



Strategic Note on Religion & Diplomacy

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Introduction

Welcome to the inaugural *TPNRD Strategic Note on Religion & Diplomacy*. Produced by the Transatlantic Policy Network on Religion & Diplomacy (TPNRD)—a forum of European and North American diplomats who collaborate on religion-related policy issues—this periodic resource is designed to help diplomats, policymakers, and other foreign policy professionals to recognize and understand the intersection of religion and the most pressing issues today in world affairs. Each edition of the *Strategic Note* will highlight key recent developments pertaining to the religious dimensions of major topics in foreign policy, offering a brief analysis of how religion fits into the picture, how religion may affect future developments, and suggestions about how to learn more. The topics and regions selected for analysis in each issue will vary, and are determined through consultation with diplomats and scholarly experts. This issue includes the following topics:

- Evangelical Christianity's growing political influence in **Brazil**;
- the intersection of Buddhism, nationalism, and violence in **Myanmar**;
- ongoing reverberations of the newly independent (autocephalous) Orthodox Church in **Ukraine**;
- Muslim detention camps in western **China**;
- comparative analysis of religion and populism in **Europe and the United States**;
- religion and politics in **Zimbabwe**;
- the role of inter-religious engagement in the **G20**; and
- the limits to religious reform in **Saudi Arabia**.

Please also consult TPNRD's full collection of resources on religion and international affairs at the [Religion & Diplomacy](#) portal site.

The Influence of Evangelical Christianity in Brazil's New Government

Evangelical Christianity has for decades been a fundamental factor in Brazil's political sphere. After the election of President Jair Bolsonaro last year, understanding Brazil's religious breakdown may be crucial to understanding new social, political and economic movements within the country.

Key Development Alert

About 30% percent of Brazilians—63 million people—are evangelical. Evangelical Christians have a history of **involvement within the Brazilian government** stretching back to 1987, when they worked in alliance with Catholics as a coordinated group for the National Constituent Assembly. In the new legislature begun on February 1, 2019, 88 federal deputies in the lower house come from this evangelical group, as well as 9 senators from the upper house. These members constitute the Evangelical Parliamentary Front.

What's at Stake?

Members of the Evangelical Parliamentary Front predominantly **espouse socially conservative positions**, including opposition to abortion, same-sex civil unions, sex education in schools. They often support criminalization of homosexuality, the teaching of creationism, stricter penal policies, and Zionism—including the proposal to move the Brazilian embassy in Israel to Jerusalem. **Evangelicals have strong support in Brazilian society, and many have allied themselves with the policies of the Bolsonaro government.** While Bolsonaro himself identifies as Catholic, he attends an Evangelical church, and both his wife and children are evangelicals.

Looking Ahead

In addition to the Evangelical Parliamentary Front in the National Congress, **some evangelical pastors have been promoted to important government positions**, many of which are non-elected. Evangelical deputies currently head important ministerial bodies such as the Secretariat for the Federal Chamber, the Ministry of Women, Family and Human Rights, the Federal Attorney General's Office, and the Ministry of Tourism. **Evangelical Christianity is coming to occupy a more central role in the government of Brazil**, and it will serve diplomats and policymakers well to understand the many political standpoints of this religious bloc. Brazilian religious groups are also reaching across the southern Atlantic and will likely become a

growing influence within lusophone Africa's Christian dynamics.

Further Reading

- Alexander Zaitchik & Christopher Lord, "How a Demon-Slaying Pentecostal Billionaire Is Ushering in a Post-Catholic Brazil," *The New Republic*, February 7, 2019, <https://newrepublic.com/article/153083/demon-slaying-pentecostal-billionaire-ushering-post-catholic-brazil>
- Pamela Mochado, "Did Brazil's evangelicals put Jair Bolsonaro into office?" *The New Internationalist*, November 6, 2018, <https://newint.org/features/2018/11/06/did-brazil%E2%80%99s-evangelicals-put-jair-bolsonaro-office>
- Linda van de Kamp & Rijk van Dijk, "Pentecostals Moving South-South: Brazilian and Ghanaian Transnationalism in Southern Africa," https://www.researchgate.net/publication/289679092_Pentecostals_moving_South-South_Brazilian_and_Ghanaian_transnationalism_in_southern_Africa
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Buddhism, Nationalism, and Conflict in Myanmar

Following the 2017 **humanitarian crisis in Myanmar's Rakhine State** that targeted the Rohingya Muslim community, ongoing prejudice and structural discrimination based on religious and ethnic identity, goaded on by monk-led Buddhist nationalist activist groups, continue to **hamper the country's democratic transition** and progress toward peace.

