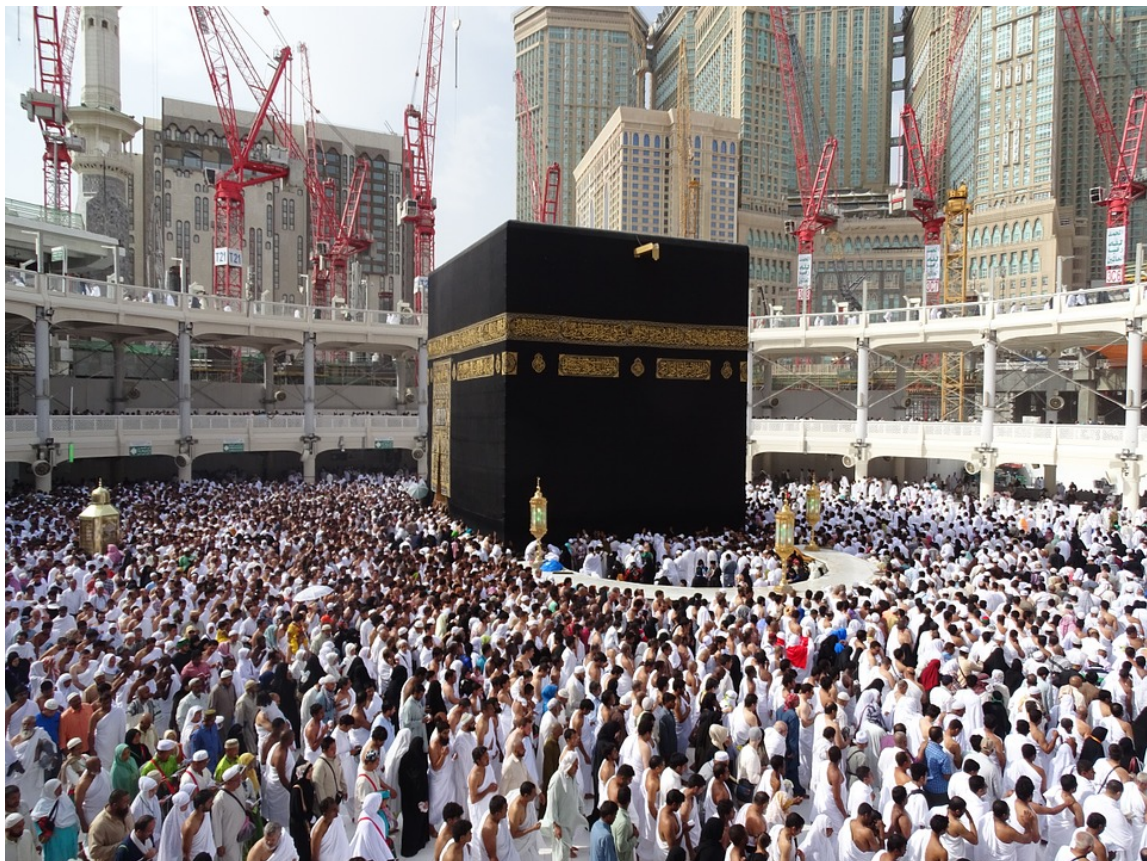


# Saudi Arabia and the Limits of Religious Reform

■ Stéphane Lacroix | 25 February 2019

---



## **About the Report**

This report was commissioned by the Cambridge Institute on Religion & International Studies (CIRIS) on behalf of the Transatlantic Policy Network on Religion and Diplomacy (TPNRD).

## **About the TPNRD**

The TPNRD is a forum of diplomats from North America and Europe who collaborate on religion-related foreign policy issues. Launched in 2015, the network is co-chaired by officials from the European External Action Service and the U.S. Department of State.

## **About CIRIS**

CIRIS is a multi-disciplinary research centre at Clare College, Cambridge. CIRIS's role as the Secretariat of the TPNRD is generously supported by the Henry Luce Foundation's initiative on religion in international affairs.

## **About the Author**

Stéphane Lacroix is an Associate Professor at Sciences Po and a member of the TPNRD Academic Advisory Council.

