

The Gender Segregation (*ikhtilāṭ*) Debate in Saudi Arabia: Reform and the Clash between '*Ulamā*' and Liberals

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Introduction²

Gender segregation, the forbiddance of *ikhtilāṭ* (mixing of sexes) has been one of the defining features of Saudi Arabia. Saudi law enforces the separation of men and women in the public sphere, with the result that women have their own exclusive public spaces in schools, universities, charitable organizations, hospitals, restaurants, and government offices. As several researchers have pointed out this is partly an invented tradition.³ Since the 1970s conservatism has actively been promoted by the state. Music was banned from public spaces, television viewing was controlled. It was the forbidding of *ikhtilāṭ* which was consistently promoted by the revivalist *Ṣaḥwa* movement,⁴ conservative '*ulamā*' and the religious police who enforced public moral behaviour. After 9/11 and especially after the attacks by al-Qaeda on the Peninsula on Saudi

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² I want to thank Greg Gause III for introducing me to Saudi Arabia and giving excellent comments on this article. Also Saud al-Sarhan has been invaluable in preventing me from making more mistakes than I have probably already made.

³ Amélie Le Renard, "'Only for Women': Women, the State and Reform in Saudi Arabia," *Middle East Journal*, 62, 4 (Autumn 2008), pp. 610-629.

⁴ Stéphane Lacroix, *Les islamistes Saoudiens: une insurrection manquée* (Paris: Puf, 2010).

soil in 2003-4, the trend has turned against Wahhabism as a conservative force. For many liberal Saudi intellectuals, Wahhabism has an ambivalent relationship with violence, hampers social and economic development and is an impediment to the necessary openness towards both the Western world but also to major parts of the Islamic world which regards Wahhabism as intolerant. The trend to restrict the overbearing power of religion and the social supervision of the official clerics is noticeable in the gradual reduction of various restrictions on women. In 2002 women were allowed to apply for an ID card and in 2007 they were permitted to study law. Gender mixing is becoming more widespread. For instance, *ikhtilāt* has recently been permitted at exhibitions and book fairs.⁵ The pace of reform has increased after Prince ‘Abdallāh became king in August 2005. His reforms have led to intense debates between the conservative ‘*ulamā*’ who dominate the internet and the reformist opinion makers who control the so-called liberal press. Although the struggle is about reform in general and clerical control over society, the main confrontation has focused on the issue of *ikhtilāt*.

This debate offers an insight into the various arguments of both sides; it shows where interests diverge, clash, overlap and which coalitions are formed and how reform has progressed.⁶

In this article I will outline the general trends and then analyse the specifics of the debate when it broke out in October 2009 and continued into May 2010. I have closely followed the arguments and standpoints of the four main players in the debate; Shaykh Sa’d al-Shithrī, Shaykh al-Ghāmīdī, Shaykh ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Barrāk, and Shaykh Yūsuf al-Aḥmad.

Reformists versus conservatives

Although the revision of the strict forbiddance of *ikhtilāt* has been on

⁵ Eleanor Abdella Doumato, “Saudi Arabia”, in Sanja Kelly and Julia Breslin (eds.), *Women’s Rights in the Middle East and North Africa*, 1-33 (New York, NY: Freedom House, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010).

⁶ For two excellent brief articles on the *ikhtilāt* controversy see, F. Gregory Gause III, “The Second Sex and the Third Rail,” *Foreign Policy*, 19 April 2010, and Caryle Murphy, “Clerics Support for men and Women Mingling in Public Sparks Furor in Saudi Arabia,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 13 April 2010.

⁷ ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Khidr, *al-Sa’ūdiyya, sirat al-dawla wa-mujtama’: Qirā’a fī tajriba thalath qarn min al-taḥawwalat al-fikrīyya wa-l-siyāsīyya wa-l-tanmīya*, 87-117 (Al-Shabaka al-‘Arabīyya li-l-Abḥāth wa-l-Nashr, Beirut, 2010).

the agenda for the several years,⁷ it was the decision in February 2009 to overhaul the personnel in the highest government agencies that triggered the present clash of interests.⁸ The opening in the same year of the King ‘Abdallāh University of Science and Technology (KAUST), which has become a symbol of reform and has accepted *ikhtilāf*, also exacerbated the already deep apprehension of the conservatives.

The Valentine’s day’s appointments by King ‘Abdallāh were important as they signalled his concerns about reform. Among the new appointments was Fayṣal bin ‘Abdallāh as the new Minister of Education and Muḥammad al-Ṭsā, as Minister of Justice. Well-known arch-conservative figures were replaced, such as the President of the Supreme Judicial Council, Ṣāliḥ bin Muḥammad al-Luḥaydān, who was succeeded by the King’s close adviser, the president of the Majlis al-Shurā, Ṣāliḥ bin Ḥumayd. The head of the Committee of Commanding Good and Forbidding Wrong (henceforth called the *Hay’a*), Shaykh Ibrāhīm al-Ghayth, was replaced by the royal adviser Shaykh ‘Abd al-‘Aziz bin Ḥumayn al-Ḥumayn,⁹ and the head of the Permanent Council of Religious Research and Fatwas (*Lajna al-Dā’ima li-l-Buḥūth wa-l-Fatwā*)¹⁰. The Council of Senior Scholars (*Hay’a Kibār al-‘Ulamā*), one of the most prestigious institutions of the Kingdom was not spared changes.¹¹ Four new members of the twenty-two member Council were appointed, among them the moderate, Qays bin Muḥammad bin ‘Abd al-Laṭīf Āl Mubārak (b. 1960). A-typically, he came from the province of Ahsā, belonged to the Mālikī school of jurisprudence and had enjoyed part of his education in Tunisia. He is a specialist in *Sharī’a* on the application of modern medicine.¹²

The Western press has widely perceived King ‘Abdallāh’s reforms

⁸ *al-Quds al-‘Arabī*, “al-‘Āhil al-Sa‘udi yaquda ‘al-thawra ṣamita’ diḍḍ rijāl al-dīn al-mutashaddidīn wa-tahrīr bilādihi,” 7 October 2009.

⁹ For more in the appointments see: Lars Døssing Rosenmeier and Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen “Can Saudi Arabia Reform itself?” 8 April 2009. Retrieved September 23, 2010, from <http://cuminet.blogs.ku.dk/2009/04/08/can-saudi-arabia-reform-itself/>

¹⁰ Ṭsā al-Suwādī, “Ibn Munī ‘: al-Malik yaṭmaḥu islāh salabiyyāt al-Hay’āt”.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Article on Qays Āl Mubārak in *al-Sharq al-Awsaṭ*, 15 February 2009, <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=507133&issueno=11037>.

¹³ See Christopher Dickey, “The Monarch who declared his own revolution,” *Newsweek*, 21 March 2009, <http://www.newsweek.com/2009/03/20/the-monarch-who-declared-his-own-revolution.html> and the above mentioned Arabic articles on the personnel change.

as an important step forward.¹³ This however remains to be seen. The highest dignitary of the religious establishment, the Muftī of Saudi Arabia, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz bin ‘Abdallāh Āl al-Shaykh, who succeeded the arch-conservative ‘Abd al-‘Azīz bin Bāz ten years ago, has consistently sided with the conservatives and has attacked the reformists on numerous occasions. Shaykh Šālīḥ bin Fawzān al-Fawzān, who is also still an active conservative of the old guard, recently issued a *fatwā* forbidding a French Muslim man from allowing his wife to leave the house without a *niqāb*.¹⁴ In contrast, the younger higher official ‘*ulamā*’ understand their limits. Their liability is that they show themselves equivocal on many issues. The newly appointed, Qays Āl Mubarak, for instance, condemns *takfīr*,¹⁵ and is known for his more liberal ideas on the Shī’a,¹⁶ but yet remains skeptical of allowing women to drive.¹⁷ Other higher ‘*ulamā*’ are even more critical of reform. Having only been appointed two weeks previously to the Permanent Council of Religious Research and Fatwas,¹⁸ Shaykh ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Khudayyir openly condemned the Ministry of Education for promoting sports for girls at schools as “corrupting”.¹⁹ Like *ikhtilāt*, girl’s participation in sports is an issue which divides the ‘*ulamā*’ and finds many conservatives in agreement. The conservative, Shaykh Yūsuf al-Aḥmad who became famous for demanding *ikhtilāt* in the Grand Mosque (by demanding to rebuild it; see below) in May 2010, opposed girls’ participation in sports²⁰ and calls for the expansion of the *Hay’a*.²¹

An obstruction to reform is the alliance between lower and higher

¹⁴ Jamīl al-Dhayābī, “Fatāwā ṭāzija,” *al-Hayāt*, 31 May 2010. Retrieved September 23, 2010, from <http://www.daralhayat.com/portalararticlendam/147003>.

¹⁵ “Tawāṣul al-raḥāḥ li takfīr mustabīḥ al-ikhtilāt,” *al-Waṭan*, 26 February 2010. Retrieved September 23, 2010, from <http://www.alwatan.com.sa/NEWS/newsdetail.asp?issueno=3437&id=137989>.

¹⁶ Interview with Qays Āl Mubārak in *al-Hayāt*, 5 February 2010. Retrieved September 23, 2010, from <http://www.daralhayat.com/ksaarticle/105338>.

¹⁷ See Jamīl al-Dhayābī, “Fatāwā ṭāzija,” *al-Hayāt*, 31 May 2010.

¹⁸ “al-Ta’yīn al-Wiqdānī qā’id li-Baharīyya wa-l-Khudayyir fī Lajna al-Iftā’,” *al-Hayāt*, 10 May 2010, <http://www.daralhayat.com/ksaarticle/139816>.

¹⁹ See Jamīl al-Dhayābī, “Fatāwā ṭāzija,” *al-Hayāt*, 31 May 2010.

²⁰ Ḥasan bin Sālim, “Ibn Bāz wa riyāḍa al-banāt,” *al-Hayāt*, 1 June 2010. Retrieved September 23, 2010, from <http://www.daralhayat.com/ksaarticle/147516>.

²¹ Aḥmad al-Farrāj, “al-Hay’a, ... Dā’im al-‘amal ghayr al-rasmī,” *al-Hayāt*, 6 April 2010. Retrieved September 23, 2010, from <http://www.daralhayat.com/ksaarticle/127259>.

