

Rejectionist Islamism in Saudi Arabia: The Story of Juhayman al-‘Utaybi Revisited

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REJECTIONIST ISLAMISM IN SAUDI ARABIA: THE STORY OF JUHAYMAN AL-‘UTAYBI REVISITED

The storming of the Mecca mosque by Juhayman al-‘Utaybi and his fellow rebels in November 1979 represents one of the most spectacular events in the modern history of Saudi Arabia. Yet it is one of the least understood. Even decades after the event, many important questions remain unanswered. Who were the rebels and what did they want? Why and how did Juhayman’s group come into existence? What happened with the rebels and their ideas after the Mecca events? This article seeks to shed light on the story and legacy of Juhayman al-‘Utaybi with new information gathered from extensive fieldwork in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere.

While the details of the Mecca operation are relatively well-known, the origin of the rebel group is shrouded in mystery.¹ The existing literature on Juhayman’s movement is both sparse and contradictory. The interested student will find few in-depth studies of it in English.² The Arabic-language literature on Juhayman is somewhat more extensive and has certainly been underexploited by Western academics, but many works suffer from inaccuracies and political bias.³ A key problem has been the absence of good primary sources, which has made it virtually impossible for historians to trace the origin and history of Juhayman’s movement in any significant detail. This changed in 2003 when Nasir al-Huzaymi, a former associate of Juhayman, lifted the veil on his past and wrote a series of articles in the Saudi press about his experience as a member of Juhayman’s group.⁴ Al-Huzaymi had been active in the organisation between 1976 and 1978, but left a year before the Mecca operation. He was caught in the police roundup after the event and spent eight years in prison. Al-Huzaymi has renounced his former Islamist convictions and now works as a journalist in the Saudi newspaper al-Riyadh.

Al-Huzaymi is one of several former Islamist radicals in Saudi Arabia who, from the late 1990s onward, began speaking publicly about their experiences as activists.⁵ While their emergence at this particular point in time was facilitated by the process of limited liberalisation initiated by Crown Prince ‘Abdallah in 1999 and to some extent exploited by the authorities as a counterbalance to conservative Islamist forces, it was by no means orchestrated by the state. These repentants had emerged gradually in independent communities and began speaking out before 9/11 or the 2003 terrorist campaign in Saudi Arabia. There are strong reasons to take al-Huzaymi’s testimony seriously. His account is descriptive, unflattering toward the authorities, and above all consistent with other key historical sources.

The current article is based on a detailed reading of the available English- and Arabic-language literature about Juhayman, as well as on extensive fieldwork. During a series of research visits to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, the authors of this article interviewed Nasir al-Huzaymi and a number of other former Saudi Islamists with in-depth knowledge of the Juhayman movement and phenomenon. Via a generous intermediary, we obtained the testimony of a senior Medina-based cleric who was very close to Juhayman’s group in the 1970s and attended the Grand Mosque during the 1979 siege. We traced the anonymous authors of the main Arabic books about Juhayman published in the early 1980s, in order to identify and assess their primary sources.⁶ We also spoke to journalists who covered the Juhayman story in the Mecca area in 1979. During this two-year research process we were able to collect the accounts of several individuals – in addition to Nasir al-Huzaymi – who were either part of Juhayman’s group or eyewitnesses to key events in the group’s history.

Our article is divided into three parts. The first and most voluminous part is devoted to the history of Juhayman's movement leading up to the storming of the Mecca mosque in 1979. In the second part, we will reflect on the nature of this movement and evaluate existing theories and interpretations of the phenomenon. Finally we shall examine the ideological legacy of Juhayman al-'Utaybi and his influence on subsequent radical movements in Saudi Arabia up to the present day. The article presents two central arguments. First of all, our research shows that the group that stormed the Mecca mosque in 1979 was a radicalised fraction of a much broader pietistic organisation set up in Medina in the mid 1960s under the name of al-Jama'a al-Salafiyya al-Muhtasiba (JSM), i.e. "The Salafi Group that Commands Right and Forbids Wrongdoing". The second main argument is that the JSM and its radical offshoot, "Juhayman's Ikhwan", were among the first manifestations of a particular type of Saudi Islamism which outlived Juhayman and has played an important yet subtle role in the shaping of the country's political landscape until today. It is characterised by a strong focus on ritual practices, a declared disdain for politics yet active rejection of the state and its institutions.⁷ This so-called "rejectionist Islamism" is intellectually and organisationally separate from the other and more visible forms of Saudi Islamist opposition such as the so-called "Awakening" (al-Sahwa) movement or the Bin Ladin-style jihadists.⁸

OPPOSITION AND ISLAMISM IN SAUDI ARABIA BEFORE 1979

There have been relatively few cases of violent opposition to the rule of the Al Saud since the foundation of the third Saudi State by 'Abd al-Aziz Ibn Saud in 1902. The first and most violent was the so-called "Ikhwan revolt" of the late 1920s. The Ikhwan were bedouins from major Najdi tribes such as 'Utayba and Mutayr who had been religiously indoctrinated and trained as a military force for use in the territorial expansion of the nascent Saudi state. When the expansion reached the border of territories controlled by the British colonial power, King 'Abd al-Aziz called for an end to further military campaigns. The Ikhwan, who had already grown critical of 'Abd al-Aziz because of his use of modern technology and interaction with Westerners, were outraged by the abandonment of jihad for reasons of realpolitik. Some of the Ikhwan leaders also had personal political ambitions which were thwarted by the Ibn Saud.⁹ They refused to lay down their weapons and instead rebelled against their king. After a series of clashes, the bedouin fighting force, led by Sultan bin Bijad and Faysal Al Dawish, sheikhs of the 'Utayba and Mutayr tribes, was crushed at the battle of Sbila in 1929. Ikhwan members who had remained loyal were later absorbed into the National Guard.

The 1950s and 1960s witnessed a few episodes of leftist and communist unrest in the Kingdom, which reinforced the regime's conviction that a reliance on religious forces was the best means of social control. The accession to the throne of the pan-Islamist King Faisal in 1964 and the dynamics of the Arab Cold War further increased the budgets and the influence of the religious establishment and the Islamic organisations in Saudi Arabia. This created a context favourable to the development of local brands of Islamism, from which later movements of political-religious opposition would emerge.

At this time, two different types of Islamism developed in Saudi Arabia. One was pragmatic, political and elitist, and became known as the "Islamic Awakening" (*al-sahwa al-islamiyya*) or just "the Sahwa". This represented the mainstream of the Saudi Islamist movement. On its margins emerged an isolationist, pietistic and low-class Islamist phenomenon, which can be termed "rejectionist" or "neo-salafi". From the 1960s to the 1990s, the two strains coexisted, representing relatively distinct ideological approaches

and sociological phenomena, although the former remained politically and numerically more significant. The Sahwa developed primarily on university campuses after the arrival, from the late 1950s onwards, of large numbers of members of the Muslim Brotherhood fleeing persecution in countries like Egypt and Syria. These individuals – many of whom were academics or well-trained professionals – would rapidly become the backbone of the newly established Saudi education and media sectors. It was partly through their impulse that the Sahwa gained momentum in Saudi universities in the 1970s and 1980s, before spearheading the reformist Islamist opposition of the early 1990s. Ideologically, the Sahwa represented a blend of the traditional Wahhabi outlook (mainly on social issues) and the more contemporary Muslim Brotherhood approach (especially on political issues). Politically, representatives of the Sahwa have sought to reform the state's policies without ever straight-forwardly questioning the state's legitimacy.¹⁰

However, it is from the other Islamist strain – the rejectionist one – that Juhayman's movement emerged in the 1970s. In 1961, The Islamic University of Medina had been set up under the leadership of the Grand Mufti Muhammad bin Ibrahim Al al-Shaykh and the later well-known 'Abd al-Aziz bin Baz.¹¹ Both of them were eager to inspire a broader movement of Wahhabisation in the Hijaz, which for decades had enjoyed relative cultural and religious autonomy. They therefore encouraged their students to engage in proselytism (*da'wa*) and enforcement of religious laws (*hisba*).

