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Saudi Arabia's superficial reforms won't mask ugliness of Wahhabism

Russia Today (30.03.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2veMC4b> - As Saudi Arabia's crown prince tours the United States on what has been dubbed a "charm offensive," the US media has gone into propaganda overdrive, whitewashing Mohammad Bin Salman as a "reformer" who is modernizing the kingdom.

As he meets with a roster of high-level politicians and A-list celebrities like Oprah, front and center of his celebrated reforms has been his decision to allow women to drive, and opening movie theaters in Saudi Arabia, which were banned until now.

"With the ascent to power of young Prince Mohammad bin Salman, the kingdom has seen an expansion in women's rights including a decision to allow women to attend mixed public sporting events and the right to drive cars from this summer," said Reuters.

"His rise to power has been accompanied by a loosening of restrictions on women's dress and an expansion of their role in the work force," reported the New York Times.

The Times went on to casually mention at the very end of the article that "Prince Mohammad is expected to ascend to the throne after his father, King Salman, dies. If that happens, given his young age, he could rule Saudi Arabia for 50 years."

This positive press is no coincidence. Saudi Arabia has spent millions on a vast lobbying apparatus that includes a network of think tanks and public relations firms to push for a war on Iran, while combating negative press related to Riyadh's autocratic government and its US-backed war on Yemen, which has led to famine and a cholera outbreak of epic proportions that kills a Yemeni child every 10 minutes.

Most of the spin has focused on presenting bin Salman as heroic reformer, particularly when it comes to women's rights.

Putting lipstick on Wahhabism

Yes, soon women in Saudi Arabia will have the right to drive – something they were banned from doing under the strict religious edicts of Wahhabism. While it's certainly a good thing that Saudi Arabia has chosen to enter the 21st century (sort of), the repeal of the driving ban is largely superficial as it does nothing to address Saudi Arabia's discriminatory male guardianship system, which treats women as children. Under this system, women must seek permission from a male relative to travel, apply for a passport, study abroad, get married, and so on.

Even if Saudi Arabia were to give equal rights to women tomorrow, it wouldn't change the destructive impact the Saudis have had in the Middle East, the most important being the intentional spreading of Wahhabism – a toxic and hateful religion practiced in Saudi Arabia.

Wahhabism is a puritanical and ultra-conservative form of Sunni Islam that emerged in the 1700s and has been a major source of inspiration for Salafi jihadist groups like Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, or ISIS.

It is difficult to explain why ISIS uses Saudi textbooks to indoctrinate children, why 15 of the 19 hijackers on 9/11 were Saudi, and why Saudi nationals make up the largest number of foreigners in ISIS, without an understanding of Wahhabi theology.



Many of the Islamophobic tropes peddled by anti-Muslim bigots are based on practices inherent in Wahhabism and carried out in Saudi Arabia and areas controlled by ISIS, such as stoning of adulterers, amputating the limbs of thieves, and death by beheading.



Spreading hate

The Middle East wasn't always plagued by regressive fundamentalism. Salafi jihadist groups like Al-Qaeda were not popular in the region and they still aren't. They have been violently imposed on people thanks in large part to the actions of Saudi Arabia in partnership with the US, which has a longstanding pattern of backing religious fundamentalists to further its geopolitical ambitions.

As far back as the 1950s, the CIA teamed up with the Muslim Brotherhood, which was then backed by Saudi Arabia, to weaken secular Arab nationalism and communism.

With US backing, Saudi Arabia has spent tens of billions of dollars spreading Wahhabism throughout Sunni Muslim communities around the world. By building Wahhabi-influenced mosques, schools and Islamic centers, Saudi Arabia seeks to remake Sunni Islam in its image. Areas of the world where this tactic has paid off – Kosovo, Albania, and South Asia – have provided fertile recruiting pools for Salafi jihadist fighters. In South Asia, Saudi Arabia has also funded Deobandi (an ultra-conservative version of Islam similar to Wahhabism) schools and mosques, the kind from which the original generation of the Taliban emerged.

The most significant chapter in the US-Islamist love affair came in the 1980s, when the US armed the Mujahedeen to bleed the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. It was the largest and longest-running covert operation in US history. People like Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, an Osama bin Laden associate whose claim to fame was splashing acid in the faces of unveiled schoolgirls at Kabul University, were the top recipients of CIA funds.

