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SAUDI SALAFI CLERICS UNDER MBS: REFORM AND SURVIVAL

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In recent years, Saudi Arabia has seen rapid social transformations driven by the country's crown prince and de facto ruler, Mohammed bin Salman (commonly referred to as MBS). The country now allows women to drive. The notorious religious police, who used to enforce dress codes and monitor public morality, have been stripped of most of their powers. Saudi Arabia's music scene and entertainment industry have blossomed, with concerts and social events organized regularly and drawing large crowds. These liberalization efforts have been publicized widely both inside and outside Saudi Arabia. They were inconceivable only a few years ago.

MBS's agenda for change in Saudi Arabia has also included the promotion of what he calls "moderate Islam"—which, the Crown Prince argues with thin justification, prevailed in the kingdom before the Iranian Revolution of 1979. State authorities under MBS's rule have arrested Saudi preachers in ever-increasing numbers for allegedly promoting extremism and destabilizing the Saudi state. This begs a number of questions. To what extent is MBS different from past Saudi rulers in his approach to state-clerical relations? And how has the

religious class responded to MBS's social liberalization efforts and assertions of power?

The Brief makes three observations. First, it finds that state-clerical conflict is not new, but that MBS is bolder than his predecessors in his attempts to promote social reforms. At the same time, he pursues arbitrary repression on a massive scale, which has enabled him to subdue Saudi Arabia's religious class, especially those clerics who would otherwise have questioned his initiatives.

Second, the Brief finds that in Saudi Arabia, the clerical establishment remains an integral part of the kingdom, albeit with reduced power to exercise religious authority. Finally, the Brief argues that neither the retreat of the religious elite from questioning social reforms nor the empowerment of loyalist clerics who provide unflinching support is an indication that the Saudi religious tradition has lost its position in the kingdom.

What makes Saudi Arabia seem different under MBS is the creation and proliferation of liberalized spaces within the kingdom outside the purview of the religious



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class. This has allowed such spaces to coexist alongside, though separate from, the religious sphere. In the past, the religious establishment and its clerics enjoyed more authority to prevent and limit the proliferation of liberalized spaces.

RELIGION AND STATE IN SAUDI ARABIA: EVOLUTION OF A PARTNERSHIP

The negotiation and renegotiation of the place of religion within Saudi Arabia, in the context of societal evolution and changing government priorities, has long shaped relations between Saudi rulers and their men of religion, going back to King Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud, who founded the modern (third) Saudi state.

His son King Faisal, who reigned from 1964 to 1975, was responsible for the bureaucratization of the religious establishment, intended to ensure that the *'ulama* (religious scholars and authorities) operated within the purview of the state. In 1970 he created the Ministry of Justice and placed a religious scholar at its head. That minister was obliged to report to the king, which enabled Faisal to control religious messaging while curbing the independence of religious scholars.

King Abdullah (2005-15) initiated a number of reform efforts, securing support from the Saudi religious establishment on some occasions but ignoring them on others. One reform was to allow women athletes to participate in the 2012 Olympics, which was endorsed by the religious establishment after weeks of intensive negotiations.¹

The Saudi religious establishment's relations with the state have long involved compromises in the service of continued loyalty to the ruling family. But that establishment was never a mere instrument of the state. It drew on religious tradition in its rationalization and acceptance of state-initiated changes.²

In fact, the state-sanctioned religious establishment maintains its position as the sole authority to interpret what is religiously acceptable, albeit subject to the final endorsement of the king, who reserves the authority to circumvent clerical decisions by issuing royal decrees. This formula has maintained a degree of consistency in the balance between the state and religion in Saudi Arabia.

MBS: DEMOTING WAHHABISM?

In June 2017, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef was deposed from his position as crown prince, paving the way for Mohammed bin Salman to assume the position and consolidate his political authority. Mohammed bin Salman's efforts to reform Saudi Arabia both economically and socially have also included promoting what he refers to as "moderate Islam." Playing up the role of the Iranian Revolution of 1979, he told the *Guardian* newspaper:

What happened in the last 30 years is not Saudi Arabia. What happened in the region in the last 30 years is not the Middle East. After the Iranian revolution in 1979, people wanted to copy this model in different countries, one of them is Saudi Arabia. We didn't know how to deal with it. And the problem spread all over the world. Now is the time to get rid of it.³