These developments coincided with the arrival of new ideological influences on the Medinan religious scene, in particular that of Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani (1914-1999). Al-Albani was a Syria-based scholar of Albanian origin who had been invited by 'Abd al-Aziz bin Baz, then vice-president of the Islamic University of Medina, to teach there in 1961. Al-Albani had become famous in Syria for identifying himself with the medieval school of thought known as the Ahl al-Hadith (i.e. "the people of hadith"), which he claimed to revive. The Ahl al-Hadith had become known in the 8th century for opposing the use of reason in religious rulings, insisting that only the Sunna was to provide answers for matters not explicitly treated in the Qur'an. Their scholars therefore developed a particular interest in the collection and the study of hadith. Of the four canonical Law schools that were to emerge a century later, only the Hanbali school followed a strict Ahl al-Hadith line. The late Hanbalis, however, increasingly tended to imitate (*taqlid*) former rulings by members of their school, instead of practicing their own interpretation (*ijtihad*) based on the Qur'an and the Sunna. This was one of Albani's main reproaches to the Wahhabis, who claimed *ijtihad* but tended to act as Hanbalis, and therefore as *madhhabis* (i.e. those who follow a particular school of jurisprudence). Al-Albani, in return, rejected all the schools of jurisprudence, calling for direct and exclusive reliance on the Qur'an and the Sunna. Another of his reproaches was that Wahhabis did not care enough about hadith. He, in return, held his own views on the authenticity and readings of certain hadith, and therefore his rulings sometimes ran counter to well established – and especially Wahhabi – beliefs, notably on ritual issues. In his well-known book "Characteristics of the Prophet's Prayer" (*sifat salat al-nabi*), al-Albani presented a number of peculiar views on Islamic rituals, which raised controversy with other scholars. Some say these controversies led to his expulsion from Medina in 1963, although the exact circumstances of his departure are unclear. Al-Albani would nevertheless maintain a close relationship with the Saudi ulama throughout his life, particularly with Ibn Baz. The teachings of the charismatic al-Albani were to have a strong impact on the Saudi religious scene, not least because they formed the ideological basis for the pietistic organisation from which Juhayman's rebels would emerge, namely al-Jama'a al-Salafiyya al-Muhtasiba.

AL-JAMA‘A AL-SALAFIYYA AL-MUHTASIBA

The group known as al-Jama‘a al-Salafiyya al-Muhtasiba (“The Salafi Group which Practices *bisba*” i.e. “which Commands Right and Forbids Wrongdoing”) took shape in Medina in the mid-1960s. It was formed by a small group of religious students who for some time had been proselytising in the city’s poorer neighbourhoods.¹² Having been influenced by al-Albani, they were driven by a general conviction that the mainstream schools and tendencies in the Muslim world at the time – including the official Wahhabism of the Saudi religious establishment – needed to be purified of innovations and misperceptions. They were also acting to counter the growing influence of other groups on the religious scene in early 1970s Medina, particularly the Jama‘at al-Tabligh, but also the Muslim Brotherhood.¹³ Both of these aims – promoting a purified Wahhabism and providing an alternative to existing forms of Islamic activism – were shared by some of the most prominent religious scholars in Medina at the time, such as ‘Abd al-Aziz bin Baz and Abu Bakr al-Jaza’iri.¹⁴ The founding members of the JSM developed personal contacts with these scholars and considered Ibn Baz as their sheikh.

The formation of the JSM was prompted by an episode known among the members as “the breaking of the pictures” (*taksir al-sumar*) which occurred in approximately 1965. The proselytisers had gradually come to see it as their duty to enforce religious obligations and regulations in certain parts of Medina. This included destroying pictures and photographs in public spaces. In the early 1960s there was friction and even minor clashes in Medina between these zealous conservatives and local residents.¹⁵ This vigilantism went unnoticed or ignored until a group of young activists were caught smashing a large number of display windows showing female mannequins in the centre of Medina. Having inflicted serious damage on commercial property, the perpetrators were arrested and imprisoned for about a week.¹⁶ This confrontation with the police inspired the main activists to intensify and coordinate their efforts. Not long after this incident, they decided to set up an organisation under the name al-Jama‘a al-Salafiyya (the Salafi Group). They approached Ibn Baz to ask for his approval. He greeted the initiative and suggested that they add the qualification *al-muhtasiba* (“which practices *bisba*”) to the name of their group.¹⁷ Ibn Baz thus became the official spiritual guide (*murshid*) of al-Jama‘a al-Salafiyya al-Muhtasiba (JSM) and appointed Abu Bakr al-Jaza’iri as his deputy.¹⁸ The JSM had no official executive leader, but was governed by a consultative council (*majlis al-shura*) of five or six members, which included four of the founding members and al-Jaza’iri.

The group gradually stepped up its activities and attracted an increasingly large number of followers in Medina. In the early 1970s they set themselves up in a purpose-built two-storey building known as Bayt al-Ikhwan (House of the Brotherhood) located in the poor neighbourhood of al-Hara al-Sharqiyya in Medina, an area known for the strict conservatism of its residents. Bayt al-Ikhwan became the natural assembly point and administrative centre for the JSM, as well as a forum for daily classes and weekly conferences. Bayt al-Ikhwan was administered by Ahmad Hasan al-Mu‘allim, a close friend of Juhayman and a Yemeni former student at the Islamic University.

Over time, the JSM’s organizational structure became increasingly large and complex. Special administrative groups were set up to coordinate practical matters. One group (initially headed by Juhayman) specialized in organizing the members’ travels, another in the reception of guests, and a third in organizing trips to the villages for “wandering travellers” (*al-musafirun al-jamwalun*) to preach and recruit new members.¹⁹ The JSM encouraged its adherents to set up similar communities in other cities around the Kingdom. By 1976, the JSM had followers based in practically all major Saudi cities,

including Mecca, Riyadh, Jidda, Taif, Ha'il, Abha, Dammam, and Burayda. All branches had a local leader or contact person. Some branches, like the one in Mecca, were also based in purpose-built houses.²⁰

In order to determine the socio-economic profiles of JSM members, we asked al-Huzaymi to provide us with as much information as he remembered on the members of the group. This, combined with other sources, allowed us to gather basic demographic data on 35 individuals, which enable us to make a few important overall observations.²¹ First, it seems that most members were young, unmarried men. Some members did have families, but no women played any direct role in the organisation. Adherents covered a relatively wide age span – from late teens to late forties – but the majority seems to have been in their mid-20s. Second, most JSM members came from marginalized or discriminated backgrounds. Many were recently urbanized young men with a *badawi* (translated as “bedouin”²²) background.²³ Historically, the tribes have largely been considered the losers of the Saudi modernisation process, both in political terms (at the collective level) and in economic terms (at the individual level).²⁴ Other JSM members were residents of foreign origin (with and without Saudi citizenship), mostly from Yemen.²⁵ It is no secret that foreigners have long suffered a degree of social and political, if not necessarily economic, discrimination in Saudi society.²⁶ The refusal of the JSM members, for ideological reasons, to take government positions would often contribute to their marginalisation. They were therefore often described by outside observers at the time as “unemployed”, “shop assistants” or “students”.²⁷

Ideologically, the JSM was initially focused on moral and religious reform, not on politics. In their view, Islam had been corrupted by the introduction of reprehensible innovations (*bid'a*) in religious practice and by the society's deviation from religious principles. They advocated a return to a strict and literal reading of the Quran and the hadith as the sole source of religious truth, and they rejected imitation (*taqlid*) of all subsequent scholars, including scholars that are revered in the Wahhabi tradition, such as Ibn Hanbal, Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab. The JSM nevertheless held al-Albani in very high esteem and would organise teaching or lecture sessions with him whenever he came from Jordan to Mecca on pilgrimage.²⁸ They also had links to the Pakistani Ahl-e Hadith through Sheikh Badi' al-Din al-Sindi, a Pakistani scholar based in Mecca who was one of the JSM's main religious references. There were also contacts between the JSM and the Egyptian salafi group Ansar al-Sunna al-Muhammadiyya (Supporters of Muhammad's Tradition), whose monthly magazine, al-Tawhid, was widely read among JSM members, and whose sheikhs would lecture at Bayt al-Ikhwan during their trips to Medina.²⁹

The JSM's literal reading of religious texts led to an extreme social conservatism and to a rejectionist attitude towards many aspects of modernity. For example, they opposed the use of identity cards and passports, because these denoted loyalty to an entity other than God. They were against images of living beings, not only on television and in photography, but also on coins. More significantly, the JSM had peculiar views on ritual and prayer, which set the group apart from other religious communities at the time. They shared many of the interpretations presented by al-Albani in his book “Characteristics of the Prophet's Prayer”³⁰. For example, they argued that the condition for breaking the fast during Ramadan was not the setting of the sun but the disappearance of sunlight, hence fast could be broken during Ramadan in a room with closed windows. They considered it permissible to pray while wearing sandals, which caused a certain amount of friction with fellow worshippers in the Prophet's Mosque in Medina. Bayt al-Ikhwan therefore contained a mosque where the group's adherents could

worship according to their own peculiar practices. Unlike other mosques, it contained no niche (*mihrab*), because the JSM considered this an innovation (*bid'a*).

