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Innate Mysticism:

An Argument for Neurotheology

[ZOE WALTS]

Cultures around the world have different forms of religion, all with unique forms of religious experience. Western culture considers the religious experiences associated with religion to be incredibly unquantifiable and often beyond measurement. In Judeo-Christian traditions, the focus of this article, religious experience often involves subjective mystical interaction with supernatural powers. Though my sources in this article focus on the Western understanding of religion, mysticism is found universally. For example, the many gods of Hinduism and the rituals that connect practitioners of this religious tradition to the deities of this can constitute a deeply mystical and supernatural experience. A variety of people from anthropologists to deeply atheistic scientists try to explain why and how humanity experiences the universal phenomenon categorized as religion. Neurotheology is a relatively young field which qualifies religion in scientific terms by examining how religion manifests within the brain, placing measurements and specific objective characteristics to what previously has been completely subjective. This is done using various forms of brain scans and measurements of electrical brain activity. In this paper, I will argue that neurotheology uses quantifiable evidence to further previous theories from other disciplines about why religion is universal to definitively prove that humans have an innate capacity for mysticism. First, I will define the concept of religion as a universal aspect of human culture and list the characteristics of religion that are relevant to my article. Next, I will look at unquantifiable theories of why religion seems natural to humanity. Finally, I will discuss recent studies in neurotheology by Eugene D'Aquili and Andrew Newberg and V.S. Ramachandran to explain how findings in the neuroscience of religion, when compounded with these unquantifiable theories, prove humankind's innate capacity for religion.

A large number of cultures around the world involve some sort of mysticism. From the perspective of Jonathan Smith (d. 2017), an American historian of religions, "Religion is thought to be a ubiquitous human phenomenon... 'Religion' is an anthropological not a theological

category...It describes human thought and action.”¹ The distinction in this quote between the theological and the anthropological furthers the sense of universality. No single religion is superior to any other—merely many versions of mysticism exist. From this point on, I will not define religion by the differences between the theologies of different cultures; instead, I will define religion as the idea that culture involves a connection between humanity and the supernatural. This connection to the supernatural is mysticism. The various roles that mysticism can serve in society is as diverse as the theologies around the world. My goal is not to reduce meaningful religious experience to random brainwaves. I aim to expand religious experience by exploring its physical manifestations.

Theologians and anthropologists vary greatly in their individual definitions of religion. This is evidenced by their varied theories which attempt to justify the existence of religion. The universality of religion means all these theories must acknowledge that religion is a cultural necessity, regardless of the specific religious tradition in any given region. Nancy Ellen Abrams, a religious philosopher, summarizes psychoanalyst Carl Jung’s theory of religion as “all people need ideas and convictions that can give meaning to their lives and help them find their ‘place in the universe’... we have the *capacity* to satisfy this need symbolically with a god image.”² This idea that humans have a capacity for religious experience suggests that humans are wired for belief in the supernatural. As interpreted by Abrams, for Jung, religion offers a system for the patterns that humans need and an idea of god who can guide them. Cultures around the world develop different ways to fulfill this capacity.

Even from the perspective of atheists, there are reasons why religion is so universal and necessary. Richard Dawkins, a notoriously anti-religious biologist, wrote a controversial work of non-fiction called *The God Delusion*, in which he describes why he sees all religion as false. He cites fellow atheist Steven Weinberg, who wrote, “Of course, like any other word, the word ‘God’ can be given any meaning we like. If you want to say that ‘God is energy,’ then you can find God in a lump of coal.”³ In one interpretation, God, or any other deity which is the object of mystical experience, is just an arbitrary label created by humans. Conversely, it could suggest a natural desire for a higher order. If people assign the name of God to something powerful like “energy,” there is a clear desire for an influence greater than themselves. The idea of a “God Capacity,” a term coined by Jung and defined here as a natural predisposition for religious thought, is interesting

1 Jonathon Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor, 269.

2 Nancy Ellen Abrams, *A God that Could Be Real: Spirituality, Science, and the Future of Our Planet* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015), 84. Emphasis in original.

3 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2006), 33.

because it implicitly suggests the presence of brain structures prewired for religion.⁴ The theories suggested by both the religiously-sympathetic Abrams and by atheist Dawkins suggest a human brain is naturally able to interpret the world around them in a way that connects to the supernatural. The conviction to believe in a religious power is uniquely a human quality. Evidence found by neurotheological studies support these theories, proving humankind's innate mysticism.

These theories, which explain the human need for religion, prove that the phenomenon of religion is pervasive and universal, yet it is still puzzling. Regardless of specific and varying religious beliefs, religion is important to humanity in an amazingly universal way; even a secular scholar like Dawkins can admit this fact.

