinism throughout the region now that Saudi-U.S. interests were in alignment. Khomeini also posed a direct short-term threat to the United States during the Tehran hostage crisis, which started on November 4th. All in all, Saudi Arabia saw the Iranian Revolution as a direct threat, as its ideology has proven itself to be receptive to the Shia minority in the Eastern Province, a highly geostrategic area for the royal family. Moreover, hostility to Iran was politically convenient, as the United States also saw it as a major threat.

5.2.2. The Muslim world's response to the seizure and its consequences for the royal family

Not only did political pressures from both inside and outside Saudi Arabia weaken the previously-undisputed iron grip of the House of Saud on the Arabian Peninsula, but the Grand Mosque Seizure also threatened the very legitimacy of the House of Saud to be guardians of the Islamic faith, thereby harming its global standing.

[124] Jones, *Rebellion on the Saudi Periphery,* 220-21.
[125] Foreign Office Files, *Seizure of the Grand Mosque*, 44.
[126] Foreign Office Files, *Seizure of the Grand Mosque*, 43.
[127] Jones, *Rebellion on the Saudi Periphery,* 222.
[128] Jones, *Rebellion on the Saudi Periphery,* 223.

In the Western world, little attention was paid to the unfolding crisis in the Grand Mosque. Although all communication services were shut down by Saudi authorities during the crisis, the U.S. embassy in Jeddah was aware of the events on the same day that hostilities started, by sending diplomatic cables to other American embassies in the region.[129] But in spite of American diplomats being acutely aware of the unfolding events in Mecca, the American media ecosystem paid little attention to it. President Jimmy Carter's November 28 press conference did not make a single mention about the ongoing seizure: no statement was made by Carter on the situation, nor was he asked any questions about the topic by the press.[130] Nearly all questions were related to the Iran hostage crisis, which started three weeks before the start of the Seizure. Nor was the event discussed during meetings within the highest echelons of American government: the U.S. National Security Council meeting of December 4th did not mention the Mecca crisis once.[131] The New York Times, the United States' premier news outlet, first reported on the event a day after it started, on November 21st, when it was front-page news.[132] It reported on the event 12 times between November 21st and December 4th, the end date of the seizure, but always as back-cover news, and oftentimes within the context of the Iran hostage crisis.[133] Apparently, the United States government and media were distracted by the ongoing hostage crisis in Iran, with the Mecca events being relegated to a topic of lower importance.

What is interesting is that the New York Times' first report on the Grand Mosque Seizure was named *'Mecca Mosque Seized by Gunmen Believed to be Militants from Iran'*. It is highly likely that the incorrect assertion that it was Iranian gunmen who seized the mosque originated from a State Department cable from the day before, which read: "*Group as yet identified seized Grand Mosque (Kaaba). […] Group reported by some to be Iranians and by others to be Saudi religious fundamentalists*".[134] Another cable on the same day also incorrectly described the militants to be 'Iranian'.[135] Although there is no evidence of Iranian involvement in the Seizure, Khomeini did respond to the events. He "charged […] that the United States and Israel were

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[129] Hamilton Jordan, "Iran-Saudi Arabia, 1979-Seizure of "Mecca," *Office of the Chief of Staff Files* (1979). Obtained through the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library website. Pp. 621.
[130] "The President's News Conference, November 28, 1979", The American Presidency Project. https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-985
[131] U.S. State Department, "83. Minutes of a National Security Council Meeting," *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980* XI, part 1 (2015), 217-225.
[132] Philip Taubman, "Mecca Mosque Seized by Gunmen Believed to be Militants from Iran", *New York Times*, November 21st, 1979. https://www.nytimes.com/1979/11/21/archives/mecca-mosque-seized-by-gunmen-believed-to-be-militants-from-iran.html
[133] New York Times archive. Date range: 20-11-1979 to 05-12-1979 using the search term 'Mecca'.
[134] Jordan, *Iran-Saudi Arabia*, 721.
[135] Jordan, *Iran-Saudi Arabia,* possibly 527 (page number is partially illegible, it is page 9/13 of the PDF file).

trying to seize two of the most sacred Moslem mosques in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina [sic]".[136] This was reportedly in response to American officials indirectly blaming Khomeini in the previously mentioned diplomatic cables for the unrest in Mecca, with Khomeini saying that "*Zionist and U.S. circles have tried to connect this act with Iran… the informed people of the world know that the enemies of the true progress and development of mankind use many such tricks*".[137] Khomeini-aligned political movements parroted his rhetoric: a 'Beirut-based group'[138] claimed responsibility for the occupation, and repeated Khomeini's lies about American military involvement in the Seizure.[139] Ultimately, the war-of-wards was stopped by Saudi Arabia itself, when it publicly announced that it believed that no foreign nationals were involved and the planning and execution of the Seizure.[140] So although the event was largely underreported at the time, it was briefly used by both Iran and the United States to accuse each other of being behind the Seizure. The rhetorical war between Iran and the United States led to at least some Muslims believing the Iranian lies, which led to the storming of the U.S. embassy in Islamabad, Pakistan, killing an American marine and two protestors.[141]