The unorthodox practices of the JSM worried the scholars of Medina who had initially been sympathetic to the group. Muqbil al-Wadi'i, one of the sheikhs of the JSM, recalls being summoned by two senior Medina-based scholars, 'Atiyya Salim and 'Umar Falata, who questioned him on "twelve issues" which they deemed problematic.³¹ The relations reached breaking point in the late summer of 1977, when a group of senior ulama led by Abu Bakr al-Jaza'iri - Ibn Baz had already left Medina at this point - visited Bayt al-Ikhwan in the hope of convincing the members to relinquish their practices. They held a meeting on the roof, during which Sheikh al-Jaza'iri clashed with the hardline Juhayman al-'Utaybi.³² The meeting ended with a split in the JSM: a minority – including most of the historical leaders of the group – declared their loyalty to al-Jaza'iri and left Bayt al-Ikhwan, while a majority – comprising the youngest and most hot-headed members – rallied around Juhayman and insisted on continuing their work. Muqbil al-Wadi'i recounts how he tried to mediate, unsuccessfully, between the two factions. Al-Wadi'i writes that Juhayman was being extremely distrustful and openly accused fellow JSM members – including founding members of the group, such as Sulayman al-Shtawi – of being police informers.³³ After the rooftop episode, Juhayman was left as the only senior person and the natural leader of the smaller and radicalised JSM. From then on, Juhayman's name became synonymous with the organisation, and he and his followers would simply refer to themselves as the "ikhwan".

JUHAYMAN'S IKHWAN

When Juhayman bin Muhammad bin Sayf al-'Utaybi rose to the fore as an Islamist leader in the mid-1970s, he was already in his forties. However, many questions remain about his early life. What we do know is that he was born in the early or mid-1930s to a bedouin family in the Ikhwan settlement (*hijra*) of Sajir in the western part of the Najd region. Juhayman's family belonged to the Suqur branch of the large 'Utayba tribe. The young Juhayman was raised in a very traditional bedouin environment. His grandfather, Sayf al-Dhan, was a horseman who participated widely in bedouin raids before the emergence of the Saudi state under King 'Abd al-Aziz.³⁴ Contrary to claims by some historians, Juhayman's grandfather was not involved in the Ikhwan revolts. According to al-Huzaymi, it was Juhayman's father Muhammad bin Sayf who fought beside the rebel leader Sultan bin Bijad. Muhammad survived the battle of Sbila in 1929 and lived until 1972. Juhayman was proud of his father's exploits and was keen to evoke the memory of the old Ikhwan to his comrades in the JSM.³⁵ Juhayman left school very early. Al-Huzaymi says Juhayman himself admitted having completed only the fourth year of primary school. The widespread rumours of Juhayman's illiteracy seem to be at least partially true. Al-Huzaymi says he never saw Juhayman write –and that the latter's spoken classical Arabic was poor and coloured by bedouin dialect. The so-called "Letters of Juhayman" were dictated to a friend who would act as a scribe, al-Huzaymi says. However, as Joseph Kechichian has rightly pointed out, Juhayman was clearly not illiterate, given his command of the religious literature and his authorship of several works in classical Arabic.³⁶ A likely explanation is therefore that Juhayman was dyslectic, in other words academically and linguistically able, but uncomfortable with writing.

Juhayman spent the bulk of his working life in the National Guard. By most accounts, he joined in 1955 and left in late 1973 although he may have left earlier.³⁷ His reasons for leaving the National Guard are unclear - some sources say he left voluntarily,

while others suggest that he was dismissed in humiliating circumstances. After leaving the National Guard, he moved to Medina, yet again for unknown reasons. Lacking formal school qualifications, Juhayman never enrolled in the Islamic University of Medina, as many historians have suggested. However, he did attend classes for a period at Dar al-Hadith, an old institution specializing in the teaching of hadith, which is affiliated with the University of Medina. It was during that time that he joined the JSM. Juhayman rose to prominence in the JSM primarily because of his charisma, age and tribal pedigree. It was particularly his readiness to openly criticise the ulama which drew the admiration of younger members of the organisation.³⁸ After the rooftop episode and the split in the JSM, Juhayman would come to dominate the group to the extent that, according to al-Huzaymi, Juhayman's Ikhwan had many of the traits of a personality cult. The young members would compete for Juhayman's favour and were socially ranked according to their relationship with and proximity to the leader. Juhayman in return would punish those who dared to argue with him by ignoring them, which would leave them socially excluded from the group.³⁹

In December 1977, shortly after the "rooftop episode", the authorities, who had received reports of the group's radicalisation through former members, decided to take action.⁴⁰ Police planned to raid Bayt al-Ikhwan and arrest Juhayman along with his associates. However, Juhayman received a tip-off about the coming raid some hours in advance by an insider in the police from the tribe of 'Utayba.⁴¹ Juhayman left Bayt al-Ikhwan immediately together with two aides, one of whom was Nasir al-Huzaymi. He sought refuge in the desert, where police jurisdiction was weaker and his bedouin allies more numerous than in the cities. Juhayman was to stay in the desert for almost two years, and he would not be seen in public again until the seizure of the Great Mosque in Mecca. Meanwhile, around 30 people in Medina were arrested and imprisoned for six weeks under accusation of weapons possession. In the days that followed, leading Juhayman associates in other cities were also detained, although in smaller numbers.⁴²

During these two years, Juhayman would lead a peripatetic life in the northern desert regions, in a triangle-shaped area between Ha'il, Burayda and Hafr al-Batin. He was accompanied at any given time by a small entourage of 3-5 people, but he would maintain contact with the rest of his followers. The police were continuously on his trail, and there are many anecdotes about Juhayman's secret ventures into inhabited areas. Shortly after his escape into the desert, Juhayman wanted to visit his mother in his home town of Sajir, but was prevented from doing so at the last minute when he received a tip-off that the police were keeping her under surveillance. At one stage, Juhayman suffered from a toothache, and after a long and painful wait his aides managed to find a dentist who would not inform the authorities. Meanwhile, secret meetings for his followers would be held in remote locations on a regular basis, usually without Juhayman being present.⁴³

After the police crackdown on Bayt al-Ikhwan, Juhayman no longer had a forum in which to gather followers and communicate his ideas. The beginning of Juhayman's desert existence therefore marked the starting point of his ideological production. He started recording his ideas on cassette tapes and in pamphlets. None of the tape recordings are available today, but his pamphlets have survived.⁴⁴ They offer important insights into his thinking. However, there has been much confusion about the total number, exact titles and real authorship of the letters of Juhayman.⁴⁵ It now seems clear that there are twelve letters in total, and that they were published in batches of one, seven and four. Although these pamphlets are commonly referred to as the "Letters of Juhayman", only eight of them were actually signed by him and, as he was uncomfortable with writing, these had been dictated to his associates Muhammad al-Qahtani (the future

mahdi) and Ahmad al-Mu'allim, who transcribed them. Of the remaining letters, one is signed by al-Qahtani, one by a certain Yemeni named Hasan bin Muhsin al-Wahidi and two by "*abad talabat al-'ilm*" ("one of the seekers of knowledge"), a pseudonym used by another Yemeni called Muhammad al-Saghir⁴⁶.

Interestingly, the letters were printed in Kuwait by the leftist newspaper al-Tali'a (the Vanguard), whose owners were sympathetic to what they interpreted as a potential working-class uprising in the Hijaz. A Kuwaiti JSM member named 'Abd al-Latif al-Dirbas had used his family connections to negotiate a deal with the leftist publisher. He then coordinated the transport and distribution of several thousand copies of Juhayman's pamphlets across Saudi Arabia. Nasir Al-Huzaymi, who participated in the distribution of the first letter in Mecca, recalls several anecdotes regarding the publishing process. For example, the name of al-Tali'a press had accidentally been printed on the front page of each copy and had to be removed with scissors. Another problem emerged when the remarks from Sheikh Ibn Baz – to whom Juhayman had secretly presented the text for approval – arrived only after the text had been printed. Hence Ibn Baz's remarks had to be manually rubber stamped onto each and every copy.⁴⁷ The first letter was distributed in several cities simultaneously on 31 August 1978.⁴⁸ The group of texts known as "The Seven Letters" was printed shortly afterwards, and distributed during the Hajj, in November 1978. A few months later came another group of four letters.⁴⁹ The "seven" and the "four" letters were also presented to Ibn Baz, who allegedly agreed with their content, except for the fact that they specifically targeted Saudi Arabia.⁵⁰ Their distribution angered the regime, which ordered new arrests within the JSM. Among the individuals targeted was Muqbil al-Wadi'i, who was accused of being their author. He was released after three months and expelled to Yemen afterwards.⁵¹

The letters were not only circulated across Saudi Arabia, but also in Kuwait, where the JSM gathered a relatively large following. A good indication of their growing presence in Kuwait is the fact that 'Abd al-Rahman 'Abd al-Khaliq, the leading figure of the mainstream Salafi movement in the Emirate, wrote a series of articles in the Kuwaiti newspaper al-Watan in late 1978 refuting Juhayman's ideas.⁵² It is also worth noting that on the day of the storming of the Mecca mosque, some of Juhayman's letters were distributed in Kuwaiti mosques.⁵³