Humans have gathered an amazing amount of information about how the world around us works, yet our mysticism remains elusive. The definitive answer to why we believe in a god or gods has not yet been found. What is clear is that religion is extremely meaningful to humans as a whole, and this is reflected in brain activity. The relatively new field of neurotheology developed as a response to this. Neurotheology is described as the neuroscience of religion. The goal of neurotheology, as described by its founder Andrew Newberg, is to discover how religion manifests within the brain. Its goal is not to say whether or not religion is real or fabricated.⁵ If neurotheologists go into studies believing religion is illegitimate, they must also consider that their studies most likely involve people with strong religious conviction. It is important that neurotheologists respect the people who are helping us learn about the brain.⁶ To do this, neurotheologists focus on the systems of the brain instead of on theories about culture. Like the theories presented by Abrams and Jung, Dawkins and Weinberg, and others about the purpose of religion, neurotheology explores the human capacity for religion. One study conducted by neurotheologists Eugene D'Aquili and Andrew Newberg looked at the brains of eight American Buddhists and three Franciscan Nuns engaged in their religious practice, either meditation or intense prayer. Using a SPECT scanner,⁷ they discovered that during religious practice, neural activity in the prefrontal cortex increased and neural activity in the superior parietal lobe decreased. Activity in the prefrontal cortex, which is associated with

4 Abrams, 84.

5 Interview with Andrew Newberg, *Neurotheology: Where Religion and Science Collide*, Talk of the Nation, podcast audio, December 15, 2010. <http://www.npr.org/2010/12/15/132078267/neurotheology-where-religion-and-science-collide>.

6 Ibid.

7 SPECT stands for single-photon emission computed tomography. It uses gamma rays and a radioactive marker administered to the patient to give 3D information about the brain's activity, which is indicated by the presence or absence of the radioactive marker. Anatomical structures are measured along with biological activity.

64 inter-text

complex thought and decision making, compounded with activity in the superior parietal lobe, which is associated with touch and vision sensory input, demonstrates that real sensation and thought arises from a religious activity. This study proves that mystical experiences are based on real neurological events, not on delusions.⁸

In his book *Phantoms of the Brain*, V.S. Ramachandran further explores how the human brain evidences religious experience. He discusses the connection between religious experience and temporal lobe epileptics. Ramachandran specifically describes a case study involving a temporal lobe epileptic named Paul. Paul experienced intense religious experience and visits from God, which caused significant lifestyle changes, including losing desire for sex.⁹ Dr. Ramachandran establishes the strong connections between the temporal lobe and the amygdala. The temporal lobe is associated with sight, which, because of the fight or flight response, is strongly connected to the amygdala, which controls emotion.¹⁰ Ramachandran hypothesizes that because sight (controlled by the parietal lobe) activates emotional response, and one of Paul's greatest symptoms from his seizures (which activate the parietal lobe) is interaction with God, emotional response prompts religious experience. Emotions originate in the brain; therefore, religious experience can be prompted by brain activity.

D'Aquili and Newberg's study suggests that the brain is affected by religious practice. Ramachandran's findings suggest that brain activity triggers religious experience. In addition, both studies suggest that religion is connected to different systems of the brain, the first to the prefrontal cortex, and the second to the limbic system, which contains the amygdala and controls emotion. These findings show that humans have physical systems which interact with religion, proving humans' capacity for mystical experiences. Some might argue because these studies found two different brain systems, the validity behind the innate mysticism in humanity is undermined; however, I would argue that these studies instead strengthens the idea. The differences in the works of these neurotheologists shows that religion is present across many parts of the brain—not just in one. The fact that mysticism occurs across many parts of the brain and is not just isolated to either system suggested by D'Aquili and Newberg or Ramachandran is significant because it means mysticism is intertwined within different structures of the brain.

Neurotheology legitimizes theories about the cultural necessity of religion by assigning quantitative measurements of brain structures

⁸ John Horgan, *Rational Mysticism: Dispatches from the Border Between Science and Spirituality* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2003), 75.

⁹ V.S. Ramachandran, *Phantoms in the Brain: Probing the Mysteries of the Human Mind* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 181.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 185.

to the phenomena of religion. The pervasive presence of religion in all human cultures strongly suggests that religion comes naturally to humans; therefore, like all of our other behaviors, it must have some origin in our brains. Religious experience has a clear connection, from D'Aquili and Newberg's study, to the posterior superior parietal lobe and the prefrontal cortex. Religious experience was also clearly connected to the limbic system, as Ramachandran demonstrated. The differences between the findings in these studies does not mean the studies are invalid. Instead, it proves that religion is present across multiple parts of the brain. Religion is complex and multi-faceted, and humans are clearly prewired for mystical experience. Neurotheology is an important bridge between religion and science in Western scientific culture, which tends to put itself at odds with religion. Religion is far more complex than the brain activity within one person. Science should not be seen as superior to religion; scientific discovery and religion, while different, are both essential parts of human culture. Only by respecting the diversity of our culture and cultures across the world will progress be made in learning more about what we share as humans.