Whatever the foreign responses to the event were, the entire situation was a massive embarrassment to the Saudi royals, especially in their role as the custodians of the two holiest mosques in Islam. The event was a clear display of a lapse in government authority and a massive blow to Saudi Arabia's legitimacy as the moral center of Islam.[142]

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[136] John Kifner, "Khomeini Accuses U.S. and Israel of Attempt to Take Over Mosques", *New York Times*, November 25th, 1979. Sic, because there was no attempt to seize the other holy mosque in Medina, just in Mecca. https://www.nytimes.com/1979/11/25/archives/khomeini-accuses-us-and-israel-of-attempt-to-take-over-mosques.html

[137] Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca*, 108.

[138] Page 51 of the Foreign Office Files refers to this group as 'the Union of the Peoples of the Arabian Peninsula', which was led by Nasser al-Saeed, a Saudi dissident. He mysteriously disappeared in Beirut on December 17th, 1979, shortly after claiming responsibility for the Seizure. After the murder of Jamal Khashoggi in 2018, several news outlets and individuals have speculated that al-Saeed may have been kidnapped by Saudi agents and brought back to Saudi Arabia, there being either imprisoned or executed, although there is no evidence of this claim.

[139] Foreign Office Files, *Seizure of the Grand Mosque*, 50.

[140] Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca*, 120.

[141] Madiha Afzal, "1979: Another embassy under siege," *Brookings Institute*, January 24, 2019. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/1979-another-embassy-under-siege/

[142] "Saudi Arabians Behead 63 for Attack on Mosque," *Washington Post*, January 10, 1980. https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1980/01/10/saudi-arabians-behead-63-for-attack-on-mosque/18063a57-ba6f-47e3-bdc0-05c1059b6961/

5.3. Saudi Arabia's response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan

As if domestic political unrest, a crisis in legitimacy, and an emerging threat coming from Iran were not challenging enough, the sudden spread of communism in the region became yet another threat to the House of Saud. On Christmas Eve 1979, 21 days after the conclusion of the Grand Mosque Seizure, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. Afghanistan was at the time already ruled by a communist regime, but prime minister Mohammed Daoud, from the Soviet perspective, shifted further and further away from communism after taking power in 1973.[143] In 1978, Daoud was killed in a coup that brought hardline communist Nur Mohammed Taraki to power, whose regime quickly became unpopular, leading to mass protests.[144] During the protests, Taraki was forced out through a counter-coup led by Hafizullah Amin. After Amin killed Taraki for suspecting Taraki to be re-installed with help from the Soviets, the Soviets invaded Afghanistan to remove Amin from power. After four days of combat, Amin was subsequently killed by the Soviets, who installed Babrak Karmal as prime minister.[145] However, Afghans had enough of both communism and the Soviet occupation and embarked on a bloody struggle against the Soviet-backed government of Karmal. These rebels, called the '*mujahidin'*,[146] were ultimately victorious in 1989, when the last Soviet troops left Afghanistan back into the Uzbek SSR.

It is a well-known fact that the United States supported the Mujahidin through covert military support throughout their struggle against the Soviets, but so did Saudi Arabia, which this paper has discussed previously. The initial reaction from the Saudis to the unfolding events in Afghanistan was one of acute concern. Turki, the Saudi spy chief, pointed to Russia's centuries-old ambition to have access to a warm-water port. By invading Afghanistan, they have come much closer to this goal, with the Pakistani port of Gwadar being only 500 km away from the southernmost tip of Afghanistan. The only thing standing in their way was Pakistan, which was at the time a close ally of both the United States and Saudi Arabia.[147] Access to a warm-water port in the Persian Gulf by steamrolling a close ally was a completely unacceptable outcome to both Saudi Arabia and the United States.

So within hours of the news of the invasion reaching the major TV networks, the GID was already in touch with its American and Pakistani counterparts. Pakistan, for its own reasons

[143] James Climent, *Encyclopedia of Conflicts Since World War II* (Routledge, 2014), 685.
[144] Climent, *Conflicts Since World War II*, 686.
[145] Climent, *Conflicts Since World War II*, 686.
[146] *Mujahidin* (مُجَاهِدِين) means something akin to 'those who spread jihad' in Arabic.
[147] Al-Saud, *Afghanistan File*, 1-2.

that are outside the scope of this paper, was just as concerned about the Soviet takeover of Afghanistan. The three countries essentially struck a deal: the United States would supply the Mujahidin with weaponry through West Germany,[148] Saudi Arabia would supply the money, and Pakistan would distribute the money and the weapons to the Mujahidin groups.[149]

