

The Emergence of a Regional Identity

Religious Extremism in northern Saudi
Arabia

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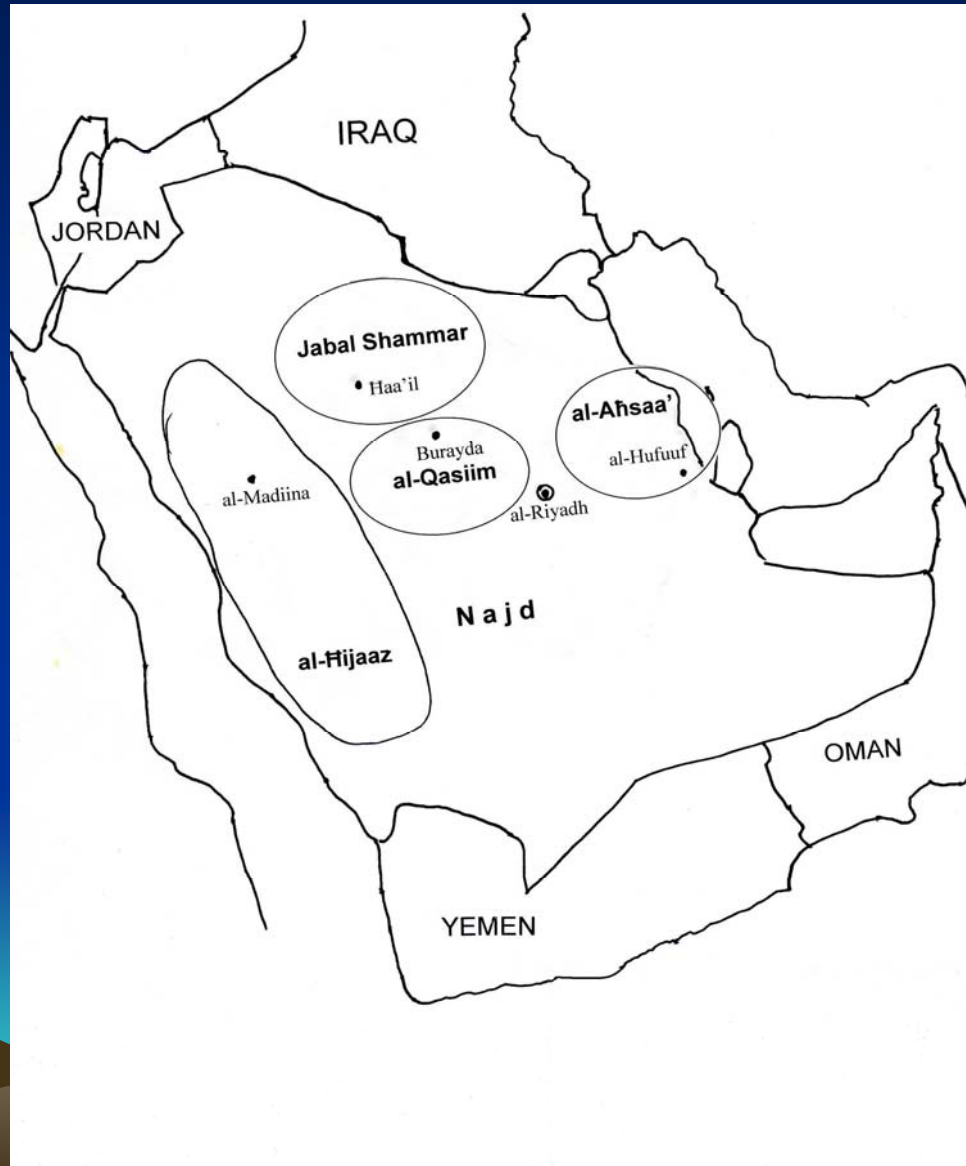


Research Problems

- What can make an entire region adopt “conservative” or “extremist” views?
- Are such “conservative” regions necessarily adversaries of the US?
- Case in point: the al-Qasiim region in north-central Saudi Arabia



Regions of Saudi Arabia



5 Regions in N. Saudi Arabia

- al-Ḥijaaz (eastern boundary: a mountain chain that separates it from Najd; western boundary: the Red Sea)
- al-Qasiim (no geographical boundaries)
- Jabal Shammar (no geographical boundaries)
- Najd (no geographical boundaries)
- al-Aḥsaa' (no geographical boundaries)

Most regions are defined by their centers rather than their boundary lines



Distinctive Bases of al-Qasiim's Regional Identity

- Irrigation agriculture (dates, wheat, fruit)
- Many more farmers than Bedouin
- Merchants important and wealthy (livestock trade with Iraq and Syria)
- In sum: economy different from economies in other regions



Political Differences before the Creation of the Saudi State

- al-Qasiim has no external allies
- al-Hijaz & al-Aḥsaa' parts of Ottoman/Turkish empire
- Jabal Shammar loosely allied with Turks
- Najd loosely allied with Britain



Al-Qasiim's Loss of Autonomy

- Sa`uudis from Najd attack Jabal Shammar
- al-Qasiim sides with Sa`uudis (1904)
- Sa`uudis conquer al-Aḥsaa' (1913)
- Sa`uudis conquer Jabal Shammar (1921)
- Sa`uudis conquer al-Ḥijaaz (1925)
- Kingdom of Sa`uudi Arabia formed (1930s)



Al-Qasiim Merges with Najd

- Traditional Qasiimi occupations eclipsed by oil economy; economic distinctiveness of the region much reduced
- Religious transformation: al-Qasiim accepts Najdi religious ideology (“Wahhabism”)
- Travel & Education: distinctive Qasiimi speech styles “old fashioned” “backward”



Raised Expectations and Disappointments

- Qasiimis identify politically and culturally with Najdis after al-Qasiim is absorbed by Najd
- Economic development during oil boom (1970s) not sustainable
- Perceived differences in wealth between al-Qasiim and Najd (Riyadh)
- Complaints: al-Qasiim loaned House of Sa`uud money and supported it with troops in 1930s, but Sa`uud family did not fully reciprocate



Discontented Clergy

- Alliance between House of Sa`uud and clergy strong in 1900 but much weaker by 1930
- Many Wahhabi clergy excluded from positions of influence by 1970
- 1979 Millenarian Revolt: Unorthodox fanatic from al-Qasiim seizes shrine in Mecca and calls for overthrow of Sa`uudi family; revolt suppressed



Complaints

- Qasiimi merchants believe that Sa`uudi family is stealing oil revenue
- Qasiimi clerics believe that Sa`uudi princes no longer observe Wahhabi restrictions on personal behavior
- Local convergence of interests between disaffected merchants and clerics



Causes of Religious Extremism in al-Qasiim

- incorporation of al-Qasiim into the growing Saudi state as an equal partner rather than as a conquered land, which led to high expectations of equal treatment by the monarchy;
- anger among the clerics in al-Qasiim about the House of Sa`uud's monopoly of power and refusal to submit to religious restrictions on personal behavior;
- a feeling of relative economic deprivation, compared with other regions in the Kingdom;
- both the merchant families of al-Qasiim and the clergy feel they have more experience in economics and religion than the House of Sa`uud and are therefore more qualified to rule