After the Soviet Union fell, some elements who fought alongside the American-armed Mujahedeen groups evolved into Al-Qaeda. Not long after that, Al-Qaeda pulled off an attack that killed 3,000 people in New York City and its existence has been invoked to justify endless war and the curtailing of civil liberties ever since. (Afghanistan, where the US is still at war, remains the world's second-largest producer of refugees.)

The US has played a similarly dirty game in Syria over the last six years, knowingly arming rebel groups linked to Al-Qaeda to weaken the Syrian government.

In spite of its role in spreading an ideology that inspires terrorism, Saudi Arabia continues to receive special treatment in Washington, first and foremost because it is an arm of US imperialism in the Middle East, but also because its leaders use their vast oil wealth buy friends in high places.

Buying hearts and minds

What I've always been most struck by is the genuine adoration American officials seem to have for their Saudi partners. In my experience, behind closed doors American officials despise working with the Israelis. They speak kindly of them publicly because they must, for geostrategic purposes and fear of ruining their careers by offending powerful pro-Israel lobby groups. But in the case of Saudi Arabia, American officials seem to genuinely like the Saudis.

This may have something to do with Saudi Arabia's approach to Western officials, which is to lavish them with expensive gifts. And it shows.

During a private meeting at the State Department in September 2016, nearing the end of the Obama administration, I expressed frustration about the US allowing Saudi Arabia to spread its toxic Wahhabi ideology, which serves as a primary inspiration for Salafi jihadist groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS, around the world. Before I could finish, a senior-level official in the Department of Near Eastern Affairs interrupted me to defend the Saudis.

"Saudi Arabia isn't exporting terrorism, they're exporting religion and we can't get into the business of policing religion. It's a free speech issue," said the official. "The Saudis are a very important geostrategic ally. And they are changing. They've worked very hard to reform their textbooks," the official added.

The official then brought up the jihadist textbooks printed by the US and disseminated to Afghan school children in refugee camps in Pakistan in the 1980s. The textbooks encouraged violence against infidels, communists and the Soviet Union in the name of Islam and helped inculcate an entire generation. These US-printed textbooks can still be found in Taliban-run schools today.

The senior State Department official insisted that, in the end, printing them was "worth it" because "we got rid of the Soviet Union."

The official's response was reminiscent of former US National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, one of the architects of the US policy to arm the Afghan Mujahedeen. Asked in 1998 if he regretted supporting Islamic fundamentalists, Brzezinski replied: "What is most important to the history of the world? The Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet

empire? Some stirred-up Muslims or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the cold war?"

This sort of thinking continues to dominate Washington's approach to the region with ever more disastrous consequences. Giving women in Saudi Arabia the right to drive, while a welcome development, won't change that.

Saudi Arabia is modernising, but will this mean greater freedom for religious minorities?



New freedoms for women in Saudi Arabia include being able to drive, visit sporting events, divorce, or even join the army (World Watch Monitor)

The political landscape in the strict Islamic Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is changing, and quickly. A charismatic crown prince seems determined to modernise his country and even speaks of a shift towards a more "moderate" Islam. But will the changes taking place in Saudi also ease the situation for members of non-Islamic faiths?

In Saudi Arabia, religions or traditions other than strict Sunni Islam enjoy little freedom. For Christians, no churches or Christian symbols of any kind are allowed anywhere. In theory, foreign Christians are permitted to organise their own, small-scale meetings, as long as they don't cause any "disturbance". However, raids on secret churches in private homes – sometimes called "house churches" – still occur, while Christian maids and nannies – many of whom are foreign citizens from countries such as the Philippines – are rarely allowed to leave their houses at all, making it impossible for them to go to church.

For native Saudis, meanwhile, becoming a Christian is almost impossible – at least openly. Apostasy from Islam is – in theory at least – punishable by death. In practice, most converts keep their newfound faith a complete secret from their families, for fear of being disowned, abused or even killed by their relatives. The huge social pressure makes

it extremely difficult for the small number of indigenous Christians to meet, increasing their isolation.

'Everything is changing'

"Change is in the air. That is for sure," said one Christian, originally from the West, who compared the period with the Arab Spring that engulfed the Middle East at the start of the decade. "Everything is changing. Some people are more open to the Christian message, but others are radicalising.