During the first four years of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, there were relatively few Saudi volunteers who joined the Mujahidin cause. In fact, Saudis were a small minority within the totality of Arabs who fought for the Mujahidin: 16 in total prior to 1985.[150] But from that point onward, the pace of Saudis coming to fight in Afghanistan increased, ballooning to thousands of fighters until the end of the first stage of the Afghan war in 1989.[151] But although these volunteers were Saudi, the recruitment of these volunteers was not organized by the Saudi government.[152] Instead, it was being done by two then-little-known Islamists: the Palestinian Islamic Studies lecturer Abdullah Azzam, and his former student, Osama bin Laden.[153] The men would work together to recruit radicalized young Saudi men to fight the communists in Afghanistan. The total number of Saudis going to Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation is estimated to be somewhere between 12 to 20 thousand, with most of them being active in the latter part of the 1980s, although Thomas Hegghammer indicates that most of them did not stay long in Afghanistan, and many were never involved in active combat.[154] Nonetheless, it is still an enormous amount of foreign, voluntary involvement in a country, although Muslim, so socioeconomically different than Saudi Arabia.

But although the Saudi government was not directly involved recruiting young men to fight in Afghanistan as that job was already filled by Azzam and bin Laden, authorities did directly aid and support the efforts that the two men were undertaking in Afghanistan. To start, Saudi Arabia sent hundreds of millions of dollars to the Mujahidin,[155] with American covert military and Pakistani operational support.[156] Saudi government support for the Mujahidin started subtly through active support for Islamic relief foundations in the early 1980s. According to Prince Turki, some Saudi princes and high-ranking members of the 'ulema

[148] Al-Saud, *Afghanistan File*, 8-9.
[149] Al-Saud, *Afghanistan File*, 12.
[150] Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 44.
[151] Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia,* 44-45.
[152] Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia,* 44.
[153] Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia,* 42-43.
[154] Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia,* 47.
[155] Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia,* 22.
[156] Al-Saud, *Afghanistan File*, 39-48.

reached out to the religious community within the country to nudge their followers to support Islamic aid groups working in Afghanistan.[157] Once millions of dollars were raised within a short timeframe during the start of the war, Saudi authorities organized military flights that would fly to Pakistan[158] and then distribute the aid from there into Afghanistan.[159] Along with inconspicuous humanitarian aid, carryalls with hundreds of USD $100 bills were flown into Pakistan, to be distributed by Pakistani military operatives to the array of Mujahidin groups fighting the Soviets.[160] A clandestine agreement was made between Saudi Arabia and the United States that stipulated that for every dollar sent to aid the Mujahidin, the Saudis would match their funds. With this in the back of the mind, it is estimated that the Mujahidin were given a total of approximately USD $6 billion between 1980 and 1989.[161]

Taken together, it is clear that there is a lot of literature indicating a large amount of monetary support from Saudi Arabia to the Mujahidin in the 1980s. Working together with the United States and Pakistan, the trio managed to push the Mujahidin into victory after the fall of President Mohammed Najibullah on April 16th, 1992.[162] It is argued that this victory altered the course of modern history, as it added to domestic Soviet frustration with the communist system which contributed to the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991.[163]

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[157] Al-Saud, *Afghanistan File*, 62-64.
[158] To be specific, the cities of Karachi and Peshawar served as something akin to a forward operating base.
[159] Al-Saud, *Afghanistan File*, 64-67.
[160] Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom*, 62-63.
[161] Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom*, 67. It is not specified if the USD $6 billion figure is the value it had in the 1980s or at the time of the publication of the book in 2009.
[162] The Mujahidin then took up arms against each other, leading to the brutal 1992-1996 civil war. That war was ended when an independent Islamic fundamentalist rebel group (that was largely uninvolved in the fight against the Soviets) captured Kabul in 1996 and executed Najibullah while under UN protection. This group, known as the Taliban, went on the lead Afghanistan until 2001, when it was invaded by the United States in response to them harboring Osama bin Laden after the 9/11 attacks. The Taliban regained power in 2021 and are in control of Afghanistan once again at present.
[163] Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom*, 67. See also Al-Saud, *Afghanistan File*, 96-98.

Chapter 6. Securitization theory and its application to Saudi Islamism

This chapter covers how the Saudi state securitized perceived global and regional threats to Islam domestically both before and after the Seizure and in light of the subsequent Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. It then looks to see if there was a change in the discourse in Saudi media about Islamism, and if these changes are a consequence of the two events. Through critical discourse analysis, this paper constructs a narrative that will aid in answering the main question. Freedom of the press is not guaranteed in Saudi Arabia both today[164] and in 1980.[165] Media is highly centralized within the country, whereby "different media platforms are supervised and regulated by the royal family according to Saudi law".[166] Whatever is shown on Saudi television and published in print or said on radio, is therefore nearly always curated and approved of by the authorities beforehand. What was published on the 1979 by Saudi media outlets is therefore no exception. As mentioned before, there was a mass media blackout during the first days of the Seizure, with only limited information being provided to viewers and readers by the Ministry of Information. It is therefore safe to assume that everything that was discussed, written or spoken about in mass media during and after the Seizure was okayed by the Saudi authorities beforehand. The next subchapters analyze how Islamism was framed by Saudi media – and thus therefore the Saudi state – before and during the Seizure, going into the first days of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

