



Religion und Staat in Saudi-Arabien. Die wahhabitischen Gelehrten 1902-1953 [Religion and State in Saudi Arabia. Wahhaby Scholars 1902-1953], by Guido Steinberg. Wuerzburg, Germany: Ergon Publishers, 2002. 689 pages. Bibl. p. 641 to 689. 86 euros.

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When leading Saudi scholars did support the presence of American troops on the sacred soil by means of a *fatwa* of *hay'at kibar al-'ulama'* ten years before the turn of the millenium, a long-standing dispute gained momentum. This dispute touched upon the role of the '*ulama'*', as well as the subject of reforms for political participation in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The German researcher Guido Steinberg takes this dispute as a starting point for his history of Wahhaby scholarship in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Steinberg's study focus on the central question, how the scholars, '*ulama'*', succeeded in preserving their position in Saudi Arabia until 1953. The author divides his study into 12 chapters. After introducing the research methodology, definitions, and sources, he turn to substantive matters: the education of the scholars; the centers of Wahhabiyya 1900-53; the social structure and the tribal affiliation; their functions in education, as reviewers, judges and religious policeman; their involvement in policy 1911-1930; the politics in the captured provinces of al-Ahsa' and Hijaz; and the scholarly involvement in policy 1930-53. The study is based on American and British archival sources, personal meetings with native scholars, and published sources.

Steinberg finds a huge discrepancy between the high Wahhabiyya ideals and the resources given to fulfill them in the society of the Najd area. Thus, just a minimal intellectual development in certain areas was possible. Until the 1950s there was even a shortage of well-trained scholars. Nevertheless, they followed a coherent curriculum (at least on the paper) that was oriented on an Islamic state according to the *salaf as-salih*, "the righteous forerunners". Steinberg opines that the scholars were neither isolated nor unwilling to accede to limited reforms. On the contrary, some traveled as far as India to study new developments. Others interacted with reformers in other Arab lands.

The author concludes from his research that the Wahhaby scholars were a heterogenous group - different in their religious and intellectual behavior. Moreover, he observes, there was a considerable plurality of opinions in the Najd area with respect to the puritan and egalitarian tradition that they had inherited, presumably from Ahmad bin Hanbal. The Wahhaby scholars were mostly conservatives and not too much interested in extensive reforms. They integrated some new institutions of religious learning and adult education in the late 1940s. Then they took over the religious police in 1930, a watershed year in the history of the Kingdom. With this, they secured a major position in the system of the developing statehood.

Traditional conflicts between the Wahhaby scholars on the one hand and most of the Muslim Brotherhood on the other lingered on. During times of crisis, the high ranking scholars remained always loyal to the House of Al Sa'ud. Often, they mediated between lower ranking Wahhaby scholars and Muslim Brothers, who tended to the opposition. Of general interest are also the detailed findings about methods of expansion, ruling and power sharing in the Kingdom. The mighty position of the scholars until the 1950s was a factor of stability for the country. So it was a game of social balancing - of mutual benefit to the rulers and the scholars in mostly internal matters. The latter never gained a great influence on foreign policy, at least during the first half of the past century. Meanwhile, due to the eminent position of the scholars, a process of secularization as such never emerged.

All in all, Guido Steinberg has produced a groundbreaking study of the Wahhaby scholarship in Saudi Arabia. Together with Reinhard Schulze's great work, *Islamic Internationalism in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (1990), *Religion und Staat in Saudi-Arabien* illuminates the unique development of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, one of the few really traditional and independent states of the region. Readers await a study equally well researched and incisive about the period 1954 onwards, a period marked by striking penetration of Wahhaby scholarship into other Islamic countries and regions.

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