



PERSPECTIVES

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Muslim Causes vs. National Interests: Muslim Nations Make Risky Bets

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Saudi attitudes toward the plight of thousands of illegal Rohingya in the kingdom fleeing persecution in Myanmar and squalid Bangladeshi refugee camps help explain Saudi support for China's brutal clampdown on Turkic Muslims in its troubled northwestern province of Xinjiang.

For more than half a year, Saudi Arabia has been deporting large numbers of Rohingya who arrived in the kingdom either on [pilgrimage visas or using false travel documents](#), often the only way they were able to leave either Myanmar or Bangladesh.

The expulsions of Rohingya as well as hundreds of thousands of other foreign workers, coupled with the introduction of [fees on their dependents and restrictions on the sectors in which they can be employed](#), are part of Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman's efforts to reform the kingdom's oil-dependent economy and increase job opportunities.

The success of Prince Muhammad's reforms rests to a large extent on his ability to reduce an overall 12.7% unemployment rate that jumps to [25.8% among its youth](#), who account for more than half the population.

Threatening up to [250,000 Rohingya believed to be residing in Saudi Arabia](#), the expulsions contrast starkly with condemnations by the kingdom as well as the Jeddah-based Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) of Myanmar's persecution of the Rohingya.

The OIC last month called for [filing a case against Myanmar at the International Court of Justice](#) for its alleged violations of the Rohingyas' human rights. Some

750,000 Rohingya have fled to Bangladesh in recent years, where they are housed in refugee camps.

Saudi Arabia [has donated millions of dollars in aid for the refugees](#) and has said it is “gravely concerned and [condemns the policy of repression and forced displacement](#) carried out by the government of Myanmar against the Rohingya minority.”

The deportations, together with [Saudi endorsement of the clampdown in Xinjiang](#) – which has put an estimated one million Uyghurs in re-education camps, where they are indoctrinated to prioritize communist party ideology and reverence for President Xi Jinping above their Islamic faith – suggests that the kingdom is not willing to compromise its economic interests even if they call into question its moral claim to leadership of the Islamic world.

The Saudi approach is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, its leadership role is bolstered. A majority of Muslim countries reluctant to criticize China take heart from the fact that the custodian of Islam’s two holiest cities, Mecca and Medina, has taken the lead in shielding China from Muslim criticism.

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia, like other Muslim nations, is making a risky bet. It could end up on the wrong side of history.

While there are no signs that hopelessness is fueling widespread radicalization among the Rohingya, analysts suggest that in the Bangladeshi camps “[almost every factor identified by radicalization experts](#) can be found, to a greater or lesser degree... It would only take a very small percentage of them (the refugees) to be radicalized for there to be a major security problem.”

The emergence of Rohingya militancy in the face of Saudi treatment of members of the group could make the kingdom a target.

Similarly, Saudi Arabia and other Muslim countries are betting against the odds that China will succeed in Sinicizing Turkic Muslims and ensuring that growing anti-Chinese sentiment in Central Asian nations that have close cultural and ethnic links to Xinjiang is kept in check.

This bet counters the historical record. Adrian Zenz, a leading scholar on Chinese policy towards religion and minorities, notes that similar attempts in the past to Sinicize minorities have failed.

Zenz’s [research among Sinicized Tibetans](#) shows that even assimilated Tibetans could become champions of the very ethnic identity they had supposedly renounced.

[Mihrigul Tursun](#), an Uyghur activist released from a re-education camp, told the [US Congress](#) that “my experience in this state program actually made me more conscious of my ethnic identity.”

Describing the Chinese clampdown in Xinjiang as an “[upgraded version of the Cultural Revolution](#),” Zenz recently noted that Tibetan nomads and Christian villagers were being forced to replace their [altars](#) and [depictions of Jesus](#) with images of Chinese leaders, including Xi.

Zenz’s reference to Tibetans and Christians highlights the fact that non-Muslim countries have been equally reluctant to put their money where their mouth is in condemnations of China’s assault on religion that go beyond Islam and are part of a larger attempt to replace religion with adherence to the country’s communist party and reverence of its party and political leaders.

Nonetheless, Saudi Arabia is walking a tightrope in balancing its national interests with expectations of its role as a leader of the Muslim world.

While needy Rohingya and other illegal Muslim workers were detained and deported to an uncertain future that was likely to fuel despair and hopelessness, Saudi Islamic affairs minister Abdullatif bin Abdulaziz al-Sheikh announced that King Salman would [host for this year’s pilgrimage to Mecca 200 relatives of the victims of the attacks by a white supremacist on two mosques in New Zealand](#)’s Christchurch. Fifty people died in those attacks.

Clearly designed to project the kingdom as a generous supporter of Muslim causes and improve its image, which was tarnished by the war in Yemen and last year’s killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, Al-Sheikh said the invitation was part of Saudi Arabia’s counterterrorism effort.

While public sentiment toward the clampdown in Xinjiang remains unclear despite vocal Saudi support for the plight of the Rohingya in Myanmar and Bangladesh, indications are that a significant segment of the kingdom’s population remain wedded to its ultra-conservative interpretation of Islam.

A recent [poll on Twitter](#) showed that a majority of Saudis was opposed to the proposed halt to forcing stores to close during prayers, a key part of the kingdom’s tradition of enforced public religiosity.

Adherence to ultra-conservative norms raises the question whether those segments of the Saudi population may be more empathetic to the plight of the Uyghurs.

As part of its effort to coopt the Chinese Diaspora and counter criticism, China has sought to woo Saudi Arabia's ethnic Chinese community. To do so, China's consulate in the Red Sea port of Jeddah hosts events not only in Mandarin and Arabic but also Uyghur, according to Muhammad Sudairi, a Saudi China scholar.

Sudairi attributed China's focus on Saudi Uyghurs, one of the largest and wealthiest Chinese Turkic diaspora communities, "to the role of this community as a stronghold for anti-Chinese and anti-CPC (Communist Party of China) sentiment in Saudi Arabia, and one that has had some influence in shaping Saudi elite and popular perceptions toward the PRC (People's Republic of China) and CPC."

That focus suggests that public sentiment toward the plight of Muslims in places like Myanmar and Xinjiang may be more layered than positions put forward by Muslim leaders.

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