

SAUDI ISLAMIST CRACKDOWN: A CASE STUDY OF A SOCIETAL SCHIZOPHRENIA

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While some conservative Saudi clerics face severe punishments for present or past activities, others seem to slip through the net. If lack of consistency between the narrative emerging from Riyadh and the actual on-ground repercussions have already occurred in the past, the issue of the fight against radical Islamism is a key one for the regime, for both asserting credibility and legitimacy. On several occasions Crown Prince Mohammed repeated that combatting extremism was one of his top domestic and international priority in places such as Syria, Iraq and Yemen together with, according to him, opposing Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei "to conquer the world". In that regard, the Saudi regime's recent crackdown on conservative clerics and the double standards it applies in doing so, weaken the gravity of the charges held against some of the clerics and the very scholars that are currently being targeted. Which could result in serious backlashes.

"70% of the Saudis are younger than 30. Honestly, we won't waste 30 years of our life combating extremist thoughts; we will destroy them now and immediately" prince Mohammed bin Salman, often nicknamed MBS, said in October 2017 at the first Future Investment Initiative (FII) conference in Riyadh.

The previous month, according to activists, two prominent Saudi clerics -Salman al-Odah and Awad al-Qarni- were detained because of the support both clerics expressed in favor of a crisis resolution with neighboring Qatar, submitted to a blockade since June 2017 by the Quartet (Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt). "Saudi Arabia's national security agency, the State Security Presidency, on Tuesday said it had arrested a group of people who were working as foreign agents "against the security of the kingdom." It didn't name those people" wrote the Wall Street Journal.

Soon a statement by the Council of Senior Scholars posted on Twitter, supported the action undertaken by the authorities and "declared there was 'no place for political or ideological parties' in a nation 'based on the book of God and the guidance of his messenger'" reported Bloomberg. If the "foreign powers" weren't named by Saudi authorities, "Okaz and Al Watan accused those detained of being supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood and working for Qatari intelligence" added the article.

In November 2017, it was the turn of prominent princes and businessmen's who were targeted by what is now called a "crackdown", and imprisoned in the Ritz-Carlton palace in

Riyadh on accusations of corruption.

In July 2018 it was [reported](#) that prominent cleric Safar al-Hawali and three of his sons were arrested. Hawali has been dubbed “theologian of terror” according to a [report by CTC Westpoint](#) published in 2006. The report added that al-Hawali “Is currently secretary general of the Supreme Council of Global Jihad; was one of the 26 Saudi scholars who issued an open letter in late 2004 calling on 'Iraqis to fight the US. Is closely associated with Salman al-`Awda [Salman al-Odah] and is considered by some to be a significant mentor to Usama bin Ladin.”

Many would point at the fact that indeed MBS did not “waste” time and actually undertook the crackdown on the extremist preachers operating, more or less freely, in the kingdom for years. Yet, many of these figures such as al-Odah and al-Hawali, have already been incarcerated in previous years leading both of them to “[downgrade](#)” the tone of their preaches and embrace more regime-aligned narrative. However, an interesting event happened in January 2014, when journalist Dawood Al-Shirian violently “attacked” several Saudi preachers among which al-Odah during his “Al-Thamina Ma’a Dawood” (Eight o’clock with Dawood) show on MBC. The now [president](#) of Saudi Broadcasting Corp., acting under the authority of the Ministry of Culture and Information, [accused](#) the “Twitter heroes”, as he calls the clerics, to send Saudis die in Syria for the jihad while they comfortably sit at home. Back then about 1 200 Saudis had already joined the battlefield in Syria according to French newspaper [Le Monde](#) that quotes official numbers from the Saudi authorities. Al-Shirian’s plea appeared to have been heard by then King Abdullah who published two weeks later a [Royal Decree](#), on the 3rd of February 2014, according to which Saudi citizens participating to a conflict abroad would face up to 20 years imprisonment.

If it is hard to fully determine if one preacher is part of the Muslim Brotherhood, particularly when the latter denies it, the Saudi authorities are convinced that clerics such as al-Odah are part of it, or at least sympathize with it, as proven according to them by the membership in International Union of Muslim Scholars (IUMS). “*The union was formed in 2004 mostly by clerics belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood, the Arab world’s oldest and largest Islamist organisation, and is chaired by prominent preacher Sheikh Youssef al-Qaradawi*” as [explained by the Reuters](#), which also reports that the union has been listed in a “terrorism blacklist” by Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain in December 2017. In a very conspiracist style article (including a reference to the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*), Prince Mamdouh al Saud, son of Saudi Arabia’s founder king Abdelaziz, namely accused al-Odah of being a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. In this article published in London-based Saudi [Al-Hayat](#) from 2013, prince Mamdouh calls the Muslim Brotherhood “the Khawarij Of This Age”. If the relationship between the Saudi power and the Muslim Brotherhood always has been complex, no doubt that the first sees the second as a threat for some years now.

