



The Arab Gulf States  
Institute in Washington  
Building bridges of understanding



## Saudi Arabia Champions “Moderate Islam,” Underpinning Reform Efforts

Eman Alhussein



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## About the Author

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## Executive Summary

Saudi Arabia's new religious direction has been widely regarded as a departure from the traditional position it has maintained both domestically and abroad. The new "moderate Islam" approach is key to explain the kingdom's recent policies, from curtailing the religious sphere at home, to recalibrating the role of the Muslim World League. Furthermore, the new approach has been perceived as instrumental in transforming the social scene in order to implement the country's diversification plan – Vision 2030.

This paper will first look at the roots of the moderate Islam approach, including its promotion by both the state and certain religious scholars after terrorism struck the kingdom in 2003. Over time, however, conflicting agendas resulted in tension rather than synergy. In 2017, the moderation approach entered a new phase not limited to the socioreligious sphere. The new top-down approach also includes the security sector, through the use of the moderation narrative in public messaging and on social media. As a result, moderate Islam can be seen as a comprehensive strategy to tackle the kingdom's regional and domestic concerns while at the same time reshaping the religious and social scene in line with the leadership's new sociopolitical objectives.

## Introduction

"We are returning to what we were before – a country of moderate Islam that is open to all religions, traditions, and people around the globe," Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman declared in October 2017.<sup>1</sup> The time and place of the announcement is significant – at the first Future Investment Initiative, which hosted many potential foreign investors in Riyadh, a month after a clampdown on influential religious scholars. As a result, the announcement came to be seen as the kingdom's new approach to religion, compatible with the current leadership's sociopolitical direction. However, "moderate Islam" is not simply limited to curtailing religious influence and relaxing social norms. The new approach is a paradigm shift from the traditional religious arrangements the kingdom fostered domestically that allowed sanctioned religious scholars and bodies, or the religious sphere, to be almost on par with the political leadership. The top-down approach extends to the security sector, which attempts to redefine the relationship between the state and its people, built around nationalism in a post-oil economy with new religious adjustments.

The 2017 announcement, along with the vast social changes introduced that same year, created a rupture in the way the kingdom's approach toward religion is perceived. Moderate Islam helps explain the kingdom's actions domestically and is seen as instrumental for the implementation of its post-oil economic diversification plan – Vision 2030. However, this perceived rupture overlooks the religious and intellectual climate that existed before 2015 (the year of the royal succession), which played a key role in influencing the leadership's new approach toward religion. It also disregards the debate on moderate Islam, and how it played out domestically after terrorism struck the kingdom in 2003. While the state and certain religious scholars promoted moderation, it was contested by conservative hard-liners.

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<sup>1</sup> "Crown Prince Says Saudis Want To Return to Moderate Islam," *BBC*, October 25, 2017.

This paper will evaluate the religious and intellectual atmosphere that existed before 2015 to explain the transition, as opposed to rupture, of the religious discourse from its organic form to its current state-led narrative.

The new approach is better understood as a comprehensive solution to the state’s domestic, regional, and economic challenges. As a result, it is strongly regulated and, therefore, excludes religious scholars not embroiled in the clampdown – despite the scholars’ attempts to be part of the emerging narrative. The state resorted to assigning the task of defining moderate Islam to one senior official: Mohammed al-Issa, secretary general of the Muslim World League and member of the Council of Senior Scholars.<sup>2</sup> Issa has become instrumental in pushing forward the moderation narrative domestically as well as abroad. This paper will explain how moderate Islam is not only religious centric but is an umbrella for a number of measures, including in the security sector. Finally, it will consider the challenges that have emerged as a result of the kingdom’s new approach toward religion.

## Domestic and Regional Challenges Before 2015

When King Salman bin Abdulaziz ascended the throne in Saudi Arabia in January 2015, he quickly implemented a series of changes signaling a different approach for the new leadership. At that time, the social and intellectual scene was deeply polarized and heavily influenced by developments in the region, especially those pertaining to the Arab uprisings. Voices within the religious sphere had evolved, which opened the door for intrareligious debates, allowing a mutation of the religious discourse.<sup>3</sup> Highlighting the intellectual climate that existed before 2015 is crucial to understand the current leadership’s policies domestically and the reasons for adopting the moderate Islam approach.

### The Domestic Scene

The Sahwa, or Islamic Awakening, which reached its peak in the 1980s and 90s, produced a rigid religious discourse that heavily influenced the social scene and limited criticism of its approach. However, the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States became a turning point after which criticism of the Sahwa was allowed to flourish. Contesting religious views intensified after a wave of terrorist attacks hit Saudi Arabia beginning in May 2003. To counter radicalism, the state used Sahwa scholars, some of whom had recently been released from prison, to interview accused terrorists on television.<sup>4</sup> At this juncture, the state was working with former detained scholars to counter radicalism. The relationship between religious scholars and the government was built on mutual interests: The state used the religious influence to

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<sup>2</sup> Mohammed Al-Issa was minister of justice from 2009 to 2015 and served under King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz’s reform initiatives. He was removed as part of King Salman bin Abdulaziz’s first Cabinet reshuffle after succession but brought back in 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Madawi Al-Rasheed, *Muted Modernists: The Struggle Over Divine Politics in Saudi Arabia* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2015), 8.

<sup>4</sup> A number of Sahwa scholars were arrested following their objection to allowing U.S. troops to operate from Saudi Arabia during the liberation of Kuwait in 1990.

counter terrorism at home while previously detained scholars regained their audience under a new religio-political arrangement. This is one of many instances of the political leadership engaging the religious sphere for its own self-interests and domestic security.

The relative openness of the time allowed an organic and pluralistic scene to slowly emerge in Saudi intellectual circles, despite also deepening the polarization between two loud and opposing camps: the so-called Saudi liberals and the conservatives. In the latter camp, different views emerged, too, opening the door for wider intrareligious debate. A “reformist” trend began to be associated with individuals, many of them with an Islamic leaning, who demanded political reforms, such as members of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association. Reformists also included other religious scholars, many from the Sahwa, who reconstructed their religious views in an attempt to target youth and focus on issues related to rights and social justice.<sup>5</sup>

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The pursuit to influence youth reached its pinnacle with the creation of the Al-Nahda youth conference in 2010.<sup>6</sup> The conference’s agenda brought the religious and political domains closer together in an effort to achieve a revival (*nahda*). The conference’s main speaker argued that politicizing the religious scholar was crucial to forge political opportunities and achieve change.<sup>7</sup> The new voices that emerged from the religious sphere revealed the development of a religious discourse that was able to attract followers among Arab youth. Scholars and intellectuals began to redefine the concept of democracy from an Islamic perspective, further blurring the lines between religion and politics.

The media revolution played a key role in providing scholars a platform to influence and attract followers. Television programs and social media became “spheres of influence” and the preferred platform for religious figures.<sup>8</sup> As one Sahwa scholar put it, “I used to give Friday sermons, but who listened to me? Before I used to write articles for newspapers that no one would publish.” He continued that social media provided a platform for scholars finally to “communicate our voices straight to the people.”<sup>9</sup> Scholars were aware of the limitations of traditional religious arenas, and the need to increase their influence and attract followers prompted a move from traditional platforms to social media, which was not then regulated or policed as it is today.

