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The Growing Salience of Moderate Islam

By Mohamed Bin Ali and Muhammad Haziq Jani

SYNOPSIS

In steering his country towards an economy more broadly based on foreign direct investments and less reliant on oil, Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman has transformed the austere Wahhabi form of Islam in Saudi Arabia into a more moderate transnational variety. Other countries in the Middle East and Southeast Asia have similarly embarked on projects to moderate their versions of Islam, all of which, as in the Saudi case, add to their soft power.

COMMENTARY

Saudi Arabia and Moderate Islam

The export of Wahhabism by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been a matter of discussion and debate for decades. Interest surrounding Saudi's religious transnationalism revolved around whether Wahhabism contributed to religious conservatism, revivalism, and extremism outside of Saudi Arabia, and whether this was a factor contributing to the resurgence of terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

It was argued that Wahhabism had been instrumentalised by Saudi Arabia to blunt the influence of Egypt's Pan-Arabism in the 1960s when both were regional rivals and later to counter the export of Ayatollah Khomeini's revolutionism after the 1979 Iranian Revolution. These phases in Saudi's religious transnationalism resulted in a marked aversion to democratic politics and a tendency to excommunicate Muslims with theological differences – particularly Shi'is and Sufis – within Wahhabism and generally within Salafism.

Under Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman (MBS), Saudi Arabia is shifting to a new paradigm of religious transnationalism, "renovating and repurposing" institutions such

as the Muslim World League (MWL). Founded in 1962 and instrumental in exporting Wahhabism, the MWL headed by Secretary-General Mohammad Al-Issa, hand-picked by MBS, now propagates ideas of interfaith harmony, co-existence, and tolerance and is the centrepiece of a revised Saudi religious transnationalism.

These ideas were markedly different from Wahhabism's rigid and exclusivist discourse. The outcome of this transformation is a new Saudi Islam that is moderate in the sense that it is open toward Western cultural presence and investments in Saudi Arabia, even if it means having "decadent" concerts not too far away from the holy cities of Mecca and Madinah. This transformation was necessary as MBS had a broad vision for Saudi Arabia's future which would depend economically on the country's ability to create, develop, and cultivate a broad portfolio of investments heavily focused on the growing Asian economies.

New Tapestry of Moderate Islam

Saudi Arabia was neither the first nor the only Muslim country to attempt at reforming Islam, adding to the global tapestry comprising moderate versions of the religion. In *Islam and the Arab Revolutions: The Ulama between Democracy and Autocracy* (OUP 2022), Usaama al-Azami of Oxford University wrote that other Gulf monarchies, particularly the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar, had created entire stables of religious scholars that had become part of their broader regional and geopolitical strategies in the Middle East and beyond.

In *Rivals in the Gulf: Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Abdullah Bin Bayyah, and the Qatar-UAE Contest Over the Arab Spring and the Gulf Crisis* (Routledge 2021), David Warren of Washington University explained the differences between the versions of Islam championed by Abdullah Bin Bayyah and the late Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who were backed by the UAE and Qatar, respectively.

These differences in jurisprudence – of peace versus revolution – centred around the domestic and foreign political interests of UAE and Qatar. As with Saudi Arabia, the UAE preferred a moderate form of Islam that would not ride on the groundswell of revolutionary sentiments of the Arab Spring, whereas Qatar wished to be a beacon for these voices to lift itself into becoming a geopolitical player.

These versions of moderate Islam were opposed to militant jihadism and friendly with the West, which was essential in attracting foreign direct investments. They shone and appealed to countries outside the Middle East. These new projects of moderate Islam added to a list of Muslim states – each with its historical traditions of Islam – that have been recognised as moderate and inclusive. They include Egypt and Morocco, both traditional centres of Islamic scholarship, as well as Malaysia and Indonesia.

Moderate Islam in the Nusantara Region

Malaysia's Islamisation, which began in the 1980s, had also produced versions of moderate Islam, including former Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi's *Islam Hadhari*, a progressive, democratic and tolerant approach to Islam, and current Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's vision for *Malaysia Madani*, a concept comprising the six core values of sustainability, prosperity, innovation, respect, trust, and care and compassion.

In Indonesia, Muslim organisations proposed their versions of moderate Islam, including Nahdlatul Ulama's *Islam Nusantara*, an interpretation of Islam that takes into account local Indonesian customs in forming its Islamic jurisprudence, Muhammadiyah's *Islam Berkemajuan* (Progressive Islam), and the Indonesian Ulama Council's *Islam Wasatiyyah*, defined as "middle way", and characterised by neither liberal nor radical religious thought.

At their core, there is little to differentiate between these models of moderate Islam – they all propose that Islam should fit the political, social, cultural, temporal, and spatial contexts of their respective societies, implying the preservation of universal values and rejecting exclusivism, extremism, and violence.

Nevertheless, Malaysia's state-driven projects and the versions proposed by Indonesian Muslim mass organisations were brought about, respectively, from Malaysia's need to include Islam in its national political discourse, and the contestation among Indonesian Muslim mass organisations for "market share" in defining Islam for Indonesians.

The Singapore Context

The various models of Islam proposed by Muslim-majority countries, some of which are centres of Islamic learning, show that the religion continues to be subject to interpretation by its adherents in accordance with local socio-political contexts. They also show that states have just as important a role as religious elites in defining Islam within their realm of influence.

Muslims in Singapore are keenly aware of the need to develop an interpretation and praxis of Islam that is suitable for the Singaporean context, as demonstrated by MUIS' (aka Islamic Religious Council of Singapore), initiation of the Singapore Muslim Identity project in 2003.

MUIS also introduced the Postgraduate Certificate in Islam in Contemporary Societies (PCICS) in 2017, a full-time year-long programme to guide returning graduates of Islamic studies in contextualising what they have learnt overseas, thereby helping to characterise the Singaporean Muslim identity further.

Furthermore, Singapore's new Islamic college would provide for the teaching of inclusivist and moderate aspects of Islam, be a model for plural societies and a resilient anchor against the constant shifts of geopolitics in the Middle East.

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