'*ulamā*'. A report by ICG in 2004 believed that this alliance could not be broken and that it regarded it as essential for the survival of the regime in the struggle against al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula.²² Since then this terrorist organisation has been defeated and it seems that the state no longer depends much on the lower '*ulamā*' who are bound to lose the most from infringements on their privileges in education, jurisdiction, and religious police. In the past it was especially the employed '*ulamā*' in lower, secondary and higher education, who agitated against reforms, even if they were symbolic. For example, in 2005, 118 '*ulamā*' signed a petition in which they agreed that women driving had practical benefits (*masāliḥ*) but believed that the danger of "legal corruption" was more of a concern [than practical benefits of women driving]". Typically they accused "Jews, Christians and hypocrites" (Muslims with Western ideas) of waging a campaign to "corrupt women and through them the Muslim nation".²³ The replaced Shaykh Luḥaydān was prominent in this type of resistance. In 2008, for instance, he protested against the detrimental effects of the growth of commercial Saudi TV stations, stating that the owners of these stations could be sentenced to death if they broadcast "profligate" programs. He accused them of promoting "deviation" (*inhirāf*) and sowing "doubts" on established religious values.²⁴

Another important obstacle to reform is the populist '*ulamā*' who extensively use TV stations and internet to propagate their ideas. A good example is Shaykh Sulaymān bin Aḥmad al-Duwīsh.²⁵ With obvious glee he plays on the dilemmas the Saudi state faces by implementing reform while retaining its Wahhābī ideological basis. His most cherished term is "contradiction" (*tanāqud*). He takes Saudi reformers to task for the tendency after 9/11 to graft a religious discourse based on tolerance (*tasāmuḥ*) and coexistence (*ta'āyush*) with other religions on a strict and

²² *Can Saudi Arabia Reform Itself?* 14 July 2004, International Crisis Group, Middle East Report, no. 28.

²³ See the article on Arabiyya.net, 16 July 2005. Retrieved September 23, 2010, from <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2005/07/16/14981.html>.

²⁴ See interview with Ṣāliḥ al-Luḥaydān, <http://www.aluae.net/vb//showthread.php?t=69925> (retrieved September 23, 2010).

²⁵ See for an analysis of the background of the resignation of Shaykh Sa'd al-Shithrī: 7 October 2010, <http://www.israj.net/vb/t4411/> (retrieved May 21, 2010).

rigorous Wahhābī doctrine, which are contrary to Islam. Unapologetically he calls the Shī'a "rejectionists" (*rāfiḍa*) and "unbelievers" (*kuffār*)²⁶ and in his eyes Christians and Jews are "overt enemies".²⁷ The attempts to embellish or down-play such notorious concepts as *al-walā' wa-l-barā'* (loyalty and disavowal)²⁸ are ridiculed.²⁹ In August 2009 he was accused by www.Arabiiyya.net of calling for the assassination of the creators of the television soap comedy "Tāsh 16" for their anti-Islamic humor.³⁰ Due to his earlier provocative pronouncements he was briefly arrested in 2006 for incitement to terrorism.³¹

A reason why the higher official 'ulamā' are unable to respond to these challenges is their lack of authority. After the death of the last Muftī, 'Abd al-'Azīz bin Bāz in 1999, few outstanding and generally accepted sources of religious authority remained. This is reflected the plethora of issuing *fatwās*. On 10 April 2010, the Council of Senior 'Ulamā' held an extraordinary meeting to discuss the "chaos of *fatwās*" and especially the use of *takfīr* in *fatwās*.³² Subsequent to that meeting, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs issued a warning to imāms for using the mosques to further their campaigns against the liberals,³³ while it was only a month

²⁶ Al-Duwīsh made these statements in a talk show on al-Arabiiyya TV station on 17 December 2005 with Maṣṣūr al-Nuqyadān, 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Qāsim and others, 19 December 2005, [al-Arabiiyya.net](http://www.alarabiyya.net). Retrieved September 23, 2010, from <http://www.alarabiyya.net/programs/2005/12/19/19619.html>.

²⁷ "Dā'iya al-Sa'ūdī: ubghīḍu al-shī'a wa-astikhdimuhum, wa amna'u abna'i min al-dirāsa", 19 April 2009, [al-Arabiiyya.net](http://www.alarabiyya.net), <http://www.alarabiyya.net/articles/2009/04/19/71029.html> (retrieved September 23, 2010).

²⁸ For more on the concept of *al-walā' wa-l-barā'*, see Joas Wagemakers, "The Transformation of a Radical Concept: *al-walā' wa-l-barā'* in the Ideology of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi," in Roel Meijer (ed.), *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement*, 81-106 (London/New York, Hurst/ Columbia UP, 2009).

²⁹ See 14 May 2010, <http://www.saudiyyoon.com/news-action-show-id-5779.htm> (retrieved June 1, 2010).

³⁰ "Dā'iya al-Sa'ūdīyya yuḥarriḍu 'alā qatl kātīb al-ḥalqa al-thālitha min 'tāsh 16'", [al-Arabiiyya.net](http://www.alarabiyya.net), 28 August 2009, <http://www.alarabiyya.net/articles/2009/08/28/83164.html> (retrieved September 23, 2010).

³¹ See his statement after his release on 29 April 2006: <http://www.muslim.net/vb/archive/index.php/t-159529.html> (retrieved June 2, 2010).

³² Muṣṭafā al-Anṣārī, "Kibār 'ulamā' yu'qīdūn jalsa istithnā'i li-munāqisha 'tajrīm al-takfīr,'" *al-Ḥayāt*, 10 April 2010, <http://www.daralhayat.com/ksaarticle/128965> (retrieved September 23, 2010).

³³ See the warning of the undersecretary of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, *al-Ḥayāt*, 11 April 2010, <http://www.daralhayat.com/ksaarticle/129322> (retrieved September 23, 2010).

earlier that the King warned that “words should not be an instrument to settle accounts”.³⁴ It appears that attempts to limit *fatwās* to the “people of rooted knowledge” represented by the religious establishment have failed,³⁵ and popular Shaykhs who in their view decree “irresponsible” *fatwās* remain unchecked.³⁶ The lack of religious authority has become especially apparent in the *ikhtilāf* debate.³⁷ Few members of the Council of Higher ‘*ulamā*’, however, seem perturbed. The newly appointed Qays Āl Mubārak stated that there was no need for drawing up a black list of ‘*ulamā*’ who gave “deviationist” (*shādhda*) *fatwās*.³⁸

The reason why the conservative alliance is so strong is that many of the higher and lower ‘*ulamā*’ share the same apocalyptic discourse. Due to the increasing power of the liberal press and the reformists, they feel threatened by “the secularists and the liberals”, who wage “horrendous campaigns” against the real protectors of Islam and the interests of the king and Saudi Arabia. ³⁹ For them liberals and “hypocrites” (*munāfiqūn*) are one and the same. They have asked the state to curtail the power of the liberals, prevent them from damaging the standing of the ‘*ulamā*’ and put their newspapers under supervision.⁴⁰ The populist, Shaykh Sulaymān al-Duwīsh has become notorious for his personal attacks on the editors-in-chief of the foremost liberal newspapers al-Waṭan and al-Riyāḍ, the head of the journalists organisation, Turkī al-Sudayrī, as well

³⁴ Jamīl al-Dhayābī, “‘Hamāqāt’ bi-ism al-fatwā”, *al-Ḥayāt*, 22 March 2010, <http://www.daralhayat.com/internationalarticle/121731> (retrieved September 23, 2010).

³⁵ ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Qarā‘āwī, “Nadwa al-amn al-dīnī wa-l-fikrī tuṭālibu al-khuṭabā’ bi-l-tarayyuth fī iftā’ al-muṣallīn,” *al-Ḥayāt*, 14 May 2010, <http://www.daralhayat.com/ksaarticle/140846> (retrieved September 23, 2010).

³⁶ Ḥasan bin Sālīm, “Tasā’ul mā bu’d al-fatwā?”, *al-Ḥayāt*, 16 March 2010, <http://www.daralhayat.com/ksaarticle/119701> (retrieved September 23, 2010), and Fayṣal al-Makhlaḥ, “Intiqādāt li- ‘Aḥmad’ ba’d fatwāhu bi-hadam al-ḥaram,” *al-Ḥayāt*, 20 March 2010, <http://www.daralhayat.com/ksaarticle/121331> (retrieved September 23, 2010).

³⁷ Ḥasan bin Sālīm, “Tasā’ul mā bu’d al-fatwā?”, *al-Ḥayāt*, 16 March 2010.

³⁸ “Hadhā al-ḥall anfa’ min ‘jald’ aṣḥāb al-fatāwā al-shādhda,” *al-Ḥayāt*, 30 January 2010, <http://www.daralhayat.com/ksaarticle/103078> (retrieved September 23, 2010).

³⁹ See interview with Sāliḥ bin al-Luḥaydān, <http://www.aluae.net/vb/showthread.php?t=69925> (retrieved September 23, 2010).

⁴⁰ “Bayān ‘ulamā’ Makka fī al-difā’ an al-duktūr Sa’d al-Shithrī,” October 2009, <http://www.almhml.com/c/-63835> (retrieved April 26, 2010).

as the former Minister of Culture, Iyād Madanī, and the media Czar, al-Walīd bin Ṭalāl.⁴¹

Liberals in the eyes of conservatives are presumed to be bent on “westernising Islam” and replacing Islam by a “modern, moderate” version, which they call an “American Islam”.⁴² For merely raising in the Majlis al-Shūrā (a body installed in the 1990s to give advice to the King), the issue of women driving is condemned as the work of “intellectual terrorism” (*al-irhāb al-fikrī*).⁴³ In their discourse conservatives try to delegitimise the liberal reform discussions by equating “progress” (*taqaddum*) with such terms as “decay” (*inḥilāl*). They regard the liberals as “corrupters on earth”, who believe that “decay of religion and behaviour is the basis for progress” and that we “cannot adopt Western industry and knowledge without taking its ideas and its values”.⁴⁴ Only the *Sharīʿa* can, in their view, constitute “a blockade against pretexts and means to promote corruption and the forbidden.”⁴⁵ The decision by Minister of Interior Nāyif to continue the ban on cinemas in Saudi Arabia was thus welcomed by the conservatives.⁴⁶

Remarkably, the conservative discourse against the liberals and reform-ists is very similar to the Wahhābī counter-terrorism discourse against “extremism” (*ghulūw*).⁴⁷ Liberalism is accused of spreading “corruption” (*fasād*)

⁴¹ ‘Aḍwān al-Aḥmārī, “Bi-mādhā yaṣannifu al-Duwīsh nafsahu al-yawm: al-dāʿiya al-Islāmī aw khuffāsh iliktrūnī?” *al-Waṭan*, 19 April 2009, <http://www.alwatan.com.sa/news/newsdetail.asp?issueno=3122&id=98185&groupID=0> (retrieved September 23, 2010).

⁴² See the interview of Shaykh Yūsuf al-Aḥmad with *al-Shams* posted on his website: <http://www.dr-alahmad.com/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=17965> (retrieved September 23, 2010).

