



## **Shifting Youth Attitudes Threaten State-controlled Interpretations of Islam**

### **Battle for the Soul of Islam: Spotlight on the Gap Between Regimes and Populations**

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BELGRADE and NEW YORK, April 14, 2021: Nahdlatul Ulama spiritual leaders are at the vanguard of a grassroots, global trend — especially prevalent among Muslim youth — to reject the political weaponization of Islam by Middle East autocrats and Islamist movements. This dramatic shift in Muslim attitudes was recently detailed by Dr. James M. Dorsey, a veteran foreign correspondent and Senior Fellow at National University of Singapore’s Middle East Institute (MEI).

In an 18-page article titled “Battle for the Soul of Islam: Spotlight on the Gap Between Regimes and Populations,” Dr. Dorsey writes that “[s]hifting youth attitudes towards religion and religiosity threaten to undermine the rival efforts of Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran and, to a lesser degree, the United Arab Emirates, to cement their individual state-controlled interpretations of Islam as the Muslim world’s dominant religious narrative. Each of the rivals see their efforts as key to securing their autocratic or authoritarian rule as well as advancing their endeavors to carve out a place for themselves in a new world order in which power is being rebalanced....

“Prominent Turkish intellectual Mustafa Akyol [noted] in a journal article that ‘too many terrible things have recently happened in the Arab world in the name of Islam. These include the sectarian civil wars in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, where most of the belligerents have fought in the name of God, often with appalling brutality. The millions of victims and bystanders of these wars have experienced shock and disillusionment with religious politics, and more than a few began asking deeper questions’....

“Widening the gap between state projections of religion and popular aspirations is the fact that governments’ subjugation of religious establishments turns clerics and scholars into regime parrots and fuels youth skepticism towards religious institutions and leaders....

“A Muslim nation that replaced a decades long autocratic regime with democracy in a popular revolt in 1998, Indonesia is Middle Eastern rulers’ worst nightmare. The shifting attitudes of Middle Eastern youth towards religion and religiosity suggest that experimentation with religion in post-revolt Indonesia is a path that [they] would embark on if given the opportunity. Indonesia is ‘where the removal of constraints imposed by an authoritarian regime has opened up the imaginative terrain, allowing particular types of religious beliefs and practices to emerge... The Indonesian case study... brings into sharper relief processes that are happening in ordinary Muslim life elsewhere,’ said Indonesia scholar Nur Amali Ibrahim.”

Dr. Dorsey's essay was published in *Horizons* — the flagship English-language quarterly journal of the Center for International Relations and Sustainable Development (CIRSD), a public policy think tank registered in Belgrade and New York. CIRSD advisors include a Who's Who of prominent political, intellectual and business leaders from Europe, North and South America, Asia and Africa.

What follows are excerpts from Dr. Dorsey's article. The complete (18-page) essay may be accessed [here](#).

### **Battle for the Soul of Islam: Spotlight on the Gap between Regimes and Populations**

JAMES M. DORSEY

TROUBLE is brewing in the backyard of Muslim-majority states competing for religious soft power and leadership of the Muslim world in what amounts to a battle for the soul of Islam. Shifting youth attitudes towards religion and religiosity threaten to undermine the rival efforts of Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran and, to a lesser degree, the United Arab Emirates, to cement their individual state-controlled interpretations of Islam as the Muslim world's dominant religious narrative. Each of the rivals see their efforts as key to securing their autocratic or authoritarian rule as well as advancing their endeavors to carve out a place for themselves in a new world order in which power is being rebalanced.

Research and opinion polls consistently show that the gap between the religious aspirations of youth — and, in the case of Iran other age groups — and state-imposed interpretations of Islam is widening....

The polls and research suggest that youth are increasingly skeptical towards religious and worldly authority. They aspire to more individual, more spiritual experiences of religion. Their search leads them in multiple directions that range from changes in personal religious behavior that deviates from that proscribed by the state to conversions in secret to other religions even though apostasy is banned and punishable by death, to an abandonment of organized religion all together in favor of deism, agnosticism, or atheism....

#### **Revival, Reversal**

The recent research and polls suggest a reversal of an Islamic revival that scholars like John Esposito in the 1990s and Jean-Paul Carvalho in 2009 observed that was bolstered by the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, the results of a 1996 World Values Survey that reported a strengthening of traditional religious values in the Muslim world, the rise of Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and the initial Muslim Brotherhood electoral victories in Egypt and Tunisia in the wake of the 2011 popular Arab revolts....