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<sup>5</sup> Nawaf Al-Qudaimi, *Al-Muhafizun wa Al-Islahiyun fi Al-Halah Al-Islamiya Al-Saudiyyah* [The Conservatives and the Reformists in the Saudi Islamic Case] (Beirut: Al-Markaz al-Thaqafi al-Arabi, 2011), 18.

<sup>6</sup> The conference took place in Bahrain in 2010 and Qatar in 2011. A third meeting in Kuwait was canceled days before it was supposed to start in 2012.

<sup>7</sup> “*Tasaulat wa Humum al-Nahda*” [Nahda’s Questions and Concerns], YouTube video, 2:42:37, posted by “مشروع النهضة,” August 19, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> This paper analyzes inter alia recorded television programs from 2010 to 2015, when the struggle for influence was at its peak and television programs were the preferred arena for debate.

<sup>9</sup> “*Al-Sheikh Mohammed Al-Arifi Dhaif Barnamaj fi Al-Samim ma Abdullah Al-Mudaifer*” [Sheikh Mohammed Al-Arifi in Fi Al-Samim with Abdullah Al-Mudaifer], YouTube video, 1:09:23, posted by “خليجية,” July 3, 2014.

At the same time, Saudi-owned television channels presented a counternarrative that often clashed with that of religious scholars. Conservatives fueled the media war, especially against the Middle East Broadcasting Company and Al Arabiya, which they considered Westernized and immoral.<sup>10</sup> Programs broadcast on MBC would also accuse religious scholars, even those who considered themselves reformists, of encouraging young Saudis to join the jihad. Many scholars had regular programs on various news channels or used video sharing websites, such as YouTube, to attract a local and international audience. As a result, the media revolution created space for contesting views, which deepened the polarization between Saudi intellectuals and religious scholars.

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## The Regional Dimension

Regional challenges posed by the 2010-11 Arab uprisings shaped intellectual debates in Saudi Arabia. The uprising in Egypt received special attention in television programs and on social media. Before Saudi Arabia included the Muslim Brotherhood in an anti-terror law in 2014, it was common to exhibit support for the movement. This support was not limited to religious figures but also included so-called liberals who wished to demonstrate their respect for the political transition in Egypt. Some religious scholars were outspoken in their defense of the Muslim Brotherhood's ideological secrecy, arguing that this was present in the history of the Prophet Muhammad himself. A prominent Sahwa scholar said, “any *dawa* [introducing others to one's religion] in the world, Islamic or non-Islamic, might need to retain some elements of secrecy.”<sup>11</sup>

Initially, the state was interested in pursuing a parallel religious direction. Prince Khalid al-Faisal, governor of Mecca, said that the events in the Arab world “confirm that the Arab uprisings are different from the European ones in the Middle Ages. The revolutions there revolted against the church whereas the ones here are revolting in favor of the mosque.”<sup>12</sup> A Sahwa scholar also shared similar views during a televised interview, saying “the concept of religion in the West, whether in the historic Christian perspective or in the secular understanding, does not apply to Islam” asserting that “the mosque is at the heart of the moment.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> In 2017, MBC's owner Waleed Al-Ibrahim was among the businessmen included in the Ritz-Carlton clampdown. The channel was handed over to the crown prince in an attempt to tighten the state's control over the media. See: Simeon Kerr, “Top Saudi Broadcaster Caught Up in Riyadh's Corruption Shakedown,” *Financial Times*, January 27, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> “Hirak: Al-Nukhab Al-Saudiyyah wa Al-Hirak fi Masr” [The Saudi Elite and the Egyptian Popular Movement], YouTube video, 1:34:32, posted by “4shbab فور شباب,” December 28, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> “Muhadharat Manhaj Al-Itidal Al-Saudi – Khalid Al-Faisal” [The Moderate Saudi Approach – Khalid Al-Faisal], YouTube video, 02:07:26, posted by “iu\_edu,” February 14, 2012.

<sup>13</sup> “Hirak: Al-Nukhab Al-Saudiyyah wa Al-Hirak fi Masr” [The Saudi Elite and the Egyptian Popular Movement], YouTube video, 1:34:32, posted by “4shbab فور شباب,” December 28, 2012.

The Arab uprisings revived pan-Arabism, especially among young Saudi intellectuals.<sup>14</sup> Many religious scholars were equally enthusiastic about it, despite how such an interest was perceived by conservative hard-liners as contrary to the pan-Islamist agenda.<sup>15</sup> The duality of Arabism and Islamism that emerged after the Arab uprisings seemingly became a real challenge for the state, which needed to deal with two consequential issues at the same time. As a Saudi academic said at the time, while Sahwa might have diminished, “Arabism and Islam are central and will remain so.”<sup>16</sup>

In these different and pluralistic perspectives, certain themes emerged. The need for an identity, a project, or a vision, seemed to be one of the pressing issues. A young Saudi writer stated that, “There is a national identity crisis in Saudi Arabia. The absence of a collective identity has allowed individuals to define themselves along sectarian, regional, and tribal identities.”<sup>17</sup> A Sahwa scholar alluded to a void that the Arab uprisings created, which needed to be filled with a project or vision to unite the state with its citizens.<sup>18</sup> Another Saudi writer suggested that an inclusive “national conference” should be formed to advise the political leadership and recommend a roadmap moving forward.<sup>19</sup> All of these calls were perhaps inspired by the events of the Arab uprisings, although demands for political reform started before the revolutions.

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As a result, the downfall of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 2013 became a highly contested topic in Saudi intellectual circles. Some became wary of attempts to export the Egyptian revolution, stressing the importance of Saudi Arabia and its religious significance. Speaking about religion, one Saudi academic argued that Saudis “are the ones who export not import it.”<sup>20</sup> It was against this backdrop that the state issued the Penal Law for Crimes of Terrorism and its Financing to criminalize the Muslim Brotherhood and further regulate and police the media.

The different views that emerged before 2015 illustrate the sociopolitical deadlock the elite felt at that time and the ease of expressing such views on various platforms. It is perhaps not surprising then that the new leadership began incorporating some of these suggestions, contributing to the sudden growth of nationalism and the introduction of Vision 2030. However, the leadership was determined to implement these changes from the top down, which explains

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<sup>14</sup> Caryle Murphy, “Saudi Arabia: Tired of Religious Conflict, Youth Explore Arab Nationalism,” *The World*, June 6, 2014.

<sup>15</sup> “Al-Sheikh Salman Al-Odah Dhaif Barnamaj fi Al-Samim ma Abdullah Al-Mudaifer” [Salman Al-Odah in Fi Alsamim with Abdullah Al-Mudaifer], YouTube video, 01:06:26, posted by “خليجية,” June 21, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Abdullah Al-Ghathami, *Ma Baad Al-Sahwa: Tahawulat Al-Khitab mn Al-Tafarud ela Al-Taadud* [Post-Sahwa: The Evolution of the Discourse from Monism to Pluralism] (Beirut: Al-Markaz Al-Thaqafi Al-Arabi, 2015), 7.

<sup>17</sup> Bader Al-Ibrahim, “Mafhoom Al-Islah (1): Azmat Al-Hawaiya Al-Wataniya Al-Saudiya” [The Concept of Reform (1): The Saudi National Identity Crisis], *Almqaal*, January 15, 2014.