Key Development Alert

A 2018 U.S. State Department [investigative report](#) into the military campaign in Rakhine noted that the violence that took place there was "extreme, large-scale, widespread, and seemingly geared toward both terrorizing the population and driving out the Rohingya residents." The campaign against the Rohingya, which led to the **mass exodus** of hundreds of thousands to refugee camps in neighboring **Bangladesh**, has been described as **ethnic cleansing** by the United States, and as genocide by others.

What's at Stake?

Violent Buddhist national activities fuel a long-standing perception that the central government and its military, controlled primarily by the majority

Bamar Buddhist community, does not view ethnic and religious communities as a legitimate part of the nation. **These dynamics hamper progress of the country's peace process** to resolve its myriad civil wars. Widespread international condemnation of Myanmar and its Buddhist nationalist groups exacerbate a sense that the global community is antagonistic toward Buddhism or, at the very least, unsympathetic to Buddhist concerns.

While broader anti-Muslim and more specific anti-Rohingya sentiment has been widespread for decades in Myanmar, the recent environment in which such extreme violence against the ethnic and religious minority Rohingya took place was cultivated in part by the rhetoric and **political mobilization of prominent Buddhist monastic and lay-led activist groups** in Myanmar. These groups formed in the early years of the military-led democratic transition, seeking to protect and extend Buddhist practices, culture, and institutions in the face of the extraordinary social, economic, and political changes the transition was bringing to the once-isolated country. Many who support these groups are **motivated by a sincere desire to ensure Buddhism's ongoing health** in the face of new technologies, consumerism, and globalizing forces of modernity. Efforts to this end have focused on strengthening and disseminating "dharma school curriculum" to ensure young Buddhists are educated in the central precepts and practices of the faith.

Many worry that **foreign influences pose a direct threat to Buddhist faith** and practice. Some members and leaders have identified external Islamic influences, and the faith's particular expression and existence in Myanmar, as posing a particular threat to the Buddhist tradition generally and core Buddhist and Burmese cultural values specifically. These leaders have **spread malicious rumors about Islam and Muslims**, using incendiary and prejudicial speech that seems to give license to structural discrimination and overt violence. Muslims throughout Myanmar of different ethnic backgrounds have experienced increased discrimination and attacks during the country's tumultuous transition period from authoritarian to quasi-authoritarian rule. Meanwhile, various ethnic groups, some of whom are also religious minorities (such as the Kachin, the majority of whom practice Christianity), also have been targeted with ongoing violence by the military.

Looking Ahead

The forms of exclusionary and prejudicial expressions of Buddhist nationalism, often led by monks and organized through Buddhist institutions, have corollaries in **other Theravada**

Buddhist countries in the region, including Thailand and Sri Lanka. Similarities shared by these groups include an anti-Islamic expression, a focus on legislative activism (democratic mobilization via petitions and lobby to pass Buddhist-interest laws), widespread use of social media, support for the military, and religious education. During elections these groups and their narratives are particularly heightened.

In efforts to mitigate the negative repercussions, many civil society organizations have led **efforts to defend and strengthen diverse religious coexistence** through building relationships across and increasing understanding about different religions, help prevent or mitigate inter-religious or inter-ethnic communal violence, create peace education curriculum within religious frames, and advance "**love speech**" social media campaigns within countries. Several regional efforts have sought to address broader (and perceived increasing) Buddhist/Muslim conflict in Asia as a whole. The impact of these efforts have shown some modest positive impact, particularly at a local level.

Further Reading

- Documentation of Atrocities in Northern Rakhine State, U.S. Department of State, September 24, 2018. <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/286063.htm>
- Matthew J. Walton and Susan Hayward, *Contesting Buddhist Narratives: Democratization, Nationalism, and Communal Violence in Myanmar*, East-West Center, 2014. (<https://www.eastwestcenter.org/publications/contesting-buddhist-narratives-democratization-nationalism-and-communal-violence-in-mya>).
- Matthew Walton, "Misunderstanding MaBaTha," *Asia Times*, June 9, 2017. <https://www.asiatimes.com/2017/06/article/misunderstanding-myanmars-ma-ba-tha/>
- Angela Ullmann, Seng Mai Aung, *Addressing Religion in Conflict: Insights and Case Studies from Myanmar*, Center for Security Studies, ETH Zurich, January 2019. <http://www.css.ethz.ch/en/services/digital-library/publications/publication.html/9d656b8e-fbe2-4380-8e61-e249cff4d9ba>.
- The US Institute of Peace conducted a meta-evaluation of the impact-writ-large of interfaith action projects in Myanmar from 2011 to the present, the results of which will be published in early 2019.

