



Saudi Religious Moderation: How Real Is It?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman is determined to promote an image of himself as a harbinger of Saudi religious moderation, but many observers suspect that the changes he has implemented are only skin-deep. His reforms may turn out to have more to do with public relations than with fundamental change.

Muhammad bin Abdul-Karim Al-Issa is the public face of Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman's version of moderate Islam. A 54-year old former justice minister, Issa, [one of a younger generation of Islamic scholars willing to do Prince Muhammad's bidding](#), has been doing the rounds internationally and making all the right moves to project the de facto Saudi leader as the spearhead of efforts to counter ultra-conservatism at home and fight political and militant Islam across the globe. Issa is doing all he can to promote the Crown Prince as a tolerant leader bent on fostering inter-faith dialogue.

Issa's moves also serve to strengthen ties with US President Donald Trump's Evangelical voter base and shape an environment that legitimizes Saudi Arabia's close cooperation with Israel.

In his latest move, Issa recently convened [a four-day international conference on moderate Islam](#) as head of the Muslim World League, once a prime vehicle for the kingdom's global promotion of anti-Shiite, anti-Iranian ultra-conservative strands of Islam, and a member of the Supreme Council of Ulema, Saudi Arabia's highest religious authority.

Breaking with Saudi religious and political tradition, Issa has reached out to Jewish and Evangelical communities. He called during a speech in October at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, widely viewed as pro-Israeli, for [a Muslim-Christian-Jewish interfaith delegation to travel to Jerusalem](#) to

promote the cause of peace despite the fact that Israel and Saudi Arabia do not have formal diplomatic relations.

Issa has defended Prince Muhammad's reforms, such as the curbing of the powers of the kingdom's religious police, lifting the ban on women's driving, and nurturing modern-day entertainment such as cinemas and concerts.

He has [rejected the use of violence, including against Israel](#), acknowledged the Holocaust, [denounced the efforts of Holocaust deniers](#), and announced that he would next January become the most senior Islamic cleric to [visit Auschwitz](#) on the 75th anniversary of its liberation.

Issa laid out his approach in an interview with *Le Monde* two years ago. "All [religious institutions must modernize their speech](#), to make it compatible with the times," he said.

No doubt, Issa's moves help reshape an environment in which religious intolerance and prejudice are the norm and remain widespread. But critics charge that his efforts to project Prince Muhammad as a religious reformer do not go beyond words and symbols and reflect a public relations effort rather than true change.

It moreover remains unclear how effective Issa's efforts are. They certainly help the Trump administration defend its unconditional support for Prince Muhammad, including its willingness to shield the kingdom from accountability for its conduct during the war in Yemen and with regard to the killing last October of journalist Jamal Khashoggi on the premises of the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. Riyadh insists that Khashoggi was murdered by rogue operatives.

Some of Issa's well-connected interlocutors during his visit to Washington said they came away from discussions with him not sure what to think. Likewise, a Saudi intellectual rhetorically asked Saudi Arabia scholar Stephane Lacroix during an interview: "How can one take Muhammad al Issa's statements seriously when religious bookstores in Riyadh are full of books advocating the exact opposite?"

Malaysia, one of the kingdom's associates in countering extremism, has taken a similarly critical view of its efforts. Last year, Malaysian defense minister Muhammad Sabu [closed the Saudi-backed King Salman Centre for International Peace](#) (KSCIP) in Kuala Lumpur following criticism that the kingdom, with its ultra-conservative interpretation of Islam, may not be the right partner.

In a [recent article](#) discussing the limits of Prince Muhammad's reforms, Lacroix, pointing to the arrests of Islamic thinkers critical of the kingdom's ultra-conservative Wahhabi traditions and the suppression of all debate, concluded that "this makes MBS's religious reforms look more like a public relations stunt than a genuine transformation." (Lacroix was referring to Prince Muhammad by his initials.)

Lacroix's conclusion is bolstered by the fact that there is little to suggest fundamental reform of religion involving tolerance at a practical rather than a talking heads level beyond the countering of extremism at home and abroad, a key Saudi interest. The social changes Prince Muhammad has so far introduced polish the kingdom's tarnished image and further his plan to diversify its oil-dependent economy and create badly needed jobs.

If anything, Prince Muhammad's reforms appear to be designed to shave off Wahhabism's rough edges, project a more moderate image, and promote – both at home and abroad, in countries like Kazakhstan, Algeria, and Libya – an ultra-conservative interpretation of Islam that preaches absolute obedience to the ruler. Prince Muhammad's crackdown on all forms of dissent enforces the principle.

By the same token, he has done little to push reform since lifting the ban on women's driving and enhancing their professional and sporting opportunities. The kingdom's [male guardianship of women](#) has been softened but remains firmly in place.

Scores of young Saudi women have recently fled the kingdom to escape family abuse and [seek asylum elsewhere](#). Saudi Arabia, rather than cracking down on domestic abuse and abolishing the guardianship system, has [sought to prevent women from fleeing and force the return of those who made it abroad](#).

The kingdom also has yet to take steps that would put flesh at home on the skeleton of its notion of religious tolerance.

Christians, Jews, Buddhists, and Hindus continue to be banned from building houses of worship despite the fact that [archaeologists have found evidence of the existence at the time of the Prophet Muhammad of a 7th century synod](#) near Jubail, and the fact that older residents along the Saudi border with Yemen vividly recall interacting with a Jewish community.

After brutally cracking down on rebellious Shiites in Saudi Arabia's oil-rich Eastern Province, [Prince Muhammad has moved quickly to rebuild the leveled town of Awamiyah](#). Shiites nonetheless accounted for [the majority of the 37 people beheaded in April in a mass execution](#).

Issa's Supreme Council of Ulema has no Shiite clerics among its members. Nor do Shiite judges sit on the benches of national courts or serve in the police force or as ambassadors.

The risk for Prince Muhammad is that religious moderation, like trickle-down economic reform, could become a litmus test by which to assess his ability to deliver on his reforms.

A recent poll of Arab youth, including Saudi youth, showed that two-thirds of those surveyed felt that religion played too large a role while 79% argued that religious institutions needed to be reformed. Half said that religious values are holding the Arab world back.

Said Lacroix: "If religious reform is only a push from above and not the result of genuine social debate, it is easily reversible."

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