## **Disclaimer**

The opinions expressed in this report are those of author and do not necessarily represent the views of CIRIS, Clare College, the Luce Foundation, the TPNRD Secretariat, or any TPNRD-participating government.

### **Cambridge Institute on Religion & International Studies**

Clare College | Trinity Lane  
Cambridge | CB2 1TL  
United Kingdom

[CIRIS.org.uk](http://CIRIS.org.uk) | [ReligionandDiplomacy.org.uk](http://ReligionandDiplomacy.org.uk)



# Saudi Arabia and the Limits of Religious Reform

■ Stéphane Lacroix | 25 February 2019

In November 2017, prince Muhammad bin Salman (MBS), the current Saudi crown prince and the kingdom's strongman, made a staggering statement that was widely reported in the foreign media. He declared his intention to revert to the "moderate Islam open to the world and all religions" that, he argued, has been the essence of Saudi Islam until 1979 and the Iranian revolution. "We won't waste 30 years of our life combating extremist thoughts", he added, "we will destroy them now and immediately."<sup>1</sup> In the year prior to that statement, as he was taking control of the Saudi state apparatus, he took a series of groundbreaking domestic decisions such as curbing the powers of the "committee for the promotion of virtue and the prevention of vice" (the so-called religious police) and introducing entertainment, including cinemas and concerts, to the Kingdom. And in June 2017, women were finally allowed to drive. All of this, combined with the prince's social and economic vision presented in his "Vision 2030," spurred immense enthusiasm among the Kingdom's Western partners.<sup>2</sup>

Those who observed more closely what was happening inside the Kingdom were more skeptical about what this meant for the future of Saudi Arabia: the prince's brutal ways seemed to signal that, despite the new discourse, not much had changed in the Kingdom. Some observers, including Jamal Khashoggi, who was later assassinated by a Saudi commando in the Kingdom's consulate in Istanbul in October 2018, argued that things were actually getting much worse than before. This paper is intended to analyse the shifting power dynamics in Saudi Arabia and, more specifically, how they are affecting the Saudi religious establishment and its ability to exert control and influence over Saudi society and abroad.

## Assessing MBS' Religious Reforms

Until MBS's rise to power, Saudi Arabia represented a unique political model in which some form of power-sharing arrangement existed between the princes and clerics: the princes were given a free hand in matters of governance with the clerics' loyal support in exchange for the clerics being put in charge of defining and enforcing social norms (in particular through the clergy's coercive branch, the "committee for the promotion of virtue

and prevention of vice") and given the means to export their vision of Islam to the rest of the world.<sup>3</sup> What also made Saudi Arabia unique was the type of Islam that prevailed: an ultra-conservative brand known as "Wahhabism," or "Salafism" as its proponents refer to it.

MBS may well be sincere in his willingness to change Saudi religious discourse and to reshape the relationship between political and religious actors in the Kingdom. His reasons for doing this are not simply ideological, however. His main issue with the Saudi political model is that it gives too much power to the clerics. Since 2016, MBS has striven to centralise and "verticalise" power into his hands, destroying the consensus-based "horizontal" power system that prevailed since the 1950s. Power was traditionally shared among princes, between princes and economic elites, and between princes and clerics. This configuration created a space – however tiny and constrained – for dissent. Though he has been acting in the name of "administrative efficiency," what MBS has been doing amounts to an authoritarian power grab. And the clerics are one of the constituencies targeted in the process. In addition, the clerics pose another problem: their ultra-conservatism makes them wary of certain social changes that MBS sees as crucial for his economic modernisation plans to succeed. The right for women to drive, for instance, has traditionally been seen as a red line for many in the religious establishment—yet, MBS sees it as a necessary condition to integrate Saudis, men and women, into the labor market. He also understands that these types of measures are widely popular in the West and likely to earn him precious support at a time when he still consolidating his position. MBS seems fascinated by the social model adopted in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where conservative values co-exist with an open and globalisation-friendly society—a model generally praised in the West.