The *Guardian* quoted him as having previously stated that “[w]e are simply reverting to what we followed—a moderate Islam open to the world and all religions.”⁴

The Crown Prince's assessment denies Saudi Arabia's history of extreme conservatism, but there is some truth to his words. Before 1979, the Saudi state had experienced social reform, albeit slowly, under Ibn Saud and subsequent rulers, including King Faisal. Some factions within the Saudi state, especially members of Saudi Arabia's religious class, resisted liberalization. But these factions were not inspired by the Iranian Revolution: They resented and demonized Ayatollah Khomeini, declaring the Iranian Revolution un-Islamic and perceiving it as devoid of religious legitimacy.⁵ They had no intention of doing anything similar in Saudi Arabia: Their response to the revolution was to increase scrutiny of Twelver Shiism, a sub-sect of Shi'a Islam.

Juhayman al-'Utaybi's siege of the Grand Mosque of Mecca in 1979 epitomized the resistance toward social liberalization in the kingdom. Before the siege, Juhayman was involved in militant activities intended to "purify" Saudi streets, including smashing female mannequins in display windows. Although the siege failed, it shook the Saudi ruling family to the core. King Khalid (1975–82) embarked on reinforcing the ruling family's religious legitimacy by empowering the religious establishment in the education sector while sidelining Saudi Arabia's liberal intellectuals. The Saudi religious police was formed in 1976 to enforce public morality and gradually gained significant power while growing in size. Its growth was exponential after 1979.

Mohammed bin Salman's contemporary and exaggerated narrative of a liberalized Saudi society that embraced moderate Islam before 1979 has become part of his campaign against those religious figures who have opposed his social liberalization, as well as those with a strong history of political activism. In this respect, MBS is but the latest in a series of Saudi rulers who have tried to maintain control over the religious scene in Saudi Arabia.

What distinguishes MBS from his predecessors? First is the pace and aggressiveness of his liberalization program. MBS's zeal has left the impression that the traditional practice of negotiating with the Saudi religious establishment is something of the past.

Beyond that is MBS's redefinition of Saudi nationalism. MBS draws his legitimacy from a redefined Saudi narrative and nationalism, alongside his own "Vision 2030." He presents himself as a reformer, an avid nationalist, and savior of the Saudi state—protecting it from radical and violent Islamism as well as from regional threats.

The announcement of "Founding Day" by royal decree, and its celebration on February 22, 2022, reflects this new national narrative. The decree designates 1727 as the year the first Saudi state was founded—implicitly undermining the Wahhabi religious establishment narrative, according to which the forging of a state-religious alliance in 1744 marked the establishment of the first Saudi state.

This new definition of nationalism celebrates a new conception of what it means to be a Saudi citizen. The narrative that the state has constructed around loyalty describes a citizen who contributes to the improvement of Saudi society within the framework of MBS's Vision 2030. Such a citizen embraces the country's pre-Islamic tradition and celebrates ancient sites like Al-Ula, previously held in contempt by the religious establishment, which have become national symbols of Saudi pride.

The populist character of the new Saudi nationalist discourse is reflected as well in both state and non-state television programs, social media, and public events held since MBS's ascendancy.⁶ The first season of "Saudi Idol," a singing contest that aired in 2023, celebrated the country's musical traditions—traditions that drew not from religious songs (*anasheed*), but from regional folklore and popular music. Contestants were encouraged to sing from Saudi repertoire to highlight the distinctive nature of Saudi culture and music. The judges, in their comments, praised the Saudi state, the King, MBS, and Turki Al-Shaykh (a royal adviser) for bringing about change.⁷

One might suppose that Mohammed bin Salman's vision does not allow for the need to maintain the ruling family's religious legitimacy. In practice, MBS does not reject the Salafi/Wahhabi tradition completely. But that tradition and what it represents have taken a severe blow.⁸

THE CHALLENGES WITHIN: SALAFISM IN CRISIS

To comprehend the different responses of Saudi Arabia's religious circles to MBS's reform efforts, it is important to understand the context in which those circles operate and the changes taking place both domestically and regionally. One factor that gave MBS the authority to subdue Saudi Arabia's religious clerics was the reputational damage confronting Salafism at the time he came to power.