***“Changing attitudes towards religion and religiosity that mirror shifting attitudes in non-Muslim countries are particularly risky for leaders, irrespective of their politics, who cloak themselves in the mantle of religion.”***

[Prominent Turkish intellectual Mustafa] Akyol went further, noting in a journal article that “too many terrible things have recently happened in the Arab world in the name of Islam. These include the sectarian civil wars in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, where most of the belligerents have fought in the name of God, often with appalling brutality. The millions of victims and bystanders of these wars have experienced shock and disillusionment with religious politics, and more than a few began asking deeper questions....”

Moroccan journalist Ahmed Benchemsi suggested that “the Arab Spring may have stalled, if not receded, but when it comes to religious beliefs and attitudes, a generational dynamic is at play. Large numbers of individuals are tilting away from the rote religiosity Westerners reflexively associate with the Arab world.”

Benchemsi went on to argue that “in today’s Arab world, it’s not religiosity that is mandatory; it’s the appearance of it. Nonreligious attitudes and beliefs are tolerated as long as they’re not conspicuous. As a system, social hypocrisy provides breathing room to secular lifestyles, while preserving the façade of religion. Atheism, per se, is not the problem. Claiming it out loud is. So those who publicize their atheism in the Arab world are fighting less for freedom of conscience than for freedom of speech.” The same could be said for the right to convert or opt for alternative practices of Islam.

Syrian journalist Sham al-Ali recounts the story of a female relative who escaped the civil war to Germany where she decided to remove her hijab. Her father, who lives in Turkey, accepted his daughter’s decision but threatened to disown her if she posted pictures of herself uncovered on Facebook. “His issue was not with his daughter’s abandonment of religious duty, but with her publicizing that before her family and society at large,” Al-Ali said.

### **Neo-patriarchism**

Neo-patriarchism, a pillar of Arab autocratic rule, heightens concern about public appearance and perception. A phrase coined by American-Palestinian scholar Hisham Sharabi, neo-patriarchism involves projection of the autocratic leader as a father figure. Autocratic Arab society, according to Sharabi, was built on the dominance of the father, a patriarch around which the national as well as the nuclear family are organized. Relations between a ruler and the ruled are replicated in the relationship between a father and his children. In both settings, the paternal will is absolute, mediated in society as well as the family by a forced consensus based on ritual and coercion.

As a result, neo-patriarchism often reinforces pressure to abide by state-imposed religious behavior and at the same time fuels changes in attitudes towards religion and religiosity among youth who resent their inability to chart a path of their own....

***“A Muslim nation that replaced a decades long autocratic regime with a democracy in a popular revolt in 1998, Indonesia is Middle Eastern rulers’ worst nightmare.”***

The shifting attitudes of Middle Eastern youth towards religion and religiosity suggest that experimentation with religion in post-revolt Indonesia is a path that [they] would embark on if

given the opportunity. Indonesia is “where the removal of constraints imposed by an authoritarian regime has opened up the imaginative terrain, allowing particular types of religious beliefs and practices to emerge.... The Indonesian case study... brings into sharper relief processes that are happening in ordinary Muslim life elsewhere,” said Indonesia scholar Nur Amali Ibrahim.

A 2019 poll of Arab youth showed that two-thirds of those surveyed felt that religion played too large a role in their lives, up from 50 percent four years earlier. Nearly 80 percent argued that religious institutions needed to be reformed while half said that religious values were holding the Arab world back. Surveys conducted over the last decade by Arab Barometer, a research network at Princeton University and the University of Michigan, showed a growing number of youths turning their backs on religion...

With the trend being the strongest among Libyans, many Libyan youth gravitate towards secretive atheist Facebook pages. They often are products of the UAE’s failed attempt to align the hard power of its military intervention in Libya with religious soft power. Said, a 25-year-old student from Benghazi, the stronghold of the UAE and Saudi-backed rebel forces led by self-appointed Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, turned his back on religion after his cousin was beheaded in 2016 for speaking out against militants. UAE backing of Haftar has involved the population of his army by Madkhalists, a branch of Salafism named after a Saudi scholar who preaches absolute obedience to the ruler and projects the kingdom as a model of Islamic governance. “My cousin’s death occurred during a period when I was deeply religious, praying five times a day and studying ten new pages of the Qur’an each evening,” Said said.

A majority of respondents in Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Turkey, and Iran said in a 2017 poll conducted by Washington-based John Zogby Associates that they wanted religious movements to focus on personal faith and spiritual guidance and not involve themselves in politics. Iraq and Palestine were the outliers with a majority favoring a political role for religious groups....

