



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Clerics and Entertainers Seek to Bolster MBS's Grip on Power

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,220, July 7, 2019

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: A [public apology](#) by a prominent Salafi scholar sheds light on Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman's version of "moderate Islam," which appears to be an effort to shape the Middle East and North Africa in his image and replace religion with hypernationalism.

Claiming to speak in the name of the Sahwa (Awakening) movement, Aidh Qarni, one of the Saudi kingdom's most popular religious scholars, has broken with the Muslim Brotherhood-linked group's past call for political reform and instead wholeheartedly endorsed Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman's undefined notion of an Islam that would be free of extremism.

"I would like to apologize to Saudi society for...the extremism, the violation of the Qur'an and the Sunnah, the violation of the tolerance of Islam, the violation of the moderate and merciful nature of Islam. I support today the moderate and open-to-the-world Islam that has been called for by Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman," Qarni said, wearing a Salafi-style red and white headdress.

More than simply a declaration of support for the Saudi leader, Qarni's apology provided ideological justification for Prince Muhammad's as yet only partially successful efforts to ensure that regional states are ruled by governments to his liking, his refusal to condemn assaults on Islam like the one taking place in China's northwestern province, and his crackdown at home, which [might have put some of Qarni's former colleagues on death row](#).

Qarni was not among the Islamic scholars who were detained in that crackdown, which occurred in September 2017. Those arrested and potentially

facing execution include some of the kingdom's most popular reformist preachers, including Salman Audah and Qarni's namesake, Awad Qarni.

Charges against the two men, as well as against author and broadcaster Ali Omari, include stirring public discord, inciting people against the ruler, public support for imprisoned dissidents, and alleged ties to the Brotherhood and Qatar. A Saudi-UAE-led alliance has been boycotting Qatar economically and diplomatically for the past two years.

Omari, a former UN Goodwill Ambassador for Youth and Humanity, is a member of the Qatar-based International Union of Muslim Scholars founded by controversial scholar Yusuf Qaradawi. Qaradawi is widely believed to be a major spiritual influence within the Brotherhood.

Qarni didn't do his former colleagues any favors by asserting that Qatar is funding Saudi scholars. "Of course, people get money... Saudis went there (Qatar)," Qarni said, refusing to identify who he was referring to.

Qarni's endorsement of Prince Muhammad, and the reports that two of his colleagues might be executed, came as Human Rights Watch rang [alarm bells about the fate of Murtaja Qureiris, an 18-year old](#) who could face a similar fate.

[Qureiris was arrested at age 13](#) for having participating in a bike protest in eastern Saudi Arabia three years earlier, in 2011, when he was just 10 years old. He is charged with belonging to a terrorist group, helping to construct Molotov cocktails, shooting at security forces, and participating in a protest at the funeral of his brother, who was killed in an allegedly violent demonstration.

[Qatar Papers](#), a book recently published in France and purportedly based on hitherto unpublished documents, asserts that the Gulf state is funding numerous mosques and individuals in Europe associated with the Brotherhood.

A TV series broadcast during this year's Ramadan, the period when programs get their highest ratings, provided [background for Qarni's apology](#). Rewriting history through the eyes of a Saudi family, the program, called *Asouf* (*Winds of Change*), blames the Sahwa for some of the region's most momentous events, including the 1979 Iranian revolution, the occupation by militants of the Grand Mosque in Mecca that same year, and the 1981 assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat over his signing of a peace treaty with Israel.

In line with Prince Muhammad's assertion that Saudi Arabia embraced a more moderate form of Islam prior to the events of 1979, *Asouf* suggests that [Sahwa's ultra-conservatism, bolstered by its hostility toward the West, misogyny, and intolerance, influenced a generation of Saudis.](#)

Adding to Qarni's apology and *Asouf's* messaging, Adil Kalbani, a former imam of the Grand Mosque and a straight-talking member of the kingdom's ultra-conservative religious establishment, who has 7 million followers on Twitter, made a 180-degree turn on his past statements in support of severe restrictions of women's rights and [denounced Shiites as apostates](#).

Challenging one of the kingdom's major taboos, [Kalbani denounced gender segregation in mosques](#) as "a kind of phobia," arguing that in the era of the Prophet Muhammad, men and women prayed together.

"Now, unfortunately, we've become paranoid to the level that in a mosque, a place of worship, it's as if women are in a fortress," he said. "They're completely isolated from the men, not seeing or hearing them except through microphones or speakers."

Qarni sought to provide religious justification for Prince Muhammad's policies by drawing red lines. The Crown Prince's concept of moderate Islam, involving absolute obedience to the ruler, was one; and the interests of Saudi Arabia as defined by Prince Muhammad was another.

"I pledged allegiance to the King and swore on the Qur'an and the Sunnah. I went on the night of the 27th (of May) to Mecca and pledged allegiance to Muhammad bin Salman. You pledge allegiance for better or for worse... I declare here that I am now one of the swords of the state," Qarni said.

In asserting that Saudi Arabia is being targeted by Iran, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and the Muslim Brotherhood, Qarni's appeared to break with *Sahwa* and the past religious embrace of Islam's concept of the *ummah*, the global community of the faithful.

In the words of Saudi Arabia scholar Raihan Ismail, Qarni was rejecting the notion of the *ummah* because it "[undermines the primacy of the nation-state](#)."

In so doing, Qarni was attempting to provide religious cover for Crown Prince Muhammad's apparent [endorsement during a visit to Beijing earlier this year of China's crackdown on Turkic Muslims](#) and his apparent [support for a US plan to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict](#).

Anwar Gargash, the minister of state for foreign affairs of Saudi Arabia's closest ally, the UAE, [hailed Qarni's apology](#) as an important step "as we close the door to the stage of extremism and the employment of religion for political purposes."

Gargash's comments highlight differences in the approaches toward Islam of Emirati Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayed and his Saudi counterpart.

Viscerally opposed to political Islam, UAE Prince Muhammad – not the Saudi crown prince – has been the driver of the two Gulf states' support for anti-Islamist forces across the Middle East and North Africa.

In fact, Saudi Prince Muhammad's notion of moderate Islam – though projected as a break with Saudi Arabia's past propagation of ultra-conservative strands of Islam that critics charge contributed to breeding grounds of violence – amounts to a form of conservative political Islam that is designed to bolster his autocratic regime rather than reform the faith.

Similarly dissident Saudi scholar Madawi Rasheed asserts that the kingdom's recent decision to convene three Gulf, Arab, and Islamic summits during Ramadan in the holy city of Mecca was “[nothing but utter Islamism](#).”

Ms. Rasheed argued that the summits exposed “the contradiction in the recent Saudi push to ban and criminalize Islamism. The three conferences are not being held to discuss theological matters, but to seek support for Saudi Arabia's king over serious, controversial and divisive political crises,” she said.

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