The first two decades of the twenty-first century witnessed close international scrutiny of the Salafi religious tradition, on account of the undeniable association of that tradition with both the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and the rise of ISIS. The jihadi groups of the era claimed in propaganda material to be “authentically Salafi” and praised Muhammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s rigid, fundamentalist conception of the tradition. King Abdullah himself criticized Saudi clerics for not doing enough to condemn extremism.

Some Saudi political observers, commenting within the sphere of permitted speech in the kingdom, have from time to time openly accused Saudi Arabia’s preachers and clerics of encouraging violence, blaming them for inspiring Saudi men to travel to Syria and Iraq to fight.⁹ Although many Saudi ‘ulama denounced violence, and in fact actively dissuaded non-Syrians and non-Iraqis from fighting in those countries, there has been a widespread perception of clerical complicity. Young Saudi men returning from Syria blamed the inflamed sectarian rhetoric of activist preachers, and even clerics sanctioned by the state were criticized for their conservatism and jihadi discourse, whether real or imagined.¹⁰ This has created an impression that Saudi Arabia is dealing with an outdated, highly problematic religious class—an impression that well comports with Mohammed bin Salman’s desire to undercut the influence of previously revered religious authorities.

Moreover, the removal of the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt by a military junta shifted the balance of power in favor of regional autocrats after the setbacks of the Arab Spring. Since then, transgressions by opposition activists, no matter how minor, have been met with extreme repression. Transnational efforts to delegitimize Islamism, often associating the Muslim Brotherhood with extremism and equating it with groups like ISIS, have placed Saudi clerics—especially preachers with politically activist leanings—on dangerous ground. These preachers are generally associated with celebrating the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and calling for political reforms across the Arab world.

Mohammed bin Salman’s campaign against “extremism” and his calling for “moderate” Islam have provided the cover for a campaign against those Salafi clerics, often known as “Sahwa” clerics, willing to question the regime. In this he has had the support of loyalist Salafis, who have absolved themselves from any association with the Muslim Brotherhood, the Sahwa movement, and jihadi groups. This required little shift of allegiance on the part of the loyalists: They had long spoken out against the activist trend within Salafism. To them, as a matter of doctrine, loyalty to the state and its rulers, along with political abstentionism, is paramount, so as to avoid dissension within the community of believers.

Mohammed bin Salman’s consolidation of power means that he has been able to dictate the narrative governing the future of Islam in Saudi Arabia. His 2017 move against Mohammed bin Nayef, who remains in detention, terrified the Saudi religious establishment; Nayef was known for his good relations with loyalist clerics. Some of these loyalists were also targeted: Abd Al-Aziz Fawzan al-Fawzan, a vocal advocate of fealty to the state and known for his anti-Muslim Brotherhood stance, was arrested and jailed. Some Saudi analysts along with the opposition figure Saad al-Faqih speculated that al-Fawzan was targeted for his close links to Nayef rather than for his religious preaching.

In this uncertain environment, the religious establishment and its clerics have been compelled to recalibrate their positions in response to changing domestic and regional circumstances.¹¹ It became clearer that loyalty to the House of Saud was no longer enough for the clerics. What was required was loyalty to the ruling family—which was now defined as loyalty to Mohammed bin Salman personally.

THE SAUDI MEN OF RELIGION: RESPONDING TO A NEW SAUDI ARABIA

The Crown Prince’s social reform efforts do not entirely reject the importance of religion and its formal establishment in the kingdom. Rather, MBS calls for “moderate Islam” and targets “extremists”—a term that, of course, he applies liberally against his detractors. MBS absolves historical religious figures, on the other hand, from the charge of “extremism”: He argues that subsequent “extremists” have distorted Muhammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s teachings and those of Sheikh Abd al-Aziz Ibn Baz (1912–99), the former grand mufti of Saudi Arabia. If they were alive, he insisted, they would undoubtedly have rejected these distortions.¹²

Sunni Islam remains a significant part of Saudi Arabia’s national identity and of the ruling family’s legitimacy. The fact that the kingdom hosts the two holiest sites for Muslims makes religion in the kingdom crucial for the regime’s legitimacy. Indeed, Saudi state television broadcasts the *hajj*, and senior rulers and officials continue to make outward displays of religiosity. The Saudi religious establishment and government-sanctioned preachers have retained their place, along with their role of preserving Islam in Saudi Arabia: They continue to deliver Friday sermons to a captive national audience, albeit having the content dictated by state authorities.