6.1. Public commentary on Islamism before the Seizure

As was established before, Islam shaped Ibn Abdul Wahhab and Ibn Saud in the 18th century, and they shaped Saudi Arabia in turn. Islamism is therefore essential to the identity of Saudi Arabia as a state, and key to the legitimacy of the House of Saud to rule the nation. This is reflected by how Saudi media portrayed political Islam before the events of 1979. "The government in this country is based on faith, and the highest authorities in this country derive guidance from the Book of God and abide by the holy teachings […]"[167] says one commentator

[164] Reporters Without Borders rank Saudi Arabia 162nd out of the 180 countries covered in 2025. https://rsf.org/en/country/saudi-arabia
[165] Raymond D. Gastil. "Freedom in the World: Political Rights and Civil Liberties 1980," *Freedom House* 1 (1980), 77 (of the PDF document).
[166] Chen Kertcher and Roi Lewin. "A diversionary benevolent media strategy: Lobbying Saudi Arabia's humanitarian aid in Arabic and English," *Digest of Middle East Studies* 33 (2024), 349.
[167] FBIS Daily Reports. "*Further Riyadh Commentary – Riyadh Domestic Service*", November 25, 1979.

on Radio Riyadh in 1979. That same commentator, responding to the unfolding revolution in Iran in late-1978, supported setting up "an Islamic force capable of achieving victory" over "the external forces [who] are planning with the aim of destroying the state of Islam and doing away with the gains of the great Islamic nation wherever it is to be found". He says that "we in the Saudi Arabian kingdom feel the time has come for the Islamic states to take a firm stand" against 'external forces' who are supposedly trying to destroy the Islamic nation.[168] This is just one instance of the Saudi state portraying their own country to its domestic audience as the bulwark of Islam against all enemies who are non-Islamic or not correctly Islamic. The royal family propagates the same view: "This kingdom has had the honor of bearing the standard of the call for Islamic solidarity. We have been observing, thanks to God, how Islamic solidarity has begun to yield fruit in a relatively short period and to prove effective with beneficial results", after which King Khaled called for retaking the al-Aqsa Mosque with an Islamic army.[169]

An important element to note whilst analyzing these press statements is that a common topic keeps coming back: nearly all of these statements were made in the context of Arab-Islamic opposition to Israel. Most of these publications came out after late-1978 in light of the then-recently signed Camp David Accords between Israel and Egypt. These statements were virulently anti-Zionist, highly critical of Egypt and possibly served as a reminder to the Saudi public that their country will not follow the same path as Egypt. And, oftentimes, these calls for anti-Zionism were meshed with highly Islamist language, as was seen in the previous paragraph.

What is interesting about these statements on Saudi public radio is the emphasis on Islamic unity across the Arab world against the supposed enemies of Islam, specifically Zionism. "[The Kingdom is] always […] the first in bringing the Arab brothers – it being the eldest of them – together, protect them from dangers and consolidate their position in the world community", a Jeddah newspaper commentator stated in early 1979. He continued: "The Kingdom stands against the tendentious press campaigns that are trying to undermine its entity and attempting to malign the Islamic religion, particularly the recent campaign in which the world press has launched a new crusade against Islam. […] Such resistance cannot be effective while the Arab world is divided and suffers from the policies of axis and while its leaders are undermining its solidarity for selfish reasons".[170] King Khaled reinforced this message by

[168] FBIS Daily Reports. "*'Islamic Force' must counter worldwide anti-Muslim plots*", December 31, 1978.
[169] FBIS Daily Reports. "*King Khalid, vows to regain Jerusalem Mosque*", November 27, 1976.
[170] FBIS Daily Reports. "*Paper looks at Saudi role in defending Arab rights*", February 20, 1979.

emphasizing "Islamic solidarity and efforts to uplift the message brought by [the] righteous Islam".[171]

But this supposedly enthusiastic endorsement of Islamic unity and pride in public by Saudi media is not shared within the private corners of the royal family. In his yearly status report to Washington in 1978, U.S. Ambassador John C. West remarked: "The present leadership [of Saudi Arabia] recognizes that modern ideas must inevitably come to the Kingdom, and they are moving ahead as fast as is necessary to placate the modernizers but at the same time not so fast as to arouse the active opposition of the traditionalists".[172] The royal family was therefore aware of the dangers Islamism could present to their rule. They were aware that they had to perform a balancing act between modernization and traditionalism, and that this delicate balance had to be maintained for the sake of domestic stability.