Juhayman's letters are written in a relatively monotonous religious language and do not reveal a particularly clear political doctrine. In the most political of his letters, entitled "The State, Allegiance and Obedience" (*al-imara wa-l-bay'a wa-l-ta'a*), Juhayman accused the Saudi regime of "making religion a means to guarantee their worldly interests, putting an end to jihad, paying allegiance to the Christians (America) and bringing over Muslims evil and corruption". He added that in any case, the Al Saud's non-Qurayshi origin (i.e. not descendants from the Prophet Muhammad's tribe) excluded them from the right to Islamic leadership. This led him to the conclusion that the *bay'a* (oath of allegiance) that unites Saudis to their rulers is invalid (*batila*), and that obeying them is no longer compulsory, especially on those very issues where their behaviour and orders contradict God's word. He therefore called for his followers to keep away from the state's institutions by resigning if they are civil servants or by leaving school or university if they are still students. However, he warned, pronouncing *takfir* (excommunication) upon the rulers is prohibited as long as they call themselves Muslims. He thus differentiated between the state as an institution – which he deemed illegitimate and un-Islamic – and individual members of the government – whom he refused to excommunicate. Likewise, Juhayman was extremely critical of the official religious establishment as an institution, but he was more careful in expressing opinions about specific scholars such as Ibn Baz.

On a more doctrinal level, Juhayman revived a number of important concepts from the writings of hardline Wahhabi scholars from the 19th century such as Sulayman bin ‘Abdallah Al al-Shaykh and Hamad bin ‘Atiq.⁵⁴ The first concept was that of “*millat ibrahim*” (the community of Abraham), which is an allegory for the true Islamic community which has disassociated from all forms of impiety. The second was “*awthaq ‘ura al-iman*” (the strongest bonds of faith), meaning the links that unite Muslims with each other and impose on them mutual solidarity. Both concepts converged in the principle of “*al-wala’ wa-l-bara*” (allegiance to fellow Muslims and dissociation from infidels) which Juhayman made the defining principle for correct Islamic behaviour.

Another important element in Juhayman’s ideology is that of the coming of the *mahdi* (the Islamic equivalent of the Messiah). The first of his “Seven Letters” is devoted entirely to this theme.⁵⁵ This text presents all the authentic hadiths about the *mahdi*, correlating them with recent events in the modern history of the Arabian Peninsula, in order to demonstrate the imminence of the *mahdi*’s coming. In the same pamphlet, he wrote that “we have dedicated all our efforts to this issue for the past eight years.”⁵⁶ According to al-Huzaymi, the issue of the *mahdi* had indeed been talked about in the JSM all along, but it only became a central part of Juhayman’s discourse in mid-1978, after his escape into the desert. In late 1978, Juhayman declared that it had been confirmed to him in a dream that his companion Muhammad al-Qahtani was the *mahdi*.⁵⁷ One of the reasons why al-Qahtani was identified as such was that he possessed several of the attributes of the *mahdi* as described in the corresponding hadiths. First, he was called Muhammad bin ‘Abdallah, as was the Prophet. Second, he claimed to belong to the *ashraf*, the Prophet’s lineage.⁵⁸ Third, his physical appearance was allegedly in conformity with the descriptions of the *mahdi* in the religious tradition.⁵⁹ The designation of al-Qahtani created a second major split in the organisation. Many members, including Nasir al-Huzaymi, were unconvinced by the messianic talk and left the movement for good. It was this remaining core of Juhayman’s followers who would carry out one of the most spectacular operations in the history of militant Islamism, the seizure of the Great Mosque in Mecca.

On 20 November 1979, the first day of the fifteenth century of the Islamic calendar, a group of approximately 300 rebels led by Juhayman al-Utaybi stormed and seized control of the great mosque in Mecca, the holiest place in Islam. Their aim was to have al-Qahtani consecrated as the *mahdi* between the black stone corner of the Ka’aba (*al-rukn al-aswad*) and Ibrahim’s station of prayer (*al-maqam*), as tradition requires. The militants barricaded themselves in the compound, taking thousands of worshippers hostage, while awaiting the approach of a hostile army from the north, as promised by the eschatological tradition.⁶⁰ The situation developed into a two-week siege which left a hitherto unknown number of people dead and exposed serious gaps in the Saudi crisis response capability. The timing of the attack was most likely determined by Juhayman’s belief in the Sunni tradition of the “renewer of the century” (*mujaddid al-qarn*), according to which a great scholar will appear at the beginning of each Hijri century.⁶¹ Juhayman may have attempted to blend the “renewer” tradition with the Sunni mahdist tradition and thus concluded that the dawn of the new century was a propitious moment to consecrate al-Qahtani as the *mahdi*.⁶² The Mecca rebellion was thus entirely unrelated to the Shi’ite uprising which occurred almost simultaneously in the Eastern Province.⁶³ However, the occurrence, in the space of a few months in 1979, of two internal uprisings and key international events such as the Iranian revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan certainly affected the outlook of the Saudi political leadership.

Nasir al-Huzaymi, who had extensive conversations in prison with surviving rebels, says that Juhayman’s group had begun collecting weapons in late 1978, approximately a

year before the attack. The main coordinator of the weapons acquisition was Muhammad al-Qahtani's brother Sa'īd. He bought arms from Yemeni smugglers with money raised by wealthier members of the group. In the months preceding the attack, they conducted weapons training on various locations in the countryside outside Mecca and Medina.⁶⁴ The rebels knew in advance that their operation might turn into a siege, and they therefore placed about a week's worth of food supplies (dried milk, dates and bread) in the basement of the mosque complex shortly before the operation. Many also brought radios, expecting to hear news of the approach and subsequent engulfment of the hostile army from the north promised by tradition. Al-Huzaymi's account also describes a rebel group perplexed by the death of Muhammad al-Qahtani already on the third day of the siege. Some started having second thoughts, while others obeyed Juhayman's orders not to acknowledge al-Qahtani's death. Even years after the events, some JSM followers continued to believe that the *mahdi* was still alive.⁶⁵

On 4 December 1979, Saudi authorities regained control of the sanctuary with the assistance of three French special forces officers led by Captain Paul Barril. The rebels were tried and sentenced with lightning speed. At dawn on 9 January 1980, 63 people were executed in eight different cities around the Kingdom. The list of convicts, which had been published two days earlier in the Saudi press, included 41 Saudis, 10 Egyptians, 6 South Yemenis, 3 Kuwaitis, as well as a North Yemeni, an Iraqi and a Sudanese.⁶⁶ In any case, the people executed do not necessarily represent the most prominent members in Juhayman's organisation, but rather the individuals who fought most fiercely in the final stages of the siege and survived. Al-Huzaymi explains that the prisoners underwent a quick medical examination to determine who would be executed. Those with bruises or pains in their shoulders were assumed to have fired upon the security forces and were punished by death. Those who were not executed received long prison sentences. Saudi police also arrested a large number of people across the Kingdom who had been involved with the JSM or Juhayman's Ikhwan at some stage. Those who escaped arrest (or were released early) sought refuge in a variety of locations. Many went abroad, particularly to Kuwait, but also to Yemen. Others sought a quiet existence in Riyadh or in conservative cities in the Najd, such as al-Zulfi and al-Rass.⁶⁷ The bedouins who had helped Juhayman were largely unaffected by the crackdown, and many of them are still present in the northern desert regions. Within a few months of the Mecca event, Juhayman's organisation had been almost completely dismantled, at least in Saudi Arabia. The Kuwaiti branch of the movement survived and remained active till the end of the 1980s, albeit in a form closer to the original JSM than to Juhayman's Ikhwan.⁶⁸

The Mecca event shook the regime, which was concentrating its political control on leftist groups and never expected its foes to come from the religious circles. It 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. Ironically, it was the other main Islamist current, the more institutionally integrated Sahwa, who would benefit from these new policies and grow stronger throughout the 1980s, until it openly confronted the regime in the early 1990s.

INTERPRETING JUHAYMAN'S MOVEMENT

Juhayman's movement has been the subject of a significant amount of analyses, some of them outwardly political, others overly simplistic. One explanation, heard particularly – but not only – from Saudi officials at the time, is that Juhayman was the product of foreign ideological influences, mainly from Egyptian groups such as Shukri Mustafa's

Jama'at al-Muslimin (Society of Muslims), commonly known as al-Takfir wa-l-Hijra (Excommunication and Emigration). These claims relied in part on the fact that many of the people arrested after the event were Egyptian citizens, as were 10 out of the 63 executed rebels. It is indeed beyond doubt that there were Egyptian al-Takfir wa-l-Hijra members in Saudi Arabia in the mid-1970s.⁶⁹ However, al-Huzaymi insists that the Egyptian element in the JSM was negligible, and that most of the arrested Egyptians had joined the rebellion immediately before the seizure of the mosque. He admits that in 1976-77 there were a handful of individuals in the JSM who held takfiri positions, but they changed their minds after Sheikh al-Albani sat down with them during one of his visits to Medina and convinced them otherwise.⁷⁰ The most important foreign ideological influence on the JSM came not from Egyptian extremist groups but from al-Albani's Ahl al-Hadith school of thought. If the JSM had contact with foreign organisations, it was primarily the Pakistani Ahl-e Hadith and the Egyptian Ansar al-Sunna al-Muhammadiyya, both of which are apolitical, non-violent movements. Hence these foreign contacts do not in any way explain the political radicalisation and activism of Juhayman, whose movement must be understood primarily as a domestic Saudi phenomenon.