⁴³ “118 al-shakhsīyya al-Saʿūdīyya yarfidūn fī bayān jadīd qiyāda al-mara’a li-l-siyāra,” 16 July 2005, *al-Arabiyya.net*, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2005/07/16/14981.html> (retrieved March 30, 2010).

⁴⁴ Ibrāhīm bin Muḥammad al-Ḥaqīl, “Hal taghrīb sabab al-taqaddum? Al-Jāmī’a Mālik ‘Abdallāh namudhijān, 8 October 2009, <http://www.islamlight.net/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=15422&Itemid=25> (retrieved September 23, 2010).

⁴⁵ “118 al-shakhsīyya al-Saʿūdīyya yarfidūn fī bayān jadīd qiyāda al-mar’a li-l-siyāra,” 16 July 2005, *op. cit.*

⁴⁶ See for instance this document on <http://www.almhml.com/c/-63778>, no date (retrieved May 29, 2010).

⁴⁷ See my forthcoming article “Saudi Arabia’s War on terrorism: Combating Passions, Ignorance and Deviation,” in Jeevan Deol and Zaheer Kazmi (eds.), *Contextualizing Jihadi Thought* (London: Hurst & Company).

and “abomination” (*munkar*). Good Muslims must be “educated” (*tathqīf*) and “inoculated” (*taḥṣīn*) against its “deadly poison” that is enclosed in such devious terms as “reform” (*islāh*), “advice” (*nasīḥa*) and “nationalism” (*waṭaniyya*). Like terrorists, liberals use “spurious arguments” (*shubahāt*) and are slaves of their passions (*ahwā*). Basically, liberals are apostates, though few will say so openly. In the hysteria of the moment, the conservatives regard KAUST as the first step to “dissolve religion, its values and its morals”.⁴⁸ Their views were confirmed in footage posted on YouTube, showing mixed dancing among students of the new universities.⁴⁹

It is important to note while the so-called liberals (*librāliyyūn*) can be divided into different categories it is the cultural liberals that are involved in this debate.⁵⁰ In this clash of worldviews the liberals are no less outspoken than their conservative counterparts. One wonders, whether Saudi Arabia is not one of the few countries in the Middle East that has developed an anti-clerical movement comparable to Iran. The liberals portray the conservatives as “reactionaries” who oppose reform, progress, science, modernity and the development of knowledge “which should be enjoyed by both sexes”.⁵¹ They accuse their opponents of misusing their power by using the media for their own purposes instead of keeping to the traditional means of giving discrete advice to the ruler.⁵² Their weapon of issuing *fatwās* and ostracising liberals and other opponents

⁴⁸ One remark in a compendium of negative responses to KAUST, <http://www.islamlight.net/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=15402&Itemid=25> (retrieved September 23, 2010).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ The liberals can be divided into different categories: political liberals who demand political reforms and who ultimately advocate a constitutional monarchy; liberals who demand freedom of speech; and cultural liberals who promote the expansion of personal rights, among them women’s rights. What unites them is their disgust with the clerical power in Saudi Arabia. The political liberals were largely defeated after their demands for reform were rejected in 2004. For more on their ideas, see the fascinating book which represents their ideas and programs, *Rabī al-Sa’ūdīyya wa-makhrājāt al-qam’a: Du’āh al-islāh al-siyāsī* (The Saudi Spring and the extracts of repression: Causes for political reform) (Beirut, Dār al-Kunūz, 2004), and the ICG report, *Can Saudi Arabia Reform Itself?* 14 July 2004, International Crisis Group, Middle East Report, no. 28.

⁵¹ Jamāl al-Kāshuqjī, “al-Shaykh al-Shithrī wa-l-qanāt al-Majd ... li-ma tashwīsh wa naḥnu fī khayr min dīninā wa dunyānā?” *al-Waṭan*, 29 September 2009, (<http://www.alwatan.com.sa/news/writerdetail.asp?issueno=3287&id=14724&Rname=51>) (retrieved September 23, 2010).

⁵² *Ibid.*

is condemned. The liberals do however accuse the conservatives of derailing the debate on the future of the country by elevating non-issues such like *ikhṭilāt*, forbidding women to drive cars and the introduction of cinemas, over the “real problems” that exist in the country like poverty, drug abuse, unemployment and nuclear threat.⁵³ The conservatives, they believe, damage the image of Saudi Arabia and isolate the country from the rest of the world. In contrast to the conservatives, KAUST is for the liberals a symbol of letting women “participate fully in the family, society and labour market”, and allowing women to have rights to exert “their normal duties in society”.⁵⁴ While the conservatives try to portray the liberals as the most important threat to Islam and the source of terrorism, the liberals try to connect the religious “extremists” (*mutashaddidūn*) and their opposition against pluralism (*ta‘addudīyya*) and freedom of expression with terrorism.⁵⁵ However, the liberals are not averse to the use religious of terms against their opponents, accusing them of promoting *fitna* (dissension) or promoting “innovation” (*bid‘a*).

One of the fascinating aspects of the debate and the power struggle is that both sides refer to the name of the ruler in their discussions. In a political environment that allows limited criticism of the ruler and where the ruler is decisive in all political matters, both sides are careful to underline the theory of complete obedience to the ruler (*walī al-amr*). But of course both insert their own interpretation to this concept. For the first time since the rise of the *Ṣaḥwa*, liberals feel that they are on the right side of things. They portray the king as the promoter of modernisation, “who believes in the future and gives the next generation chances [for development]”.⁵⁶ KAUST conveniently links those elements that are

⁵³ ‘Abdallāh bin Bakhīt, “Hal qiyādat al-mara’a li-l-siyāra hīya akbar hammunā?”, *al-Riyād*, 13 January 2010, <http://www.alriyadh.com/2010/01/13/article489309.html> (retrieved September 23, 2010).

⁵⁴ Yūsuf al-Kwaylīt, “al-Mara’a bayn hājis al-shakk wa ‘l-yaqīn,” *al-Riyād*, 30 September 2009, <http://www.alriyadh.com/2009/09/30/article462881.html> (retrieved September 23, 2010).

⁵⁵ “Dā’īya al-Sa’ūdīyya yuḥarriḍu ‘alā qatl al-kātib al-ḥalqa al-thālitha min ‘tāsh 16”, *www.al-Arabiyya.net*, 28 August 2009 (retrieved September 23, 2010).

⁵⁶ Jamāl al-Khashuqjī, “al-Shaykh al-Shithrī wa-l-qanāt al-Majd...li-ma tashwīsh wa naḥnu fī khayr min dīninā wa dunyānā?” *al-Waṭan*, 29 September 2009, <http://www.alwatan.com.sa/news/writerdetail.asp?issueno=3287&id=14724&Rname=51> (retrieved September 23, 2010).

crucial for their program of modernisation: it enjoys the patronage of the ruler, promotes science, leads to progress and women's emancipation as well as incorporates nationalism, and is a way of dismantling the walls of isolation and of connecting Saudi Arabia with the rest of the world. In a mirror view of the Wahhābī clergy, the liberals entertain a utilitarian view of religion. As one liberal writer said: "We cannot believe that when the state sets the highest goals for the benefit of the citizen (*muwāṭin*), that it can contradict the principles of religion or break the locks of the forbidden (*maḥzūra*) and rejected (*marfūda*)."⁵⁷

No less vigorous is the conservatives' defence of the ruler. They criticise KAUST and liberal reforms in the name of the *walī al-amr*. Did he not earlier criticise the press for printing pictures of women? Does he not promote the "good" (*al-khayr*) and defend the general interest (*al-maslaḥa*)?⁵⁸ The conservatives have the best interests of the ruler at heart and only they can prevent the liberals from promoting their hidden agenda of Westernization.⁵⁹

The Ikhtilāṭ Debate

The Sa'd al-Shithrī Case

The *ikhtilāṭ* debate has been around for some time, but emerged into the limelight after the reforms of February 2009. Sa'd bin Nāṣir bin 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Shithrī was the first to trigger the strong emotions involved in the debate. Remarkably, he had been appointed to the Council of Senior 'Ulamā' during the February 2009 personnel overhaul (born in 1964/5)⁶⁰ and was regarded as a member of "the King's party". He was not known to be a reformer though he was member of a well-known family of 'ulamā' who had been in the service of the royal family for some time and was

⁵⁷ Yūsuf al-Kwaylīt, "al-Mara'a bayn al-hājis al-shakk wa yaqīn," *al-Riyāḍ*, 30 September 2009.

⁵⁸ These remarks were made by Shaykh al-Shithrī when he criticized KAUST, see below.

⁵⁹ See the attack of Sulaymān al-Duwīsh on the editor-in-chief of *al-Waṭan* newspaper, Jamāl al-Kāshuqjī, made on 12-10-1430 (2 October 2009), <http://www.islam-feqh.com/News/NewsItem.aspx?NewsItemID=2201> (retrieved April 20, 2010).

⁶⁰ See the article on al-Shithrī on www.israjanet.net, <http://www.israjanet.net/vb/t4411/>, 7 October 2009 (retrieved April 21, 2010).

⁶¹ 'Abduh Khāl, "Nazra al-Shithrī wa-l-nazra al-wāqī'a," *Ukāz*, 30 September 2009, <http://www.okaz.com.sa/new/Issues/20090930/Con20090930306933.htm> (retrieved September 23, 2010).

assumed to be a loyalist.⁶¹

Remarks that he made after he was appointed to the Council show him to be level-headed in his thinking. He was to point out that the Council of Senior ‘Ulamā’ had never been confined to only the Hanbalis but had always been open to the other three schools of jurisprudence.⁶² One of his *fatwās* was to forbid jihad “unless it is permitted by the ruler.”⁶³ Likewise, he dutifully warned against the use of the holy texts for *takfīr* and terrorism and “the development of extremist thought”.⁶⁴ On another occasion he repeated the standard Sunni warning against internal divisions (*fitna*), for “the *sharī’a* forbids parties (*aḥzāb*) and factions (*firāq*) as Islam demands that the *umma* is united”.⁶⁵

Shaykh Sa‘d al-Shithrī’s career took a turn for the worse when he was interviewed by the private TV station al-Majd on 28 September 2009 for the opening of KAUST. He began by carefully praising King ‘Abdallah for founding such an excellent university and “restoring the *umma* to its previous position of being a world leader in science”; in short, he considered it a “blessed step”. However, he believed there were some aspects of the university “of which the King will not approve”, and acting on the King’s condemnation of publishing images of women in the press, he recommended that special ‘*ulamā*’ committees be established to ensure that the university acted in accordance with the wishes of the king and “remove that which contradicts the *Sharī’a*,” and “differs from the truth”. As an example he gave the theory of evolution. Typically he claimed, to speak in name of the “general interest”, for the *Sharī’a* promotes the good and rejects the bad and corruption. Only at the end of the interview, did he mention the *i*-word and that “one of the reasons why people might oppose the good (*al-khayr*)” is that it might promote *ikhtilāf*, which is regarded as

⁶² Na‘īm Tamīm al-Ḥakīm, “al-Shithrī: Hay’a Kibār al-‘Ulamā’ mundhu takwīnha la tat’aṣṣabu li-madhhab al-mu‘ayyan,” *‘Ukāz*, 19 February 2009, <http://www.okaz.com.sa/okaz/osf/20090219/Con20090219259602.htm> (retrieved September 23, 2010).

