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Influence Abroad: Saudi Arabia Replaces Salafism in its Soft Power Outreach

Hesham Alghannam

Introduction

In recent years, Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has instigated a series of reforms intended to weaken extreme Salafi influence in the kingdom and soften religious practice in society. The aim has been to counter the effects of extreme Salafi interpretations and activism and favor more moderate approaches to Islam that are in step with contemporary global and societal values.

Today, there is greater acknowledgment, both in Saudi Arabia and abroad, of the connection between certain Salafi teachings and extremism. By cutting back on Saudi support for Salafism, the prince has tried to dispel the notion that the kingdom supports extremist groups. He has also understood the security risks that some such groups may pose, not least threats to Saudi Arabia itself, especially after the Arab upheavals in 2011 and the rise of Islamist movements throughout the Middle East.

In doing so, however, the crown prince is moving away from an ideological position that had played a major role in augmenting Saudi influence throughout the Muslim world and beyond. Support for Salafism had allowed the kingdom to build up constituencies among Muslim communities in many countries. By reducing the dissemination of a strict approach to Islam, Saudi Arabia seeks to foster warmer relationships abroad, particularly in the West, which had criticized the kingdom for promoting extremist ideologies. This profound shift in the Saudi position may come with a cost, since the kingdom's approach to Islam was intimately tied to the domestic and international legitimacy of its leadership, compelling the Saudi leadership to find a proper balance between continuity and change.



Saudi Support for Salafism

The Saudi state, established by the Al Saud in 1727, later formed an alliance with the Muslim scholar Mohammed ibn Abdul Wahab. This has given rise to the simplistic reference of Saudi Arabia as a “Wahhabi state.” The partnership provided the state with religious legitimacy and gave religious scholars influence over secular governance. The commonality between Salafism and Wahhabism is their inclination toward a return to Islam’s earliest practices, distinguished mainly by a reliance on the Quran and Hadith, the Prophet Mohammed’s traditions and sayings. However, Salafism and Wahhabism are [varied in origin, scope, and application](#). Salafism, a broader movement oriented toward imitation of the first three Muslim generations and that denounces innovation, ranges from quietist to politically engaged. Wahhabism is a more puritanical Salafi subgroup, characterized by a rigid application of Islamic law and aligned with the Hanbali school of jurisprudence.

In recent decades, there have been two main elements behind Saudi Arabia’s support for Salafism. Just as it was once a source of domestic religious legitimacy, Salafism was also turned into a source of ideological legitimacy abroad; and it was also used to combat the kingdom’s enemies. Between 1982 and 2005, the kingdom invested heavily in promoting Salafism worldwide, especially during the reign of King Fahd. This made Salafism, and the effort to establish a global Salafi network, a valuable tool of Saudi soft power, particularly among Muslim countries, where the kingdom built religious schools and mosques, awarded scholarships, and even published literature promoting Salafism. The windfall from the post-1973 oil boom allowed Saudi Arabia to spread its influence and its particular interpretation of Islam, thereby countering other ideological movements such as Arab nationalism, Shia Islamism after the Iranian revolution in 1979, and even some more extreme interpretations of Sunni Islam.

For example, the Islamic University of Medina, established in 1961, was [pivotal in educating foreign students in Islam and Arabic](#). Many graduates returned home to spread the version of Islam they had learned there. A notable example among Southeast Asian alumni is [Anis Matta](#), a former deputy speaker of the Indonesian House of Representatives and a key figure in the [Prosperous Justice Party](#). Though the party supports a mainstream Islamic agenda, its conservative political thought derives from Salafi influences. Other examples of Saudi interventions include funding religious schools under the umbrella of the [Islamic Science University of Malaysia](#), which also spread conservative Salafi thought. The same holds for organizations such as [Wahdah Islamiyah in Indonesia](#), a Salafi mass organization, that has similarly grown both because of local dynamics and external influences, such as Saudi sponsorship. Yet it is also worth remarking that Saudi influence notwithstanding, Salafism in Southeast Asia often blends in with local practice, forming a Salafi approach that is not necessarily close to Saudi norms. This has resulted in a diversification of Islamic practice even within Salafi communities.