Among the interpretations of the Mecca episode found more often in the western academic literature is the view that Juhayman's rebellion was essentially a modern replay of the 1920s Ikhwan revolt.⁷¹ The memory of the original Ikhwan certainly had an influence on Juhayman, who liked to tell his father's stories at JSM gatherings. There are also a few references to the early Ikhwan in Juhayman's letters, for example when he writes: "We wish to clear of all suspicions our 'Ikhwan' brothers who conducted jihad in the name of God and were faithful to it, while this State and its evil scholars presented them as Kharijites, to the extent that one can now find people to whom the issue is so unclear that they don't even ask God to grant them His mercy."⁷² However, many of the JSM's members were not bedouin, and many among the bedouin in the JSM did not come from tribes that were prominent in the first Ikhwan revolt. It would therefore be far too simplistic to explain Juhayman's rebellion as a resurgence of old tribal grievances against the Al Saud. Restoring the honour of the first Ikhwan was only one minor aspect of the group's message. Despite their reactionary positions, the JSM and Juhayman's Ikhwan were essentially a modern phenomenon to be understood within the context of 1970s Saudi Arabia, a society undergoing rapid socio-economic change and a steady process of politicisation.

Another frequently heard explanation is that Juhayman and his followers were apocalypticists who had drifted so far in their belief in the *mahdi* that they had lost their sense of political rationality. It seems relatively clear now that Juhayman's personal belief in the *mahdi* was genuine and that this was indeed a major factor behind the takeover of the Mecca mosque. At the same time, Nasir al-Huzaymi insists that some of Juhayman's companions did in fact not believe in the messianic dimension of his ideology. These individuals chose to stay because they felt a strong sense of loyalty to the charismatic Juhayman and to the group or because they were convinced of other aspects of the ideology, such as the need for a religious and moral purification of society.⁷³ Moreover, reducing Juhayman's Ikhwan to a messianic sect would ignore the political dimension of Juhayman's discourse as well as the question of why this movement gathered such strength at this particular point in time. It seems, then, that we need to understand Juhayman's group as being simultaneously messianic and political.

A last interpretation, favoured by the Arab left at the time of the attack, is that the Mecca event represented a "people's rebellion", in which the disenfranchised Saudi working class rose up against the rich Saudi elite. Days after the event, the Arab Socialist Labour Party in the Arabian Peninsula expressed its support for the rebels. Shortly

afterwards, Nasir al-Sa‘id, the historic leader of the Arabian Peninsula People’s Union, described the attack as part of a “People’s Revolution”, aimed at establishing a republic and adopting democratic freedoms.⁷⁴ He claimed that fighting had been going on in other places, such as Tabuk, Medina, Najran and parts of Najd – a version of the events adopted by Alexei Vassiliev, among others.⁷⁵ Al-Sa‘id’s claim seemed so well-informed that it caught the attention of Saudi authorities, and on 17 December 1979, he mysteriously disappeared in Beirut, never to reappear. Today, it is clear that his claims were not true.⁷⁶ However, the leftists were to some extent right in pointing out that the rebels were for the most part poor and disenfranchised. As noted earlier, Juhayman’s Ikhwan, as the JSM before it, drew most of its members from the politically, economically and socially marginalized sections of Saudi society, particularly the recently sedentarized nomadic tribes and the residents of foreign origin.

As we have seen from this discussion, there is no simple explanation for the emergence of the Juhayman movement. A first and important step in the analysis is to distinguish between the JSM on the one hand and Juhayman’s Ikhwan on the other. The emergence of the JSM seems to be linked to three important societal changes in Saudi Arabia in the 1960s and 1970s. First was the slow but steady push toward increased social conservatism from a religious establishment which sensed that it was losing its grip on an increasingly liberal society. Second was the arrival of new ideological currents that provide alternatives to the established political and religious order. Third were the socio-economic tensions resulting from Saudi Arabia’s rapid modernisation process. As for the emergence of Juhayman’s Ikhwan, it seems to have followed a classic pattern of group radicalisation, whereby a small faction breaks out of a larger and more moderate organisation after a process of politicisation and internal debate. After the break, the behaviour of the radicalised faction is more determined by ideology and charismatic leadership than by structural socio-economic and political factors.

JUHAYMAN’S LEGACY

It has long been assumed that Juhayman al-‘Utaybi and his movement represent an exceptional and rather short-lived phenomenon whose influence on the subsequent history of Saudi Islamism has been rather limited. However, as we shall see, there are many indications that the memory of Juhayman has been kept alive in certain Islamist circles until today, and that his ideology has inspired periodic attempts at reviving his movement.

Most prominent among Juhayman’s intellectual heirs is Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi (aka ‘Isam Barqawi, b. 1959), a radical Islamist ideologue of Palestinian origin who grew up in Kuwait. In the early 1980s, he started frequenting Islamist circles in Kuwait, where he came in contact with the local JSM branch, whose ranks had swelled with the arrival of remnants of the Saudi JSM in 1980.⁷⁷ He became friends with Juhayman’s former associate ‘Abd al-Latif al-Dirbas, who had come back from Saudi Arabia after being released from prison.⁷⁸ In 1981 or 1982, al-Maqdisi went to Medina to study religion, during which time he made many contacts with former Juhayman sympathisers across the Kingdom.

Al-Maqdisi’s writings are heavily influenced by Juhayman’s ideology, and there are numerous references to Juhayman in his writings.⁷⁹ However, he was more radical than Juhayman on a number of issues. Most notably, al-Maqdisi did not hesitate to pronounce *takfir* upon Muslim rulers. In 1989, he wrote a book called “The Obvious Proofs of the

Saudi State's Impiety" (al-kawashif al-jaliyya fi kufr al-dawla al-sa'udiyya) in which he praised Juhayman, while adding that "unfortunately, he [Juhayman] considered that rebelling against these rulers, whatever they may do, (...) is contrary to the Sunna. (...) Very unfortunately, he considered this government to be Muslim."⁸⁰

Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi did not remain with the JSM for long, as he kept arguing with them over the issue of *takfir*. Instead he went to Peshawar in 1985 to join the Arab-Afghan community, and he subsequently became one of the leading ideologues of the so-called Salafi-Jihadi movement. However, he preserved his admiration for Juhayman, and in the late 1980s he would travel regularly to Saudi Arabia where he paid visits to former friends of Juhayman in the Saudi desert.⁸¹ In the early 1990s, al-Maqdisi left Peshawar and settled in Jordan, where he became the spiritual leader of a Jordanian militant community. He was imprisoned in 1995 but has continued to write from his cell. Recently, al-Maqdisi has attracted much attention for his open criticism of his former pupil Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi's activities in Iraq.

The early 1990s witnessed a revival of Juhayman's ideas in certain Islamist circles in Saudi Arabia. The authors of the current article learned of the existence of a small community of young Saudi Islamists in Riyadh in the early 1990s who saw themselves as the continuation of Juhayman's movement.⁸² The community had taken shape around a core of three or four individuals in their early twenties who considered society in general, and state education in particular, as corrupt.⁸³ They had broken with their families and set themselves up in an apartment in the Shubra area of al-Suwaydi district in Riyadh where they could study religion on their own. Their apartment, which aimed at recreating Juhayman's Bayt al-Ikhwan, was known as Bayt Shubra, and it soon became a meeting-place for like-minded youth. Although only 5-10 people would be living there at any one time, many more would attend the informal lessons or just drop by for discussion and socializing.

The residents of Bayt Shubra did not consider themselves as part of an organisation, but rather as "seekers of religious knowledge" (*talabat 'ilm*). In their view, this knowledge could not be found among the sheikhs of the religious establishment, whom they considered corrupt, nor among the leaders of the Sahwa, whom they saw as too political. Instead they looked to the writings of Juhayman, al-Maqdisi and the 19th-century Wahhabi theologians such as Sulayman bin 'Abdallah Al al-Shaykh. The residents of Bayt Shubra greatly admired Juhayman and saw themselves as his ideological successors. Because none of them were old enough to have known Juhayman personally, they would seek out former members of the JSM in various parts of the country, particularly among the bedouin in the desert.⁸⁴ They would also invite former JSM members in Riyadh to lecture in Bayt Shubra. Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi himself visited the apartment during one of his visits to Saudi Arabia.⁸⁵ The Bayt Shubra residents adopted the JSM's extreme social conservatism, strong emphasis on ritual matters, as well as its scepticism toward the state and its institutions. Juhayman's mahdist ideas, however, do not seem to have been particularly important in Bayt Shubra, although some of its residents did accept those ideas and continued to believe that the *mahdi* had not died in 1979.