⁶³ Shaykh al-Shithrī, “La jihād bi-dūn wilāya al-sharī’a wa idhn al-imām,” 6 July 2009, <http://www.assakina.com/fatwa/3419.html> (retrieved May 4, 2010).

⁶⁴ See the article taken from the newspaper *al-Madīna* and posted on 6 September 2009, <http://www.sahab.net/forums/showthread.php?t=370881>, 6 September 2009 (retrieved May 3, 2010).

⁶⁵ ‘Abd al-Muḥsin al-Hārithī, “al-Shithrī yad‘u ṭalabat al-‘ilm li-badhala al-jahd fi muḥāriba al-fikr al-dāll,” *‘Ukāz*, 3 January 2008, <http://www.okaz.com.sa/okaz/osf/20080103/Con20080103163285.htm> (retrieved September 23, 2010).

“massive evil”. To ensure that his message was heard, he stated that “in mixed gender universities we see lots of evil and corruption (*fasād*)”, in those places “men can look at women and women can look at men and their hearts might catch flame”.⁶⁶

The liberal press were shocked and no less than eighteen articles were published during the next few days in the national newspapers, especially in *al-Riyāḍ* and *‘Ukāz*, attacking the unfortunate Shaykh. The assault began with an article from the editor-in-chief of *al-Waṭan*, Jamāl al-Kāshuqī. He attacked al-Shithrī for opposing “progress”, but more ominously for attacking the king. By openly casting doubt on the legality of the university on national television he had promoted *fitna* and had “accused the rulers of this country of betraying its security and of being the stooges of unbelieving foreigners.”⁶⁷ Ahmad bin Muhammad al-‘Isā stated in *al-Waṭan* that *ikhtilāṭ* was just an excuse. The *ulamā* want to regain their previous power over education by using *ikhtilāṭ*, which is regarded a threat to academic freedom. He concluded that “we do not want an intellectual police”.⁶⁸

Other liberals used the case to attack the prohibition of *ikhtilāṭ* in general. They regarded the obsession with prohibiting *ikhtilāṭ* as senseless as they argued that it already exists in hospitals, marketplaces, in airplanes, and even during the *ṭawāf* (circumambulation) of the Ka’ba. Moreover, as some pointed out, it is a new phenomenon that existed before the conservative reformist *Ṣaḥwa* movement imposed *ikhtilāṭ* on Saudi Arabia during the 1970s and 1980s.⁶⁹ An argument that would later

⁶⁶ The full text of the interview was published a day later in *al-Waṭan* newspaper with a letter by Sa’d al-Shithrī, “Ma nusiba lī ghayr daqīq wa uḍa’imu KAUST”, 30 September 2009, <http://www.alwatan.com.sa/news/newsdetail.asp?issue-no=3288&id=119507&groupID=0> (retrieved September 23, 2010).

⁶⁷ Jamāl al-Kāshuqī, “al-Shaykh al-Shithrī wa-l-qanāt al-Majd...li-ma tashwīsh wa naḥnu fī khayr min ḍminā wa dunyānā?” *al-Waṭan*, 29 September 2010, *op.cit.*

⁶⁸ Ahmad bin Muḥammad al-‘Isā, “Hunāka mā huwa akhtar fī kalām Shaykh al-Shithrī,” *al-Waṭan*, 2 October 2009, <http://www.alwatan.com.sa/news/writerdetail.asp?issueno=3290&id=14802&Rname=391> (retrieved September 23, 2010).

⁶⁹ Qaynān ‘Abdallāh al-Ghāmīdī, “Fizā’a al- ikhtilāṭ al-mutajaddada: al-Shithrī lam yasma’ infijār al-lughm,” *al-Waṭan*, 1 October 2010. *Op. cit.* Retrieved September 23, 2010, from <http://www.alwatan.com.sa/news/writerdetail.asp?issueno=3289&id=14773&Rname=319>.

be developed, was that most liberals pointed out that prohibition of *ikhṭilāt* is not Islamic and that it did not exist during the time of the Prophet and is “tarnished by our local culture”.⁷⁰ Along that line of reasoning, Turkī ‘Abdallāh al-Sudayrī, editor-in-chief of al-Riyāḍ, asked whether the rest of the Islamic world, who do not know of the practice of the total separation of men and women, hold the same view of the deviant al-Shithrī? He also asked whether the portrayal of women as “temptations” and sources of sin and deviation was not an insult to human values and their rationality? He argued that these extremist ideas will isolate Saudi Arabia not just from other religions but also from the majority of other Muslims.⁷¹

Shaykh Sa’d al-Shithrī tried to defend his standpoint and explain his good intentions in a letter he sent to al-Waṭan praising KAUST. He protested that the content of the interview with the TV station had been distorted by the editor-in-chief of al-Waṭan and praised the “excellent role of KAUST and the glorious goals it pursues”. He was especially adamant in correcting the idea that he had criticised the *walī al-amr*. However, in less than a week, on 4 October, Sa’d al-Shithrī was relieved from his position as member of the Council of Senior ‘Ulamā’ by royal decree. He was relieved from various other positions as well, among them the membership of the Permanent Council of Religious Studies and Fatwas.⁷² This was the second time that a member of the Council of Senior ‘Ulamā’ had been dismissed.⁷³

One of the questions asked within the context of resistance against reform was, “to what extent did al-Shithrī speak for the Council of Senior ‘Ulamā’? Was it a planned strategy? Was he encouraged by his colleagues to voice their concerns and those of the whole religious establishment without severe consequences? Or was it simply a blunder?

It is clear from al-Shithrī’s answer to the question on KAUST that it

⁷⁰ ‘Abduh Khāl, “Nazra al-Shithrī wa-l-nazra al-wāqī’a,” *‘Ukāz*, 30 September 2009. Op.cit.

⁷¹ Turkī ‘Abdallāh al-Sudayrī, “Min manṭiq al-Shaykh al-Shithrī ...Li-mādhā nakhtalifu ‘an al-majmū’ al-islāmī?”, al-Riyāḍ, 30 September 2009. Retrieved September 23, 2010, from <http://www.alriyadh.com/2009/09/30/article462891.html>.

⁷² For the full text of al-Shithrī’s dismissal. Retrieved September 23, 2010, from <http://www.alwatan.com.sa/news/newsdetail.asp?issueno=3293&id=120058>

⁷³ See for analysis of the affair, <http://www.mqataa.com/vb/showthread.php?p=165682>, 4 October 2009, (retrieved April 21, 2010).

was not simply a blunder. His responses during the interview were well-reasoned and lengthy and give the impression of expressing a more general opinion. This is supported by the massive protest from the religious establishment against the dismissal of al-Shithrī. The Muftī publicly stated that when al-Shithrī had earlier offered to step down, that his “resignation was unacceptable”.⁷⁴ For fiery preachers like Shaykh Sulaymān al-Duwīsh, the al-Shithrī case was another example of the mortal threats that Saudi Arabia faced from the “deviationist liberals”. He clearly voiced the opinion of many conservatives that al-Shithrī had become the victim of a well-orchestrated campaign of the liberals led by the al-Waṭan newspaper.⁷⁵ In anger Shaykh Sulaymān al-Duwīsh “disavowed” (*bara’a*) KAUST and stated that the educational board of KAUST were “corrupters” (*mufsidūn*).⁷⁶ Many members of the religious establishment however remained neutral. The imam of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, Shaykh ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Sudays called upon everyone in his Friday sermon to remain calm and prevent *fitna* from spreading in the country. He praised KAUST and pressed upon leaders, ‘*ulamā*’ and intellectuals and “those interested in general interest [...] to uphold the consensus (*ijmā*) and agreement on this important endeavor”.⁷⁷

The al-Shithrī case seemed to confirm that the reformist trend was on the rise and that nothing could stop it. It was encouraging to the liberals that even though someone who had just been appointed by the King and as well-connected as al-Shithrī would not be able to stand in the way of reform.

The Shaykh al-Ghāmidī Affair

Two months after the dismissal of al-Shithrī the *ikhtilāf* debate flared up again. On 9 December 2009, Shaykh Aḥmad bin Qāsim al-Ghāmidī,

⁷⁴ See the article on al-Shithrī on www.israj.net, <http://www.israj.net/vb/t4411/>, 7 October 2009 (retrieved April 21, 2010).

⁷⁵ See, <http://www.qassimedu.gov.sa/edu/showthread.php?p=181699> (retrieved September 23, 2010).

⁷⁶ See, <http://www.islamlight.net/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=15314&Itemid=48> (retrieved September 23, 2010).

⁷⁷ Posted on 11 October 2009 on the website, <http://aintedles.yoo7.com/montada-f48/topic-t13547.htm> (retrieved September 23, 2010).

head of the Committee for Commanding Right and Preventing Wrong in Mecca wrote an article in the liberal newspaper 'Ukāz in which he argued that *ikhtilāf* should be permitted and that its prohibition had no basis in *Sharī'a*.⁷⁸ Like al-Shithrī, al-Ghāmidī was with 46 years of age relatively young. He based his views on an extensive study he had written during the previous two years.

The al-Ghāmidī affair confuses the reformist case. While Shaykh al-Shithrī was supposed to tow the reformist line and support the policy of King 'Abdallāh, al-Ghāmidī was a civil servant who was required to implement the policy of the state to the letter and see to the prevention of *ikhtilāf*, and should not as an 'ālim voice opinions on controversial matters of doctrine. He did however retain his position, indicating that his views were supported by the government hierarchy.

During the following months nothing seemed to stop him from promoting a more comprehensive reform program, although he was abused, ostracised, and even physically intimidated by five young men who tried to enter his house demanding to have *ikhtilāf* with his wife and daughters as he did not object to mingling of genders.⁷⁹ He expanded his campaign to subjects other than *ikhtilāf*, when in an interview with al-Madīna on 8 April he stated that any 'ālim who regarded the duty of common prayer in the mosque as unnecessary could not be punished (he argued it was not a *munkar*) as it was an issue of personal interpretation (*ijtihād*).⁸⁰ In relation to this issue, he also regarded the mandatory closing of shops during prayers as unnecessary. On 18, 19 and 20 April al-Madīna

⁷⁸ "al-Ikhtilāf mustalah jadīd wa adilla al-sharī'a taraddu bi-quwwa 'alā man yahrimuhu", 9 December 2010, <http://www.okaz.com.sa/new/Issues/20091209/Con20091209319589.htm> (retrieved September 23, 2010).