<sup>18</sup> “Al-Sheikh Salman Al-Odah Dhaif Barnamaj fi Al-Samim ma Abdullah Al-Mudaifer” [Salman Al-Odah in Fi Alsamim with Abdullah Al-Mudaifer], YouTube video, 01:06:26, posted by “خليجية,” June 21, 2015.

<sup>19</sup> “Aqel Al-Bahli Dhaif Barnamaj fi al-Samim ma Abdullah Al-Mudaifer” [Aqel Al-Bahli in Fi Alsamim with Abdullah Al-Mudaifer], YouTube video, 1:00:04, posted by “خليجية,” October 10, 2014.

<sup>20</sup> “Hirak: Al-Nukhab Al-Saudiya wa Al-Hirak fi Masr” [The Saudi Elite and the Egyptian Popular Movement], YouTube video, 1:34:32, posted by “فور شباب,” December 28, 2012.

how 2015 has been perceived as a rupture, overlooking much of the organic growth of ideas and demands before 2015. The changes the leadership introduced affected various media platforms while utilizing the void that was created to promote hypernationalism.<sup>21</sup>

## The Emergence of Moderate Islam

The term moderate Islam began to be used in Saudi Arabia after the September 11, 2001 attacks. As a result, it was initially associated with foreign attempts to tackle radicalism and put pressure on the government to evaluate school curricula and religious teachings. The leadership adopted the moderate Islam approach after a wave of terrorist attacks struck Saudi Arabia in May 2003. Initially, the state’s use of the term attempted to inhibit radicalism and distance itself from accusations of supporting terrorism. Later, it began to situate the term within a historic framework to create a narrative that places the political authority at the heart of the moderation approach. However, competition was running high as other religious scholars began to use the term for their own agendas, creating a parallel discourse on moderation that was often in conflict with the state’s approach.

After the crown prince’s remarks in 2017, moderate Islam evolved from being a reaction to the state’s immediate religious challenges, notably radicalism, into a new approach focused on rearranging and depoliticizing the religious scene. Scholars who were not embroiled in the clampdown in 2017 quickly readjusted their discourse to accommodate the leadership and be part of the new religious approach. However, their attempted involvement has been largely unsuccessful. This is because moderate Islam is not only limited to altering the religious sphere as it is only one component of the state-led project. Therefore, the state’s new approach is in many ways highly regulated and centralized, which perhaps explains why it has excluded religious scholars despite their changed positions.

## The Struggle To Claim Moderate Islam

When the term moderate Islam first emerged many were skeptical of it. However, the government was able to persuade members of the Council of Senior Scholars to use the terminology and promote it. For example, Saleh Al-Fawzan delivered a speech on moderate Islam in 2005 as part of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Dawah and Guidance program “Together Against Terrorism.”<sup>22</sup> Fawzan later criticized the term, arguing that the quest for moderation has resulted in tilting toward “indulgence and negligence.”<sup>23</sup> Other hard-line religious scholars were equally skeptical of the approach, arguing that Islam is inherently moderate and does not require parameters for moderation. One scholar even argued that those who lean toward

<sup>21</sup> Eman Alhussein, “Saudi First: How Hyper-Nationalism is Transforming Saudi Arabia,” *European Council on Foreign Relations*, June 19, 2019.

<sup>22</sup> “Al-Sheikh Al-Fawzan Yulqi Muhadharah Aan Al-Wasatiya Al-Yawm” [Sheikh Al-Fawzan Delivers a Speech on Moderation Today], *Alriyadh*, February 11, 2005.

<sup>23</sup> “Al-Wasatiya fi Al-Islam” [Moderation in Islam], *Sheikh Saleh Al-Fawzan’s Official Website*, accessed November 7, 2020.

*taysir* (ease in understanding and implementing religion) usually “accommodate what suits the general atmosphere and the audience,” which is why the prophet considered these scholars “preachers at the gates of hell.”<sup>24</sup>

Despite the negative connotations that were associated with the term initially, the notion of moderate Islam presented an opportunity for both the state and religious scholars to repackaging the religious discourse in a way more suitable for their own agendas. Khalid al-Faisal was one of the pioneers of advancing this new approach. In 2009, he announced the creation of a chair under his name at King Abdulaziz University devoted to researching the “moderate Saudi approach.”<sup>25</sup> He explained this approach by situating it between radicalism and Westernization, giving it both a religious and cultural dimension. Al-Faisal said, “there are now two paths, the first is for the *takfiris*, who turn against their religion and country, and another for whom I like to call ‘Westerners,’ who want to implement everything from outside.” He argued that the kingdom is on the path of moderation “represented by those who adhere to their religion, are proud to be Arabs, and hold on to their Saudi identity.”<sup>26</sup>

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Al-Faisal explained how moderation is fundamentally “Saudi” as the kingdom is the only Islamic country that built its nation-state on the Quran and Sunnah while remaining moderate in its principles and values.<sup>27</sup> He argued that domestic radical groups have always attempted to “hijack” the moderate Saudi approach; these were either radicals who rejected development and modernity or those with “imported views” influenced by Western culture.<sup>28</sup> His remarks demonstrate the state’s approach of situating itself in the middle of two opposing camps while taking charge of maintaining the balance between the two. The state began to redefine moderate Islam in 2017, repositioning it in opposition to the *Sahwa* and a looser definition of “immorality” and not against Westernization. This helped the state begin to implement its diversification plans and justify social openness while remaining within the new religious boundaries of moderation.

The way moderate Islam was defined initially relied on familiar parameters at that time, namely religious radicalism and Westernization. The West-versus-us divide was a relatable cultural notion that managed to unify the religious sphere for many years. It was considered the foundation for much of the security discourse that was equally critical of Westernization as it was of radicalism.<sup>29</sup> This narrative was pushed forward by Prince Nayef bin Abdulaziz,

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<sup>24</sup> “Al-Sheikh Al-Turaifi – Al-Halaqah Al-Khamisah – Sharia wa Minhaj – Alwasatiyah” [Sheikh Al-Turaifi – Episode 5 – Sharia and Approach – Moderation], YouTube video, 56:15, posted by “Abdulaziz Turaifi,” February 2, 2013.

<sup>25</sup> Sultan Alobthany, “Khalid Al-Faisal Mukhatiban Thalathat Alaf Taleb wa Talebah: Tamasaku bi Dinikum ... wa Iftakhiru bi Urubatikum... wa Itazu bi Hawiyatikum Kasaudiyen” [Khalid Al-Faisal Addressing 3 Thousand Students: Hold on to Religion, Be Proud of being Arab, and Cherish Your Saudi Identity], *Asharq Al-Awsat*, March 18, 2009.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> “Muhadharat Manhaj Al-Itidal Al-Saudi – Khalid Al-Faisal” [The Moderate Saudi Approach – Khalid Al-Faisal], YouTube video, 02:07:26, posted by “iu\_edu,” February 14, 2012.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Mohammed Alsudairi, “Fighting the Many Smoke-less Wars: A Comparative Study of the Origins, Conceptualizations and Practices of Cultural Security in China and Saudi Arabia” (PhD dissertation, University of Hong Kong, 2019), 212-13.

minister of interior from 1975 until his death in 2012, who strongly supported the Salafi trend and was notably involved in the 2011 conference “Salafism: Legal Approach and National Demand.”<sup>30</sup> While promoting Salafism might seem contrary to al-Faisal’s approach of moderate Islam, the views expressed by both royals are not contradictory in the big picture. The end result is essentially the same – reemphasizing the legitimacy of the political authority, inhibiting radicalism, and referencing “Westernization” to confirm the leadership’s traditional approach.