Over time, however, the Bayt Shubra community grew more and more interested in politics, and its members would eventually take more radical positions than Juhayman on a number of questions. Although the Bayt Shubra community was initially inward-looking and apolitical, it was unable to avoid the political-religious debates of early 1990s Saudi Arabia, a time when the confrontation between the State and the Sahwa was at its most intense. The process of politicisation introduced a number of disagreements, first (in 1992) on the issue of *takfir* of the royal family and later (around 1994) regarding *takfir*

of the religious establishment. Eventually, the Bayt Shubra network split into a number of factions, each of which would go its own way. The involvement of some former Bayt Shubra members in the 1995 Riyadh bombings would lead the police to try and arrest the entire network. A few members managed to escape, and found shelter with the very bedouin they had earlier got to know through their fascination for Juhayman. The others were marked by the prison experience in different ways: Some became more radical (several of them subsequently went to Afghanistan), while others began a process of soul-searching and went on to become liberal intellectuals.

Bayt Shubra was just one of many similar study circles that emerged throughout the Kingdom at the time. Although these groups remained relatively marginal compared to the Sahwa – which was at its climax at this point – their very existence provide two significant new insights about Islamism in Saudi Arabia in the early 1990s. First, the ideology and example of Juhayman still had a significant appeal to young Saudis ten years after the Mecca event, and second, the Sahwa did not have a monopoly of the Islamist field. The Bayt Shubra residents shunned the Sahwa leaders (whom they saw as too interested in politics), and sought knowledge and inspiration from a different intellectual tradition. Among these communities, Bayt Shubra is historically the most interesting because many of its residents later became well-known figures. Some became prominent liberal writers, such as Mishari al-Dhayidi and ‘Abdallah al-‘Utaybi, while others made a name as militants. Bayt Shubra’s alumni include three of the four people convicted for the November 1995 Riyadh bombing as well as some of the senior militants involved in the terrorist campaign launched in 2003.⁸⁶

CONCLUSION: JUHAYMAN AL-‘UTAYBI AND “REJECTIONIST ISLAMISM” IN SAUDI ARABIA

The study of Juhayman’s legacy has showed that the influence of Juhayman on the development of Saudi Islamism is greater than generally assumed. Moreover, it has allowed us to trace the origins and the development of a particular intellectual tradition within Saudi Islamism which categorically rejects the legitimacy of the state and its institutions and which advocates withdrawal from the state’s sphere. This intellectual tradition may be termed “rejectionist Islamism”. Saudi rejectionist Islamism bears some similarity with other Islamist groups characterised by a withdrawal from society (such as Shukri Mustafa’s Jama‘at al-Muslimin in Egypt), but is first and foremost a Saudi phenomenon to be understood within the dynamics of the Saudi political-religious landscape. Although the JSM and the Bayt Shubra network have no doubt been two of the most visible and politicised manifestations of this strain of Islamism, related communities have existed – and still exist – in Saudi Arabia.⁸⁷

Identifying a “rejectionist” strain in Saudi Islamism also makes it easier to distinguish it from the better-known phenomenon of “reformist Islamism”, as exemplified by the Sahwa. The Sahwists consist of prominent academics well integrated into the system, while the rejectionists attract the marginalized and avoid state education and employment altogether. They also clearly differ in their attitude towards the state: Sahwa Islamists such as Salman al-‘Awda never openly question the state’s legitimacy, only criticising (though sometimes with virulence) its policies, which they strive to change through non-violent, institutional means.

The 1980s witnessed the emergence of a third strain of Saudi Islamism: Jihadism, which has its roots in the participation of thousands of Saudi youth in the Afghan jihad

against the Soviet Union. The jihadists developed a highly militaristic culture which set them apart from other Islamist currents. They were also explicitly interested in politics, which the rejectionists were not. However, the Saudi jihadists were initially politicised and radicalised on issues of international politics, not on issues of domestic politics, like their counterparts in other Arab countries. In 1990, Saudi jihadists were not openly critical of the Saudi state.

In the first half of the 1990s, jihadists and rejectionists started to mix, as was the case in the Bayt Shubra community. Although they represented two different cultures - the rejectionists being men of introspection and the jihadists being men of action - their views converged on many important issues. Most importantly, they mutually influenced each other, as many rejectionists became more interested in politics, while the jihadists adopted the rejectionists' strong distaste for the Saudi state. By the late 1990s, many rejectionists had joined the jihadists and left for Afghanistan or elsewhere. By the early 2000s, the growing polarization of the Saudi Islamist field between the reformists and the jihadists left little room for the rejectionists. Juhayman's intellectual legacy had effectively been eclipsed – but the memory of his rebellion was more in vogue than ever.

¹ For a reliable and updated account of the siege, see Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Knopf, 2006), 88-94

² The main works on the history of Saudi Arabia mention Juhayman only in very brief terms; See for example Alexei Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia* (London: al-Saqi, 2000), 395-7; Madawi al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 144-6. A few English-language academic books and articles have dealt with the phenomenon in somewhat more detail, but most of them are based on secondary sources in Arabic; see James Buchan, "The return of the Ikhwan-1979" in David Holden and Richard Johns, *The House of Saud: The Rise and Rule of the Most Powerful Dynasty in the Arab World* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981), 511-26; Ayman al-Yassini, *Religion and State in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia* (Boulder: Westview, 1985), 124-7; R. Hrair Dekmejian, *Islam in Revolution: Fundamentalism in the Arab World* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1985); Nazih Ayubi, *Political Islam* (London: Routledge, 1994), 99-104; Joshua Teitelbaum, *Holier than Thou: Saudi Arabia's Islamic Opposition* (Washington: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2000), 19-21. Perhaps the only Western study to make systematic use of primary sources is Joseph Kechichian's excellent 1990 article on Juhayman's letters; see Joseph A. Kechichian, "Islamic Revivalism and Change in Saudi Arabia: Juhayman al-'Utaybi's 'Letters to the Saudi People,'" *The Muslim World* 70 (1990): 1-16; See also Kechichian, "The Role of the Ulama in the Politics of an Islamic State: The Case of Saudi Arabia," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 18 (1986): 53-71

³ Perhaps the most well-known work is that of Rifat Sayyid Ahmad entitled *rasa'il juhayman al-'utaybi, qa'id al-muqatahimin li-l-masjid al-haram bi-makka* [The Letters of Juhayman al-'Utaybi, Leader of the Invaders of the Sacred Mosque in Mecca] (Cairo: Madbuli, 2004). A Saudi leftist militant has produced a long and interesting work under the pseudonym Abu Dharr; see Abu Dharr, *thawra fi rihab makka* [Revolution in the Mecca Precinct], (Kuwait: Dar Sawt al-Tali'a, 1980). The text was first published in the leftist opposition magazine *Sawt al-Tali'a*, 21, April 1980, under the name "*ahdath al-haram bayna al-haqa'iq wa-l-abatil*" ["The Haram Events, Between Truth and Lies"]. The London-based Saudi Shiite opposition has produced several interesting works: *intifadat al-haram* [Uprising in the Sanctuary], (London: Munazzamat al-Thawra al-Islamiyya fi al-Jazira al-Arabiyya, 1981), which the organisation first published in its magazine, before turning it into a book; as well as *zilzal juhayman fi makka* [Juhayman's Earthquake in Mecca], (unknown publisher, 1986), signed by a certain Fahd al-Qahtani, a pseudonym for Hamza al-Hasan, a Shiite opposition figure based in London. Another work is 'Abd al-'Azim al-Mat'ani, *jarimat al-'asr: qissat ihtilal al-masjid al-haram: riwayat shahid 'iyan* [The Crime of the Age: Eyewitness Account of the Occupation of the Sacred Mosque] (Cairo: Dar al-Ansar, 1980)

⁴ See *al-Riyadh*, 10 June 2003; *al-Riyadh*, 18 June 2003; *al-Riyadh*, 9 May 2004; *al-Riyadh*, 6 September 2004. See also articles by Mishari al-Dhayidi in *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 24 and 25 February 2004; and Adil al-Turayfi in *al-Riyadh*, 10 and 13 March 2004.