⁷⁹ Ḥātim al-'Amīrī, "Shurṭa Makka tataḥaffaẓa 'alā 5 shabāb ḥāwilū dukhūl manzil al-Shaykh al-Ghāmidī," 30 April 2010, al-Madīna, <http://www.al-madina.com/node/244237> (retrieved September 26, 2010).

⁸⁰ "Mudīr 'āmm al-Hay'at Makka Dr. Aḥmad Qāsim al-Ghāmidī fī risālatihi 'al-Qawāfil' al-Ta'a fī Ḥukm al-Ṣalāt al-Jum'a" (The caravans of obedience on the issue of the communal prayer), 'Ukāz, 8 April 2010. There is link to the book in this article, <http://www.okaz.com.sa/new/Issues/20100418/Con20100418345202.htm> and a link to the full interview <http://www.okaz.com.sa/new/Issues/20100417/Con20100417344908.htm>. The full document can be found on <http://www.benaa.com/Read.asp?PID=1758757&cnt=-2&Sec=0> (retrieved September 23, 2010).

newspaper published three extensive excerpts from his 190-page book on the subject, further kindling the fires of *fitna*.⁸¹ In this latter half of his campaign he even included institutions as the *Hay'a* itself of which he was an important functionary.

Al-Ghāmidī would not have been able to wage his campaign for reform if the liberal press and other related spheres of influence (like cultural clubs) had not given him the assistance to express his views. Al-Ghāmidī launched the second part of his campaign during a lecture he gave in a cultural club in al-Tā'if on 4 April 2010.⁸² His most important interviews were with the liberal media, which published excerpts from his books; two to al-Arabiyya.net,⁸³ one to al-Waṭan,⁸⁴ and two (6, 17 April) to 'Ukāz,⁸⁵ and one to Elaph.⁸⁶

Al-Ghāmidī did not limit his attacks on “extremist thought” in the liberal press. He also engaged in fierce debates and even became the butt of vicious attacks on religious television shows as al-Bayyana on Iqrā' TV.⁸⁷ All of these television debates have been posted on Youtube, where they

⁸¹ Excerpts from al-Qawāfil al-Ta'a fi Ḥukm al-Ṣalāt al-Jum'a were published in al-Madīna, the first on 18 April 2010, <http://www.al-madina.com/node/240958>; the second on 19 April 2010, <http://www.al-madina.com/node/241206> and the third on 20 April 2010, <http://www.al-madina.com/node/241451> (retrieved September 23, 2010).

⁸² al-Jazīra, 18 April 2010, <http://search.suhuf.net.sa/2010jaz/apr/18/ar2.htm> (retrieved September 23, 2010).

⁸³ “Al-Sa'ūdiyyūn yatadhakkirūn mādhim ba'd ḥadīth al-Ghāmidī 'an al-ikhtilāf,” 12 December 2009, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2009/12/12/93988.html> and “Nuṣūṣ al-ikhtilāf ṣaḥīḥa wa min khālifunī yuridu taḍlīl al-nās,” www.al-Arabiyya.net, 3 January 2010, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2010/01/03/96207.html> (retrieved September 23, 2010).

⁸⁴ Jamāl al-Kāshuqī, “Min ajli al-Hay'a: li-nufiq bayn al-Shaykh al-Ghāmidī wa-l-ikhwānuhu,” al-Waṭan, 22 April 2010, <http://www.alwatan.com.sa/news/writerdetail.asp?issueno=3492&id=18968&Rname=51> (retrieved September 23, 2010).

⁸⁵ 'Ukāz, 6 April 2010, <http://www.okaz.com.sa/new/Issues/20100406/Con20100406342746.htm> and “Khilāṣa al-Kalām...Lā yaṣīḥu al-inkār 'alā man yunādī bi-'adam iḡhlāq al-mahāl al-tijāriyya awqāt al-ṣalāt,” 'Ukāz 17 April 2010, <http://www.okaz.com.sa/new/Issues/20100417/Con20100417344908.htm> (both retrieved September 23, 2010).

⁸⁶ Published on 1 May 2010, <http://www.elaph.com/Web/news/2010/5/557334.htm> (both retrieved September 23, 2010).

⁸⁷ Iqrā', 15 April 2010. For an analysis of the debate, see <http://www.barakish.net/news.aspx?cat=12&sub=13&id=6284> and 'Ukāz, 22 April 2010, <http://www.okaz.com.sa/new/Issues/20100422/PrinCon20100422345923.htm> (both retrieved September 23, 2010).

are widely viewed and referred to in websites. The fact that his campaign is comprehensive and was sanctioned in important circles, calls for a closer look at his ideas and background.

Shaykh Aḥmad al-Ghāmīdī's Background and Ideas

Aḥmad bin Qāsim al-Ghāmīdī was born in 1965 in a village in al-Baha in the southern part of Saudi Arabia. He describes himself as belonging to the Wasaṭīyya and the rationalists (*'uqalā'*). Although he has contacts with liberals and obviously has obtained some ideas from them, he does not belong to them and regards himself as Salafī. Yet, at the same time he claims to have been a student of the Muftī 'Abd al-'Azīz bin Bāz (d. 1999) and the conservative scholars such as Muhammad bin Sāliḥ al-'Uthaymīn (d. 2000) and 'Abdallāh bin Jibrīn. However, since 1998, he claims to be a *ṭālib al-ilm* (student). Strangely enough, he received his BA and MA in business administration from the American Ambassador University. When the controversy started, he had been an employee of the *Hay'a* for twenty years though he only became head of the *Hay'a* in Mecca three years prior to the controversy and only two years before the February 2009 appointments.⁸⁸

Since his appointment as head of the *Hay'a* in Mecca he has been in the news on account of his function in supervising the Hajj and has been interviewed in that capacity.⁸⁹ On the rare occasions he was interviewed he showed himself to be open-minded. In one interview he mentioned the issue of women working, stating that the issue was not whether they could work but under what conditions they should work. During the whole controversy he supported the power of the ruler (*walī al-amr*) who he claimed could put an end to discussions of matters under *ijtihād* if the security of the state was comprised.⁹⁰

Which of his reformist ideas have provoked such sharp responses? First, al-Ghāmīdī challenges the religious competence of the '*ulamā'* by

⁸⁸ See for his biography, 'Ukāz, 17 April 2010, <http://www.okaz.com.sa/new/Issues/20100417/Con20100417344909.htm> and other sources (both retrieved September 23, 2010).

⁸⁹ See al-Riyāḍ, 14 May 2009, <http://www.alriyadh.com/2009/05/14/article429404.html> (both retrieved September 23, 2010).

⁹⁰ "Khilāṣa al-Kalām...Lā yaṣīḥu al-inkār 'alā man yunādī bi-'adam ighlāq al-mahāl al-tijāriyya awqāt al-ṣalāt", 'Ukāz 17 April 2010, op. cit.

stating that *ikhṭilāṭ* “is natural in the life of the *umma* and forbidding it does not rest on clear religious evidence (*dalīl*).” He asserts that “the term *ikhṭilāṭ* is a recent phenomenon which the earliest people of knowledge, the *Ṣaḥāba*, (Companions of the Prophet) were unaware of”. “In fact”, he asserts, “*ikhṭilāṭ* was a natural disposition in the life of the *umma* and its societies”.⁹¹ His argument that forbidding *ikhṭilāṭ* is based on “custom” and “tradition” is remarkable as it constitutes a direct assault on the main tenets of Wahhabism and its claim to represent pure doctrine, combating customs such as the veneration of local holy men and Sufism as “innovation” (*bid‘a*).⁹² This is also why he defends KAUST. As a modernising force it is not just a project that restores Arab role in science, but is opposed to un-Islamic traditions (*taqālīd*) and customs (*‘adāt*) which in his liberalist terminology are the “worst enemies of development and change”.⁹³

His second challenge concerns the authority of the *‘ulamā’*. By explaining that *ikhṭilāṭ* and mandatory common prayers and the closing of shops is an issue of *ijtihād*, he undermines their claim that they have closed the debate on *ikhṭilāṭ*. His answer is that rulings on these issues must be “resolved by impartial investigation of the evidence”. Merely accepting the opinions of senior *‘ulamā’* in the past is *taqlīd*, which in Salafism is forbidden.⁹⁴ Opening the door of *ijtihād*, al-Ghāmīdī opens a Pandora’s box.⁹⁵ Remarkably, in containing it, he follows the theory of *walī al-amr*, assigns to the King the power to terminate *ijtihād* as soon as it

⁹¹ “Ikḥṭilāṭ muṣṭalaḥ jadīd wa-adilla al-shar‘iyya turaddu bi-quwa ‘alā man yaḥarrimuhu,” ‘Ukāz, 9 December 2009 <http://www.okaz.com.sa/new/Issues/20091209/Con20091209319589.htm> (both retrieved September 23, 2010). Retrieved September 23, 2010.

⁹² Ibid. For more on the doctrine of Salafism, see Bernard Haykal, “On the nature of Salafi Thought and Action”, in Roel Meijer (ed), *Global Salafism: Islam’s New Religious Movement*, 33-50 (London: Hurst & Co, 2009).

⁹³ Muhammad Sa‘īd al-Zahrānī, “Na‘am...hunāk muḥtasibun yashawwahun sam‘a al-Hay‘a wa sa-nuqāḍihum,” ‘Ukāz, 6 April 2010, <http://www.okaz.com.sa/new/Issues/20100406/Con20100406342746.htm> (retrieved September 23, 2010).

⁹⁴ “Nuṣūṣ al-ikhṭilāṭ ṣaḥīḥa wa min khālīfunī yurīdu taḍlīl al-nās”, www.al-Arabiya.net 3 January 2010, op.cit.