Russia and the Geopolitics of Ukrainian Orthodox Autocephaly

Politics within the Orthodox churches in Eastern Europe and Eurasia continue to be a critical though often under-appreciated component of broader geopolitical tensions—especially with Putin’s efforts to leverage the Russian Orthodox church as a foreign policy tool.

Key Development Alert

The Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople awarded a *tomos* (“decree”) of autocephaly (independence) to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church on 6 January, 2019—an act with significant religious and political consequences. The Ukrainian Church has now been recognised as the 15th Church in the communion of churches comprising Eastern Orthodox Christianity. Russia has been affected not only due to the rupture in longstanding relations between Orthodox believers in both countries but more broadly due to the failure of its religious diplomacy to prevent the break. As such, **the autocephaly process represents a direct challenge to Russia’s power in the region.**

What’s at Stake?

With ongoing tension between vestiges of former rival branches of the Orthodox church in Ukraine, implementation of autocephaly at the local level in Ukraine and the politics of international recognition by other Orthodox churches will continue to make headlines in the next months. Some churches within the Orthodox fold are hedging their bets. **The Georgian Orthodox Church refrained from recognising the new independent Ukrainian Church** out of fear that Moscow may dilute its authority by recognizing an independent Abkhazian Church in the northern part of the country. In addition, the **Polish, Serbian, and Antiochian Churches have publicly expressed support for Moscow.** The Holy See refrained from taking an official stance.

Looking Ahead

Ukrainian President **Poroshenko has been a key player in recognizing the new Ukrainian Church.** To what extent will his support translate into popular support in the looming March election? The fact that only a small number of parishes (70-100 out of 12,000) moved to the new Church indicate that **support for the unified church may be limited,** with further implications for Ukraine-Russia relations. **Russia remains linked to Kiev and could**

easily find a reason to ‘protect’ its faithful in Ukraine, while the issue of violence remains acute with individual parishes debating whether to switch jurisdiction. If the process of unifying the disparate strands of Orthodoxy in Ukraine succeeds, the new Ukrainian Church could become one of the largest in the world with over 12,000 parishes.

Further Reading

- Andrew Higgins, [‘As Ukraine and Russia Battle Over Orthodoxy, Schism Looms’](#), *The New York Times*, 31 December 2018
- Carlotta Gall, [‘Ukrainian Orthodox Christians Formally Break From Russia’](#), *The New York Times*, 6 January 2019
- David Masci, [‘Split between Ukrainian, Russian churches shows political importance of Orthodox Christianity’](#), Pew Research Centre, 14 January 2019
- [‘Putin describes establishment of new church in Ukraine as ‘dangerous politicking’](#), *Interfax-Religion*, 16 January 2019
- Leustean, Lucian. 2019. [‘The politics of Orthodox churches in the European Union’](#) *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 18(2-3): 146-157

China’s Muslim Internment Camps

China is undergoing another deeply unfortunate Cultural Revolution albeit on a significantly smaller scale and focused on a particular religious community. Will it be able to navigate the emerging and not insignificant tensions between the aspirations of its Belt & Road initiative and the increased human connectedness across cultures and regions that it entails?

Key Development Alert

Extensive international reporting since the second half of 2018 suggests that China has created a network of detention, “cultural education,” and forced labor camps in the far western Xinjiang province, home to a large population of ethnic Uighurs. Some estimates suggest that as many as 2 million people have spent time in these camps since they become active in 2016. The Chinese authorities have resisted calls from the international community, including at the United Nations, to provide further information about these practices. Beijing denies the existence of detention facilities, claiming instead that it is operating “educational centres” and “vocational training facilities” to help

Uighurs learn Mandarin Chinese and create employment opportunities. Reports emerging from the province based on testimony from former detainees, however, suggest that people are often rounded up arbitrarily and against their will. They speak to crowded dormitory environments in which they are forced to attend “cultural reprogramming” classes that teach the importance of Chinese identity and highlight the dangers of foreign extremist ideologies. Residents are forced to sing patriotic songs and, at the labor camps, to work for meager wages.

What’s at Stake?