⁵ Stéphane Lacroix, "Saudi Arabia's Islamo-Liberal Reformists", *Middle East Journal* 58 (2004): 345-365

⁶ This enquiry revealed, for example, that Hamza al-Hasan based his work *zilzal juhayman fi makka* on interviews with two former members of the JSM other than al-Huzaymi. Another finding is that Abu Dharr (author of *thawra fi rihab makka*), is not the pseudonym of an Islamist commentator as previously believed (Kechichian, "Islamic Revivalism", 12), but an old *nom de guerre* of a leftist activist linked to the Saudi Baath party. According to Hamza al-Hasan, Abu Dharr's insights stem from the fact that he was based in Iraq and had access to Iraqi intelligence sources; Interview with Hamza al-Hasan, London, February 2006.

⁷ In this article, "Islamism" is understood in a very broad sense as "Islamic activism", directed at either the state or society.

⁸ See Stéphane Lacroix and Thomas Hegghammer, *Saudi Arabia Backgrounder: who are the islamists?* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2004)

⁹ Vasiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia*, 272

¹⁰ Lacroix and Hegghammer, "Saudi Arabia Backgrounder"

¹¹ 'Abd al-'Aziz bin Baz (1909-1999), Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia from 1993 until his death in 1999, became one of the most respected figures of the Wahhabi religious establishment in the late 20th century.

¹² The founding members included Sulayman al-Shtawi and Sa'd al-Tamimi. Interviews with Nasir al-Huzaymi, Riyadh, April 2004 and April 2005.

¹³ The Jama'at al-Tabligh (usually known as "Tabligh" or "Tablighi Jamaat") is a pietistic and apolitical missionary organisation founded in India in the late 19th century. Although it was quite popular among Saudi youth in the 1970s, the senior sheikhs of the religious establishment reproached it for not subscribing entirely to the Wahhabi creed (they regarded the tablighis as "sufis").

¹⁴ Abu Bakr al-Jaza'iri (litt. "the Algerian") was born in 1921 in South Algeria, where he frequented religious circles close to cheikh 'Abd al-Hamid bin Badis, before leaving the country in 1952 to settle in Saudi Arabia. He worked as a professor at the Islamic University of Medina from its foundation in 1961 until his retirement in 1986. He is known in Salafi circles to have been close to the Tabligh, which could explain the interest he found in a grass-root proselytising and pietistic movement such as the JSM. For his biography see Muhammad al-Majdhub, *'ulama' wa mufakkirun 'araftuhum – al-juz' al-awwal* [Scholars and Thinkers I have Known – Part One] (Cairo: Dar al-I'tisam, 1986)

¹⁵ Interview with Saudi Islamist, Riyadh, November 2005

¹⁶ Al-Huzaymi says that there were in fact two separate episodes referred to by JSM members as "the breaking of the pictures". The second incident occurred in the mid 1970s, when JSM members were arrested for breaking pictures of the newly crowned King Khalid.

¹⁷ Ibn Baz's position on this matter can probably be explained by mainstream Salafism's traditionally negative attitude towards the creation of parties, organisations or groups, which are considered as fragmenting the community, and therefore as a means for sedition (*fitna*). The only exception are the groups of *mutawwa'un* (often described as Saudi Arabia's religious police) who are seen as putting into practice the Quranic injunction of "*al-'amr bi-l-ma'ruf wa-l-nahi 'an al-munkar*" (The promotion of Good and the prevention of Evil), a function also called "*hisba*"; see Michael Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

¹⁸ It must be emphasized here that the JSM emerged as a perfectly legal pietistic movement which, according to al-Huzaymi, actually produced documents with its name printed on the letterhead. Ibn Baz's involvement should therefore not be interpreted as an unholy alliance with a clandestine Islamist opposition group.

¹⁹ See *al-Riyadh*, 9 May 2004

²⁰ Interview with al-Huzaymi

²¹ Al-Huzaymi's information is unique because until recently, the only available source on the rebels' profiles was the list of names and nationalities of the 63 rebels executed in January 1980, published in the Saudi press at the time. This list has two significant limitations: First, it does not allow us to distinguish between a *badawi* and a *qabali* nor between foreigners with and without Saudi citizenship. Second, the list is likely to include individuals who joined the rebels immediately prior to the attack and who were not necessarily long-time followers of Juhayman. In contrast, al-Huzaymi was able to

provide us with substantial information on the background of individuals whom he personally met during his time as a JSM member in Medina or as a prisoner.

²² The term *badawi* (pl. *badu*) usually refers to members of bedouin tribes who “recently” became sedentary, in most cases at the time of the 1920s *Ikhwan* and after. A *badawi* is distinguished from a *qabali* (tribal), who is basically a *hadari* (sedentary) with a tribal genealogy. Among the *hadar* (sedentaries), the *qabali* is himself distinguished from the *khadiri*, who has no tribal genealogy.

²³ Out of 35 individuals, we have 15 *badu* in total (i.e. 43 percent): 5 Harbi, 5 Shammari, 3 ‘Utaybi, 1 Tamimi and 1 unknown. The relatively high number of individuals from Harb and Shammari compared to that of ‘Utayba should not surprise the reader, as al-Huzaymi was mainly based in Medina, which is closer to these two tribes’ territory. The presence of these individuals also proves that the ‘Utayba was only one of many *badu* elements in Juhayman’s *Ikhwan*.

²⁴ Steffen Hertog, *Segmented Clientelism: The Politics of Economic Reform in Saudi Arabia*, D.Phil. Thesis, Oxford University, 2006

²⁵ Nine (i.e. almost 25%) of the 35 people described by al-Huzaymi were of foreign origin. Six had a Yemeni background and one was from the Saudi-Yemeni border region of Najran. Al-Huzaymi’s sample also includes a Saudi of Egyptian origin and a Saudi of Iranian origin. The Yemenis in particular featured prominently in the movement. Muqbil al-Wadi‘i was considered one of their main scholars, Ahmad al-Mu‘allim administered Bayt al-Ikhwan while Yusuf Bajunayd was a key financial contributor.

²⁶ In Saudi Arabia, the relationship between social background on the one hand and socio-economic status on the other is a complex one. Individuals of foreign descent may be socially and politically marginalised but are not necessarily economically disadvantaged (Yusuf Bajunayd, a wealthy Saudi of Yemeni origin who funded Juhayman’s group, is a case in point). Conversely, *badu* may enjoy a high social status, but remain economically weak.

²⁷ Al-Yassini, *Religion and State*, 125.

²⁸ Al-Huzaymi recalls his visit to a tent camp in Mina outside Mecca in during the hajj in early December 1976. The tent housed around 250 people, most of whom were JSM members. Al-Albani and Juhayman were in close contact. Al-Albani would hold many lectures over consecutive days.

²⁹ The Ahl-e Hadith is an Islamic revivalist movement founded in Bhopal, India, in the mid-19th century. It puts great emphasis on the study of hadith, and rejects all schools of jurisprudence. Ansar al-Sunna al-Muhammadiyya was founded in Egypt in 1926 by Muhammad Hamid al-Fiqqi, a Salafi scholar heavily influenced by the teachings of Ibn Taymiyya. Both Ahl-e Hadith and Ansar al-Sunna al-Muhammadiyya have maintained strong links to Saudi Arabia and the Wahhabi religious establishment throughout the 20th century.

³⁰ Muqbil al-Wadi‘i writes that although they did follow many of al-Albani’s views, they also differed with him on a small number of issues; See Muqbil al-Wadi‘i, *al-makhray min al-fitna* (Sanaa: Maktabat San’a al-Athariyya, 2002), 140

³¹ Al-Wadi‘i, *al-makhray min al-fitna*, 140

³² The details and significance of the rooftop meeting have been confirmed and corroborated by several independent sources; al-Wadi‘i, *al-makhray min al-fitna*; Interview with al-Huzaymi; and Nabil Mouline’s interview (in Mecca in April 2005) with a senior Wahhabi sheikh who attended the meeting.

³³ Al-Wadi‘i, *al-makhray min al-fitna*, 141

³⁴ *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 24 and 25 February 2004

³⁵ Interviews with al-Huzaymi. See also *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 24 and 25 February 2004

³⁶ Kechichian, “Islamic Revivalism and Change in Saudi Arabia”, 11

³⁷ *Intifadat al-haram*, 35-9

³⁸ Interview with al-Huzaymi

³⁹ *al-Riyadh*, 18 June 2003

⁴⁰ After failing to get the JSM to renounce their controversial practices, the senior scholars alerted the authorities. and allegedly started falsely accusing the JSM of possessing weapons and preparing a coup; Interview with al-Huzaymi; Al-Wadi‘i, *al-makhray min al-fitna*, 141

⁴¹ Interview with al-Huzaymi

⁴² In Riyadh, for example, four or five people were arrested, including Muhammad al-Qahtani (the future *mahdi*) and Muhammad al-Haydari (head of the JSM Riyadh branch).