At the same time, some religious scholars saw moderate Islam as an opportunity to advance their own agendas. Using the banner of moderation was particularly important to attract Arab youth, who wanted an alternative religious discourse that was more compatible with their views. Just like al-Faisal used nationalism to promote moderation, reformists also began to utilize nationalism as a means to create awareness of civil rights.<sup>31</sup> These opposing agendas under the same banner increasingly came into conflict. According to one Saudi scholar who was active in promoting his own approach to moderate Islam, the state was hindering these efforts on the ground by banning scholars from preaching and reaching out to youth.<sup>32</sup>

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While moderate Islam was initially an attempt to foster and implement a new interpretation of religion to limit radicalism, it later became a guise for a deeper political struggle. Reformists were aware that their influence over youth was crucial for gaining widespread approval and grassroots change. On the other hand, the state wanted to make sure that it had youth on its side while also containing religious scholars. This explains many of the policies that were implemented after 2015, especially Vision 2030, which made youth its vehicle for change and tried to gain their approval by allowing various forms of entertainment. In this sense, moderate Islam was crucial for both sides who saw youth as an important card that could be mobilized and utilized.

## Scholars in Transition

With the announcement of Vision 2030 in 2016, it was clear that the social and religious scene would require an overhaul to implement diversification plans. Before the clampdown on religious scholars, criticism of the newly established Entertainment Authority and the introduction of cinemas and entertainment events surfaced. In January 2017, Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdulaziz Al-Sheikh said that concerts and cinemas were considered harmful and corrupt, arguing that such a move would ease segregation and allow gender mixing.<sup>33</sup> A

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<sup>30</sup> The conference was criticized by Saudi intellectuals who saw it as encouraging an exclusive understanding of religion. See: Du’aa Al-Matrafi, “Nadwat Al-Salafiya Manhaj Shari wa Matlab Watani” [The Conference of Salafism: Legal Approach and National Demand], *Almqaal*, January 15, 2012.

<sup>31</sup> Abdulaziz Al-Khedhr, *Al-Saudiya Sirat Dawlah wa Mujtama* [A Biography of Saudi Arabia’s State and Society] (Beirut: Al-Shabakah Al Arabiya lel Abhath wa Al-Nasher, 2011), 648.

<sup>32</sup> “Liqa Al-Jumaa ma Al-Duktur Ali Al-Omari” [Friday Meeting with Dr. Ali Al-Omari], YouTube video, 56:18, posted by “4shbab فور شباب,” October 17, 2011.

<sup>33</sup> “Saudi Mufti Warns of ‘Depravity’ of Cinemas and Concerts,” *The National*, January 14, 2017.

member of the Council of Senior Scholars, Abdullah al-Mutlaq, advised the government to reconsider the proposed entertainment agenda, arguing that Saudi society does not want cinemas or concerts.<sup>34</sup> The leadership's move to silence religious scholars seemed to tackle this issue quickly, as such calls suddenly stopped.

The arrests in 2017 and the moderate Islam proclamation served as another reminder of the state's adamant approach to change. As a result, scholars were caught between keeping silent or changing their approaches abruptly, perhaps fearing arrest or hoping to be part of the state's new religious narrative. Some scholars began to show support for the state's newly introduced entertainment and tourism sectors either by participating in entertainment events or promoting tourist sites.<sup>35</sup> A scholar known for his opposition to visiting the archeological site of Al-Ula, home to Vision 2030 megaprojects, started promoting the sites and encouraging citizens to visit them.<sup>36</sup> By appeasing the government and promoting its entertainment and tourism sector, scholars fell into an inconsistency trap that was widely exposed on social media. Such change of religious direction or positions is not perceived favorably by society, seeing it as a sign of weakness and unreliability.

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The political leadership undermined the religious establishment by going against its religious teachings and clamping down on scholars who might question its new direction. The demonizing of the Sahwa, which escalated after the new leadership's ascent to power, was meant to allow for the transition to a state-led narrative. While the leadership needed religious figures in the mid-2000s to counter terrorism on television, it – paradoxically – needed them again to confirm the Sahwa's collapse. Aid al-Qarni, one of the scholars the state used to inhibit radicalism in the mid-2000s, was recently brought back into the picture to expose the Sahwa. He was interviewed in 2019 during Ramadan to apologize to the population for the extreme views of the Sahwa, in a statement that generated much debate inside and outside the country.<sup>37</sup> He was again brought back in 2020 to confirm the Sahwa's demise in a television series broadcast on MBC.<sup>38</sup> Reintroducing scholars is a signal that the leadership remains dependent on the religious sphere, even when it wants to convince the public that these very figures are not that influential anymore.

## Mohammed al-Issa: The Voice of Moderate Islam

Mohammed al-Issa has become instrumental in promoting Saudi Arabia's changed religious approach. A justice minister from 2009-15, in 2016 Issa was appointed to the Council of Senior Scholars and as secretary general of the Muslim World League. Initially, he focused

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<sup>34</sup> "Al-Mutlaq Yualeq ala Iqamat Hafiah Ghinaeyah fi Jeddah wa Fath Dour Senema fi Al-Mamlakah" [Al-Mutlaq Comments on a Concert in Jeddah and Opening Cinemas in the Kingdom], *Akhbar24*, January 14, 2017.

<sup>35</sup> Eman Alhussein, "The Enlightened Sheikhs of the New Saudi Arabia," *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, June 27, 2018.

<sup>36</sup> Winter at Tantora (WinterAtTantora), Twitter post, February 19, 2010, 8:03pm.

<sup>37</sup> "Saudi Cleric Apologizes for 'Intolerant' Views of Sahwa Movement," *Arab News*, May 7, 2019.

<sup>38</sup> Al-Satr Al-Awsat, "S1:E13 – Aid Al Qarni – part 1," *MBC Shahid*, 37:48, October 17, 2020.

his attention abroad to promote the kingdom’s adoption of the moderate Islam narrative. His visit to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and a synagogue in Paris as well as leading a prayer at Auschwitz generated much discussion domestically and abroad. As part of this outreach, Issa wrote a letter to the museum’s director on International Holocaust Remembrance Day aimed as “an outreach from the heart of Islam.”<sup>39</sup>

Up until mid-2020, Issa’s efforts catered almost exclusively to boosting the kingdom’s image abroad. Since then, however, his attention has shifted inward. During Ramadan in May, Issa addressed the Saudi audience for the first time through a daily television program, which continued after Ramadan under a different name.<sup>40</sup> While Issa is a permanent presence on the show, other scholars from different institutions in the Muslim world and diaspora are featured in short appearances to support Issa’s message and Saudi Arabia’s approach. Even though Issa repeatedly stresses the importance of not importing or exporting religion, the attempt to showcase other scholars is meant to demonstrate a unified approach to the religious issues the program tackles.

