



PERSPECTIVES

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MidEast Powers Vie to Shape the Next Generation of Muslims

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Education is emerging as a major flashpoint in competing visions of a future Muslim world. Rival concepts being instilled in the next generation are likely to shape what amounts to a battle for the soul of Islam.

Reports published earlier this year by the Israel-based Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education (IMPACT-SE) chart a notable divergence in educational approaches across the Muslim world.

At one end of the spectrum are Pakistan and Turkey, two of the more populous Muslim countries. Their claim to leadership of the Muslim world is rooted in conservative if not ultra-conservative interpretations of Islam that increasingly shape their education systems.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE reside at the other end of the spectrum with their reduced emphasis on religion in education and emphasis on science as well as religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue.

Straddling the two approaches is Qatar, the world's only other Wahhabi state alongside Saudi Arabia—even if it adhered to a more liberal interpretation long before the rise of Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman.

Since coming to office, Prince Muhammad has significantly reduced the role of ultra-conservative religious figures and institutions, cut back on global funding of Wahhabi activity, enhanced women's rights, and built a Western-style entertainment sector.

Sandwiched between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Qatar sees global support of political Islam, including the Muslim Brotherhood, as its best defense against the Saudi and Iranian governance models.

Qatari textbooks reflect the tightrope the Gulf state walks between professing adherence to concepts of democratic freedoms, human rights, tolerance, and pluralism, yet refusing to break with antisemitic and anti-Christian notions as well as philosophies of jihad and martyrdom prevalent in political Islam.

What the different approaches have in common is what makes both problematic: an endorsement of autocratic or strongman rule by either explicitly propagating absolute obedience to the ruler or the increasingly authoritarian environment in which the Islamicized education systems are being rolled out.

Underlying the different approaches to education are diverging interpretations of what Islam represents and what constitutes a moderate form of the faith as well as seemingly haphazard definitions put forward by various leaders.

To be sure, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, in contrast to the values propagated in Turkish and Pakistan school curricula, tackle issues that are widely seen as potentially contributing to breeding grounds for radicalism and extremism.

These include supremacist concepts, discriminatory portrayals of minorities, emphasis on rote learning, and attitudes toward violence.

In an interview in early May, Prince Muhammad expressed seemingly contradictory definitions of what his version of moderate Islam entailed. On the one hand, the crown prince suggested that it involved a liberal application of Islamic law guided by principles of tolerance and inclusivity.

Yet at the same time, when asked about tackling extremism, Prince Muhammad cited a hadith or prophetic saying that urges the faithful to kill extremists. Saudi dissidents charged that the crown prince was justifying the targeting of people who criticize him, such as Jamal Khashoggi, the Saudi journalist who was killed in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in 2018.

“Today, we cannot grow, attract capital, offer tourism, or move forward with the existence of extremist ideology in Saudi Arabia. If you want millions of jobs, decline of unemployment, economic growth, and better income, then you must uproot this project... Any person who espouses an extremist ideology, even if he is not a terrorist, he is still a criminal who must be held

accountable before the law,” Prince Muhammad said, arguing that the days in which religious ultra-conservatism served a purpose were in the past.

The divergence in educational approaches takes on added significance because countries that are competing for leadership of the Muslim world, like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Turkey, and Iran, export their visions of what the faith stands for in a variety of ways. These include funding religious, cultural, and educational institutions in other countries and lobbying for policies that bolster their approach and counter those of their rivals.

While cutting back significantly on its overseas funding and harnessing the Muslim World League (MWL), once a prime vehicle in the Saudi promotion of ultra-conservatism, to propagate the kingdom’s more recent message of tolerance and inter-faith outreach, Saudi Arabia at times does not shy away from employing those it now denounces as extremists.

Indonesia is a case in point. The World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY), another government-sanctioned NGO once used to further Saudi ultra-conservatism, prides itself on the funding of mosques in Indonesia built by the Prosperous Justice Party (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera, or PKS), a Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated group.

When MWL secretary general Muhammad Issa visited the headquarters in Jakarta of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the world’s largest Muslim movement, he opted to take with him Hidayat Nur Wahid, a leader of the PKS and a staunch rival of the National Awakening Party (or PKB), which is associated with NU.

The Saudi flaunting of its political Islamic Indonesian associate appears designed to counter Nahdlatul Ulama, the single most serious challenger to the various concepts of Islam put forward by Middle Eastern powers, including the kingdom.

Nahdlatul Ulama promotes a concept of humanitarian Islam that is rooted in a reinterpretation of religious texts, recognizes the need for reform to revise or remove what the group calls “obsolete” concepts such as that of the kafir or infidel, and is supported by a broad base of Islamic scholars.

For its part, Turkey’s religious authority, Diyanet, which resides in the office of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has seen its budget increase 23-fold in the last two decades, making it by far one of the best funded government agencies.

Diyanet has funded mosque construction from nearby formerly Ottoman countries in the Balkans to Africa and even Cuba. The Maarif Foundation, a

vehicle used to take control globally of schools once operated by followers of Fethullah Gülen, uses school materials supplied by Diyanet.

Turkey accuses Gülen, a preacher who lives in exile in the US and an erstwhile ally of President Erdoğan, of having engineered a failed military coup in Turkey in 2016. Turkey has since arrested thousands of alleged Gülen supporters and removed large numbers of suspected supporters from the government bureaucracy and the military.

Multiple countries have handed local Gülen-operated schools to the Maarif Foundation. At last count, the foundation operated 323 schools, 42 dormitories, and one university in 43 countries.

By the same token, the UAE, supported by Saudi Arabia, has employed its religious soft power and commercial and economic sway to lobby for a tougher French policy toward political Islam prior to the crackdown initiated by President Emmanuel Macron.

The lobbying emphasized common interests in countering political Islam and Turkey, with which France is at odds in Libya and the eastern Mediterranean as well as on the issue of political Islam. It gave the French leader welcome Muslim cover to target political Islam and Turkey as he gears up for an election in 2022 in which Marie Le Pen, the leader of the far right, nationalist, and anti-immigration party National Rally, looms large.

As part of the crackdown on political Islam, France required children to attend school from age three. It also all but eliminated options for home schooling or the operation of privately-funded schools.

President Erdoğan threw down the gauntlet in 2018, declaring that “the joint goal of all education and our teaching system is to bring up good people with respect for their history, culture and values.” Erdoğan spoke of a “pious generation” that “will work for the construction of a new civilization.” It’s that new civilization that is at stake in the battle for the soul of Islam.

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