⁴³ Al-Huzaymi recalls a general meeting for the remaining members, held in the desert along the Qasim road between Riyadh and Sudayr a few weeks after the first arrests. According to al-Huzaymi, the meeting was attended by approximately 80 people.

- ⁴⁴ Tape recordings of Juhayman were circulating in Islamist circles in Saudi Arabia at least as late as the early 1990s.
- ⁴⁵ Kechichian, "Islamic Revivalism and Change in Saudi Arabia"
- ⁴⁶ Interview with Nasir al-Huzaymi
- ⁴⁷ Juhayman himself claimed that Ibn Baz had found "nothing wrong in it". See "da'wat al-ikhwan" [The Call of the Ikhwan], quoted by al-Qahtani, *zilzal juhayman fi makka*, 28
- ⁴⁸ Interview with Nasir al-Huzaymi, who took part personally in the distribution
- ⁴⁹ The first letter was entitled "raf' al-iltibas 'an millat man ja'alah al-lah imaman li-l-nas" [Clarification about the community of whom God has made a guide for the people]; The group of seven pamphlets was entitled "al-rasa'il al-sab'" [The seven letters]. The group of four bore the title "majmu'at rasa'il al-imara wa-l-tawhid wa-da'wat al-ikhwan wa-l-mizan li-hayat al-insan" [Group of the Letters 'The State', 'The Unicity of God', 'The Call of the Ikhwan', and 'The Scale for the Life of Man']. Abu Dharr, *thawra fi rihab makka*, 113
- ⁵⁰ "da'wat al-ikhwan", quoted in al-Qahtani, *zilzal juhayman fi makka*, 37
- ⁵¹ Muqbil al-Wadi'i, *tarjamat abi 'abd al-rahman muqbil bin hadi al-wadi'i* (Sanaa: Dar al-Athar, 2002), p 27
- ⁵² Telephone interview with 'Abd al-Rahman 'Abd al-Khaliq in Khalid Sultan's office, Kuwait, May 2005. Some of these early refutations have later been collected in a book by 'Abd al-Khaliq entitled "al-wala' wa-l-bara'" [Loyalty and Disassociation].
- ⁵³ Interviews with Khalid Sultan and Isma'il al-Shatti, Kuwait, May 2005.
- ⁵⁴ Their writings were compiled in the early 20th century in an influential book known as "al-durar al-saniyya fi-l-ajwiba al-najdiyya" [The Glittering Pearls of the Najdi Answers].
- ⁵⁵ "al-fitan wa akhbar al-mahdi wa nuzul 'isa 'alayhi al-salam wa ashrat al-sa'a" [Turmoil and the reports of the *mahdi* and the coming of Jesus - Peace be upon Him – and the portents of the last hour [i.e., Judgement Day]
- ⁵⁶ Ahmad, *rasa'il juhayman al-'utaybi*, 209
- ⁵⁷ According to al-Huzaymi, al-Qahtani had been imam at the small al-Ruwayl mosque in Riyadh, and was one of the founding members of the JSM's Riyadh branch.
- ⁵⁸ Muhammad al-Qahtani claimed that his ancestor, a *sharif* (pl. *ashraf*), had come from Egypt with Muhammad 'Ali's army in the early 19th century and had settled in one of the villages inhabited by the members of the tribe of Qahtan, therefore becoming a "Qahtani by alliance".
- ⁵⁹ "The *mahdi* is from me - he has a wide forehead and a hooked nose" *Sunan Abu Dawud*, 36, 4272
- ⁶⁰ "Disagreement will occur at the death of a caliph and a man of the people of Medina will come flying forth to Mecca. Some of the people of Mecca will come to him, bring him out against his will and swear allegiance to him between the *rukn* and the *maqam*. An expeditionary force will then be sent against him from Syria but will be swallowed up in the desert between Mecca and Medina. When the people see that, the eminent saints of Syria and the best people of Iraq will come to him and swear allegiance to him between the *rukn* and the *maqam*", *Sunan Abu Dawud*, 36, 4273
- ⁶¹ See for example Ella Landau-Tasseron, "The cyclical reform: A study of the *mujaddid* tradition", *Studia Islamica* 70 (1989)
- ⁶² The authors thank Professor Bernhard Haykel for this analysis
- ⁶³ Toby Craig Jones, "Rebellion on the Saudi Periphery, Modernity, Marginalization and the Shia Uprising of 1979", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 38 (2006): 213-233
- ⁶⁴ A British journalist stationed in Saudi Arabia at the time says he interviewed a Saudi farmer in December 1979 who said he had observed a group of ragged men firing weapons in a field outside Mecca in November 1979; Interview with James Buchan, London, February 2006.
- ⁶⁵ Interview with al-Huzaymi
- ⁶⁶ Abu Dharr, *thawra fi rihab makka*, 125
- ⁶⁷ *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 6 April 2005
- ⁶⁸ Among the prominent Kuwaiti JSM members at the time were Jabir al-Jalahma, who subsequently became a prominent jihadi figure; 'Abdallah al-Nafisi, one of the most influential Islamist thinkers in Kuwait, and Khalid al-'Adwa, who later joined the mainstream Salafi current and became a member of parliament.
- ⁶⁹ *Al-Riyadh*, 19 and 26 May 2003; Gilles Kepel, *Muslim Extremism in Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003): 89
- ⁷⁰ Interview with al-Huzaymi; al-Wadi'i, *al-makhray min al-fitna*, 141
- ⁷¹ See for instance Ahmad, *rasa'il juhayman al-'utaybi*, 62-3.
- ⁷² *Ibid*, p. 84

⁷³ A separate incident narrated by al-Huzaymi illustrates this sense of loyalty: When ‘Abdallah al-Harbi, a former JSM member who didn’t believe in the *mahdi* and had left the group, heard the news of the storming of the Mecca Mosque, he decided to organize the storming of the Medina Mosque in order to diminish the pressure on Juhayman and his followers. However, he was shot by police at a checkpoint on his way to Sajir to gather followers for his project.

⁷⁴ One possible explanation for these declarations is that the Saudi leftist opposition tried to take advantage of the political situation in order to regain the visibility it had lost since the late 1960s.

⁷⁵ Nasir al-Sa‘id in *al-Dustur*, quoted in *MERIP Report*, 85, February 1980, 17

⁷⁶ Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, for instance, writes that he received confirmation from former JSM members that there was no broader plan, and no operations in other cities. See Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, *al-kawashif al-jaliyya fi kufr al-dawla al-sa‘udiyya* [the obvious proofs of the Saudi State’s impiety], 197; available at www.tawhed.ws

⁷⁷ See al-Maqdisi’s 1998 interview with the Islamist magazine *Nida’ al-Islam*, available at www.tawhed.ws

⁷⁸ Al-Maqdisi later married the sister of al-Dirbas’ wife. See *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 15 May and 7 July 2003.

⁷⁹ See in particular “millat ibrahim” [Abraham’s Creed] from 1984 (available at www.tawhed.ws) in which he adopts and further develops Juhayman’s doctrinal system; and “i‘dad al-qada al-fawaris bi-hajr fasad al-madaris” [Preparing Shrewd Leaders by Abandoning the Corruption of the Schools] from 1989 (available at www.tawhed.ws), in which al-Maqdisi reiterates Juhayman’s rejection of state education and employment.

⁸⁰ Al-Maqdisi, *al-kawashif al-jaliyya*, 198

⁸¹ Interviews with ‘Abdallah al-‘Utaybi, Riyadh, April 2004

⁸² Interview with Mishari al-Dhayidi, Jeddah, June 2003. Interviews with ‘Abdallah al-‘Utaybi and unidentified Saudi former Islamist, Riyadh, April 2004.

⁸³ The leadership core included Mishari al-Dhayidi and ‘Abdallah al-‘Utaybi. They have subsequently become outspoken liberals and prominent writers.

⁸⁴ Bayt Shubra residents were primarily in contact with bedouins in north-western Najd, whom they accessed through a Pakistani former member of JSM who lived in the town of al-Rass. Interview with Saud al-Sarhan, Riyadh, April 2004

⁸⁵ Interview with unidentified Saudi former Islamist

⁸⁶ Ibrahim al-Rayyis and Saud al-‘Utaybi had frequented Bayt Shubra regularly. ‘Abd al-‘Aziz al-Muqrin had visited once or twice. Interview with al-‘Utaybi. See also *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 9 December 2003 and 6 April 2005

⁸⁷ Just outside the city of Burayda, a community known as “the Ikhwan of Burayda” lives in near-isolation from the society around them. They do not interact with the state, and refuse to adopt modern technologies such as electricity, cars, or telephones. There were similarities and even direct links between the JSM and the Ikhwan of Burayda. Another ultra-conservative and isolationist community is found in the neighbourhood called “hayy al-muhajirin” in the Najdi city of Zulfi.