The Origins of Saudi Arabia's Nuclear Ambitions

[ZACH KLEIN]

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been part of a long chain of monarchies that have periodically ruled over the Arabian Peninsula. However, the House of Saud has not had a long rule over the region. The Kingdom came to existence in 1932 and since the consolidation of power it has encountered a host of problems, from creating a cohesive identity for the country to rally behind to challenging the King's authority to challenging the security of the nation from international actors. The Kingdom itself has historically been reliant upon foreign powers providing military aid to protect the country. However, in recent years, as Western powers have steadily increased and decreased their roles in the region, instability across the Middle East has increased dramatically. Additionally, Iran, the traditional enemy of the Saudi Arabia, has steadily expanded its nuclear weapons program and taken advantage of the retreat of the US to further entrench its power in the Middle East. Thus, the quandary that the Kingdom finds itself in is how to best ensure its security in the face of their enemy becoming a hegemon and a retreat of their western allies from the region. The Kingdom has clear ambitions in its foreign policy that come from a decision-making calculus with plenty of inputs to create a variety of possible decisions about how best to act. Understanding the inputs that go into the decision-making process and which pieces of information are most valued in the decision-making process help the US government to better prepare to deal with the Kingdom. Saudi Arabia's nuclear ambitions are informed by a desire to defend the security interests of the nation in the face of a more powerful Iran rather than looking to defend an acquired identity as leader of the Arab-Muslim world.

Saudi Arabia's desire to become a nuclear power stems from a historical conflict with Iran. Iran has been an enemy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia since the revolution of 1979. Before the revolution, the Shah of Iran and the King of Saudi Arabia cooperated on much in regard to

securing the legitimacy of their thrones. "Arab nationalism, born in the era of anti-colonial struggle, often equated the monarchial system with colonial cronyism. Therefore, monarchies such as Iran and Saudi Arabia considered Arab nationalism an immediate danger."¹ However, in the post-revolution world, Iran attacked the Saudi Kingdom with claims of it being anti-Islamic, which then prompted a war of words between Saudi Arabia and Iran:

By declaring Islam to be the basis of the Iranian republic and by propagating the establishment of an Islamic state in Iran, the clerical leadership was competing with the Al Sa'ud on their own turf. The claim that they were ruling according to Islamic norms and traditions and looking after the safety of the holy places in Mecca and Medina had been the Al Sa'ud's most important argument for legitimacy. Furthermore, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the leader of the Iranian revolution, propagated the notion that a monarchy was basically non-Islamic and that a republic was the only form of state adequate to Islam. Consequently, a Saudi counter-campaign denounced the insufficiencies of the revolutionary regime in Iran and described it ultimately as "non-Islamic." By mid-1980 at the latest, all political signals in the Gulf region pointed to confrontation. Iran and Saudi Arabia, allied during the 1970s, had become bitter opponents. For many Saudi princes, the Iranian foreign policy credo of exporting the revolution seemed even more dangerous than the pan-Arabist maneuvers of Iraq, which had been successfully contained during the past decade.²

The alliance between the two states was no longer a possibility as the two nations no longer had common ground. Iran was a Persian, Shi'ite majority country now ruled by a theocratic elite. Saudi Arabia is an Arab, Sunni majority nation ruled by a monarchy that uses Islam as the justification for its rule. From here on, the House of Saud looked to contain the Marxist theocratic Iran and fortunately had an ally in the fight. The US, in the era of the Cold War, looked to restrict the anti-Western sentiments of the Iranian republic so that it may continue to acquire resources from the Middle East. As a result, the US and Saudi Arabia began to foster an alliance. Together they attempted to balance against Iran and keep them contained. However, in recent years the containment of Iran has become more difficult as instability in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen have presented opportunities for Iran

1 Henner Fürtig, "Conflict and Cooperation in the Persian Gulf: The Interregional Order and US Policy," *Middle East Journal* 61, no. 4 (2007) 627.

2 *Ibid.*, 629.

68 inter-text

to entrench its power in the region. To amplify this rise in Iranian power, the US has focused on getting rid of the Iranian nuclear program rather than curbing its influence in other nations.

While the Iranian nuclear program dates back to the Shah, the reactors were exclusively used to generate energy until the late 1980s and early 1990s.³ Here the leadership of Iran decided to expand their nuclear program to begin to develop weapons and a short nuclear breakout time. This means that Iran is looking to quickly develop nuclear weapons, should it need them, but not necessarily to constantly have nuclear warheads. The US responded swiftly in applying pressure to eliminate those supplying nuclear technology to Iran.⁴ The US has since focused on applying sanctions on Iran to cease all nuclear weapons development and submit to international inspections to ensure they are complying with international nuclear energy standards. This stems from the desire to prevent Iran from arming itself with nuclear weapons and enforcing its anti-Western sentiment across the region. Currently, Saudi Arabia has chosen to remain a non-nuclear armed state and to not seek weapons. However, the Kingdom has recently begun to negotiate with the US in an attempt to gain more nuclear reactors and also homegrown uranium enrichment plants.⁵ This puts the nation on par with Iran in providing a quick nuclear breakout time. However, there is one thing that Iran has that Saudi Arabia doesn't: the ability to domestically produce ballistic missiles. Iran has had this domestic program for a long time; little open-source information exists about its capabilities, but it is known is that the program is advanced relative to the country's capabilities.⁶ This missile program provides a perfect delivery method for any nuclear warhead Iran develops. Thus, the Saudis' fear is that should Iran continue along its path it will have nuclear weapons and the Saudis will have nothing to combat the threat posed to their nation by having a hostile nuclear armed neighbor.