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*The state is using the same platforms traditionally used by religious scholars to promote its message, demonstrating the continued importance of television in influencing public opinion and changing perceptions.*

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The state is using the same platforms traditionally used by religious scholars to promote its message, demonstrating the continued importance of television in influencing public opinion and changing perceptions. Throughout the program, Issa tries to contest certain religious views by presenting a new understanding of religion more compatible with the government’s approach. As the kingdom’s moderate Islam advocate and image maker, Issa’s new role includes influencing Muslim communities in the diaspora by directly addressing them during the program and encouraging them to integrate into their societies.

## The Muslim World League: A New Direction

After curbing the powers of the religious police, allowing entertainment events, and clamping down on scholars, questions of whether the kingdom was abandoning its role and centrality in the Muslim world surfaced. As the custodian of Islam’s two most holy sites, Saudi Arabia seems determined to retain this position. Issa is playing a central role in stressing the importance of the kingdom as well as demonstrating the Muslim World League’s efforts in changing the image of Islam in the West. His efforts are also an attempt to change the direction of the Muslim World League, which has long been scrutinized for its integral part in Saudi Arabia’s promotion of Islam.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Robert Satloff, “A Historic Holocaust Awareness Awakening in Saudi Arabia, of All Places,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, January 26, 2018.

<sup>40</sup> “Bellaty Hiya Ahsan” ran during Ramadan and the name of the program was changed to “Fi Al-Afaaq” after the holy month.

<sup>41</sup> Robert Satloff, “A Historic Holocaust Awareness Awakening in Saudi Arabia, of All Places,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, January 26, 2018.

In Issa's television program, he constantly refers to the Mecca Charter, which was signed in 2019 during a conference hosted by the Muslim World League.<sup>42</sup> He argues that the charter succeeded in unifying the religious discourse across the Muslim world regardless of intra-Islamic differences as it was signed by more than a thousand muftis. Issa emphasizes the importance of the time and place of signing the charter, in Mecca during the last 10 days of Ramadan, giving it a holy dimension. Issa calls the charter the second-most important declaration after the Constitution of Medina, which was drafted during the time of the Prophet Muhammad.<sup>43</sup>

The emphasis placed on the Mecca Charter demonstrates Saudi Arabia's interest in remaining central to the wider Muslim world. This approach is consistent with Vision 2030 as well as new textbooks and curricula that the Saudi government has put in place that stress the importance of Islam to Saudi identity and the country's role in the Muslim world.<sup>44</sup> Attracting Muslims for pilgrimage is one of Vision 2030's objectives to generate revenue. Influencing the Muslim world is also part of the kingdom's soft power that it wants to employ through the Muslim World League. This perhaps explains why the program does not only target a Saudi audience but also specifically addresses Muslim communities in the diaspora.

## Muslims in the Diaspora

Speaking to Muslim communities in the diaspora, Issa encourages them to integrate into their societies. He argues that a national identity is never in conflict with their Islamic identity and that individuals should aspire to have both. Issa says, "The Islamic identity must reinforce the national identity and be in harmony with it. It must also promote a positive image of Islam around the world and respect every country's constitution and laws."<sup>45</sup> During the program, he assures Muslims in the diaspora that integrating into their societies does not dilute or affect their Islamic identity, arguing that many Western countries respect minorities' rights and different religious backgrounds.<sup>46</sup> Issa repeatedly mentions that integration into Western societies is one of the objectives of the Muslim World League and that it has worked with Western governments, nongovernmental organizations, and cultural centers to promote it.

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Issa also points to one of the issues that was discussed in the Mecca Charter, banning exporting and importing fatwas. He argues that such a practice does not take into account the situational and spatial circumstances of each country.<sup>47</sup> He says, "Any person who enters

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<sup>42</sup> "The Charter of Makkah," *Muslim World League*, July 4, 2019.

<sup>43</sup> Bellaty Hiya Ahsan, "S1:E24," *MBC Shahid*, 22:58, May 17, 2020.

<sup>44</sup> Eman Alhussein, "New Saudi Textbooks Put Nation First," *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, October 17, 2019.

<sup>45</sup> Bellaty Hiya Ahsan, "S1:E2," *MBC Shahid*, 26:13, April 25, 2020.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Bellaty Hiya Ahsan, "S1:E21," *MBC Shahid*, 25:24, May 14, 2020.

a country must respect its constitution and laws or not go there to begin with.”<sup>48</sup> He argues that influential scholars have been exporting fatwas to Muslims in the diaspora, which has exacerbated their problems and created tensions in the countries where they reside. Issa’s approach toward Muslims in the diaspora is more focused on security concerns, which is in line with his interest in the concept of *al-amn al-fikri* (thought security). Therefore, the program has not yet addressed issues of importance to the wider Muslim audience nor has it provided specific details on how the Islamic and national identity can co-exist.

## Religion and Classifications

Issa’s approach to changing public opinion is highly structural; he contests long-established religious views by presenting two sides of each issue discussed. For example, he argues that one must distinguish between *al-din* (religion) and *al-tadayun* (religiosity), arguing that the former is essentially fault free, whereas the latter is easily tinted by the individual’s understanding and implementation of religion. Then, he says there are two types of religiosity, and to implement the right religiosity, one must adhere to the teachings of “moderate Islam.”<sup>49</sup>

The two types of false religiosity, according to Issa, are strict religiosity and thought extremism. The former denies implementing *taysir* (ease) due to its focus on what is prohibited rather than what is allowed. He argues that religion, in principle, permits more than it forbids. And thought extremism, he says, is intentionally attempting to deceive people and obstruct their right of independent reasoning.<sup>50</sup> Issa lays out different classifications of religious characteristics, as opposed to the past when such characteristics were more unified. This is in line with the Saudi Character Enrichment Program of Vision 2030 in which “Islam is presented not in creedal but rather in motivational tenets: moderation and tolerance, excellence and discipline, equity and transparency, and determination and perseverance.”<sup>51</sup>

Issa discusses “classification and exclusion,” arguing that there are two kinds of classifications: one positive and another negative. He warns against negative classification, which leads automatically to excluding others. However, he says that positive classification is vital, yet can only be implemented by state organizations and institutions. According to Issa, positive classification, for example, is identifying terrorist groups, such as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, al-Qaeda, and the Muslim Brotherhood. He asserts that this classification is done thoroughly and efficiently, for the greater good of the people.<sup>52</sup>

## The Cartoon Controversy: A Test for the Moderate Approach

Saudi Arabia’s prominence in the Muslim world makes it regularly the center of attention in the aftermath of controversies surrounding Islam. This has been the case from the Jyllands-Posten cartoons in 2005 to the projection of Charlie Hebdo cartoons on government buildings

<sup>48</sup> Fi Al-Afaq, “S1:E7,” *MBC Shahid*, 44:09, September 4, 2020.

<sup>49</sup> Bellaty Hiya Ahsan, “S1:E23,” *MBC Shahid*, 25:38, May 16, 2020.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Kristin Smith Diwan, “Max Weber in Arabia: Saudi’s Character Enrichment Program,” *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, May 12, 2020.

<sup>52</sup> Bellaty Hiya Ahsan, “S1:E3,” *MBC Shahid*, 26:29, April 26, 2020.

in France in 2020. The Saudi leadership's changed stance on political and religious issues affected its initial response, putting it under the spotlight, highlighting how it has diverged from its traditional role. As a result, the cartoon controversy became a test of the moderate approach.