In order to achieve his goals, MBS has targeted the clergy in a range of ways. He took major steps aimed at weakening the clerics, such as the April 2016 decision to curtail the powers of the religious police by taking away their ability to arrest offenders.<sup>4</sup> By doing so, he basically cut the clergy's coercive arm, preventing clerics from enforcing Wahhabi norms on society. Although no exact figures have been revealed, sources also indicate that MBS has diminished the amount of resources

dedicated to religious institutions in charge of exporting Saudi Islam abroad.<sup>5</sup>

All of this represents a fundamental breach to the original agreement between princes and clerics. Not that MBS wants to destroy the alliance, though. He understands the monarchy's crucial need for religious legitimisation. But he would like to create a subservient clergy, similar to that of other authoritarian Arab countries, whose role is merely to rubberstamp the regime's political decisions. However, this a complex goal to achieve. It is true that, despite all the disagreements they may have, the Wahhabi clerics in the Kingdom's official religious establishment were unlikely to publicly oppose the regime because they believe obedience to the ruler to be a core religious principle. But most of them were as unlikely to publicly support his social liberalising measures. They would generally stay silent, voicing criticism only in private and advising the rulers between closed doors.

For MBS, however, public silence is not enough. For this reason, he started promoting within the religious establishment relatively young (i.e. in their 50s) religious figures willing to provide the kind of active religious justifications that he seeks. One of them is Muhammad al-'Issa, a former justice minister whose rise in the establishment started in the late years of King Abdallah's rule, and who was appointed in 2016 as the new secretary general of the Muslim World League.<sup>6</sup> With the more senior figures who remained silent, certain tricks were used: in April 2018, for instance, MBS paid a filmed visit to Salih al-Fawzan — one of the most conservative members in the council of senior ulama — where the two men are seen cordially shaking hands and talking, but with no sound. The video was broadcast on Saudi TV as proof that the sheikh supported the prince.<sup>7</sup>

As for the clerics known for their past or present public criticism of the regime, they were targeted with harsh repression. Many of them were socialised in the so-called Sahwa movement, which emerged on the margins of the Saudi religious field in the 1960s and 1970s as a result of the cross-fertilisation between Wahhabi religious ideas and the Muslim Brotherhood's intellectual and political views<sup>8</sup>. Those clerics openly spoke about politics, and saw criticism of the regime as legitimate — something Wahhabi clerics generally shun. In pre-MBS Saudi Arabia, that type of speech was tolerated to some extent — within red lines. After the 1990s, the Sahwa evolved in many different directions: some clerics, like Salman al-'Awda, transformed into liberal Islamists, defending the idea of a constitutional monarchy and championing political rights, especially in the context of the Arab Spring where they sided with protesters across the region. Others, like Nasir al-'Umar, remained deeply conservative and restrained their political

criticism to the limited social liberalising measures adopted by the state (as when, in 2010, women were finally allowed to work as cashiers in shops)<sup>9</sup>.

Though they usually did not hold formal official positions in the religious establishment, these clerics were no doubt the most popular religious voices in the Kingdom. Salman al-Awda had 15 million followers on Twitter and the more conservative Muhammad al-'Arifi had about 20 million. Since September 2017, the main figures in that group have been arrested. Many of them were accused of having ties to the Muslim Brotherhood (considered a "terrorist organisation" by Saudi Arabia since March 2014) or to a "foreign entity," namely Qatar. In September 2018, the general prosecutor requested the death penalty against Salman al-'Awda.

## The Limits of MBS's Project

This attempt to destroy the Sahwa is part of a wider attempt to silence any type of dissent in the Kingdom. In addition to the clerics, liberal or women activists known for their critical positions were arrested by the dozens. Yet, the Sahwa provides a useful scapegoat for everything that went wrong in the Kingdom over the past few decades, just like the Muslim Brotherhood serves as a similar scapegoat in post-2013 Egypt. What is meant by MBS's quote at the beginning of this article is really: "we were moderate before those Islamists took over, and forced us to become radicals." A variant, expressed in other interviews, is that Saudi's pro-Islamist policies were meant to support US interests, at a time when Islamists were seen in Washington as allies against the pro-Soviet Arab Left.<sup>10</sup>