The Uighur detention centres throw into stark relief a deep tension at the heart of China’s. These developments speak to a perception on the part of Beijing that its previous openness to Uighurs and other minorities has gone too far. In the wake of several acts of violence in the province, the authorities have cited concerns that extremist interpretations of Islam have become too prominent in Xinjiang due to foreign influences and have announced a new initiative to “Sinicize” Islam. Despite efforts to whitewash emerging accounts of its growing network of Muslim internment camps, Beijing is worried that these developments will hamper its ability to project a benevolent international image as it implements aggressive economic expansion strategies. Its already deeply problematic human rights record has become further tarnished.

Looking Ahead

The Uighur detention centres throw into stark relief a deep tension at the heart of China’s global strategy. By necessity, the ambitious Belt & Road strategy linking China’s western provinces to Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East will necessarily entail greater interconnectedness and the exchange of ideas and identities. While Beijing might hope to get ahead of such influences through a top-down program of forced “cultural inoculation,” its strategy is likely ultimately to backfire with heavy-handed oppression of its Muslim communities creating a sense of grievance and laying the groundwork for unrest and, potentially, greater radicalization.

Also significant and telling here is how other major Muslim powers have responded. Rather than decrying the mistreatment of its co-religionists, Saudi Arabia—which often views itself as the leader of the Muslim world—Riyadh has endorsed China’s actions as necessary for stemming the growth of terrorism. This is likely a harbinger of how things will work in a new and re-aligning world order in which emerging powers will prioritize their

sovereignty, geo-economics, and security cooperation over other considerations.

Further Reading

- Chris Buckley, “[China is Detaining Muslims in Vast Numbers. The Goal: ‘Transformation’](#),” *New York Times*, September 8, 2018.
- Philip Wen & Olzhas Auyezov, “[Tracking China’s Muslim Gulag](#),” *Reuters*, November 29, 2018.

Religion and Populism in Europe and the US

In both Europe and the United States the confluence of religion and populism continues to shape domestic and foreign policy. In Europe, Brexit and its consequences will continue to be a key focus for all analysts, especially as the economic, political and social consequences of a no-deal Brexit could be dire. An additional serious concern is the **impact of Brexit on the related and pan-European phenomenon of rising right-wing populism**.

The marriage of nationalist populism with white conservative evangelicalism continues to be a major feature of American political life, as seen in recent debates over wide ranges of issues: abortion, immigration, refugees, Israel, Iran, Russia, trade policy, and populist movements in Europe.

Key Development Alert

Whilst right-wing populism has always had immigration as a key focus, in the current version, significant emphasis is placed on the **religious identity of migrants** (almost always assumed to be Muslim) and, conversely, on the religious identity and heritage of European nations (almost always Christian). Viktor Orban’s so-called ‘**Christian democracy**’ is especially important to watch. Defined in opposition to ‘liberal democracy’, Orban argues that where liberal democracy privileges multiculturalism and is pro-immigration, **Christian democracy privileges Christianity and is anti-immigration**. Far-right groups in other European countries, including France and Germany, have praised Orban for ‘re-inventing Christian democracy’. Orban has also enjoyed the support of members of far-right groups in Britain.

In the US, shifts in evangelical political opinion could have significant electoral consequences. According to a March 2019 Pew poll, Trump’s support amongst white evangelicals has dropped by 9%—from 78% in early 2017 to 69% in early 2019. Other surveys have shown similar drops in white

evangelical support. However, that support could again increase as abortion emerges as a major issue in 2019, with several Southern state legislatures placing new restrictions on access to abortion.

What's at Stake?

There is an important relationship between 'Christian' and 'secular' for some of these groups as well, often used interchangeably or **with Christianity seen as compatible with secularism, while Islam is not**. It is also not insignificant that **Steve Bannon**, former Chief Strategist for President Trump, has been acting as an informal adviser to many of the far-right groups across Europe.

Looking Ahead

Policymakers need to closely monitor the ways in which these deployments of 'Christian democracy' and 'liberal democracy' operate to limit public debate and civic engagement of secular and religious groups alike—including religious groups promoting alternative and inclusive interpretations of Christianity.

In the US, religion is always a factor in national elections, but the type and style of influence that religion has can vary greatly. Some of the Democratic candidates have made appeals to religious voters, calling for a more civil and gracious public discourse and for a Christian concern for the poor and marginalized. However, such appeals have to compete with rhetoric that draws on the cultural fears and moral sentiments of white evangelicals.