⁹⁵ “Khilāsa al-Kalām...Lā yaṣīḥu al-inkār ‘alā min yunādī bi-‘adam iḡhlāq al-mahāl al-tijāriyya awqāt al-ṣalāt”, ‘Ukāz 17 April 2010, op. cit.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

threatens the unity of the *umma* and leads to dissension (*fitna*).⁹⁶

Al-Ghāmidī's third line of attack is more rational and is based on a current that is supported by the liberal trends within Wahhabism, namely the median way or al-Wasaṭiyya. The trend has gained greater influence since the criticism of Wahhabism after 9/11. He explains that *ikhtilāt* is an outgrowth of extremism (*ghuluw*) that has become ingrained in Saudi Arabia during the past thirty years. He believes that the *Sharī'a* demands that people live their lives normally without "exaggeration" or "neglect". This is an interesting view because it basically attacks the official counter-terrorist discourse which calls the jihadis *ghulāt*, extremists. It is also the image the liberals have of the conservatives.⁹⁷

The fourth argument is pragmatic and is based on his own experiences as head of the *Hay'a* that has to enforce the prohibition of *ikhtilāt*. He points out that *ikhtilāt* is out-dated and can no longer be practically implemented. Does *Ikhtilāt* take place over internet? The internet has become so realistic that it is as if men and women through webcams actually meet. He accuses people who condemn *ikhtilāt* of hypocrisy: "Those who forbid it actually experience it in their daily lives."⁹⁸

Undoubtedly it was not just his ideas that provoked such strong responses, he also directly attacked various institutions and personnel. His speech for the Cultural Club in al-Ta'if was a retort to his detractors calling for a major overhaul of the *Hay'a*. Echoing the critics of the liberals, he advocated an open debate on the mistakes of the *Hay'a*.⁹⁹ He said the *Hay'a* should be purged of "extremists" (*mutashaddidūn*) who should be replaced by "moderates" and adherents of al-Wasaṭiyya.¹⁰⁰ The *Hay'a*, according to him, had seized power and its members "have exceeded the [original] limits and instructions to the extent that they have taken away the freedom that Islam allows to people".¹⁰¹ He argued for the "correction" (*taṣḥīh*) of "flaws"

⁹⁷ "Ikhtilāt' muṣṭalah jadīd wa-adilla al-shar'iyya turaddu bi-quwa 'alā man yaḥarrimuhu," 'Ukāz, 9 December 2009 <http://www.okaz.com.sa/new/Issues/20091209/Con20091209319589.htm>

⁹⁸ Muhammad Sa'īd al-Zahrānī, "Na'am...hunāk muḥtasibun yashawwahun sam'a al-Hay'a wa sa-nuqāḍihim," 'Ukāz, 6 April 2010, op. cit.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ "Khilāṣa al-Kalām...Lā yaṣihhu al-inkār 'alā min yunādī bi-'adam ighlāq al-mahāl al-tijāriyya awqāt al-ṣalāt," 'Ukāz 17 April 2010, op. cit.

¹⁰¹ Muhammad Sa'īd al-Zahrānī, "Na'am...hunāk muḥtasibun yashawwahun sam'a al-Hay'a wa sa-nuqāḍihim," 'Ukāz, 6 April 2010, op. cit.

(*khalal*) in the *Hay'a* and for the appointment of “moderate minded ‘ulamā’ in leading places in Mecca and replacing those who are irresponsible and overwhelmed with rashness and who are unwilling to work with that spirit [of moderateness] or are ignorant of *fiqh* on the different forms of allegiance to the ruler”.¹⁰² In his latest utterances he promoted the culture of “dialogue” (*hiwār*), stating that “the general public is dominated by fanaticism and traditions of one point of view”,¹⁰³ echoing the belief of the liberals that terrorism has its source within Wahhabism.¹⁰⁴

Responses

The responses to al-Ghāmīdī’s reformist campaign are indicative of the alliances and forces opposing each other. Although al-Ghāmīdī was to everybody’s surprise not dismissed for his ideas, very few really defended him. His direct boss, Shaykh ‘Abd al-‘Aziz bin Ḥumayn al-Ḥumayn, who was appointed in February 2009, did not support him.¹⁰⁵ Another so-called reformer, Shaykh Qays Āl Mubārak, who was named by al-Ghāmīdī as an ally, quickly denied any association with him.¹⁰⁶ Salmān al-‘Awda, the leader of the *Ṣaḥwa* movement in the 1990s, who has moderated and accommodated his speech,¹⁰⁷ refused to become involved in the debate but criticised the “extremist” ‘ulamā’, denouncing their “over-enthusiastic mentality for pronouncing something forbidden (*taḥrīm*)”. He acknowledged that there was room for debate on the issue of *ikhtilāf*.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰² See “Khilāṣa al-Kalām...Lā yaṣiḥḥu al-inkār ‘alā min yunādī bi-‘adam iḡhlāq al-mahāl al- al-tijāriyya awqāt al-ṣalāt”, *‘Ukāz* 17 April 2010, op.cit.

¹⁰³ “Aḥmad al-Ghāmīdī, “Farḍ al-ray’ al-wāḥid huwa ma yuḥdith ‘al-ḍajīj’”, al-Ḥayāt, 14 May 2010, <http://international.daralhayat.com/ksaarticle/141198> (retrieved September 25, 2010).

¹⁰⁴ Aḥmad al-Ghāmīdī, “Wiṣāya al-fikrīyya muqaddima li-l-irḥāb al-jisḍī”, al-Ḥayāt, 19 May 2010, <http://international.daralhayat.com/ksaarticle/143050> (retrieved September 26, 2010).

¹⁰⁵ See for his response, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2010/04/25/106830.html> (retrieved September 25, 2010).

¹⁰⁶ “Shaykh Āl Mubārak: mā li-nisba li-duktūr Aḥmad bin Qāsim al-Ghāmīdī bi-muwāfiqihi al-ray’ fī mas’ala ikhtilīt ‘kadhb wa kalām khaṭīr’”, 7 May 2010 <http://www.kabar.ws/news-action-show-id-14199.htm> (retrieved June 2, 2010).

¹⁰⁷ See for more on the accommodation of the *Ṣaḥwa* movement, Madawi Al-Rashid, *Contesting the Saudi State: Islamic Voices from a New Generation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹⁰⁸ See for his pronouncements: 28 February 2010, <http://islamtoday.net/salman/artshow-78-128533.htm> (retrieved June 2, 2010).

This weak and non-committal attitude of the reformers and moderate officials and clergy allowed the conservatives to express their views. On 23 April 2010, the Muftī repeated his earlier critique and called al-Ghāmidī's ideas concerning the non-mandatory nature of common prayer as “misguided opinions” (*al-ārā' al-ḍālla*) that aim “to mislead Islam and Muslims”.¹⁰⁹ It was at this point that it was revealed that al-Ghāmidī had sent him his study on common prayer before he published it and that the mufti had advised him “on a personal basis” not to publish it.¹¹⁰ Also major *parts* of the Council of Senior ‘Ulamā’ and the Fatwa Council were opposed.¹¹¹ Not surprisingly, the *Hay’a* was outraged that such a high member of the institution would come out a detractor. A meeting of the *Hay’a* in Burayda condemned al-Ghāmidī especially for venting his ideas through the liberal press.¹¹² An official declaration, signed by among others the Muftī and Shaykh Ṣāliḥ bin Fawzān al-Fawzān, condemned allowing shops to be open during prayer as *munkar* and contrary to the *sunna* and the *dalīl* that the Ṣaḥāba have laid down.¹¹³ Other higher ‘ulamā’, such as Shaykh ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Atram, member of the Majlis al-Shūrā, also condemned al-Ghāmidī.¹¹⁴ The Permanent Council of Research of Religious Knowledge and Fatwas indirectly accused him of “making it easy” (*tahwīn*) to evade the general prayer.¹¹⁵ Researching various conservative religious Saudi websites shows endless postings that

¹⁰⁹ “Muftī yasifu Aḥmad al-Ghāmidī bi-annahu min du‘āt al-ḍalāl,” 23 April 2010, <http://www.ejaz.ws/news.php?op=viewNews&id=2740&catID=9> (retrieved September 25, 2010); and “Al-sheikh tells Haia official to stay out of Shariah issues,” www.arabnews.com, 23 April 2010.

¹¹⁰ Badr al-Sultan, “Aḥmad al-Ghāmidī: sa-abqā udāfi‘ ‘an mawqifi,” 2 May 2010. <http://www.alhiad.com/news-action-show-id-4463.htm> (retrieved September 25, 2010).

¹¹¹ See, 29 April 2010, <http://www.sabq.org/sabq/user/news?section=5&id=9036> (retrieved September 25, 2010).

¹¹² See for its condemnation of al-Ghāmidī, <http://www.buraydahcity.net/vb/showthread.php?t=204450> (retrieved September 25, 2010).

¹¹³ The declaration was issued on 29 April 2010 and posted on: <http://www.sabq.org/sabq/user/news?section=5&id=9036> (retrieved May 20, 2010)

¹¹⁴ “al-Shurṭa al-dīniyya bi-l-Sa‘ūdiyya tatarāj’a ‘an iqāla mudīrihi bi-Makka bi-manṣabihi,” *al-Quds al-‘Arabī*, 26 April 2010, <http://www.alquds.co.uk/index.asp?fname=data\2010\04\04-26\25z44.htm&storytitle=> (retrieved September 25, 2010).

¹¹⁵ 28 April 2010, <http://www.sabq.org/sabq/user/news?section=5&id=9036> (accessed 20 May 2010)

refute al-Ghāmidī's statements, often reiterating the same 'authoritative' sources. His book *Qawāfil* on shops and prayers is condemned.¹¹⁶ The bulk of the *fatwās* issued during the past fifty years against reform, are often referred to.¹¹⁷

The opposition against al-Ghāmidī was not just based on arguments. Much of it was pure slander. The Muftī called him "one of the preachers of misguidance" and devoted a complete Friday sermon to the issue of not praying in the mosque.¹¹⁸ Others called his arguments "passions for making it easier" (*shahawāt al-tahwīn*) or just "madness" (*hathayān*).¹¹⁹ Shaykh Sulaymān al-Duwīsh, who debated with al-Ghāmidī on the Iqrā' TV show, al-Bayyana, on the issue of *ikhtilāf* tried to discredit him by stating that his standing as a scholar is "weak". He claimed al-Ghāmidī was a "nonentity" and his views "contradictory". Moreover, he had been "carried away by personal passions" and was willing to "sell his religion for publicity".¹²⁰ Ostracization extended even to his own tribe, when its 'ulamā' in a joint proclamation denounced al-Ghāmidī for shaming the tribe's name.¹²¹ Even students came out against al-Ghāmidī.¹²²

The considerable negative response to al-Ghāmidī's ideas gives reason to contemplate the effectiveness of the half-hearted support al-Ghāmidī received from higher up and the reason for his stubbornness.

¹¹⁶ See the refutation on the Salafi site by Abū al-Jabr Abdallāh Muḥammad al-Anṣārī, 14 May 2010, <http://www.sahab.net/forums/showthread.php?p=773024>; and 'Abd al-Muḥsin 'Abd al-Hamd al-'Ibād al-Badr, "al-Taḥdhīr ahl al-ṭā'a min al-hathayān," 7 May 2010, <http://www.saaaid.net/bahoth/123.htm>. Both these articles have been reproduced endlessly on Salafi websites, as, for instance, www.alhudaweb.com and www.alazd.net (retrieved May 20, 2010).