Issa attempted to contain public outrage and demonstrate the kingdom's new role by repeatedly addressing the most recent cartoon controversy.<sup>53</sup> While he acknowledged that the cartoons were disrespectful to Muslims, he argued that they should not be considered damaging to the prophet as he is "above" such depictions. Issa called the cartoons "worthless bubbles" and said the wide "negative reaction" is responsible for escalating the controversy. Issa stressed the importance of *al-taghamud* (disregard), arguing that it is best to simply ignore the cartoons and disregard the controversy as the prophet did himself when he was ridiculed.<sup>54</sup>

There was a unified response by the state's top religious institutions to the cartoon controversy, which was less severe compared to previous incidents.<sup>55</sup> The Muslim World League's lengthy statement condemned targeting symbols belonging to any religion. It also argued that a wise response must be to deescalate and disregard the controversy.<sup>56</sup> The Council of Senior Scholars – to which Issa belongs – issued a statement similar to that of the Muslim World League. While the statement condemned the cartoons, it also stressed that the prophet is above such depictions, which should be disregarded.<sup>57</sup> The Friday sermon from Mecca also delivered a similar message, although a bit more passionate, borrowing Issa's "bubble" expression by calling the controversy a "passing bubble."<sup>58</sup> The following Friday sermon advised parents to teach their children that "tolerance is neither a sign of weakness nor indignity" and that God is the one responsible for people's actions, not them.<sup>59</sup>

This moderate approach must also be seen in light of Saudi Arabia's rivalry with Turkey, including Turkish moves to boycott French products. In its decision to avoid escalation and disregard the cartoons, Saudi Arabia appears to be on the opposite side of the Turkish response. As Issa said, Saudi Arabia can use its "soft power" as a means for "peaceful influence" in the Muslim

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<sup>53</sup> Fi Al-Afaaq, "S1:E7," *MBC Shahid*, 44:09, September 4, 2020.

<sup>54</sup> Fi Al-Afaaq, "S1:E15," *MBC Shahid*, 46:15, October 30, 2020.

<sup>55</sup> Salem Al-Ahmed, Saleh Al-Muhaisen, Nawaf Al-Otaibi, Saleh Al-Huwaimel, Ahmed Al-Qutb and Abdullah Al-Ruwaili, "Muqataat Al-Muntajat Al-Dinimarkiyah Tatafaal inda Al-Muasasat wa Al-Muwatineen Difaan Aan Al-Rasool Al-Karim" [Boycotting Danish Products and the Responses of Institutions and Citizens in Defense of the Prophet], *Alriyadh*, January 30, 2006.

<sup>56</sup> "Rabitat Al-Alam Al-Islami: Wayuna Al-Islami Yajaluna Akthar Hikmah fi Al-Taamul ma ay Muhawalah Leltatawel wa Al-Isaah" [Muslim World League: Our Islamic Awareness Makes us Wiser in Dealing with Attempts to Insult Religion], *Al-Madina*, October 25, 2020.

<sup>57</sup> "Al-Isaa ila Maqamat Al-Anbiya wa Al-Rusul lan Yadhurhum Shayyan wa Inama Yakhdum Ashab Al-Daawat Al-Mutatarifah" [Offending Prophets and Messengers Will Not Harm Them, Only Serves Those With Extremist Views], *Saudi Press Agency*, October 25, 2020.

<sup>58</sup> "Al-Raees Al-Aam fi Khutbat Al-Jumaa: Laysa mn Huriyyat Al-Taabeer Tawjeeh Al-Ihanat aw Al-Istihzaa fi Al-Muqadasat wa Al-Rumooz Al-Diniyyah" [President General During the Friday Sermon: Insulting and Mocking Religious Symbols is Not an Exercise of Freedom of Expression], *General Presidency for the Affairs of the Grand Mosque and the Prophet's Mosque*, accessed November 7, 2020.

<sup>59</sup> "Imam Al-Haram Yadu ela Thaqafat Al-Ikhtilaf fi Alraye" [The Mosque's Imam Calls for a Culture of Diverse Views], *Alriyadh*, November 6, 2020.

world.<sup>60</sup> Conversely, a Saudi writer argued that the Turkish boycott of France is purely a Muslim Brotherhood campaign since the movement is in “ideological conflict” with France.<sup>61</sup> Around the same time, an informal boycott of Turkish products began in Saudi Arabia.<sup>62</sup> While some neighboring countries joined the boycott of French products, Saudi Arabia found itself caught between two boycotts – one, a politically and commercially driven effort at home directed against Turkey and, two a more religious one driven by Ankara and its regional allies.

Regional and religious positions should also be seen in the context of the presidential election in the United States. One prominent Saudi columnist argued that the administration of President-elect Joseph R. Biden Jr. should take advantage of Saudi Arabia’s new approach that stands contrary to other Muslim countries “which are playing a provocative role,” possibly in reference to Turkey.<sup>63</sup> On the other hand, the prospect of a Biden presidency also unleashed uncertainty in Saudi Arabia of a possible change in U.S. policy toward the region, including on the Muslim Brotherhood. Hence, a unified stance against the movement was widely promoted through the kingdom’s religious institutions. The Council of Senior Scholars, the grand mufti, and the minister of Islamic affairs, dawah and guidance all issued statements in mid-November calling the Muslim Brotherhood a “terrorist organization” not representative of Islam.<sup>64</sup> This is another example of how the religious sphere remains crucial in pushing forward the state’s policies when needed.

## An Assessment of Issa’s Efforts

Because Issa’s voice was not as prominent in previous years, he has a clean canvas to construct a new religious narrative without being burdened by previous positions on religion. On the other hand, it could also put him at a disadvantage since he is not well known outside of his official role as a former minister of justice and the secretary general of the Muslim World League. So, his program is usually promoted via official and semiofficial social media accounts, as well as on traditional media, to push his narrative to the local audience.

Issa’s regular television appearances, just like the moderate Islam approach, appear to target numerous objectives. Therefore, his program does not have a clear theme or address a specific audience. As of December, Issa appeared in 49 televised interviews discussing issues related to a Saudi audience, the wider Muslim world, and the diaspora in Western countries. The program also shed light on Christian religious institutions and tried to explain the perspective of the radical right in Europe and its fear of the growth of Islam across the continent.<sup>65</sup> The diverse topics and target audiences could hinder its effort in attracting a loyal audience. However, the intention may not be for the program to attract a regular following as much as to present the state’s new approach to religion.

<sup>60</sup> Fi Al-Afaaq, “S1:E12,” *MBC Shahid*, 41:47, October 8, 2020.

<sup>61</sup> Abdullah bin Bajad Al-Otaibi, “‘Unsuru Al-Rasool ... Qatiu Faransa la Turkiya’ [‘Support the Prophet ... Boycott France Not Turkey’], *Asharq Al-Awsat*, November 1, 2020.

<sup>62</sup> Ahmed Al Omran, “Go Cold Turkey,” *Riyadh Bureau*, October 30, 2020.

<sup>63</sup> Abdulrahman Al-Rashed, “Nahnu wa Biden Al-Raees” [We and President Biden], *Asharq Al-Awsat*, November 9, 2020.