And the current regime in Saudi made no secret designating the Muslim Brotherhood as one of the kingdom’s main enemies. As prince MBS [explains](#) himself: “*If you look at Osama bin Laden, you will find that he was a Muslim Brother. If you look at al-Baghdadi of IS, you will find that he too was a Muslim Brother. In reality, if you look at any terrorist, you will find that they were a Muslim Brother. Their main goal is to radicalize Islamic communities in Europe. They hope that Europe becomes a Brotherhood continent in thirty years. They want to rule the Muslims in Europe.*”

The severe crackdown against the Muslim Brotherhood by the Saudi authorities is illustrated also by the threat of death sentences for al-Odah, and possibly other clerics. According to his son, “*Mr. Odah faces 37 charges for alleged crimes including spreading discord, incitement against the ruler, and being active in the Muslim Brotherhood. The senior Saudi official also cited Mr. Odah’s position in the International Union of Muslim Scholars, which he said has*

ties to al Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood”, as [reported](#) by the the *Wall Street Journal*.

Many have been the [voices](#) who rose against this possible sentence, particularly given some preachers have been “measured” in their statements lately. But the kingdom’s authorities publicly claim they want to get rid of extremist views and fight the Muslim Brotherhood. “The education ministry is working to "combat extremist ideologies by reviewing school curricula and books to ensure they do not reflect the banned Muslim Brotherhood's agenda," Ahmed bin Mohammed al-Isa said in a statement issued” in March 2018 to [Reuters](#). Today, it is not an exaggeration to say that clerics with formal or supposed links to the Muslim Brotherhood, past or present, can face a severe treatment in today’s Saudi Arabia, regardless of them being vocal or not. The punishment can range from being imprisoned to the death penalty, as the kingdom ostensibly operates a crackdown on “Islamists”.

Yet, in that regard, one particular individual’s status and views put into question the Saudi narrative on extremism:

- *“Some women who drove cars in Riyadh in 1991 and [as punishment] were suspended from their jobs at the universities for a year or two, were reinstated and are now teaching at the universities, but there is still a concern that they might instill their ideas in their students minds... How can we entrust our daughters to them?”* [Mohamed al-Arefe](#), June 2014.
- *“Devotion to Jihad for the sake of Allah, and the desire to shed blood, to smash skulls, and to sever limbs for the sake of Allah and in defense of His religion, is, undoubtedly, an honor for the believer”* [Mohamed Al-Arefe](#), July 2010.
- *“Those Shiites would glorify the imams and elevate them above the level of humanity. Today, oh monotheists, the evil Shiites continue to set traps for monotheism and the Sunna. They try to spread their false doctrine to the ignorant among the Sunnis”,* [Mohamed Al-Arefe](#), December 2009.
- *“Those Houthis are so adamant about their Shiite belief, that during their exchange with the Yemeni government, they insisted that the problem would be resolved by Ayatollah Al-Sistani. [...] They selected a sheik who is a great sinner and infidel from a remote corner of Iraq, and said: We want this man to be the arbitrator between us.”* [Mohamed Al-Arefe](#), December 2009.
- *“According to statistics from Denmark, 54% of the births in Denmark are illegitimate. In this case, the term "illegitimate" does not mean a girl getting pregnant by her boyfriend. It refers to a woman, who gives birth in a hospital, and when the doctor asks her under whose name to register the baby - who's the father - she says: "I don't know. It might be the doorman... No, no, it might be the company director... It might be the clerk, or the taxi driver... I don't know." They end up registering the child in her own name. That's an "illegitimate" birth. But when she says that the child is from her boyfriend, that's fine...”* [Mohamed Al-Arefe](#), April 2006.

Mohamed Al-Arefe is one of the most successful Saudi scholars active on the internet. If he is banned from entering the [United Kingdom](#), Denmark and Switzerland, his reach is phenomenal and beyond geographical borders. With more than 21 million followers on Twitter, he runs the 86th most successful Twitter account worldwide and first religious Twitter account according to French think-tank [Institut Montaigne](#). He also has 25 million followers on Facebook. Al-Arefe is one of the most [influential](#) Islamist preachers, and is famous also

for his snapchat videos. The 48-year-old cleric teaches at King Saud University in Riyadh and was religiously educated by no other than former Grand Mufti Ibn Baz. For a long time Al-Arefe has been accused of [inciting violence](#), [insulting Jews](#), [Shias](#), [homosexuals](#), [Western values](#) and [opposing](#) Saudi women's right to drive, a right recently granted by the Saudi authorities. He is claimed to have justified the right for one to [beat his wife](#), called young Muslims to [undertake Jihad in Syria](#) or supported the Nusra Front. In every single reference made against Saudi clerics sympathizing with the Muslim Brotherhood, Al-Arefe is cited, and has been under house arrest in 2013 for supporting then Egyptian President Morsi.