The first interpretation of international relations that can explain the behavior of Saudi Arabia is the realist tradition as pioneered by Hans Morgenthau. To a realist, Saudi Arabia desires a nuclear deterrent to combat Iran's nuclear weapons and ambitions. Realism emerged in the post-World-War world when the global institutions, such as the League of Nations, desired to perfect society and create everlasting peace which utterly failed. After almost 40 years of fighting, which tore the world apart,

3 Robert J. Reardon, "Iran's Nuclear Program: Past, Present, and Future," *Containing Iran: Strategies for Addressing the Iranian Nuclear Challenge* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2012) 10-11.

4 *Ibid.*, 13.

5 Mahmoud Habboush and Bruce Stanley, "Why Oil-Rich Saudi Arabia is Turning to Nuclear Power," *Bloomberg Businessweek*, March 20, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-03-20/why-oil-rich-saudi-arabia-is-turning-to-nuclear-power-quicktake>.

6 Reardon, 39-40.

international relations theorists began to agree that the world was very similar to a global Machiavellian power struggle or a Hobbesian state of nature. In Hans Morgenthau's book, *Politics Among Nations*, he writes:

International politics, like all politics, is a struggle for power. Whatever the ultimate aims of international politics, power is always the immediate aim. Statesmen and peoples may ultimately seek freedom, security, prosperity, or power itself. They may define their goals in terms of a religious, philosophic, economic, or social ideal. They may hope that this ideal will materialize through its own inner force, through divine intervention, or through the natural development of human affairs. But whenever they strive to realize their goal by means of international politics, they do so by striving for power.⁷

Rather than a world cooperating on transnational issues, every single interaction is an opportunity in which states may gain greater power or authority over others. Thus, cooperation is limited to times of absolute crisis or necessity. Since states seek survival as much as they seek power, cooperation is also limited to times in which every state that is cooperating in the "alliance" will equally benefit. In his book, Morgenthau also outlines the elements of power, which consist of geography, natural resources, industrial capacity, military preparedness, population, national character, national morale, and quality of diplomacy.⁸ Morgenthau's focus is on the ability for a state to translate its "nascent power" into military power.⁹ By this, Morgenthau means the ability to mobilize your entire state for a war, or at least appropriate the proper amount of resources required by the military. In this sense, the world is an arms race in which everyone attempts to grab as much nascent power as they can to turn into real military power when the time comes. Considering that every state desires power means that the likelihood of forming alliances is close to none. This is because your ally one day can easily become your enemy the next day if that state now perceives you as a threat to their power.

Given this theoretical paradigm, let's apply it to modern day Saudi Arabia. To fully understand this there are a couple of basic factors relating to Saudi Arabia that have to be understood. In 2015, according to Observatory for Economic Complexity, 55 percent of the 183 billion dollars' worth of exports of the nation of Saudi Arabia came from crude petroleum.¹⁰

7 Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), 13.

8 *Ibid.*, 80-105.

9 *Ibid.*, 14.

10 Observatory for Economic Complexity (OEC), "Saudi Arabia," accessed May 3, 2018, <https://atlas.media.mit.edu/en/profile/country/sau/>.

70 inter-text

The oil fields that provide the majority of the Kingdom's wealth are located in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia that borders the Persian Gulf, Qatar, and Bahrain.¹¹ This is also one of the least populated provinces of the country with most of the nation's people living on the western coast area near Mecca and Medina.¹² Most of the nation's Shi'ite population lives in the Eastern Province in which the neighboring countries are also Shi'ite majority nations.¹³ The Kingdom exports most of its oil through the Strait of Hormuz that links the Persian Gulf with the Indian Ocean.¹⁴ On one side of the Strait is Oman and on the other side is Iran.