Policymakers should also seek to engage and support a range of actors, including grassroots civil society actors, across Europe who are seeking to challenge the forces of religious nationalism and European disintegration. In the specific case of Hungary, potential actors to engage:

[Direkt36](#), an independent Hungarian news agency

[Hungarian Europe Society](#)

[Hungarian Helsinki Committee](#)

Further Reading

Cox, Daniel and Robert P. Jones. 2017. [America's Changing Religious Identity](#). The Public Religion Research Institute.

Haberman, Clyde. 2018. 'Religion and Right-Wing Politics: How Evangelicals Shaped Elections' [The New York Times](#) 28 October 2018.

[Hungarian Spectrum](#), a blog with regular posts reflecting on politics in Hungary, edited by Eva S.

Balogh, former Professor of History at Yale University.

Marzouki, Nadia, Duncan McDonnell and Olivier Roy. 2016. *Saving the People: How Populism Hijacks Religion*. London: Hurst and Company.

Zerofsky, Elisabeth. 2019. '[Viktor Orbán's Far-Right Vision for Europe](#)' *The New Yorker* 14 January 2019.

Mapping the Religious and Political Landscape in Zimbabwe

As Zimbabwe adjusts to a new political climate under President Emmerson Mnangagwa, an understanding of Zimbabwe's particular religious landscape may prove essential for diplomats and policymakers keeping note of social and political movements within the country.

Key Development Alert

Zimbabwe is currently navigating its own political future as a second republic following the military overthrow of President Robert Mugabe in November 2017, after 37 years of rule. **Religious actors and organizations have been crucial to several key moments in Zimbabwe's recent political history**. Notably, Pastor Evan Mawarire and his religio-political #ThisFlag movement were **largely responsible for agitating popular opposition to Mugabe's rule**. Soon after, the Zimbabwean Jesuit priest Father Fidelis Mukonori served as mediator between Mugabe and the military in the transition to the second republic.

What's at Stake?

In light of the current political and social unrest in Zimbabwe, **religious organizations still play a prominent role in public life**. Fully 84% of the population identifies as Christian, and political elites tend to be members of mainstream or Pentecostal churches. Because of the huge following the churches have and the high level of societal religiosity, **politicians tend to appropriate and capitalize on religious motifs** in political mobilization and coordination. Moreover, religious organizations and individuals have often been important voices of political critique, and have often linked up with civil society organizations to pursue social justice. This critical role of religion in Zimbabwe will likely continue into the future.

Looking Ahead

It is important for international policymakers and diplomats to note that **religion is alive and active in**

the politics of Zimbabwe today, and several religious organizations are worth mentioning. The Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference, Zimbabwe Council of Churches, and Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe occasionally publish pastoral letters commenting on **political developments in the country from a local perspective**. Critical religious actors working at the civil society level include the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace Commission, the Zimbabwe Christian Alliance, and Grace to Heal. Organizations such as the Apostolic Christian Council of Zimbabwe **claim to represent African-initiated churches broadly, but have historically sided only with Zimbabwe's ruling party**.

Further Reading

- *Religions in Zimbabwe*, a website for Zimbabwean religious news and other information, <https://relzim.org>.
- *Zimbabwe Peace Project*, peace and justice reports and commentaries from Zimbabwe, www.zimpeaceproject.com.
- *Kubatana*, a non-governmental outlet for civil society and religious organizations in Zimbabwe, Kubatana.net.
- Zimbabwe Democracy Institute, a politically independent think tank in Zimbabwe producing critical policy commentary, zimdem.org.

The G20 Interfaith Forum: An Evolving Interreligious and Intercultural Effort

Since 2014, the G20 Interfaith Forum has provided an annual platform through which a variety of religiously affiliated institutions can engage together on achieving global agendas, most notably the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Background

The Forum's objective is to build a "network of networks" that can work across different religious sectors and communities worldwide. It is led and supported by a diverse group that was initially primarily from academic institutions, but increasingly draws on interfaith and other organizations and religious communities. The Forum builds on the vital roles that religious institutions and beliefs play in world affairs, reflecting their rich diversity of institutions and ideas. These include interfaith and intercultural organizations, religious leaders, scholars, development and humanitarian entities, and

business and civil society actors. This network seeks to contribute meaningful insight and recommendations that respond to and help shape the G20 and global policy agendas.

What's at Stake?

