



PERSPECTIVES

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Suggestion to the New Saudi Crown Prince

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: It is unlikely that the new heir to the Saudi throne, Prince Mohammed bin Salman – who will be the first of King ibn Saud’s grandchildren to come to power – will stop the private Saudi program of promoting Salafism. Salafism is the radical form of Islam practiced by the Saudis, and their export of their beliefs has been a major cause of the Muslim world’s move towards radicalism over the last nearly 40 years. But the Saudi leadership might respond to a US suggestion that they begin to omit Indonesia and India from their program. This would protect a critical quarter of the world’s Muslim population from moving from moderate Islam to radical Islam.

After 64 years of rule by the sons of King ibn Saud, control of Saudi Arabia is moving to a new generation. The ailing 81-year old King Salman recently decreed that his 31-year old son, Mohammed bin Salman, will become King when he dies.

A major challenge hanging over the heads of the Saudi ruling family for decades has been how to continue their remarkably long-lived unity beyond the generation of King ibn Saud’s 54 sons. If the preparation for the epochal decision to make Mohammed bin Salman the Crown Prince has succeeded in avoiding division in the family, this challenge has now been met.

For nearly 40 years, the Saudi royal family has been conducting one of the most successful programs of changing the world that history has ever seen. They spend something on the order of \$4 billion per year paying for imams and mosques all over the world to teach the Saudi version of the Salafi form of Islam. The result has been that the strength of radical Islam (such as Salafism), compared to moderate Islam, has sharply increased in a major share of Muslim populations of the world. Evidence of this includes the notable increase in

Muslim use of veils, burkas, beards, and other forms of conservative religious dress.

The Saudi program does not teach terrorism or promote terrorist organizations, but it is widely believed that its success has made it easier for Muslim groups that favor war with the West, including terrorist organizations, to recruit popular support.

One of the effects of this Saudi success has been a great increase in support within Muslim communities for Islamists, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, who believe Islam is obligated to be at war with the infidel world and/or that the West is trying to destroy Islam. Obviously, the Saudi-funded program is not the only reason for this dangerous radicalization of the Muslim public, but it has been an important contributor.

The leaders of the Saudi royal family, including the new Crown Prince, and the Saudi government do not believe the Islamist war against the West is good for Saudi Arabia, and they are strongly opposed to the Muslim Brotherhood, the largest Islamist organization. So why do they spend so much money exporting Wahhabi Salafism?

Two reasons. First, they started the program in 1979 after the Islamic revolution brought Khomeini to power in Iran. The Saudis felt they could not afford to allow Khomeini and the Shiites to dominate Islamic radicalism; a separate Sunni radical movement was needed to compete with Iranian influence. Second, their domestic political position was based on their long-term alliance with the Ulema of powerful Wahhabi clerics for whom the teaching of Salafism is a religious obligation. The position of the Ulema was strengthened when the government needed a fatwa from them – as well as help from French military officers – to put down a radical takeover of the Grand Mosque in November 1979.

The Saudi program of exporting Salafism, although it has slowed somewhat and is less radical than it once was, is still one of the most important reasons why the Islamist war against the West is as strong as it is, and why it may have the potential to become much more serious. It is ironic but true that, although the Saudi leadership is opposed to the Islamist war against the West, Saudi money is still one of the crucial reasons why Muslim support for that war is so strong.

The US cannot convince the Saudi leadership to stop spending so much money on exporting Salafism around the world, because the program has too much domestic support. But now that the US is working with the Saudi government against the Shiite challenge from Iran, Saudi leaders might be amenable to a suggestion about a fairly small change in their program that could make a big difference – particularly as they are at least somewhat ambivalent about some

of the effects of that program.

The US should urge the Saudis to drop Indonesia and India from the payroll. That is, the US should suggest to the Saudis that it would be in the interests of both the US and Saudi Arabia for them to quietly arrange that almost no Saudi money going to the export of Salafism be used to pay for imams or mosques in Indonesia or India.

So far, the Muslim communities of Indonesia and India – together over 400 million people, or close to one quarter of all the Muslims in the world – have not been radicalized, and both communities contain significant sources of resistance to radicalization by Arab groups. However, radicals have begun to experience some success in both countries in recent years. This year in Indonesia, for example, a popular mayor and strong candidate for president was sentenced to prison for blasphemy – an event that could not have happened there five years ago.

If one takes a long-term perspective on the conflict between moderate Islam and radical Islam, the likely success of moderate Islam in Indonesia and India is one of the main reasons for confidence that eventually the Muslim world will firmly choose peace and modernization rather than Islamism and religious conflict. These countries can be towering examples that Muslims can move into the modern world while continuing to be loyal to Islam. Their example could ultimately be the key to the outcome of the long-term clash within the Muslim world.

Most experts would agree that there is little chance that Indonesia and the Muslim minority in India can be radicalized without large amounts of Saudi money being used to encourage such a change. If the US could convince the Saudis to keep Saudi money out of those countries, it would go a long way towards assuring eventual victory for moderate Islam. As Dr. Daniel Pipes has argued for many years: “radical Islam is the problem, and moderate Islam is the solution.”

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