Taken together, the narrative pre-Seizure as shaped by the Saudi state was decidedly Islamist in public, but hesitant in private. The authorities carefully crafted a notion that Islam was under attack by hostile foreign actors – namely Zionism– and that pan-Islamic unity is a necessity for Islam to survive, but they were simultaneously worried about the rise in Islamism in private. What this tells us is that the House of Saud was struggling to balance its need to reinforce its legitimacy as the leaders of the Muslim world: they had to publicly show their support for pan-Islamic unity and defensive actions against non-Muslim hostile actors. On the other hand, privately, the country's leadership were worried about the sentiments that they were embedding themselves in, and that this Islamist rhetoric would threaten their own authority down the line. Indeed, less than a year after this report was written, their biggest fear did indeed become reality.

6.2. Public commentary on Islamism during and after the Seizure

The first official comment by the authorities on the unfolding situation in Mecca came about 20 hours after the first shots were fired.[173] It read: "A group of those who are renegades against the Islamic religion seized the opportunity of the dawn prayers on Tuesday, the first day of Muharram 1400 AH […] and infiltrated the Holy Mosque carrying weapons and ammunition. […] The authorities concerned have taken all measures to [bringing] the situation under

[171] FBIS Daily Reports. "*King Khalid urges Islamic unity in face of threats*", October 27th, 1979.
[172] U.S. State Department, "176. Report Prepared by the Ambassador to Saudi Arabia (West)," *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980* XVIII, part 1 (2015), 562.
[173] FBIS Daily Reports. "*U.S. Reportage Analyzed*", November 26, 1979.

control".[174] In a statement the following day, the Minister of Information declared – prematurely as it turned out – that the situation in the Grand Mosque was under control. In the following days, Saudi media outlets are seen quoting several high-ranking clerics and government officials referring to the militants in a variety of disparaging ways. Some examples include: "this group […] is deviating from the Islamic religion", "[it] subscribes to religious follies and heresy",[175] they are heretics,[176] religious fanatics,[177] seditionists, criminals,[178] a "corrupt gang of renegades",[179] an "ugly, oppressive group",[180] "dissidents of the Islamic faith",[181] they are those "who violated the holiness of God's house and transgressed against its security and tranquility",[182] an "outrageous, misled group",[183] whose tactics are terroristic and sinful, and it is a group who are "spreading corruption and madness".[184] All of these harsh statements are intended to delegitimize the militants by directly accusing them of what the militants accused the Saudi royals of: straying from the true path of Islam. The authorities are also clearly diverging from their supposed enthusiasm for pan-Islamic unity and for holy wars against non-Islamic political entities, as they are now condemning this from happening on their own soil.

The narrative that Saudi media, and therefore the Saudi state, put out during the Seizure is interesting. In modern history, whenever a terrorist attack occurs, the state where the terrorist attack occurred is often quick to denounce religious extremism as-a-whole.[185] But in Saudi Arabia in 1979, this did not happen at all. Reading through the lines, one can see that the state is forcefully condemning the attacks, but not because of its religious extremism. Instead, they are condemning the militants for not being the 'correct' version of Muslims as imagined by the Saudi state: they are 'deviating from the Islamic religion', they are 'renegades', 'dissenters of the Islamic faith', and they are 'misled'. These words are indicative of such a narrative. That narrative, based on what this paper has covered so far, seems to go something along the lines of the following:

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[174] FBIS Daily Reports. "*Interior Ministry Statement*", November 21, 1979.
[175] FBIS Daily Reports. "*Information Minister on Situation*", November 22, 1979.
[176] FBIS Daily Reports. "*Ministers discuss mosque attack, internal development*", December 17, 1979.
[177] FBIS Daily Reports. "*Attack Leader 'Foreign Student'*", November 24, 1979.
[178] FBIS Daily Reports. "*Ministers discuss mosque attack, internal development*", December 17, 1979.
[179] FBIS Daily Reports. "*Mosque Purged 'Renegades'*", December 3, 1979.
[180] FBIS Daily Reports. "*King Thanks Troops*", December 5, 1979.
[181] FBIS Daily Reports. "*Information Minister's Statement*", November 26, 1979.
[182] FBIS Daily Reports. "*Royal Family Supervises Operations*", November 25, 1979.
[183] FBIS Daily Reports. "*Mosque Speaker Praises Government*", December 7, 1979.
[184] FBIS Daily Reports. "*Riyadh Commentary*", November 24, 1979.
[185] For example, Emmanuel Macron's denunciation of religious extremism after the 2020 beheading of Samuel Paty, Theresa May's condemnation of the 2017 Manchester Arena bombing, Jacinda Ardern after the 2019 Christchurch Mosque shootings, etc.

> 'We, the Saudi royal family, are the standard-bearers of Islam, our version of Islam is the correct one, and we support exporting *this* version, and this version *only*, at home and abroad. Anyone who dares to question our version of Islam is not a true Muslim. Challenge us through violence on our soil, and you will be labeled an outcast, a deviant, a renegade, a terrorist, a heretic and worse, and you will therefore be worthy of death.'