"This is a crossroads. If it works, it will bring huge change and more freedom to this country. If it fails, Saudi might be the next Yemen – only worse. If the fundamentalists win the battle that is now being fought behind the curtains and spark a civil war, this place will go back to the dark ages. So, this is either going to be a huge [spiritual] awakening or it will be one of the biggest bloodbaths in history."

But he added that political developments had at least shifted the focus away from Christians in Saudi, saying: "Christians are plankton compared to the whales that are now being hunted. So, they simply don't have time to care. As long as [Christians] keep their heads low and don't get themselves reported to the government, they will be fine."

'Nobody could carry a Bible'



The office of the Muttawah in Riyadh (World Watch Monitor)

A second foreign Christian in Saudi – an Indian pastor – said Christians' lives had become easier since the Muttawah, Saudi's religious police department, was stripped of its authority to make arrests in 2016.

"Before that, nobody could carry a Bible in the streets without getting arrested and harassed," he said. "Now we can. Before, it was very dangerous for a non-Christian to visit a Christian meeting, but now there is less fear."

He said that as Saudis and Indians don't usually mingle, it remains unlikely that a Saudi Muslim would visit an Indian church service, "but the trend is that people are less fearful".

'Repression makes people question'

Another Christian, working and living in a rural part of the country, said he remains pessimistic about the effect of the crown prince's new policies and warned of the effects of "too much change at once".

"Change can lead to disruption. No-one knows what will happen if large groups of people start feeling left behind in their own country," he said.

"But a repressive religious system can cause people to ask questions. Look at what is happening in Iran today: the more Christians are persecuted, the more the Church seems to grow. If Saudi would adopt a more moderate form of Islam, open to all sorts of ideas, that might actually be more difficult to turn away from than a very strict Islam."

He said many Saudis have already turned their backs on the strict, fundamentalist Islam that defines the teaching in Saudi's mosques, and that they still go to the mosque and pray, but only because it's the cultural norm.

"A lot of Muslims here don't like the Islam of the narrow-minded. Many 'lukewarm' Muslims are fed-up with the hypocrisy of it," he said. "Many Saudis who turn into 'lukewarm' Muslims don't start looking for other religions. They start living secular lives, focusing on getting a job, a family, kids and good vacations. Nothing to do with God."

Who is the crown prince?

Crown prince Mohammad bin Salman, 32, is a phenomenon in Saudi Arabia. Young, idealistic, energetic and modern, in the last year he has made huge efforts to raise his profile, both locally and internationally, through headline-grabbing reforms such as opening cinemas, and allowing women to drive, visit sporting events and, most recently, leave their husbands or even join the army.

With oil revenues declining, the crown prince is aiming to make his country less dependent on it. In modernising Saudi society, he is seeking to draw more foreign investors to develop the retail and tourism industries.

In his wave of reforms, he has also taken on longstanding issues such as corruption. In a dramatic purge at the end 2017, dozens of members of Saudi Arabia's political and business elite – including several princes, ministers and business tycoons – were rounded up and arrested on corruption charges, only to be released after paying the equivalent of millions – or even billions – of dollars in fines.

His adversaries blame the young crown prince of using his fight against corruption as an excuse to take down his political opponents. However, the majority of Saudis seem to support the crackdown, since many of them reap little personal benefit from the country's huge oil profits.

In a recent speech, the future king also announced his plans for a correction of the highly fundamentalist Wahhabi Islamic theology that has defined Saudi society for the last 40 years. Speaking to investors in Riyadh in October 2017, Bin Salman unveiled his plan to implement a "moderate, balanced Islam that is open to the world and to all religions and all traditions and peoples".

The new crown prince may be progressive, but his critics say that "MBS" – as the crown prince is called locally – is simply seeking to reposition Saudi Arabia as the most dominant country in the region, by any means necessary.

They say that by engaging in bloody proxy wars in Syria and Yemen, he is attempting to bring Iran's expansionism to a halt. In Yemen, the ongoing Saudi bombings to weaken the Iran-backed Houthi rebels have caused thousands of civilian casualties, and Saudi's continuing interference in its neighbouring country has contributed to what the UN has warned is in danger of becoming the world's worst humanitarian disaster for 50 years.