Saudi ideological legitimacy in many Muslim countries, and the soft power that came with it, also gave the kingdom significant political influence. For example, Saudi sway is visible in Pakistan, where the [kingdom helped to spread Salafi and Deobandi interpretations of Islam](#). This was particularly true during the Soviet Union’s war in Afghanistan. Throughout the 1980s, Saudi funding [helped establish](#) thousands of Deobandi religious schools near Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan. These schools were a main source of young men for the *mujahideen* resisting Moscow. The Saudis also retain influence over key power centers in Pakistan. For example, around [85 percent of military mosques](#) in the country follow Deobandi teachings, [allowing the kingdom to have a deep impact](#) on the Pakistani religious sphere, with an ideological reach into the country’s powerful army.

In geopolitical terms, the promotion of Salafism provided Saudi Arabia with a leg up in its opposition to other forms of Islam, such as Shiism, which is especially significant for its rivalry with Iran. The financial and ideological sponsorship of Salafism helped Saudi Arabia create alliances with regimes and nonstate actors that either shared its views, or at least tolerated them, often serving to further Saudi foreign policy goals.

More broadly, Saudi Arabia played an [important role](#) in shaping what constitutes orthodox Sunni Islam. By helping to define a Muslim identity globally, the kingdom was able to claim a leadership position within the Islamic world. Moreover, the interpretation of Islam promoted by Saudi Arabia, [which advocates obedience to authority](#), facilitated a better maintenance of order and less of a potential for political violence. This dual aim of reinforcing Saudi leadership among Muslims while promoting social peace allowed the kingdom to accumulate considerable diplomatic, economic, and political leverage.

Additionally, Saudi Arabia's support for Salafism was often used to combat the kingdom's adversaries. For instance, during the upheavals in Syria, the Saudis [backed certain Salafi groups](#) against the Syrian regime and Iranian allied armed groups. However, simultaneously, they also propped up Salafis in order to counter more extreme groups. An example of such a tactic was [Saudi support for Jaysh al-Islam](#), a rebel faction based in the eastern Ghouta around Damascus. Jaysh al-Islam was led by [Zahrán Allóush](#), the son of a Syrian cleric living in Saudi Arabia. It was established in September 2013, a process negotiated and directed by Saudi Arabia, which hoped [to use the group against the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Nusra Front](#). This [included](#) funding, arming, and training Jaysh al-Islam, employing Pakistani instructors to boost the group's military capabilities.

Furthermore, Saudi Arabia has tactically supported Salafi groups in Yemen to offset Iranian influence. The Saudi support for Salafi groups there was mostly through figures such as [Muqbil al-Wadi'i](#). In 1982, he founded the Dar al-Hadith Institute in Dammaj, Saada Governorate. Dar al-Hadith promoted Salafi education against Zaydi supporters of Iran. During Yemen's conflicts, this ideological support was complemented by Saudi military and political aid, to prevent Tehran from gaining a strategic advantage in Yemen.

In light of this, [Saudi Arabia has supported the Giants Brigades](#), formed in 2015 as part of the Yemeni National Resistance forces fighting against Ansar Allah, better known as the Houthis. There is a [significant Salafi tribal component](#) in the Giants Brigades, who emerged from earlier military units that were part of the North Yemeni military that saw action during the 1994 Yemeni civil war. They have [received training and funding](#) from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and their effectiveness in combat has been credited to assistance provided by the Arab coalition, mainly Saudi Arabia. Another Salafi group receiving Saudi backing is the [Rashad Union](#). Formed in 2012, the party reflected a Saudi interest in having a Salafi mechanism to influence governance in Yemen. After 2015, however, Ansar Allah's takeover of Sanaa and its subsequent control over significant portions of Yemen limited the operational space for political groupings, such as the Rashad Union, that were not aligned with it.