If we use this narrative to shape how the Saudi press portrayed the Mujahidin in Afghanistan, we see roughly the same narrative that was used in the 1970s to denounce Zionism as an existential threat to Islam now being used to support the notion that Islam was under attack by communism. Three days after the initial invasion, a Riyadh newspaper said that "communism [is] determined to make all the states of Southeast Asia [sic] subject to the domination of the hammer and the sickle and to efface every Islamic or non-Islamic culture there", after which "the paper appealed to Islamic states throughout the world to intervene immediately because the people of Afghanistan are alone in the arena [and are] in a direct confrontation with communism".[186] Other papers expressed similar sentiments, calling for a global Muslim intervention against 'atheistic' communism being imposed on Muslim Afghanistan.[187] Several papers also enthusiastically lauded the 'Islamic resistance' in Afghanistan, with one paper saying: "[This conflict is different from the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia because] the Islamic resistance is taking place under the banner of Islam, which makes it impossible for any regime with ideas contrary to the beliefs of the Muslim Afghan people to find a foothold in Afghanistan […]",[188] and another commentator propagates that "the future will hold many surprises for the Islamic nation unless it rallies together and stands in force in the face of [the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan], declares its rejection of this imperialist method, and affirms its support for the Islamic Afghan people […]".[189] Others point to the Soviet Union's supposed intention to "uproot Islam from the country".[190] One editorial in a Jeddah newspaper puts the matter in the simplest of terms: "Soviet communism has revealed its hatred for and malice against Islam and Muslims".[191]

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[186] FBIS Daily Reports. "*Al-Jazirah warns Islamic states about communism threat*", December 28, 1979.
[187] For example, FBIS Daily Reports. "*Saudi Papers*", December 29, 1979, or "*Further Commentary*", December 30, 1979.
[188] FBIS Daily Reports. "*Commentator views Afghan coup, Islamic resistance*", December 29, 1979.
[189] FBIS Daily Reports. "*Call for Islamic Solidarity*", January 6, 1980.
[190] For example, FBIS Daily Reports. "*Further Press Comment*", January 1, 1980, or "*Newspapers warn of Soviet Threat to Mideast*", January 6, 1980, or "*'UKAZ warns USSR of consequences of Afghanistan invasion*", January 8, 1980.
[191] FBIS Daily Reports. "*'UKAZ warns USSR of consequences of Afghanistan invasion*", January 8, 1980.

Therefore, these statements play into the state-led narrative that Islam is under attack by foreign ideologies and that it needs to be defended through pan-Islamic unity. In essence, it is the exact same narrative that the Saudi state disseminated before 1979, when the main enemy of this narrative was Zionism, whose ideology was also supposedly an existential threat to Islam. Simply put, the narrative this paper laid out before remained exactly the same, it was just the subject of securitization that changed: from Zionism before 1979, to 'deviants' from Islam during the Seizure, to communism after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, all within the span of a few weeks.

6.3. Possible explanations for the appeasement of Islamists

The previous subchapter analyzed how the narrative on Islamism as propagated by Saudi media, and thus the Saudi state, has changed from before, to during and to after the Grand Mosque Seizure. It concluded that this narrative essentially translates into 'only the royal family knows what true Islam is',[192] and this narrative remained the same throughout all major events of 1979, with just the discursive enemy having been changed.

I consider this narrative to be highly plausible in terms of the internal doctrine of the House of Saud towards religious legitimacy, as this narrative forms an additional explanation for why the state did not retaliate against Islamist movements in the aftermath of the Seizure. It was not Islamism *in its entirety* that the royal family was afraid of, it was *competing versions* of Islamism that they saw as a threat. Hence why they did not see Islamism as a totality as a threat, which is why they also saw no need to curtail the activities of known Islamists in their country after the Seizure. It would also explain why Saudi Arabia's domestic laws became more Islamic puritan after 1980: the House of Saud wanted to root out competing versions of their version of Islam, which is why they doubled-down on Wahhabi policy so to make clear to everyone in and outside of the country that the House of Saud's version of Islam – Wahhabism with loyalty to the royals, *royalist Wahhabism* if you will – is the only relevant and acceptable version of Islam in Saudi Arabia, and that competing versions of Islam are highly unwelcome within the Kingdom.

In addition to the aforedescribed discursive explanation for the lack of retaliation by the Saudi state against Islamists in the aftermath of the Seizure, previously-mentioned aspects should not be forgotten about. Namely, domestic political pressures from the clerical class,

[192] Please refer to chapter 5.1.2. to read the full constructed narrative.

newfound socio-political rivalry with Iran, domestic unrest and a crisis in legitimacy are also factors that weighed in on the decision not to strike back against Islamist actors at the late-1979 political juncture.