<sup>64</sup> “Council of Senior Scholars: Muslim Brothers’ Group Don’t Represent Method of Islam, Rather Only Follows Its Partisan Objectives, Violating Our Graceful Religion,” *Saudi Press Agency*, November 10, 2020.

<sup>65</sup> Bellaty Hiya Ahsan, “S1:E14,” *MBC Shahid*, 23:58, May 7, 2020.

Issa's program has covered many themes and issues and addressed them from an ideological perspective that often comes off as direct preaching, such as an episode on political Islam. Issa tends to speak broadly on issues, which has made some episodes abstract and not easily relatable. For example, one episode focused on the "power of the word" to emphasize how what one says could have dire repercussions. However, the show involves the audience by allowing questions via Twitter. To add credibility, a question that was critical of Issa was addressed to him.

## The Security Dimension of Moderate Islam

The state's approach to moderate Islam is comprised of a number of measures, including the aforementioned concept of thought security, which has been a crucial component of the country's fight against terrorism. The concept began to be used in Saudi Arabia as early as the 1990s.<sup>66</sup> Prince Nayef bin Abdulaziz played a key role in fostering this term.<sup>67</sup> However, the way thought security was initially framed was heavily influenced by the religious discourse at that time.<sup>68</sup> The concept evolved over the years from one used in security circles inside the Ministry of Interior to a web of measures in schools and higher education.

Initially, the purpose of thought security was twofold: to protect individuals from "hostile elements seeking to undermine national security" and to ensure the conformity of individuals in following "the thought patterns of the nation," which relies on Islam.<sup>69</sup> Since 2017, thought security changed from the concept fostered by Nayef bin Abdulaziz, who utilized religion and religious scholars to inhibit radicalism. Now, thought security uses the moderation argument not only to deter terrorism but to strengthen a sense of national belonging and adopt a moderate approach to religion more accepting of the state's new social policies. The new leadership centralized and created new institutions to disseminate messages emphasizing this new approach.

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## General Department for Counter Extremism

The Presidency of State Security was formed in July 2017 after the removal of the former interior minister and crown prince, Mohammed bin Nayef, from the line of succession and the subsequent restructuring of the security sector.<sup>70</sup> This led to the creation of the General Department for Counter Extremism in 2018. It promotes the moderation narrative under #*l'tidaluna Yumayizuna* (our moderation defines us) on social media and emphasizes the

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<sup>66</sup> Mohammed Alsudairi, "Fighting the Many Smoke-less Wars: A Comparative Study of the Origins, Conceptualizations and Practices of Cultural Security in China and Saudi Arabia" (PhD dissertation, University of Hong Kong, 2019), 198.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>70</sup> Kristin Smith Diwan, "Saudi Arabia Reassigns Roles Within a More Centralized Monarchy," *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, January 22, 2019.

importance of promoting a positive image of the country by not circulating negative news that could harm its standing or be used by its enemies.<sup>71</sup> As part of a campaign in 2019 to raise awareness on extremism, the department released several short videos that were widely circulated. These videos warned youth against extremism and women against feminism, which is portrayed as aiming to destroy the family structure.<sup>72</sup>

The General Department for Counter Extremism released a video including feminism, homosexuality, and atheism as part of the state’s definition of extremism. The video defines moderation as being in the middle between radicalism and immorality, arguing that it is the best way to steer away from both extremes. The department later deleted the video and said it was published without authorization after it created much debate inside and outside

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*Moderate Islam is the main theme running through the various materials produced by the new security institutions, making the two intrinsically linked.*

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the country. This episode highlights how security institutions are actively playing a role in developing the paradigms of moderation. While new security institutions are not heavily influenced by religion, they use the language of moderation as the basis for their messaging on social media. Moderate Islam is the main theme running through the various materials produced by the new security institutions, making the two intrinsically linked.

## The Global Center for Combatting Extremist Ideology (*Etidal*)

The kingdom’s security concerns were initially addressed through laws and regulations to monitor social media and intellectual discourse. Now, the various thought security institutions and their moderate Islam approach is playing a central role in providing preemptive measures to inhibit what is deemed as radicalism. The Global Center for Combatting Extremist Ideology (known as *Etidal* in Arabic, which means moderation) is best known for its social media initiatives. The center was inaugurated during President Donald J. Trump’s 2017 visit to Saudi Arabia.

Issa is the head of Etidal’s High Committee of Ideology, comprised of Saudi and foreign religious scholars responsible for filtering extremist ideas.<sup>73</sup> The center steers away from using religion in its messages on social media and focuses solely on illustrating the destructive nature of terrorism through its multilingual outreach.<sup>74</sup> Etidal General Secretary Mansour Al-Shammari argues that separating religion from politics is vital to resolving tensions scholars created by tackling contemporary issues. But he asserts that “the state’s management of religious affairs is part of its wider management of public affairs,” which ensures containing religious influence and preventing scholars from using their religious legitimacy to gain political power.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> The General Department for Counter Extremism (ce\_pss), Twitter post, [February 25, 2019, 5:02pm](#).

<sup>72</sup> The General Department for Counter Extremism (ce\_pss), Twitter post, [February 5, 2019, 3:46pm](#).

<sup>73</sup> Mohammed Alsudairi, “Fighting the Many Smoke-less Wars: A Comparative Study of the Origins, Conceptualizations and Practices of Cultural Security in China and Saudi Arabia” (PhD dissertation, University of Hong Kong, 2019), 238.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Mansour Al-Shammari, “*Muqtadhayat Al-Ijtihad wa Dharurat Al-Masaleh*” [The Requirements of Ijtihad and the Necessities of Interests], *Asharq Al-Awsat*, September 6, 2020.

## The Ideological Warfare Center

The Ideological Warfare Center was launched in 2017 under the Ministry of Defense with Issa as its general director. Not surprisingly, many of the center's messages are similar in content to Issa's television program. The center aims to "immunize the youth from around the world" against radicalism through its programs that are built on moderation.<sup>76</sup> According to Issa, the center "managed to get into the heart of extremism" through its numerous publications, which "exposed" the messages of extremists, especially in the way they interpret Quranic phrases.<sup>77</sup> The center's approach seems to rely heavily on producing publications that refute extremist ideology. Among the 800 publications released in its first year was a four-volume book edited by Issa.<sup>78</sup>

## The Thought Awareness Center

Efforts to integrate thought security into the education system have faced a number of obstacles in the last few years. The Ministry of Education adopted educational programs to protect students from extremist views. However, these programs were abruptly suspended due to "infiltration" by the Muslim Brotherhood in the education system as reported in 2018.<sup>79</sup> The government established the Thought Awareness Center in December 2017 to strengthen the ministry's work and give it full control over previous thought security initiatives.<sup>80</sup> The history of infiltration was discussed by the center's general supervisor, who said that the system was deeply affected by regional developments, especially pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism, which is contrary to the state's approach of moderation.<sup>81</sup> Therefore, the center's main objective is to enforce and strengthen a sense of national belonging to protect students against extremist views.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>76</sup> "Markaz Al-Harb Al-Fikriyah: Mashru Aalami li Muwajahat Aydyulujiyah Al-Tataruf" [Ideological Warfare Center: A Global Project To Confront the Ideology of Extremism], *Okaz*, May 2, 2017.

