

Battle for the Soul of Islam: Will the real reformer stand up?

by James M. Dorsey | September 23, 2021



Honouring Riyanto

Saudi and Emirati efforts to define 'moderate' Islam as socially more liberal while being subservient to an autocratic ruler is as much an endeavor to ensure regime survival and bolster aspirations to lead the Muslim world as it is an attempt to fend off challenges rooted in diverse strands of religious ultra-conservatism.

The Saudi and Emirati efforts to garner religious soft power have much in common even though the kingdom and the United Arab Emirates build their respective

campaigns on historically different forms of Islam. The two Gulf states are, moreover, rivals in the battle for the soul of Islam, a struggle to define what strand or strands will dominate the faith in the 21st century.

The battle takes on added significance at a time that Middle Eastern rivals are attempting to dial down regional tensions by managing their disputes and conflicts rather than resolving them. The efforts put a greater emphasis on soft power rivalry rather than hard power confrontation often involving proxies.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE propagate a 'moderate' Islam on the back of significant social reforms in recent years that preaches absolute obedience to the ruler and relegates the clergy to the status of the ruler's clerics.

The reforms include Saudi Arabia's lifting of a ban on women's driving, enhancing of women's professional and personal opportunities, curbing the powers of the religious police and introducing Western-style entertainment.

The UAE last November allowed unmarried couples to cohabit, loosened alcohol restrictions and criminalised "honour killings," a widely criticised religiously packaged tribal custom that allows a male relative to kill a woman accused of dishonouring her family.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE compete in the Muslim world with Turkish and Iranian Islamist strands of the faith that are laced with nationalism.

The Gulf states' state-led moderation of religious practices rather than of theology and Muslim jurisprudence is also challenged by some strands of Wahhabism, the ultra-conservative interpretation of Islam on the basis of which Saudi Arabia was founded.

["Wahhabism has refracted into three broad groups since the early 1990s:](#) a left that has developed a discourse of civic rights, a centre occupying official posts of state (dubbed 'ulama al-sultan' or the ruler's clerics) that has put up some resistance to the loosening of their powers in the social, juridical and media spheres, and a Wahhabi right sympathetic to the jihadist discourse of al-Qaeda and its focus on questions of foreign policy," said scholar Andrew Hammond.

While Turkey and Iran pose a geopolitical danger, autocratic monarchical rule is more fundamentally threatened by the religious challenge posed by what Mr. Hammond dubs the Wahhabi left and the Wahhabi right as well as Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama, [the only non-state player in the battle for the soul of Islam](#), that advocates and practices reform of Islamic jurisprudence and unconditionally endorses the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The arrests in recent years of Saudi scholars and preachers such as [Safar al-Hawali](#), [Salman al-Awda](#), [Sulayman al-Duwaish](#), [Ibrahim al-Sakran](#), and [Hasan al-Maliki](#) suggests as much.

Implicitly drawing a distinction with Nahdlatul Ulama, Mr. Hammond argues that Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's reforms amount to "defanging Wahhabism not dethroning it."

The crown prince, since coming to office, has radically cut back on the [investment of tens of billions of dollars](#) in the propagation of religious ultra-conservatism across the globe, most effectively in Pakistan and Afghanistan. He has also sought to balance Wahhabism with Saudi ultra-nationalism and shave off the rough social edges of the kingdom's austere interpretation of the faith. His subjugation of the clergy, and incarceration of adherents of the Wahhabi left and far-right, put an end to a 73-year long power-sharing agreement between the ruling Al-Saud family and the clergy.

The left has entertained concepts of a constitutional rather than an absolute monarchy, called for political liberalisation and civil rights and in some cases endorsed the 2011 popular Arab revolts that toppled four Arab autocrats.

The Wahhabi left could be joined in challenging the conservative Gulf monarchies and, simultaneously, be challenged by Nahdlatul Ulama once the group expands its activities to target the Muslim world's grassroots beyond Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim-majority country as well as its foremost democracy. In its first outreach to grassroots elsewhere, Nahdlatul Ulama is expected to launch an Arabic-language website before the end of the year that would target the Arab world.

Nahdlatul Ulama's concept of a humanitarian Islam that embraces principles of tolerance, pluralism, gender equality, secularism and human rights as defined in the Universal Declaration goes considerably further than proposals put forward by Mr. Hammond's Wahhabi left, perhaps better described as more liberal rather than an ideological left-wing of a fundamentally ultra-conservative movement.

The Indonesian group's concept of Islam also contrasts starkly with the Saudi and Emirati notion of autocratic religious moderation that involves no theological or jurisprudential reform but uses 'the ruler's clergy' to religiously legitimise repressive rule under which protests, political parties and petitioning of the government are banned and thought is policed.

"The state has strengthened the Wahhabi centre through neutralising the Wahhabi left and right, which have each represented a threat to state authority and legitimacy ... As for the civic rights innovations of the Wahhabi left exemplified by al-Awda, it is

precisely this discourse that the state wants to shut down,” Mr. Hammond said, referring to the imprisoned cleric.

The track record of proponents of autocratic religious moderation is checkered at best. While the UAE has created a society that is by and large religiously tolerant, neither Saudi Arabia nor Egypt, which doesn't have the wherewithal to fight a soft power battle in the Muslim world but seeks to project itself as a champion of religious tolerance, can make a similar claim.

Prince Mohammed has met Jewish and Evangelical leaders. Mohammed al-Issa, the head of the Muslim World League, long a major vehicle to promote Saudi religious ultra-conservatism, doesn't miss an opportunity these days to express his solidarity with other faith groups. Yet, non-Muslims remain barred in the kingdom from worshipping publicly or building their own houses of worship.

In Egypt, Patrick George Zaki, a 27-year-old student, lingers in prison since February 2020 on charges of spreading false news and rumours for [publishing an article documenting incidents of discrimination against Egypt's Coptic Christian minority](#).

Mr. Zaki was arrested a year after Ahmed el-Tayeb, the Grand Imam of Al Azhar, Egypt's citadel of Islamic learning, signed a Declaration of Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together with Pope Francis during the two men's visit to the UAE. The declaration advocates religious freedom and pluralism.

By contrast, Nahdlatul Ulama secretary-general Yahya Staquf recently told the story of Riyanto in a September 11 speech at Regent University, a bulwark of American Evangelical anti-Muslim sentiment founded by televangelist Pat Robertson. A member of Nahdlatul Ulama's militia, Riyanto died guarding a church in Java on Christmas Eve when a bomb exploded in his arms as he removed it from a pew.

“To us in Nahdlatul Ulama, Riyanto is a martyr, and we honour his memory every Christmas Eve alongside millions of our Indonesian Christian brothers and sisters,” Mr. Staquf said.

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