Since the 1979 revolution, Iran has been an enemy of the House of Saud. Iran represents a rising regional power capable of challenging Saudi power in the region. Iran has taken advantage instability in the region by expanding its influence across several nations. In Syria, Iran has been able to maintain Assad as leader of the nation by enabling the Ayatollah to continue support of the vast networks of terrorists across the region:

First, Assad won his war to stay in power. Granted, he rules a challenging, fragile, and fragmented Syria; one where violence will not cease in the coming years nor will efforts to unseat him...Iran, despite profound and persistent domestic political and economic vulnerabilities, has demonstrated an unwavering commitment to its mission in Syria, increasingly purchasing another strategic border with Israel. Working by, with, and through Hezbollah, Iranian power projection across the Middle East has skyrocketed. Both Iran and Hezbollah are entrenched in Syria, which will make any U.S. efforts to counter their regional influence that much harder.¹⁵

Syria's border with Lebanon allows Iran to provide more material support to Hezbollah as well as continue power projection in the region against Turkey and Israel, both of which were historically major US allies. Iran has also been focusing on other areas closer to Saudi Arabia. In Yemen, the decline of Ali Abdullah Saleh provided Iran a target of opportunity that enabled them to sow instability along the Saudi border.¹⁶ Saudi intervention

11 Stratfor Global Intelligence, *Saudi Arabia's Geographic Challenge*, December 5, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LS4G0bvpwgc>, 1:30.

12 Ibid., 1:35.

13 Ibid., 1:40.

14 Ibid., 1:20.

15 Mara Karlin, "After 7 Years of War, Assad Has Won In Syria. What's Next for Washington?" *Brookings*, February 13, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/02/13/after-7-years-of-war-assad-has-won-in-syria-whats-next-for-washington/>.

16 Simon Henderson, "How the War in Yemen Explains the Future of Saudi Arabia," November 8, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/11/saudi-arabia->

in the conflict has only proven to be ineffective. “Despite the Saudi air force’s best efforts, it has failed to dislodge the Houthis. The UAE’s forces have been more successful in the south of the country, around the port city of Aden. But there it is challenged by al-Qaeda types who have turned the Yemeni hinterlands into their sanctuary.”¹⁷ Saudi Arabia’s inability to maintain the Peninsula free of Iranian influence has proven to be a major security risk for the Kingdom. On December 12th, an Iranian-made Burkan 2 ballistic missile was fired by the Houthi rebels at Riyadh.¹⁸ The missile was intercepted by the cities US-made Patriot missile defense batteries and no casualties or damage was sustained, but it remains a powerful reminder of how far Iran’s reach is.¹⁹

Additionally, Iraq has become an Iranian puppet thanks to the US’s failed attempt at regime change:

A new building goes up? It is likely that the cement and bricks came from Iran. And when bored young Iraqi men take pills to get high, the illicit drugs are likely to have been smuggled across the porous Iranian border. And that’s not even the half of it. Across the country, Iranian-sponsored militias are hard at work establishing a corridor to move men and guns to proxy forces in Syria and Lebanon. And in the halls of power in Baghdad, even the most senior Iraqi cabinet officials have been blessed, or bounced out, by Iran’s leadership.²⁰

Thanks to the US ousting Saddam Hussein from power and the subsequent attempt to create a Western democracy, modern Iraq has fallen well under Iranian control. Iran is now perched on the northern and southern borders of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, posing a real threat to the security of the nation. Qatar, by nature of its shared oilfield with Iran and shared border with Saudi Arabia, has had to maintain good relations with both nations.²¹ Saudi Arabia has engaged in an air, sea, and land blockade of Qatar in conjunction with the UAE, Egypt, and Bahrain. This was because of the failure to meet a list of 13 demands, the first of which was to curb its relations with Iran.²² Saudi Arabia’s desired to prevent what happened in

iran-yemen-houthi-salman/545336/.

17 Ibid.

18 “Yemen Rebel Ballistic Missile ‘Intercepted Over Riyadh’,” *BBC*, December 19, 201, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42412729>.

19 Ibid.

20 Tim Arango, “Iran Dominates In Iraq After U.S. ‘Handed the Country Over’,” *The New York Times*, July 15, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/15/world/middleeast/iran-iraq-iranian-power.html>.

21 “Qatar Crisis: What You Need To Know,” *BBC*, July 19, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-40173757>.

22 Ibid.

72 inter-text

Iraq and Yemen from happening again. So, a blockade of the country came to be in order to forcefully keep Qatar under the Kingdom's control.

On all fronts, Saudi Arabia has lost a lot of ground to Iran. The Kingdom has been looking to increase its defensive capabilities and not make the nation so reliant on oil as the main source of wealth. In the Vision 2030, released by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, it calls for a massive restructuring the economy that calls for 50 percent of all defense expenditures to be spent on domestically produced goods by 2030.²³ A homegrown defense industry is paramount to the defense of a nation, something that Morgenthau finds intrinsic in the calculation of a nation's power.²⁴ Additionally, the Vision 2030 calls for the Saudi economy to become an investment banking paradise.²⁵

Saudi Arabia has been looking to try and stop Iran's growing influence in the region by supporting rebels and NATO in Syria, intervening in Yemen, and blockading Qatar. Currently, Saudi Arabia is finding little success in balancing against Iran; however, as Iranian influence grows, the Kingdom could very well seek a nuclear deterrent to more properly balance against a martially superior Iran with multiple powerful regional allies. The Kingdom's principle enemy in the region has a very capable ballistic missile program, has shown itself to be willing to use it, and is focused on adopting the ability produce nuclear weapons should it decide it needs them. If Iran has all of this and more, Saudi Arabia's security dilemma could very easily be evened out by adopting a similar strategy, especially given the considerable wealth advantage that the Kingdom has over Iran.