¹¹⁷ See for instance, <http://www.azuad.com/vb/showthread.php?t=7040>, 25 April 2010 (retrieved May 22, 2010).

¹¹⁸ See <http://www.islamlight.net/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=18501&Itemid=0>, (retrieved April 24, 2010).

¹¹⁹ 'Abd al-Muḥsin 'Abd al-Hamd al-'Ibād al-Badr, "al-Taḥdhīr ahl al-ṭā'a min al-hathayān," 7 May 2010, <http://www.saaaid.net/bahoth/123.htm> (retrieved May 22, 2010).

¹²⁰ See, <http://www.sabq.org/sabq/user/news?section=5&id=8634>, 20 April 2010 (retrieved May 23, 2010).

¹²¹ See <http://www.alazd.net/news-action-show-id-4250.htm> (retrieved June 20, 2010) and also posted on 26 April 2010, <http://www.otaibah.net/m/showthread.php?p=1034031>

¹²² Posted in January 2010, <http://www.almhtml.com/c/-63916> (retrieved September 25, 2010).

The expansion of al-Ghāmīdī's reformist campaign clearly alarmed not just conservatives but also more thoughtful 'ulamā' who feared the effect of al-Ghāmīdī's promotion of *ijtihād* on the common people ('*amma al-nās*') that they would start doubting the authority of the 'ulamā'. The influential administrative judge in Mecca, Sultan bin 'Uthmān al-Busayrī, argued that this could lead to dissension (*fitna*) and deception (*taghrīr*).¹²³ Even some of the liberal newspapers which published al-Ghāmīdī's articles felt compelled to print retractions as a way of dissociating themselves from the runaway reformer.¹²⁴ Few moderates held al-Ghāmīdī in high esteem. Most regarded al-Ghāmīdī as ignorant of both religious knowledge (*jāhil*) and bent on deception (*talbīs*). By stating that one has direct access to the Qur'an and the *ḥadīth* he was ignorant of both the Principles of the *Sharī'a* (*uṣūl al-sharī'a*) and of *tafsīr* and *ḥadīth*.¹²⁵ Neither his association with the liberals nor his degrees from an American University helped him in that respect.¹²⁶ Some websites even accused him of plagiarizing two articles from liberal newspaper and websites.¹²⁷

Strangely enough the liberal response to al-Ghāmīdī was divided. Prince Khālīd bin Talāl bin 'Abd al-'Azīz has asked al-Ghāmīdī to resign.¹²⁸ The journalist Fāris bin Hizām had mixed feelings about al-Ghāmīdī, whom he regarded not as a liberal but as a Salafī.¹²⁹ On the other hand, the columnist 'Abdallāh bin Bakhīt supported al-Ghāmīdī "one hundred percent" and called *ikhtilāf*, in one of those half-ironic, half-serious religious counter-arguments as "innovation" (*bid'a*). He agreed with al-

¹²³ See the publication written by Sulṭān bin 'Uthmān al-Busayrī, *Mazāhir al-jahl wa-l-talbīs 'ind Ahmad bin Qāsim al-Ghāmīdī*, <http://www.saaaid.net/Doat/busairi/34.htm> (no date, but probably April 2010). Retrieved September 25, 2010.

¹²⁴ See the critical article in the newspaper *al-Madina*, 19 April 2010, <http://www.al-madina.com/node/241206> (retrieved September 25, 2010).

¹²⁵ Sulṭān bin 'Uthmān al-Busayrī, *Mazāhir al-jahl wa-l-talbīs 'and Ahmad bin Qāsim al-Ghāmīdī*, *op cit*.

¹²⁶ See, 25 April 2010, <http://www.darumm.com/vb/showthread.php?t=11036> (retrieved June 5, 2010).

¹²⁷ See, 28 April 2010, <http://www.harfnews.org/news.php?action=show&id=1004> (retrieved June 6, 2010).

¹²⁸ See, 19 April 2010, <http://muntada.islammessage.com/showthread.php?p=92891> (retrieved June 6, 2010).

¹²⁹ Fāris bin Hāzim, "Quwa wa ḍa'f al-Shaykh Ahmad al-Ghāmīdī," *al-Riyāḍ*, 4 May 2010, <http://www.alriyadh.com/2010/05/04/article522467.html> (retrieved September 23, 2010).

Ghāmidī that *ikhtilāṭ* contradicts the spirit of Islam and hinders women acquiring economic independence.¹³⁰ Other liberals, even within al-Waṭan, point out the dangers of assuming the position of authority of the Muftī and raising such controversial issues as *ikhtilāṭ*, which are not the jurisdiction of the head of the *Hay'a* in Mecca but that of the Permanent Council of Religious Research and Fatwas and the Council of Senior 'Ulamā'.¹³¹

The most generous support al-Ghāmidī has received is from more moderate 'ulamā' outside of Saudi Arabia. The famous Iraqi Shaykh, Aḥmad al-Kubaysī, living in Qatar, agreed with al-Ghāmidī that the prohibition of *ikhtilāṭ* has its origins in Abbasid reign and that Arabs during the Prophet, the Rightly Guided Caliphs did not forbid *ikhtilāṭ* as men and women mingled in *tawāf*, marketplaces, education, prayer and even in battle.¹³² Likewise the Azhar was embarrassed by the *fatwā* of al-Barrāk which it condemned as it gives Islam a bad name.¹³³

What helped al-Ghāmidī the most was the vicious attacks he had to endure.¹³⁴ Most neutral commentators were shocked and amazed by the fierce campaign that has been waged against al-Ghāmidī. Especially that the highest 'ulamā' of the country participated together with the populist Shaykhs in the slander campaign revealed to them the intolerant nature of Saudi society.¹³⁵

'Abd al-Raḥman bin Nāṣir al-Barrāk Case

The *ikhtilāṭ* debate reached a new level of notoriety when on, 22 February 2010, 77-year-old Shaykh 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Barrāk¹³⁶ warned against

¹³⁰ 'Abdallāh bin Bakhīt, "Taḥrīm ikhtilāṭ ibtidā' fī-l-dīn", <http://www.alriyadh.com/2009/12/14/article481235.html> (retrieved September 23, 2010).

¹³¹ Khālīd 'Abdallāh al-Mashawīh, (no title) <http://www.anbacom.com/articles.php?action=show&id=2128> (retrieved May 20, 2010).

¹³² "al-Shaykh al-Kubaysī yu'ayyidu Shaykh Aḥmad bin Qāsim al-Ghāmidī fī-l-mas'alat al-ikhtilāṭ," <http://www.humanf.org:8686/vb/showthread.php?t=2521>, 28 April 2010 (retrieved May 20, 2010).

¹³³ See statements by the Azhar, 25 February 2010, http://www.leblover.com/variated/barak_43857567546456.html (retrieved May 21, 2010).

¹³⁴ Badrīyya al-Bishr, "al-khuṭba al-jum'a", 5 May 2010, <http://international.daralhayat.com/internationalarticle/137750>

¹³⁵ Ḥasan bin Sālim, "al-Shaykh al-muthīr," *al-Ḥayāt*, 4 May 2010, <http://international.daralhayat.com/ksaarticle/137451>

¹³⁶ See for his works: <http://www.saaaid.net/Warathah/ALBarak/index.htm>

promoting *ikhtilāṭ* by stating that “*ikhtilāṭ* between men and women in work and education---which is wished for by the modernists (*al-‘asriyyun*)---is forbidden (*harām*).” He continued, “that it will lead to words that are *harām*, gazes that are *harām*, and *khalwa* (when a man meets a woman alone) that is *harām*”. His most damaging remark was that “those who permit *ikhtilāṭ* are unbelievers; this means they become apostates” and they can be killed if they do not repent.¹³⁷ Earlier Shaykh al-Barrāk had been involved in the al-Shithrī case, who he had defended in a declaration on his website entitled “Justice and the case of *ikhtilāṭ*”.¹³⁸ His page on the website of Shaykh Habdān hosted most of the posts in support of al-Shithrī.¹³⁹ The tremendous support he received for the organization of support of Shaykh al-Shithrī must have encouraged him to come out with his *fatwā* in February.¹⁴⁰

If his public *takfīr* pronouncements in the *ikhtilāṭ* issue are rare, his arguments are not. In his condemnation of gender mixing, he repeated the by-now familiar diatribes against the modernists, who are inclined to a “Western unbelieving lifestyle” and who intend to “Westernise the *umma*”.¹⁴¹ Fighting this evil is a “*jihād* against the people of falsehood (*ahl al-bāṭil*)” and the “people of innovation” (*ahl al-bida*).¹⁴²

Although Shaykh al-Barrāk appears a maverick he had a typical if not illustrious career. He was appointed a member of the al-Ma‘had al-‘ilmī in Riyād when it was opened in 1951, and he became lecturer in 1959. He has an impressive career as teacher but was not allowed to join the Dar al-Iftā.

¹³⁷ “Taḥdhīr min fitna al-da‘wa ila al-ikhtilāṭ,” (retrieved February 22, 2010, <http://albarrak.islamlight.net/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=17426>)

¹³⁸ ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Barrāk, “Inṣāf wa-l-qaḍīya al-ikhtilāṭ,” <http://albrrak.net/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=15420&Itemid=25> (accessed on 2 June 2010).

¹³⁹ See <http://www.islamlight.net/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=15259&Itemid=0> (accessed 2 June 2010).

¹⁴⁰ al-Barrāk’s declaration was posted on numerous websites of the religious followers. See for instance, <http://www.alwadi.com.sa/vb/showthread.php?p=677278> (retrieved June 2, 2010).

¹⁴¹ “Taḥdhīr min fitna al-da‘wa ila al-ikhtilāṭ,” 22 February 2010, *op.cit.* For his official biography, see <http://albarrak.islamlight.net/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=1364&Itemid=45>

¹⁴² See his *fatwā* issued on 2 May 2010, http://www.islamlight.net/index.php?option=com_ftawa&task=view&Itemid=0&catid=1007&id=36746 (retrieved September 25, 2010).