This obviously ignores the fact that the Sahwa was only allowed to develop because the regime saw political benefit in it. More importantly, defining pre-1979 Wahhabism as moderate is quite problematic: Muhammad bin Ibrahim, who was the Kingdom's mufti until 1969, was certainly one of the most intransigent Wahhabi figures of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, going so far as to ban the use of military uniforms in the Saudi army because it made them resemble infidels.<sup>11</sup> What was no doubt different before 1979 was the clerics' inability to exert full and homogeneous social control across Saudi society, which allowed for the existence of certain liberal spaces (for instance in the Hedjaz region, where small cinemas sometimes did exist). What changed in the 1970s was that Saudi Arabia started amassing the financial resources that would allow the state — and with it the clerics — to reach much further into Saudi society. This has little to do with the Sahwa per se. Scapegoating the Sahwa provides a useful narrative though: it exonerates the Wahhabi clerics from radicalism, while blaming it on the opposition. It also allows MBS to present his

reforms as a simple return to previous practices rather than an innovation.

The Sahwa certainly includes some very conservative figures whose social discourse is no different from that of hardcore Wahhabis. But the Sahwa has also produced a generation of critical clerics and intellectuals, who have developed novel conceptions regarding state-religion relations, democracy, coexistence with the West, and even inter-sect relations. In addition to Salman al-'Awda, they include younger figures such as Abdallah al-Maliki, jailed in September 2017.<sup>12</sup> Many of them would have certainly supported much of the crown prince's social and religious modernisation project, had they been able to openly express their positions when they disagreed. At the same time, they would also have called for genuine political reforms to be implemented in parallel to the social reforms. Yet, MBS is not willing to have any of that—and he has been particularly brutal in repressing those moderate Sahwa figures, precisely because they represent a more credible voice than the hardcore segments of the Wahhabi movement.

Instead, MBS has preferred to rely on a small number of official religious figures with little social credibility to openly advocate for his agenda. The discourse they produce is meant to be seductive to Western ears: they denounce terrorism, call for religious tolerance, defend the social measures taken by MBS.<sup>13</sup> Some of them also added actions to words, as when Muhammad al-'Issa met with Coptic bishop Morcos in Riyadh.<sup>14</sup> Yet, this discourse is not rooted in any genuine effort to reconsider the Wahhabi tradition from within. As one Saudi intellectual said: "How can one take Muhammad al-'Issa's statements seriously when religious bookstores in Riyadh are full of books advocating the exact opposite?"<sup>15</sup> The only effort in that direction that was announced in October 2017 was the creation of a "King Salman Complex" whose mission was allegedly to reevaluate the authenticity of hadiths used by extremists.<sup>16</sup> In addition to the fact that this seems to be a

complicated endeavor (many undeniably sound hadiths can be used to justify radical actions if understood in a certain way), no more news has come out about that project.

At the same time, most of the clerics who, for the last twenty years, had been trying to think critically about the Wahhabi tradition and had produced a corpus of books and writings to that effect—from famous anti-Wahhabi scholar Hasan al-Maliki<sup>17</sup> to reformists from within the tradition like Salman al-'Awda<sup>18</sup> and Abdallah al-Hamid<sup>19</sup>—are now in jail. This makes MBS's religious reforms look more like a public relations stunt than a genuine transformation. No such transformation can happen without an open and frank debate about the Wahhabi tradition—and this is precisely what MBS is not willing to have. One risk here is that of a backlash, which—in a country that, despite generational change, remains conservative—seems a real possibility in the mid- to long term. Another risk is that MBS changes his mind after a few years, once his power grab is successful, and rediscovers the benefits of a more intransigent religious discourse for domestic and international purposes. If religious reform is only a push from above and not the result of a genuine social debate, it is easily reversible.

Finally, even if MBS manages to durably impose a new religious discourse to the leaders of the Saudi religious establishment, one should not exaggerate the impact this would have outside the Kingdom. Salafism has become a global and decentralised religious movement over which Saudi Arabia and its clerics—despite their symbolic authority—exert little control. This is all the more true in the absence of a genuine reflection on the founding texts of the Wahhabi tradition, which—whatever the clerics in Riyadh may say—will remain available as a potential source of contestation whenever the political context demands it.