All Al-Arefe's statements are public as he is a renowned figure in the Islamists' communities. [Dubbed](#) the clerical "Brad Pitt", Al-Arefe is everything but an obscure cleric preaching in remote places for a selected audience. Which might be one of the reasons MBS met with him at least two times since his father became king. In 2016, Al-Arefe posted two pictures on his social media accounts with him posing with the young Crown Prince: one in April 2016 and one in December of the same year. That was met with surprise by some observers considering the pedigree and past inflamed stands of the preacher all the while Riyadh's narrative was



going hard on "extremism". Some privately argue that this is a "staging" by the Crown Prince in order to both address Al-Arefe's audience and not directly collide with the most conservative elements of the kingdom, similarly to the [crackdown](#) on women's rights activists.

Yet, if Al-Arefe's [audience](#) is impressive, the targeted clerics who have been arrested also enjoy significant audience on social media. Al-Odah himself has 14 million Twitter followers. As for the excuse according to which the Saudi power tries to carefully handle some of the most conservative fringes of Saudi society, the threat of death penalty against some former Sahwa Movement's members is not exactly testament to that.



Finally, one could argue that calls by certain clerics for more independence towards the regime resulted in frustration, accusations and eventually imprisonment. But when taking a look at the activities of some of these preachers in the last years, one can only witness their quietness apart from some messages of support to resolve the crisis with Qatar.

It has been [reported](#) that Al-Arefe has been banned from preaching since a week. The rumor circulated without full confirmation, and without

certainty that Al-Arefe was indeed still preaching in any mosque. The question remains: if promoting violent Islamism, [Jihad](#), opposing women's right to drive and/or being close to the Muslim Brotherhood, lead some to face death penalty in today's Saudi Arabia, why is it leading others to a "preaching ban" at worst?

Even if, "*arrests of these individuals and others is in line with the kingdom's keenness with the international community to exert efforts to combat the extremism that the world suffers from and to combat terrorism in all its forms*", as a Saudi official told the [Wall Street Journal](#).

Meanwhile, [clerics](#) who for years have defended the *de facto* [ban](#) on women's right to drive or made sectarian remarks as pointed out by [Human Rights Watch](#), are sitting in the Council of Senior Scholars, Saudi Arabia's highest religious body. These Salafi clerics somehow remain in line with the State's narrative by changing their own if necessary, or remaining silent. Yet these sudden shifts, or these silences, will not prevent a direct intellectual "[collision](#)" between the decades long conservative education in the kingdom and the recent reformist narrative.

And this collision is already visible online. Sectarian discourses - that have for long been the "norm" among some prominent Salafi clerics - are echoed on Twitter as highlighted by Alexandra Siegel's [study](#) in 2015 and confirmed by Marc Owen Jones's [study](#) in 2018. Owen Jones writes: "Similar to the study by Siegel in 2015, Saudi, Kuwait and Iraq were the top three locations that returned the highest number of tweets containing anti Shi'a hate speech by volume."

All of which facts raise the following questions:

Should it be understood that sectarianism is not part of the regime's fight against radicalism?

And is it how it is perceived by the Saudi citizens?

Is there a double standard being applied for the treatment of Saudi clerics? And if so, on what account?

Many of the clerics whether acting independently of the official religious body or not, saw the rise of Salman and his son in a good light. King Salman, because as Governor of the Riyadh Province enjoyed much [respect](#) from the members of the House of Saud and also from the clerical establishment. His tenure as Governor has long been celebrated and set as an example. MBS, because of what he represented: a young, dynamic leader to be, who would operate great changes and would lift the [ban](#) some "[reformer](#)" religious scholars were subjected to.

If Saudi legal authority fails to be consistent in its charges and its targets, there is a risk of questions being raised about the true intent behind the fight against radicalism. We might see an increased deficit of trust toward the ability of Saudi Arabia's leadership to actually fulfill its claimed objectives. This would be detrimental to both the regime's domestic legitimacy and to the credibility it wishes to showcase at international level, particularly toward the business community it intends to seduce.

Finally, it would deepen the rift between "conservative" citizens, fed with decades long radical discourses and "reforms" enthusiasts who are for now adhering to the official narrative. Failing to reconcile these views – which could be by operating readable and fair policies in the fight against radicalism – will risk seeing them collide.