<sup>77</sup> Fi Al-Afaaq, "S1:E4," *MBC Shahid*, 46:36, August 14, 2020.

<sup>78</sup> Osamah Al-Jamaan, "Markaz Al-Harb Al-Fikriyah Yusder Kitaban Yanqudh Estidlalat Ahl Al-Ghuluw wa Al-Tataruf" [Ideological Warfare Center Issues a Book Refuting the Arguments of Extremists], *Alriyadh*, November 4, 2017.

<sup>79</sup> Ahmed Al Omran, "Saudi Arabia Struggles To Check Extremism in Schools," *Financial Times*, January 16, 2018.

<sup>80</sup> Mohammed Alsudairi, "Fighting the Many Smoke-less Wars: A Comparative Study of the Origins, Conceptualizations and Practices of Cultural Security in China and Saudi Arabia" (PhD dissertation, University of Hong Kong, 2019), 234.

<sup>81</sup> "Mushrif Al-Waai Al-Fikri li Okaz: Lan Nasmaha Bikhtiraqina ... Mutlaqan" [Supervisor of "Thought Awareness" to Okaz: We Will Not Allow Any Infiltration], *Okaz*, January 25, 2018.

<sup>82</sup> "Markaz Al-Waai Al-Fikri fi Al-Taalim Yartakiz Aala Tazeez Al-Intima Al-Watani wa Al-Wiqayah mn Al-Afkar Al-Mutatarefah" [The Thought Awareness Center in Education Focuses on Promoting National Belonging and Preventing Extremist Ideas], *Ministry of Education*, March 5, 2020.

## The Prince Khalid Institute for Moderation

While Prince Nayef bin Abdulaziz was behind the emergence of thought security, Prince Khalid al-Faisal has been equally known for advancing the moderate Saudi approach since 2009, helping develop the moderation discourse over the past decade. The chair he founded in 2009 was upgraded to the Prince Khalid al-Faisal Institute for Moderation in 2018.<sup>83</sup>

The institute has numerous resources on moderate Islam available on its website. These publications cover issues pertaining to nationalism, digital citizenship, and characteristics of a moderate individual, some especially written for primary and secondary school students. There is an emphasis on defining moderation from a historical framework that portrays previous kings as advocates of moderate Islam. The institute’s pursuit of this approach stems from the prince’s interest in “rewriting Saudi history,” which he mentioned in his moderate Saudi approach speech in 2009.<sup>84</sup>

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The institute has recently started offering a postgraduate degree on moderation and has made a point of targeting potential candidates from the General Presidency for the Affairs of the Grand Mosque and the Prophet’s Mosque.<sup>85</sup> Unlike Nayef bin Abdulaziz’s approach, which relied on scholars and religious institutions to advance the thought security narrative, the moderate Islam approach seems to be doing the opposite through training religious scholars by enrolling them in the center’s moderation programs.

## Conclusion: How Effective is the New Approach?

The top-down approach to moderate Islam attempts to solve many domestic and regional dilemmas. It also tackles security concerns by regulating the religious sphere, diminishing the influence it wielded just a few years ago. However, there remains an inconsistent emphasis on religion; while new textbooks emphasize the importance of Islamic identity and upholding religious teachings, religion is selectively, and sometimes inconsistently, employed in the social sphere due to the recent relaxation of traditional norms.<sup>86</sup> Moreover, old videos and articles by official religious scholars that contradict the current social reforms are often circulated on social media to counter the moderation discourse by exposing their inconsistencies. Such

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<sup>83</sup> “Tahweel Markaz Al-Amir Khalid Al-Faisal lel Itidal ela Maahad Bijamiat Al-Malek Abdulaziz” [Converting the Prince Khalid Al-Faisal Center for Moderation Into an Institute at King Abdulaziz University], *Saudi Press Agency*, November 3, 2018.

<sup>84</sup> Sultan Alobthany, “Khalid Al-Faisal Mukhatiban Thalathat Alaf Taleb wa Talebah: Tamasaku bi Dinikum ... wa Iftakhiru bi Urubatikum ... wa Itazu bi Hawiyatikum Kasaudiyen” [Khalid Al-Faisal Addressing Three Thousand Students: Hold on to Religion, Be Proud of Being Arab, and Cherish Your Saudi Identity], *Asharq Al-Awsat*, March 18, 2009.

<sup>85</sup> “Lajnat Taqyyem wa Qubool Al-Mutaqadmeen Lebarnamaj Al-Majester Al-Tanfethi fi Al-Itidal Tabda Aamalaha Bimuqabalat 22 Mutaqadiman” [The Committee for Appraisal and Acceptance of Applicants for the Executive Master’s Program in Moderation Begins its Work by Interviewing 22 Applicants], *General Presidency for the Affairs of the Grand Mosque and the Prophet’s Mosque*, accessed November 7, 2020.

<sup>86</sup> Eman Alhussein, “One Year On, Saudi Public Decency Law Still Meeting Resistance,” *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, September 30, 2020.

contradictions could eventually become another security concern. One way the state has tried to address this issue has been to filter old fatwas on the website of the Council of Senior Scholars that contradict the current social opening.<sup>87</sup>

The attempt to unify the moderate Islam discourse inside and outside the kingdom by providing Issa with a wider platform for influence could help in these endeavors. However, supplementing the emerging narrative with a progressive religious discourse is largely a work in progress. There has already been an intellectual void due to the clampdown on religious scholars and intellectuals.<sup>88</sup> Allowing intellectual debates to resume free from the heavy-handed ideological approach prevalent today on television and in state media could contribute to maturing the state-led religious narrative, without undermining religious institutions or the state's new security paradigm.

The Saudi leadership is aware of the importance of religion for its legitimacy, the kingdom's centrality in the wider Muslim world, and its importance to the West for inhibiting religious extremism. At the same time, the state wants to make sure that its need for religious legitimacy will not result in the reemergence of negative forces (as happened in the 2000s when Sahwa figures regained influence after the state used them to counter terrorism). Therefore, the leadership is sustaining itself and preserving its religious legitimacy by centralizing thought security and ensuring a unified message is disseminated through its various institutions.

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efforts while rewriting the historical narrative that situates the political elite at the heart of moderate Islam. One of the main reasons for this new approach is to sustain its political authority while selectively employing religion for its legitimacy. However, this approach has led to some inconsistencies; while officials from the security sector stress the importance of separating religious and political domains, the state has at the same time utilized religious scholars to confirm its political approach. This use of religion highlights at times the government's security dilemma. Furthermore, it weakens the new moderation argument, which aims to minimize the role of religion, especially in the political sphere. Pursuing moderate Islam may best be achieved by providing the population with a progressive religious discourse. This could offer long-term societal benefits while addressing the state's more immediate security concerns.

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<sup>87</sup> Abdulsalam Al-Blawi, "Bi Qarar Al-Shura...Murajaat Al-Fatawa wa Arshafat Al-Ijtihadiyah" [Al-Shura's Decision: Revision of Fatwas and Archiving Ijtihad Ones], "Alriyadh", March 8, 2018.

<sup>88</sup> See: Mohammed Al-Abbas, "Faragh ma Baad Al-Sahwa" [The Post-Sahwa Void], "Asharq Al-Awsat", September 25, 2019.