<sup>1</sup> "I will return Saudi Arabia to moderate Islam, says Crown Prince," *The Guardian*, 24 October 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/24/i-will-return-saudi-arabia-moderate-islam-crown-prince>

<sup>2</sup> One famous example of Western enthusiasm for MBS's reforms is this op-ed by Thomas Friedman in the *New York Times*: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/23/opinion/saudi-prince-mbs-arab-spring.html>

<sup>3</sup> On this, see Stéphane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011: 8-10.

<sup>4</sup> "Saudi Arabia strips religious police of arresting power," *Jazeera*, 13 April 2016, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/04/saudi-arabia-strips-religious-police-arresting-power->

[160413141418824.html](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/04/saudi-arabia-strips-religious-police-arresting-power-160413141418824.html)

<sup>5</sup> Author interview with officer at the Ministry of Religious Affairs, December 2017.

<sup>6</sup> "Au sein du clergé wahhabite, la montée d'une jeune garde, plus moderne et plus docile," *Le Monde*, 9 June 2017, [https://www.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2017/06/09/au-sein-du-clerge-wahhabite-la-montee-d-une-jeune-garde-plus-moderne-et-docile\\_5141260\\_3218.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2017/06/09/au-sein-du-clerge-wahhabite-la-montee-d-une-jeune-garde-plus-moderne-et-docile_5141260_3218.html)

<sup>7</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lv4ujAULRgw>

<sup>8</sup> On this see Stéphane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam*: 37-80.

<sup>9</sup> Stéphane Lacroix, *Saudi Islamists and the Arab Spring*, London School of Economics, May 2014. [https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/56725/1/Lacroix\\_Saudi-Islamists-and-theArab-Spring\\_2014.pdf](https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/56725/1/Lacroix_Saudi-Islamists-and-theArab-Spring_2014.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> "Saudi Prince Denies Kushner is 'in his pocket,'"

---

Washington Post, 22 March 2018,  
[https://www.washingtonpost.com/amhtml/world/national-security/saudi-prince-denies-kushner-is-in-his-pocket/2018/03/22/701a9c9e-2e22-11e8-8688-e053ba58f1e4\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/amhtml/world/national-security/saudi-prince-denies-kushner-is-in-his-pocket/2018/03/22/701a9c9e-2e22-11e8-8688-e053ba58f1e4_story.html)

<sup>11</sup> Stéphane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam*: 25.

<sup>12</sup> Al-Maliki was the author in 2012 of a noted book, which spurred immense controversy among conservatives in Saudi Arabia, entitled “The sovereignty of the Umma comes before the implementation of shari’a” (*siyadat al-umma qabla tatbiq al-shari’a*).

<sup>13</sup> “‘Wiping out’ extremist ideology is my mission: head of Saudi-based Muslim body”, Reuters, 24 November 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-islam/wiping-out-extremist-ideology-is-my-mission-head-of-saudi-based-muslim-body-idUSKBN1DO1JV>

<sup>14</sup> Muslim World League chief receives Egyptian Coptic bishop, *Arab News*, 28 November 2018, <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1412701/saudi-arabia>

<sup>15</sup> Interview with a (now jailed) Saudi intellectual, January 2018.

<sup>16</sup> “Saudi scholars to vet teaching of prophet Muhammad to combat extremism,” *The Guardian*, 18 October 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/18/saudi-scholars-to-vet-teaching-of-prophet-muhammad-to-curb-extremism>

<sup>17</sup> See for instance Hasan al-Maliki’s book about Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab “a preacher, not a prophet” (*da’iyyatun wa laysa nabiyyun*).

<sup>18</sup> See Madawi al-Rasheed, “Salman al-Awdah: In the Shadow of Revolutions,” 27 April 2013, [www.jadaliyya.com/Details/28521](http://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/28521)

<sup>19</sup> Al-Hamid is a veteran Saudi reformist who has been the intellectual inspiration for the demands for a constitutional monarchy since 2003. He has produced a great number of books about religion, society and politics in Saudi Arabia. In 2013, he was sentenced to 11 years in prison.