The second alternative explanation for Saudi behavior in the international community can be taken from a constructivist viewpoint. Constructivism takes a step back from the normal positivist theories and instead looks at international relations through a more sociological lens:

Conventional constructivism, which is the school dominant in the US, examines the role of norms and...identity in shaping international political outcomes. These scholars are largely positivist in epistemological orientation and strong advocates of bridge-building among diverse theoretical perspectives; the qualitative, process-tracing case study is their methodological starting point. Sociology and elements of institutional/organizational theory are sources of theoretical inspiration.²⁶

23 Mohammad Bin Salman BIN Abdulaziz Al-Saud, *Vision 2030 Saudi Arabia*, Economic Report, Council of Economic and Development Affairs, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Riyadh: Council of Economic and Development Affairs, 48.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Jeffrey T. Checkel, "Social Constructivisms in Global and European Politics: A

Constructivism relies on the premise that “ideas construct realities; and that, all agents and structures are mutually constituted.”²⁷ This means that an agent’s actions are based off the system as much as the system reacts to the agent. Or in simpler terms, the system is what states make of it. Scholars across all theoretical paradigms can agree that the system in which states operate is anarchy, where there is no singular sovereign ruling over other states. In this systems states can interpret the meaning of anarchy differently, a state could have a realist, liberal, or entirely unique interpretation of what anarchy means. This means that a state can act in the same system with completely different interpretations of the world. However, states are also influenced by their interactions with other states. For example, the US gained its identity as the preserver of the Western Liberal world during the Cold War against the Soviet Union that sought to end Western liberalism. In this way, states are socialized to act a certain way and thus gain an identity through socialization.

Saudi Arabia’s identity is relatively complex due to its complicated relationship with Islam. Saudi Arabia, largely due to its control of the cities of Mecca and Medina, is a deeply religious society. The House of Saud relies on religion as a source of legitimacy for their rule over the nation:

This sought identity is based primarily on strict observance of Islam and, of course, on loyalty to the House of Saud. The painstaking effort to expand its basis of legitimacy is the Saudi way of coping with whatever threatens the ruling dynasty, be it ambitious neighbors or radical ideologies from the outside, or domestic oppositions: ‘revolutionary’, anti-royalist, or religious fundamentalist. By employing religion for this purpose, the Saudi monarchy has actually availed itself of Islam to change the situation in which religion constitutes the predominant provider of the regime’s legitimacy.²⁸

Saudi society has been cultivated around the transcendence of tribal bonds to create loyalty toward the royal family around a single Sunni Muslim Saudi identity. The King of Saudi Arabia is not only the chief executive and sole power of the nation, he is also the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques: Mecca and Medina.²⁹ This signifies a greater authority than just

Review Essay,” *Review of International Studies*, 30, no. 2 (2004) 230.

27 Runa Das, “Critical Social Constructivism: ‘Culturing’ Identity, (In) Security, and the State In International Relations Theory,” *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, 70, no. 4 (2009) 962.

28 Joseph Nevo. “Religion and National Identity in Saudi Arabia.” *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 34, no. 3, 1998, pp. 36.

29 Paul Wood, “Life and legacy of King Fahd,” *BBC News*, August 1, 2005..

74 inter-text

ruler of a piece of land, but command over a religious identity that over twenty percent of the world's population ascribes to.³⁰ Islam is also heavily entrenched in Saudi society:

Saudi Arabia is the most theocratic state in the contemporary Sunni Muslim world. By definition, a non-Muslim cannot be a Saudi citizen. The idea of religious pluralism has neither meaning nor support in many segments of the population, and religious norms and practices are encouraged, promoted and even enforced by the state. The Saudi constitution is the Quran, and the shari'a is the source of its laws. Even the Basic Law of Government (*al-nizam al-asasi li'l hukm*), issued in 1992, stressed their supremacy. Moreover, in order to underline that there is no other, mundane source of legislation, the use of terms such as *qanun* (law) and *musharr'i* (legislator) are practically forbidden as they imply Western-style statutory enactment. They are substituted by *nizam* (regulation) and *marsum* (decree), which are supposed to complement the shari'a, not to take its place.³¹

Saudi society is molded almost entirely around the Quran as matter of further entrenching the idea that tribal allegiances do not matter nearly as much as the Islamic identity that all citizens must share in. Without this Islamic identity, it is highly likely that Saudi Arabia would be significantly less stable. However, there is also a distinction to be made about which sect of Islam drives this identity.