[A]ssertions by Saudi Arabia that projects itself as the leader of an unidentified form of moderate Islam that preaches absolute obedience to the ruler and by advocates of varying strands of political Islam such as Turkey and Iran ring hollow in light of the dramatic shift in attitudes towards religion and religiosity....

### **Acknowledging Change**

Widening the gap between state projections of religion and popular aspirations is the fact that governments’ subjugation of religious establishments turns clerics and scholars into regime parrots and fuels youth skepticism towards religious institutions and leaders.

***“Religious authorities continue to project interpretations of the faith that serve the state and are often framed in the language of tolerance and inter-faith dialogue but preserve outmoded legal categories... that date back centuries.”***

Pooyan Tamimi Arab, the co-organizer of an online survey in 2020 of Iranian attitudes towards religion that revealed a stunning rejection of state-imposed adherence to conservative religious mores as well as the role of religion in public life noted the widening gap “becomes an existential question. The state wants you to be something that you don’t want to be... Political disappointment

steadily turned into religious disappointment... Iranians have turned away from institutional religion on an unprecedented scale....”

Although compatible with a trend across the Middle East, the Iranian survey’s results, which is based on 50,000 respondents who overwhelmingly said they resided in the Islamic republic, suggested that Iranians were in the frontlines of the region’s quest for religious change.

Funded by Washington-based Iranian human rights activist Ladan Boroumand, the Iranian survey, coupled with other research and opinion polls across the Middle East and North Africa, suggests that not only Muslim youth, but also other age groups, who are increasingly skeptical towards religious and worldly authority, aspire to more individual, more spiritual experiences of religion....

The Arab Youth Survey found that, despite 40 percent of those polled defining religion as the most important constituent element of their identity, 66 percent saw a need for religious institutions to be reformed...

A 2018 Arab Opinion Index poll suggested that public opinion may support the reconceptualization of Muslim jurisprudence. Almost 70 percent of those polled agreed that “no religious authority is entitled to declare followers of other religions to be infidels.” Similarly, 70 percent of those surveyed rejected the notion that democracy was incompatible with Islam while 76 percent viewed it as the most appropriate system of governance.

What that means in practice is, however, less clear. Arab public opinion appears split down the middle when it comes to issues like separation of religion and politics or the right to protest.

Arab Barometer director Michael Robbins cautioned in a commentary in the *Washington Post*, co-authored with international affairs scholar Lawrence Rubin, that recent moves by the government of Sudan to separate religion and state may not enjoy public support....

Writing at the outset of the popular revolt that toppled Al-Bashir, Islam scholar and former Sudanese diplomat Abdelwahab El-Affendi noted that “for most Sudanese, Islamism came to signify corruption, hypocrisy, cruelty, and bad faith. Sudan is perhaps the first genuinely anti-Islamist country in popular terms. But being anti-Islamist in Sudan does not mean being secular....”

Tamimi Arab, the Iran pollster, argued that his Iran survey “shows that there is a social basis” for concern among authoritarian and autocratic governments that employ religion to further their geopolitical goals and seek to maintain their grip on potentially restive populations. His warning reverberates in the responses by governments in Iran, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere in the Middle East to changing attitudes towards religion and religiosity. They demonstrate the degree to which they perceive the change as a threat, often expressed in existential terms....

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Shifting attitudes towards religion and religiosity raise fundamental chicken and egg questions about the relationship between religious and political reform, including what comes first and whether one is possible without the other. Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama argues that religious reform requires recontextualization of the faith as well as a revision of legal codes and religious jurisprudence. The only Muslim institution to have initiated a process of eliminating legal concepts in Islamic law that are obsolete or discriminatory — such as the endorsement of slavery and notions of infidels and dhimmis or People of the Book with lesser rights — Nahdlatul Ulama, a movement created almost a century ago in opposition to Wahhabism, the puritan interpretation of Islam on which Saudi Arabia was founded, is in alignment with advocates of religious reform elsewhere in the Muslim world....

The thinking of Nahdlatul Ulama's critical mass of Islamic scholars... offers little solace to authoritarian and autocratic leaders and their religious allies in the Muslim world at a time that Muslims are clamoring not only for political [but also] religious change. If anything, it puts them on the spot by offering a bottom-up alternative to state-controlled religion that seeks to ensure the survival of autocratic regimes and the protection of vested interests.

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