# How the Saudis Can Promote Moderate Islam

Riyadh’s new leaders may be amenable to modestly scaling back the country’s exporting of Salafism.

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After 64 years of rule by sons of King Ibn Saud, Saudi Arabia is making a transition to a new generation of leaders. The ailing 81-year-old King Salman decreed in June that his successor would be his 31-year-old son, Mohammed bin Salman, who is already largely running the country.

The challenge of succession has been hanging over Saudi rulers for decades—ensuring that the family’s amazing unity continued beyond the generation of King Ibn Saud’s 50-odd sons. Yet the epochal decision to elevate young Prince Mohammed has—so far, at least—succeeded without creating apparent division.

This presents an important opportunity for long-term U.S. aid to Islamic moderates across the globe. For nearly 40 years the Saudis have conducted an extraordinarily successful program to export their version of radical Salafi Islam. They have spent something like $4 billion a year on imams and mosques all over the world. This has drastically increased the size of the radical Muslim population. Visible evidence includes the notable rise in Muslim veils, burqas, beards and other conservative religious dress.

The Saudi program does not teach terrorism or promote terrorist organizations. But it is widely believed to have increased support for Islamists such as the Muslim Brotherhood, which believes Islam must be at war with an infidel West. Saudi funding is not the only cause of this dangerous radicalization, but people familiar with the diverse Muslim world report that it has played a critical role.

The Saudi leadership does not believe that the Islamist war against the West is good for Saudi Arabia. They see the Muslim Brotherhood as their deadly enemy. So why do they spend so much money exporting Wahhabi Salafism? First, after Iran’s 1979 revolution, the Saudis worried that Shiites would dominate Islamic radicalism and felt they needed a Sunni movement to compete. Second, the Saudis’ domestic political position was based on their long-term alliance with powerful Wahhabi clerics, for whom the teaching of Salafism is a religious obligation.

Saudi exportation of Salafism, although somewhat slower and less radical of late, is one reason the Islamist war against the West could become a much more serious conflict. It is unlikely that the Trump administration could induce the Saudis to stop this program. But now that the U.S. is working with the Saudis to counterbalance the Shiite challenge from Iran, new leaders, including Crown Prince Mohammed, may be amenable to modestly scaling back the country’s program of exporting Salafism. These leaders are probably at least somewhat ambivalent already about the effects of the program.

The U.S. should suggest to the Saudis that it would be in the interest of both countries for them to arrange quietly to stop paying for imams or mosques in Indonesia and India. The Muslim communities in these two countries total more than 400 million people—close to a quarter of all the Muslims in the world. So far they have not been radicalized, and their history and culture provide significant sources of resistance to Arab radicalization. But radicals have been making inroads in both countries.

If moderate Islam succeeds in Indonesia and India, it would give reason to be confident that the Muslim world eventually will choose peace and modernization rather than extremism and conflict. These countries can stand as towering examples that Islam can move into the modern world while continuing to be loyal to its beliefs and traditions.

Most people who worry about potential radicalization in Indonesia and India would agree that there is little chance it will happen without large amounts of Saudi money. If the U.S. could convince the Saudis to keep their cash out of Indonesia and India, it would go a long way toward assuring eventual victory for moderate Islam. As Daniel Pipes, director of the Middle East Forum, has argued for many years: “Radical Islam is the problem; moderate Islam is the solution.”

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