The Wahhabi school of Sunni Muslim thought has heavily influenced Saudi society. Wahhabis believe that it is necessary to return to the original ways in which the Prophet Muhammad and his first followers practiced Islam.³² They also followed a belief called *tawhid*, which translates to the "oneness of God."³³ God is omnipotent and the only being who is all powerful. No object or individual could obtain divinity so no one can mediate between the mortals and God. Anyone who follows someone who is claiming to be an intermediary between God and earth is a polytheist and a heretic.³⁴ This led to the ostracizing of the chief preacher of Wahhabism, Muhammed Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, until an alliance was formed with the House of Saud.³⁵

30 "The Global Religious Landscape." The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. *Pew Research Center*. 18 December 2012. Accessed 18 March 2018.

31 Nevo, 40.

32 *Ibid.*, 36.

33 *Ibid.*, 37.

34 *Ibid.*

35 *Ibid.*

Muhammed Ibn Saud realized that Wahhabism had additional beneficial factors as developing a strong identity that super cedes tribal identities to be ruled by a central state:

That bond between umara and ulama (statesmen and divines) marks the modern inception of the use of religion as an instrument for both consolidating a collective identity and legitimizing the ruling family. It served the interests of the two parties, in the spirit of the political writing of Ibn Taymiyya. This scholar, whose most stringent interpretation of the teachings of Ibn Hanbal (founder of the most orthodox of the four Islamic schools) was adopted by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, held that religion and state are indissolubly linked. Without the coercive power of the state, religion is in danger, and on the other hand, without the shari'a the state becomes a tyrannical organization.³⁶

This is the beginning of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. As the King became more and more powerful he spread Wahhabism within the borders of the Kingdom. Thus, the House of Saud found a way to integrate itself with the religion of Islam to secure a tranquil, domestic society. This would form the bedrock of the Saudi identity and is the reason that they are so deeply religious. As a means of generating a cohesive Saudi identity, the Kingdom pushed an Islamic identity. Wahhabism is also the dominant government philosophy as a necessity to fully enforce it throughout the entirety of society.³⁷ The government using a Wahhabist framework as their state, translated it into a foreign policy.³⁸ This allowed them to push for legitimacy in dominating the Arabian Peninsula, to be a leader and founder of the Arab League and maintain sovereignty over the two holy cities.

While Saudi Arabia sees itself as the supreme religious authority for Islam, being the caretaker of the two holy Islamic cities and having a strong Wahhabist ideological support, there is a strong challenge from Iran as leader of the Islamic faithful. "Iran, where most citizens are ethnically Persian and not Arab, is the largest Shi'ite country in the world, with over 90 percent of its residents identifying as such."³⁹ As previously stated earlier,

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Yury Barmin, "Can Mohammed bin Salman Break the Saudi-Wahhabi Pact?" Al Jazeera, January 7, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/mohammed-bin-salman-break-saudi-wahhabi-pact-180107091158729.html>

³⁸ Athina Tzemprin, Jugoslav Jozić, and Henry Lambare, "The Middle East Cold War: Iran-Saudi Arabia and the Way Ahead," *Politička Misao*, 52, nos. 4-5 (2015), 187-202. <https://hrcak.srce.hr/159926>.

³⁹ Jill Ricotta, "The Arab Shi'a Nexus: Understanding Iran's Influence In the Arab World," *The Washington Quarterly*, 39, no. 2 (2016): 139-154.

76 inter-text

Iran not only ideologically challenges the legitimacy of the Saudi monarchy but is also in a struggle for power in the Middle East. Islam in the Iranian context creates a different identity:

Since the 1979 Revolution in Iran, the country's government has been based on guidance of Shi'i clerics. Founded under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, the Islamic Republic of Iran was born out of a movement among Shi'i clerics (led by Khomeini), started in the 1960s that advocated for an active role of the clerics in politics. Khomeini spoke eloquently about his desire to export the revolution and bring justice through Islam to all. However, many clerics in the Arab world still abide by the more traditional quietist role that only provides clerics the opportunity to involve themselves in politics in the most dire situations.⁴⁰

Since the Revolution, Iran has experienced a gigantic shift in the nature of its government. Rather than being led by a devout Muslim monarch, i.e. the Shah, the nation was to be ruled by the religious leaders themselves. The Ayatollah desired one thing: the end of injustices to Muslims across the world. This was not exclusive to only Shia Muslims but also included Sunnis, and, from the Ayatollah's perspective, there was no greater injustice than the Saudi Monarchy. The Saudi King had supported the oppressive Shah and monarchies across the entire region, something that, according to the Ayatollah, was inherently un-Islamic.⁴¹ To Iranians, the Saudi monarchy is representative of a perversion of the faith that is seeking to use Islam to justify their own personal power rather than adhering to the tenets of the faith.