Unofficially he is considered a major source of following (*marja'īyya*) in 'aqīda after the death of the previous Muftī Bin Bāz in 1999. He is known for his modesty and piety.¹⁴³ His ideas are typical of the conservative 'ulamā' who oppose all reforms and divide the world in good and bad; truth and falsehood; believers and unbelievers; the party of God and the party of the devil, and who abhors divisions and differences.¹⁴⁴ His notoriety goes back to March 2008 when he issued a *fatwā* in which he pronounced *takfīr* against two Saudi writers who had written articles critical of Wahhābī Islam in al-Riyāḍ newspaper.¹⁴⁵ Typically, he had been supported by Ṣāliḥ Fawzān al-Fawzān, member of the Council of Senior 'Ulamā', who called upon the writers to admit their mistakes,¹⁴⁶ and by Shaykh Ṣāliḥ bin Muḥammad al-Luḥaydan.¹⁴⁷ He reiterates that classical Wahhābī doctrine of forbidding to travel to the land of the kuffār as a tourist.¹⁴⁸ During the civil strife in Iraq he denounced the Shī'a as "unbelievers".¹⁴⁹ Isma'īlī's are in his eyes "rejectionists" (*rāfiḍa*) because they belong to the school of hidden knowledge (*madhhab al-bāṭiniyya*),¹⁵⁰ and not surprisingly Jews constitute "the worst of all nations".¹⁵¹ He argued that making permanent peace with Israel is contrary to the *Sharī'a* as long as Israel occupies Muslim land.¹⁵²

In July 2010 Shaykh al-Barrāk made the headlines again when he cursed

¹⁴³ Biography of Shaykh al-Barrāk, <http://www.israj.net/vb/t6015/> (retrieved June 1, 2010).

¹⁴⁴ Shaykh 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Barrāk, *Mawqif al-muslim min al-khilāf*, originally published in 1993, <http://saaid.net/book/open.php?cat=85&book=2267> (retrieved June 1, 2010).

¹⁴⁵ See article, 1 April 2008, <http://middle-east-online.com/?id=60291> (retrieved September 25, 2010).

¹⁴⁶ See, <http://alfetn.net/vb3/showthread.php?p=101783> (retrieved June 1, 2010).

¹⁴⁷ See, <http://alfetn.net/vb3/showthread.php?p=101783> (retrieved June 1, 2010).

¹⁴⁸ See his collection of *fatwās*: http://www.islamlight.net/index.php?option=com_ftawa&task=view&Itemid=0&catid=981&id=36829 (retrieved September 25, 2010).

¹⁴⁹ See 24 February 2010, <http://www.israj.net/vb/t6015/> (retrieved September 25, 2010).

¹⁵⁰ See his collected *fatwās*: <http://www.alksa2.com/vb/t1501.html> and specifically the *fatwā* on "Su'āl 'an al-sunna wa-l-shī'a", <http://saaid.net/Warathah/ALBarak/19.htm> (retrieved September 25, 2010).

¹⁵¹ "Hiwār ma'a al-'allāma al-faḍīla al-Shaykh 'Abd al-Rahmān bin Nāṣir al-Barrāk," *Majallat al-Bayān*, 28 March 2009, <http://www.factway.net/discuss.php?id=28> (retrieved September 25, 2010).

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

journalists as “armies of the devil” on his website. He was criticised by judge ʿĪsā al-Gayth for not “respecting the good intentions of the other” (*ḥusnu al-zanni bi-ākharīn*), “plural views” (*taʿaddud wjihāt*) and “difference of opinion” (*ikhtilāf*). The judge noted that it was deplorable that clerics could use the Internet for slander (*qathf*) and incitement and said that those responsible should be held accountable for their “dangerous and forbidden acts”. The Ministry of Media and Culture, however, made it clear that they were unable to pursue Shaykh al-Barrāk because controlling the internet did not fall within their jurisdiction.¹⁵³

The Yūsuf al-Aḥmad Case

The Shaykh Yūsuf bin ʿAbdallāh al-Aḥmad case is the latest chapter in the *ikhtilāf* debate. This affair arose as result of his call to rebuild a much larger Grand Mosque in Mecca and during the process assure that the mixing of sexes would be prevented. He is a prominent government official who has voiced an even more severe criticism of KAUST than Sheikh al-Shithri and yet remains in office. Shaykh Yūsuf al-Aḥmad is a professor who teaches at Department of *Sharīʿa* at the Imam Muḥammad ibn Saʿūd Islamic University in Riyadh. He had taken part in the *ikhtilāf* debate at an earlier stage when he attacked the minister of Justice Muhammad al-ʿIsa with regard to KAUST. In this article, entitled “Twenty questions... Mister Minister of Justice”, he states that KAUST is a source of unbelief in Saudi Arabia: it is not based on Islamic principles; its president as well as its teachers are unbelievers; its finances are based on *ribā* and derive from public finances; Saudis constitute only 15% of the teaching personnel; no courses on Qurʾan are given; but worst of all it “totally lacks religious surveillance”.¹⁵⁴

But as in the other cases his is part of longer guerrilla. The opposition against Shaykh Yūsuf al-Aḥmad apparently flared up when he intended to gatecrash the Riyadh book fair in March 2010 where *ikhtilāf* was permitted.

¹⁵³ ʿĪman al-Qahtānī, “al-Barrāk yuṭālibu bi-taghtīya wjih al-maraʿa,” *al-Hayat*, 11 July 2010, <http://www.daralhayat.com/ksaarticle/161849> (retrieved September 25, 2010).

¹⁵⁴ Yūsuf al-Aḥmad, *ʿIshrūn suʿālān...yā maʿālī wazīr al-ʿadl*, <http://www.almhml.com/c/-63853>, 29 October 2009 (retrieved September 25, 2010). It was written as a response to an article the minister had written in the newspaper *al-Riyāḍ*.

He is convinced that the affair was a premeditated attempt to discredit him, by linking his call for expanding the Grand Mosque to *ikhtilāf*. He believes that his liberal opponents pitched the case to make it appear that he was willing to tear down the Grand Mosque in Mecca for the single minded purpose of preventing *ikhtilāf* while he was primarily interested in expanding it.¹⁵⁵ He did state “nobody would allow his wife or the next of kin to touch men during the *ṭawāf*.”¹⁵⁶ His opponents apparently looked for writings to attack him and found an article he had written in al-Jazira on 30 December 2008 with the title “Expanding the Haram Mosque”, where he called for building a larger Grand Mosque.¹⁵⁷ This was based on a larger study he had made on the subject. In an interview he explains that he had written a study three years ago calling for expanding the capacity of the Haram al-Sharif from 900.000 to 10 million persons.

As in the al-Shithrī case, conservatives immediately rallied to the cause Sheikh Yusuf al-Ahmad. Fifty-five supporters issued a declaration in which they protested against the liberal attempt to undermine the Shaykh’s position.¹⁵⁸ Even his family, claiming superior lineage, came to his support. Other sites supported him and stated that it would be rational to expand the Haram mosque to accommodate millions and at the same time make it safe for women.¹⁵⁹

Conclusions

As the four cases above demonstrate, it is extremely difficult to determine whether reforms are successful and whether the liberals or conservatives are making gains. Although the general trend is in favour of the reformists,

¹⁵⁵ See for the interview with the al-Shams on Yūsuf al-Aḥmad’s website: <http://www.dr-alahmad.com/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=17965> (retrieved September 25, 2010).

¹⁵⁶ “Ulamā’ al-Miṣriyyūn....”, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2010/03/19/103464.html> (retrieved September 25, 2010).

¹⁵⁷ See for the *bayān* on Yūsuf al-Aḥmad’s website: <http://www.dr-alahmad.com/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=18293> (retrieved September 25, 2010).

¹⁵⁸ Al-Arabiyya.net, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2010/04/25/106769.html>, 25 April 2010. For the full text “Bayān fī munāṣira al-Shaykh Yūsuf al-Aḥmad”, see <http://www.saaaid.net/Doat/yusuf/38.htm>, no date (retrieved September 25, 2010).

¹⁵⁹ Article by ‘Abd al-Raḥmān bin Muḥammad al-Anṣārī, 25 March 2010, <http://www.almisq.net/articles-action-show-id-475.htm> (retrieved September 25, 2010).

reform is piecemeal, hesitant, equivocal and strongly resisted.

Several issues are worthy of attention. First, it appears that the state itself is divided between reformists and conservatives, with not just King ‘Abdallāh on the one side and Prince Nāyif on the other, which is the usual cliché. In fact, all the religious institutions are divided. As there is no constitution and no clearly defined policy for reform, and the state is still officially based on Wahhabism, despite the insertion of nationalism, and an ideology of “dialogue” and “tolerance” based on Wasaṭiyya, the conservatives can resist any attempts at reform and call the government’s bluff. It seems as if there is an ideological power vacuum and the state allows liberals and conservatives to slug it out. This allows for an uncertain situation. Naïve loyalists like Shaykh al-Shithrī find themselves caught up in the struggle and the butt of a liberal campaign for a slight remark which is commonly supported by conservative circles. On the other hand, reformist who stick their heads out like Shaykh Aḥmad al-Ghāmidī are left dangling and the focus of a massive and vicious conservative campaign to discredit him. The ideological vacuum allows popular Shaykhs like al-Duwīsh, and pensioned mavericks like ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Barrāk, and provocative officials like Yūsuf al-Aḥmad enough room to propagate their conservative ideas and strike alliances with more prominent ‘*ulamā*’ of official institutions.

Secondly, one wonders what the effect is of the appointment of new personnel in the top echelons of religious institutions, as has happened in February 2009. It seems that the replacement of the heads of the religious institutions has not always had beneficial results, as the al-Shithrī case demonstrates. He was young but obviously not a reformer. On the other hand, Qays Āl Mubārak is young but an equivocal reformer. During the power struggle neither he nor the Minister of Education nor the newly appointed head of the Hay’a, Shaykh ‘Abd al-‘Aziz bin Ḥumayn al-Ḥumayn, made clear pronouncements in the *ikhtilāf* debate. The personnel policy during the debate was also confusing. While Shaykh al-Shithrī was fired for voicing a cautious critique, which the whole religious establishment probably shared, a teacher at an official university like Yūsuf al-Aḥmad can quite easily voice much more severer critique of KAUST and remain in function, while the Muftī can easily use his function to oppose reform.

Thirdly, in this regard, the lack of religious authority and the ensuing

“fatwa chaos” is a sign of the tremendous changes Saudi Arabia is going. Religious authority has moved to informal popular preachers as Sulayman al-Duwīsh, while maverick old-guard preachers as Shaykh al-Barrāk can still create turmoil and civil servants as Yūsuf al-Aḥmad can mobilise protest against reform. Meanwhile the liberal press can launch a massive and outspoken campaign against Wahhabism and the control over society of the official clergy. Although it is too early to tell, it is quite possible the Saudi state is managing this behind the scenes, drawing out the opponents.

Fourthly, the debate and vehement response makes one wonder about the dangers of reform and chances of success in the future. The real promotion of reform can only take place when it is supported by a large audience and therefore needs a broad overhaul of ideas not just of personnel. Although the state is promoting a more moderate Islam in the form of *Wasaṭiyya*, which is more open and tolerant, from the *ikhtilāf* debate it is obvious that the battle has not been won. Many Saudis are fed up with the inordinate interference of clerics in their lives and one can even speak of an anti-clerical movement, but the liberals speak a language that is totally alien to the world of official Wahhabism and therefore is hardly likely to influence it.