6.4. Securitization of Islamism by the Saudi state

Now, this paper has established that the Saudi state had a conscious and strategic narrative being put out towards its subjects: the Saudi state alone knows the correct form of Islam. This process has a name in international relations theory: securitization. Securitization is a somewhat discursive concept: its meaning depends on the context and time in which it is being used. If applied to Saudi Arabia, or at least according to the House of Saud, the sociological element of utmost importance to the nation that is constantly in apparent existential danger is Islam. They securitized Islamism to such an extent that extraordinary measures, such as wanting to launch a holy war against Israel pre-1979 or against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan post-1979 could now be considered a legitimate political option. Why? Because according to the Saudi state, the survival of Islam equals the survival of the state and thus its people: the entire nation-state as a concept. And since the House of Saud consider themselves to be the main defenders of the Islamic faith, an existential threat to Saudi Arabia is an existential threat to Islam as a whole. With that in mind, there is little that Saudi Arabia would *not* do to protect itself from the supposedly evil ideologies that are out to ruin the core ideological basis of the country and its people. Securitization therefore aids in explaining the actions Saudi Arabia took during the Seizure. Since the authorities pushed the narrative that the militants were not true Muslims and therefore constituted a threat to the state, the state used the securitization of their version of Islam as a way to paint the Mecca militants as an existential threat to Saudi Arabia, and by extension, to the whole of Islam.

Chapter 7. Conclusion

The main question this paper attempted to answer is the question on how the Saudi state securitized perceived global and regional threats to Islam following the Grand Mosque Seizure and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. It has argued that the Saudi state did not oppose Islamism as a whole, as Islamism is a key component of the country's identity as a nation-state. Instead, the Saudi state paradoxically co-opted Islamist rhetoric in response to the Soviet-Afghan war, which happened shortly after the conclusion of the Grand Mosque Seizure. The state defined what the acceptable version of Islam is through the use of state media, public statements by the royal family, and through their Islamist domestic and foreign policy changes following the two events. I prefer to call the House of Saud's preferred type of Islam as 'royalist Wahhabism': Wahhabism that does not supersede loyalty to the Kingdom and its rulers. These actions served to reinforce regime legitimacy and to delegitimize competing interpretations of Islam.

This paper's aim was to narrow the literary gap on the link between two major historical events in Saudi Arabia's history: the Grand Mosque Seizure and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. I established that although there is clear and wide-ranging evidence of Saudi involvement in the Afghan war through their support for the Mujahidin, there is little to no academic literature in existence on whether there was a causal link between the two. This paper attempted to find such a link. It did establish that the House of Saud was in a crisis of legitimacy around the time of the Seizure. With socioeconomic upheaval being brought upon its subjects because of the sudden and rapid arrival of oil wealth in the 1970s, certain elements of society were befuddled or outright opposed to the country's rapid modernization. Juhayman al-Otaibi was one such individual, and attacked the Grand Mosque on November 20th, 1979, controlling it for fourteen days until the Saudi authorities, with covert help from the French, arrested and executed Juhayman and his group of militants. It was a major embarrassment to the House of Saud, who have partially rested their legitimacy to rule their country on the basis of them guarding the two holiest mosques in Islam. Moreover, the al-Saud family was now indebted to the 'ulema of the al-Ash Sheikh family, after practically begging them to approve of military action within the mosque, greatly jolting the balance of power in favor of the 'ulema and diminishing their own. Further compounding the royal family's legitimacy issues was that directly after the mosque was seized, Saudi Arabia's Shiite population in the Eastern Province started to rebel. Although this rebellion was ultimately brutally squashed by the authorities, the

royal family now realized that the Iranian Revolution, which was ongoing at the time of these events, started to reverberate in Saudi Arabia: the Shia population was receptive to Khomeini's message. Khomeini, concurrently, continuously and viciously attacked the House of Saud's legitimacy to rule, casting them as puppets of the West and unworthy of guarding the two mosques. Saudi Arabia, for the first time in its history, was rapidly destabilizing because it was under attack by both domestic Sunni extremism and Shia unrest, and by foreign attacks on their legitimacy.

Realizing that their rule was hanging in the balance, the royal family made some drastic and sometimes paradoxical moves. Instead of striking back against the Islamists, who were an immediate threat against their rule during the Seizure, this paper established that the royal family instead decided to co-opt their rhetoric and aims for the country. Through critical discourse analysis, this paper analyzed dozens of state media publications in the years before and after the Grand Mosque Seizure, and what we saw was that the Saudi state had always securitized Islamism. Islam, according to the Saudi state-led narrative in their media, was always under attack, and when Islam is under attack, Saudi Arabia is under attack. Before 1979, the ideology that was the object of ire was Zionism: this was back then the primary existential threat to Islam. But during the Grand Mosque Seizure, it seemed that government officials did not blame Zionism for what had happened, but rather Islamic impurity: those who were involved in the seizure were impure Muslims. State media, which are one and the same as the state in Saudi Arabia, went on a vicious rhetorical attack against those who were involved in order to delegitimize them and to cast them as unrepresentative of what 'true' Islam is. What we thereby concluded was that through these actions, the Saudi state produced a narrative whereby they propagated to their subjects and to the world that the only correct version of Islam is the one that the House of Saud supports: what I like to call 'royalist Wahhabism'.