The G20 Interfaith Forum offers a space to **consider global policy issues from the unique perspective of religious identity and engagement**. In the past, it has considered wide-ranging agendas, including economic models and systems, the environment, women, families, children, work, humanitarian aid, health, education, global security, governance, human rights, and the rule of law. Forum agendas are framed taking into account the annual G20 priorities (which are shaped each year by the host government), together with topics that the various networks of religious actors recommend that the G20 leaders address.

Looking Ahead

The sixth annual G20 Interfaith Forum will take place in Tokyo in June 2019. The theme for the 2019 G20 Interfaith Forum will build on the goals of equity and sustainability that have linked prior events. Topics to be emphasized will include health, children, environmental action, food security, disaster relief and humanitarian response, action on refugees, good governance and fighting corruption, the role of women, challenges facing the aging, and engagement between states and religious communities. The Interfaith Forum will certainly continue to evolve and to **occupy a uniquely important position in the G20 policy agenda** in the future.

Further Reading

- Find the 2018 Interfaith Forum policy recommendations [here](#).
- See the broad range of [collaborating institutions](#) that have joined in Forum efforts over time.
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Saudi Arabia's "return to moderate Islam"

Despite the (increasingly questionable) talk of Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman being a reformer, he seems unlikely to fundamentally alter the power balance between the palace and the religious establishment in the near future. Measures to curb the influence of clerics are best viewed as part of a broader strategy by MbS to consolidate his power base rather than as evidence of any

ideological aversion to their brand of strict Salafi Islam. Indeed, the Crown Prince is likely to continue using religion as a political tool if and as it serves his objectives.

Key Development Alert

In late 2017, rising Saudi crown prince Muhammad bin Salman (MbS) intriguingly announced his intention to “return Saudi Arabia to moderate Islam.” Many in Western capitals took this as further evidence of his reformist credentials and began to wonder whether MbS might be serious about bringing the Kingdom’s religious establishment—the ideological source of the deeply conservative Wahhabi strain of Islam that Saudi petrodollars have disseminated around the world—firmly under his thumb. In the period since this dramatic acknowledgement, of the need to address religious intolerance and extremism within the Kingdom itself. We find a strong clue to the second aspect of “the return” in the fact that MbS himself put a date on it: 1979. While many in Washington DC and London immediately associated this year in their minds with Iran’s Islamic Revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that eventually gave rise to Al-Qaeda, MbS likely had something else in mind. 1979 was the year that an Islamist insurrection within Saudi Arabia itself led to the deeply embarrassing (for the royal family) seizure of the Grand Mosque of Mecca. Bearing this historical context in mind, MbS wishing to return to “moderate” Islam can be parsed as a desire for politically quietist religion—and is therefore wholly consistent with the hardline stance that Saudi Arabia has taken towards the Muslim Brotherhood movement since the revolutions of 2011.

Looking Ahead

MbS has taken a number of significant steps to curb the influence of the Kingdom’s religious establishment. He has banned the religious police from arresting Saudi citizens and named as Secretary General of the Muslim World League an ideological moderate closely aligned with his agenda. Looking ahead, however, it seems unlikely that MbS will seek to reshape religious norms and practices within the Kingdom itself. A deeply conservative country, any such effort would likely be met with considerable popular backlash. On these issues, the Crown Prince is first and foremost a pragmatist. When it suits his agenda to promote Salafism around the world—for example, to counter Iranian influence—he will encourage and provide resources for the religious establishment. Conversely, any perceived threat to his authority emanating from the clerics will likely be met with a

announcement, however, it has become increasingly clear that what MbS intended to say and what his audience heard are two very different things.

What’s at Stake?

In the mind of MbS, the “return to moderate Islam” seems to have two primary dimensions. The first involves an emphasis on countering extremist ideology, especially the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda. In the months since his 2017 announcement, senior Saudi functionaries close to MbS, when asked about the return to moderate Islam, have responded with a set of talking points emphasizing Saudi Arabia’s commitment to counter-terrorism and combating ideological extremism at the regional and global levels. Noticeably absent has been any talk, or even

forceful and unhesitant response from King’s Palace.

Further Reading

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<https://religionanddiplomacy.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/TPNRD-Lacroix-Saudi-final.pdf>

Peter Mandaville & Shadi Hamid, *Islam as Statecraft: How Governments Use Religion in Foreign Policy*, Washington DC: The Brookings Institution, 2018.

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About the TPNRD

The TPNRD is a forum of diplomats from North America and Europe working at the intersection of religion and foreign policy. 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

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