This conflict of identity has translated across the entire Middle East. Saudi Arabia has seen the physical exportation of the revolution across the region and the inflammation of sectarian tensions as a result. Under Saddam Hussein, Iraq was a secular Sunni-led government that was vehemently anti-Iranian.⁴² The regime was very much afraid of an exportation of the Iranian revolution to the majority Shia population and was constantly deporting Shi'ites out of the country to Iran and other nations.⁴³ This led to uprisings that were violently suppressed by the Iraqi army.⁴⁴ The only nation to attempt to support these uprisings and accept these refugees was Iran. As a result, Iran gained an enormous amount of

40 Ibid., 141

41 Fürtig, 629.

42 Ricotta, 139-140.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid., 142.

soft power and respect for Arab Shi'ites, who have been largely ignored by the larger population of Arab Sunnis.⁴⁵ Iran has sought to lead all Shi'ites regardless of their ethnic origin. In the gulf region Iran has been looking to exploit the Arab Shia populations who have experienced similar situations to the Iraqi Shia Arabs:

The history of both the Saudi and Bahraini communities involves a significant political, cultural, social, and religious repression by the state. In Bahrain, the majority Shi'a population has been ruled by a Sunni dominated monarchy that, similar to Iraq in 1991, during the Arab Spring brutally repressed an uprising demanding equal rights. The Bahraini government received support from its allies in the Gulf, who sent in troops to help quash the movement. The protests originally were not framed as a sectarian battle, but once the state and its allies intervened violently, the Shi'a and outside observers began to question the motives at play.⁴⁶

The leadership of Iran has seen a window of opportunity with the populations and has sought to create more revolutions in the Gulf states to further increase their influence among those they consider the oppressed faithful. Iran willingly lends its support to the oppressed groups in order to gain the ability to project their dominance as the true leader of the faith to the Saudi monarchy:

Often allegiance to Iran also comes from a misunderstanding of the popular tradition of flying the flags of Lebanese Hezbollah, Iran's most valued proxy, and photos of Khomeini and current Supreme Leader Khamenei, which stand-in as symbols for the broader Shi'a community. Usually, Shi'a are merely expressing pride in and solidarity with Shi'i Islam as a culture rather than politically dedicating themselves to these groups. Nevertheless, it stokes fear in many Sunni onlookers and political elites, who see any relationship with Iran as being nefarious in nature, similar to the Iraqi case.⁴⁷

This is not always a conflict that requires arms to gain power. The image of Saudi citizens hoisting an Iranian flag and a picture of the Ayatollah is a powerful one to the King of Saudi Arabia. It represents not only support for the chief enemy of the state, but also supporting Shia Islam. This is

45 Ibid., 144.

46 Ibid., 142.

47 Ibid., 141.

78 inter-text

a direct challenge to the identity of Saudi Arabia and how it sees itself. It challenges the belief that Saudi Arabia is the leader of the Muslim world. With this assault on their identity, Saudi Arabia internalizes it and seeks to show that it is the most powerful Muslim nation on the planet. In doing so, it reflects on its ideology to see what the Kingdom needs in order to further its power. Saudi Arabia recognizes the power of a nuclear weapons program and would seek to start its own in the face of the assault on its core identity by Iran.

Of the two theoretical paradigms, realism explains Saudi Arabia's desire for nuclear weapons better than a constructivist interpretation. This is because the Saudi identity does not necessarily translate well into a foreign policy goal beyond uniting Muslims under a single banner. The Saudi identity is incredibly well crafted to create domestic cohesion and loyalty to the Crown, but not to create foreign policy goals. The King of Saudi Arabia is the protector of the two holy Mosques, not the sword of the righteous. If the threat came from a Western nuclear power, then a counter nuclear deterrent would be more feasible. This is because the King is defending the Holy Land from heretics of a completely different faith, thus justifying more drastic action. While the Saudi identity is under attack from Iran, it does not grant the Kingdom proper provocation to seek a nuclear weapon as a way to protect themselves from a verbal Iranian offensive. However, realism offers a very logical explanation as to why Saudi Arabia desires a nuclear weapon. As Iran gains more power in the region, both militarily and with greater influence over other nations, it provides a serious challenge to the vital avenues of wealth for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. As all of the oil wealth of the Kingdom must leave the Persian Gulf via the Strait of Hormuz, which is controlled in part by Iran, or the pipelines through Iraq and Syria, which are both under heavy Iranian influence.⁴⁸ In addition, Iran has been a well-known sponsor of terror groups that have carried out attacks in the region and in Saudi Arabia itself.⁴⁹ As Iran grows in power it will undoubtedly seek to dominate the peninsula. As Saudi power is unable to keep up it will seek an equalizer to stave off any possible invasion of its sovereignty. A nuclear deterrent very well would be a real addition to the power of Saudi Arabia that would provide it with means of defending itself and surrounding allies in the face of an Iranian threat.

48 Frederick W. Kagan, Kimberly Kagan, and Danielle Pletka, "Research Report: Iranian Influence in the Levant, Iraq, and Afghanistan," *American Enterprise Institute* (2008),

49 Ibid.