And when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan three weeks later, the object of ire changed again, but the securitization of perceived global and regional threats to Islam remained intact: it was now communism that posed the largest threat to Islamic civilization. And henceforth, partially because of the event in Mecca, partially because of the state's eroding legitimacy, partially because of the Kingdom's relationship with the United States, and partially to return the favor to the 'ulema who helped the royal family in providing religious legitimacy for their military actions in the Grand Mosque, Saudi Arabia decided to aid the Afghan Mujahidin. At first, they did so indirectly, through the use of the clerical class, then more explicitly by sending billions of U.S. dollars to Pakistan, to be distributed among the several

mujahidin groups battling the Soviets. The state, through the clerical class, indirectly encouraged young Saudis to volunteer in Afghanistan, which thousands of them did throughout the course of the war.

Ultimately, the House of Saud managed to end the crisis: the 'ulema was placated because of the decision to aid the Mujahidin and to implement Islamist reforms domestically, Islamist radicalism was diverted away from their own country and toward Afghanistan, the Shias were successfully repressed, the communist regime in Kabul was gone, and the alliance with the United States remained intact. In spite of the odds against them from both inside and outside the country in 1979, the royal family stayed in power through the clever use of media, a carrot-and-stick approach to domestic instability, an apt approach to balancing the needs of the royal family versus those of the 'ulema, and the use of international alliances. But although the Kingdom remained standing, it was not without cost. Juhayman al-Otaibi, who died as an enemy of the state, had his dreams come true, nevertheless: Saudi Arabia embarked on a path of Islamist reforms that would have made him proud of his country if he remained alive: women were not allowed to work anymore and disappeared from the public scene, and Sharia law in general was harshened. These reforms remained in place for over three decades, until the ascension of Mohammed bin Salman as the de facto leader of the country in 2017.

Taken together, the Saudi state securitized Islam throughout the mid-20th century and used foreign and domestic tensions as a way to shape the narrative that Islam is under existential threat. First, it was Zionism, then it became Islamic impurity, and then it became communism after the Soviet invasion. Therefore, their securitization was selective: the House of Saud only securitized Islam when it suited them, and they especially did so whenever they felt threatened in their own security to rule the country. I am hereby willing to say that Islam was not the reason for intervening in Afghanistan, but merely an *excuse* used by the House of Saud to maintain their legitimacy to rule.

The relevance of this paper hereby comes to the fore: it shows how the Saudi royal family uses religion and culture to maintain the status quo. Their cynical use of religion should be kept in the back of one's mind when analyzing Saudi politics, both domestic and foreign, or at least the Saudi Arabia between 1979 and 2017. What this paper also aimed to achieve was to add to the existing knowledge on the Saudi motivations for aiding the Afghan Mujahidin and to the ever-mysterious Grand Mosque Seizure. In specific, I aimed to add knowledge on the link between the two events, which has been critically under-researched so far. I used securitization theory to help explain what happened, and why the state responded to the crisis

as it did. This paper showed that severe domestic legitimacy crises can prompt authoritarian states like Saudi Arabia to redefine ideological threats and to co-opt previously subversive elements in order to preserve power. Considering the major modernizing reforms Saudi Arabia has gone through since the ascend of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman since 2017, I hope this paper serves as a cautionary tale of what happens when rapid modernization is cast upon a society that is not used to it. Just like in the 1970s, when Saudi Arabia underwent rapid development and modernization because of its newfound oil wealth, the country is going through the same process now, but this time without any newfound oil. In 1979, this project of modernization ended abruptly and dramatically after Juhayman's violent gesture in the Grand Mosque, and nearly all reforms were reversed during the Islamist reforms of the 1980s. Time will tell whether or not the present-day reforms will be more successful.

Admittedly, this paper has its limitations. The secondary sources that were used were wide-ranging and diverse. However, the primary sources should be interpreted with some skepticism. If I were only to go about, for example, the New York Times reporting in the days of the Seizure, I would have been grossly misinformed as evidenced by their mistakes in reporting that the militants were Iranian or that the mosques in both Mecca *and* Medina were attacked, which was not true. Furthermore, as mentioned in the theoretical framework, the FBIS database should be interpreted knowing that it may be selective and incorrectly translated because of the deeper meanings of certain Arabic words. Moreover, this paper has unfortunately only been able to rely on Western intelligence reporting, news publications and secondary literature for the most part. The Saudi side of the story is admittedly underrepresented. The only Saudi perspectives that this paper relied on was the book published by Prince Turki al-Faisal al-Saud and the FBIS reports on what Saudi media was saying. But even then, both of these sources are state-aligned actors, which is logical considering the severe limitations on freedom of speech and press in the country. The Saudi perspective on both topics therefore remains elusive.

Therefore, I recommend further research into what the perspective of Saudi subjects were on both events: how they interpreted them, how they view Juhayman al-Otaibi's actions, how they perceived their government's support for the Mujahidin, and how they feel about the securitization of perceived global and regional threats to Islam by the royal family. Oral histories from Saudi participants, observers and regular citizens would be extremely useful to further research into the topic.

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