Saudi Arabia's strategic use of ideology aptly illustrates how it was able to make use of religious doctrine not simply as a guiding principle, but also as an instrument in its relations across borders. However, this brought with it its own series of complexities, not least how far the kingdom's Salafi ideology would spread, and how it was interpreted and used once it was picked up by others over whom the Saudis had no control.



The Implications, and Complications, of Pulling Away from Salafism

Mohammed bin Salman began implementing crucial policy changes after his appointment as deputy crown prince to King Salman in April 2015. His aim was to fundamentally alter Saudi Arabia's social and economic landscape. The anticipated changes were more systematically laid out in the prince's [Vision 2030 plan](#) a year later, in April 2016, and involved economic diversification and a reduction in the kingdom's reliance on oil, as well as reforms in education, women's rights, and approaches to entertainment.

The reduction in support for Salafism was part of a broader realignment in which the Saudis sought to bolster relations with countries or blocs that did not press religious ideologies, such as Western, especially European, countries, or those with lucrative markets, such as China. This pivot toward more economic and political engagement, and away from religious propagation, was tied to the kingdom's commitment to relying less on hydrocarbons. Opening up other economic sectors necessitated foreign investment, which meant loosening social restrictions and challenging perceptions that Saudi Arabia was a reactionary country. In addition, [around 63 percent of the Saudi population is under 30 years of age](#), with a high concentration of young people actively engaged with digital and social media platforms. This exposed them to more liberal lifestyles that are very different from the traditional or conservative interpretations of Islam by Salafi scholars.

The crown prince also had a practical interest in mitigating the risks of radicalization associated with certain strands of Salafi thought, thereby improving domestic and regional security. However, this did not mean rejecting Islam in political or social life, but rather engaging in a reform of religion and reprioritizing spending away from Salafi institutions. One example

is the Saudi decision [to close the King Fahd Academy](#) in Bonn, Germany, at the end of the 2016–2017 school year. In early 2018, Saudi Arabia also agreed [to relinquish control of the Brussels Grand Mosque](#), one of Belgium's largest. The mosque had been under Saudi management since the late 1960s, when it was converted from a disused exhibition building into a mosque for Moroccan workers. In addition, there have been a number of reports of diminishing Saudi financial support for Salafi mosques and religious institutions in the Balkans and Western Europe. The main reason behind the Saudi decisions was that some of these mosques were seen as fomenting radical ideologies. The Saudis were also [keener to encourage local governance](#) that could bring about the better integration of Muslim communities in Western Europe and the Balkans.¹

The Saudi Arabian decision to scale down its support for Salafism has had several implications. In stopping the financing of mosques and religious institutions abroad, the Saudis have been less able to shape Islamic discourse around the world, chiefly where Salafi groups have strong influence. Because of this, the kingdom runs the risk today of losing ideological authority over religious communities in countries such as Yemen and Pakistan, and large parts of Africa. This could create a vacuum that might be filled by other regional powers or ideologies, including Iran or militant Sunni organizations.

There is also a possibility that by ending its support, the Saudis will provoke a backlash from certain Salafi groups, who will equate the Saudi decision with an abandonment of their religious values. Inadvertently, this might radicalize some groups and provide them with an impetus to act outside the Saudi orbit. At the same time, there are places in which Riyadh has continued to support Salafi groups militarily and politically, such as Yemen, where these groups continue to resist Ansar Allah. This illustrates that the Saudi approach is pragmatic, and that the kingdom can bolster Salafis to

advance Saudi interests without pursuing an ideological foreign policy. At the same time, it also underlines that the Saudis are aware of the risks involved in reducing aid to the Salafis. This could have a destabilizing impact, especially if it pushes Salafi groups to seek affiliations with more extreme factions, or with states opposed to Saudi Arabia, in order to survive.

In short, the geopolitical challenges of Saudi Arabia breaking with Salafism are great, with Saudi influence, regional stability, and the kingdom's role in the global Islamic environment hanging in the balance. The economic and diplomatic costs because of this shift, much like the probability of a rise in radicalization, are factors that require careful management if Saudi Arabia wants to avoid undermining its strategic interests abroad.

That is why, in moving away from Salafism, Mohammed bin Salman had to replace it with different approaches that could enhance Saudi foreign influence. Saudi Arabia has developed relationships with an array of international actors, including Western countries, China, and Russia, thereby refocusing its methods of global interaction. The transition away from Salafism has also had economic repercussions. Saudi Arabia spent considerable money in spreading Salafism worldwide. In redirecting these resources, new strategies for the kingdom's economic diplomacy have involved making major investments in the infrastructure, technology, and even sports sectors of foreign countries, as a way of advancing alternative forms of soft power. For example, Saudi Arabia, through the Public Investment Fund (PIF), is mulling financing projects such as the new Indonesian capital, [Nusantara](#). This reflects a drive to diversify its economic portfolio and extend its influence through infrastructural development. The kingdom has also used the PIF to purchase the British football team [Newcastle United](#).

Saudi Arabia has, simultaneously, engaged in more discreet efforts to increase support for Islamic interpretations in line with Saudi foreign policy goals. This includes promoting scholarship that is not politically charged. For example, the [King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Center for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue](#) (KAICIID) is one of the kingdom's attempts at facilitating dialogue between the world's different societies. While KAICIID does not directly advocate Islamic scholarship, it does so indirectly by helping to create space for people from different faiths to engage in constructive conversations in the hope that this will lead to a less politically charged atmosphere in religious relations.

Furthermore, Mohammed bin Salman has been balancing any perceived loss of influence that could be associated with a change in religious policy by addressing the demands of external geopolitics and internal modernization. For instance, the Saudis have negotiated new security agreements with other countries, notably [the United States](#). The kingdom is also exporting Saudi culture through media and educational initiatives around the world. This outreach aims to change perceptions of Saudi Arabia as primarily a religious state. And the kingdom has used environmental projects, such as the [Saudi and the Middle East Green Initiatives](#), to portray itself as an influential global actor in addressing climate change and energy transition. Yet Saudi Arabia has also faced the challenge of balancing these green aspirations with its reliance on hydrocarbon revenues. This balance underlines the complex path the kingdom has had to take in order to match its public environmental commitments with the practical realities of an oil-dependent economy.

In parallel with this diverse approach to sustain its influence, Saudi Arabia has also sought to actively limit the spread of violent groups inspired by Salafi principles. For instance, in December 2015 the kingdom

announced the establishment of the Islamic Military Counter-Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC) to combat terrorism within Muslim countries. The coalition began with 34 countries, but then expanded to 41, all from the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. Saudi Arabia thus hoped to play a leading role in fighting terrorism in the Muslim world, while also counterbalancing Iran and its allies. The coalition is supported by the United States, the United Kingdom, and France, among other international actors, even if there are concerns about its effectiveness. One of the weaknesses of IMCTC is that its decisionmaking process is cumbersome, as it includes multiple countries with different backgrounds and very different interests.

Conclusion

Overall, the emerging Saudi position on Salafism is reflective of a wider strategic adjustment in the kingdom's religious and diplomatic engagement, one that may indicate far-reaching ramifications in the years ahead. The Saudis hope to make up for having exported Salafism as part of their previous foreign policy by promoting a less polarizing, less austere version of Islam, so as to reduce extremism at home and abroad. This might also presage less sectarianism in the Islamic world, greater Sunni cohesion, even greater Sunni-Shia cohesion, if inclusivism becomes a hallmark of

the new Saudi approach. This could, in turn, enhance the kingdom's reputation internationally, especially in the West, and among states with more moderate forms of Islam, thereby increasing Saudi soft power through a model of Islam in tune with the values of tolerance and coexistence.

About the Author

Hesham Alghannam is a nonresident scholar at the Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center. His research focuses on policy and strategy in Saudi Arabia and abroad. He is also the director general of the Strategic Studies and National Security Programs at Naif Arab University for Security Sciences.


Notes

- 1 This theme was raised at a conference in which the author participated at the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies in March 2018, under Chatham House Rules. The conference link is here: <https://kfcris.com/en/eve/view/109>.



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