Several trends have emerged in response to the changes MBS has instituted.¹³ First, the Saudi religious establishment has witnessed the retreat of scholars who previously held extremely conservative views on social issues.

These scholars, remaining loyal to the state, have praised Mohammed bin Salman and sought to retrofit their doctrinal outlook to justify the changes made by the Crown Prince. The Board of Senior Clerics, for example, issued rulings in support of the 2018 decision to lift the ban on women driving—though establishment clerics had, by large majorities, long supported the ban.

The grand mufti, 'Abd al-'Aziz bin Muhammad al-Shaykh, justified his own change in position on the driving ban by saying that it had never been classified as a sin under Islamic law for women to drive. According to the grand mufti, the point was more that the 'ulama had hitherto believed that permitting women behind the wheel would in turn lead to preventable moral and social indiscretions. Consequently, the Council of Senior 'Ulama, led by the grand mufti, ruled in favor of permitting women to drive. The Council's representative, Fahad al-Majid, observed that, contrary to common understanding, the Council had never published a ruling on the legality of women driving. He explained that the Council deferred to the country's rulers on matters such as this—noting, as had the grand mufti, that women driving was not actually a sin but could merely lead to other indiscretions. Consequently, the question of women driving was a political matter.¹⁴

Rulings also emerged to justify the growing music scene in Saudi Arabia, as the country has started to host concerts that attract local audiences. 'Ali Ibn Salih al-Marri, a member of the fatwa committee of the Eastern Province, asserted that the permissibility of listening to music is contested within the religious tradition; the 'ulama have disagreed on the matter. This is not untrue: There have been marginal voices within Saudi religious circles arguing that music and musical instruments are acceptable. Hatim al-'Awni and 'Adel al-Kalbani are among those scholars who have for some time been part of a movement to reform the Salafi tradition in this regard.¹⁵

Al-Marri went on to emphasize that the difference of opinion with regard to music should not be a cause of division among people and should not be used to slander those clerics who have argued for its permissibility. Such are the contortions to which the most conservative of the country's establishment clerics have been driven in order to keep pace with political change.

Another trend that has emerged is the empowerment of "radical loyalist" clerics, often members of the religious establishment, who go to exceptional lengths to proclaim admiration for Saudi rulers—extending to equating political leaders with historical figures such as the rightly guided caliphs (the first four rulers of the community of believers after the passing of the Prophet) and bestowing on them the title *amir al-mu'minin* (commander of the faithful).

This is contrary to the approach of conventionally loyalist 'ulama, who support and are loyal to the state but tend to contain their enthusiasm for the rulers.

"Radical loyalists"¹⁶ are often described as Madkhalis (followers of Sheikh Rabi' ibn Hadi al-Madkhali) or Jamiis (followers of Sheikh Muhammad Aman al-Jami)—two 'ulama who were critical of the 'ulama who opposed the ruling family during the first Gulf War and later attacked them forcefully.

The radical loyalists have their detractors, who note regretfully that they are at their most powerful under MBS's rule. The minister for Islamic affairs, Abdullatif Al Al-Sheikh, is one ultraloyalist: He endorses Mohammed bin Salman's moderate Islam, tweets regularly against perceived enemies of the state, demonizes the Muslim Brotherhood and other such groups, and praises MBS personally for his reform initiatives. It would be wrong to argue that Abdullatif departs from Saudi religious tradition in his radical loyalism: He quotes historical Salafi figures in his interviews, tweets, and lectures. He maintains the Salafi/Wahhabi outlook, albeit selectively. He has made no attempt to dismantle the existing religious tradition in Saudi Arabia or to adopt a different religious tradition.

Even though some of the social changes introduced by MBS are outside the traditional religious norms in Saudi Arabia, these radical loyalists support and advocate for those changes, denounce critics as enemies of the state, and act as personal advocates for the Crown Prince. They are also obvious beneficiaries of this new regime. Abdullatif was appointed to replace Salih bin Abdulaziz Al Al-Sheikh, whose removal was rumored to be a response to his perceived sympathy for the Sahwa movement and the Muslim Brotherhood. These rumors might have been started and then exaggerated to taint his reputation before he was eased out in favor of his successor.

But beyond benefiting from MBS's regime, there is an ideological basis for the support that the radical loyalist clerics give to the Crown Prince. The Madkhalis and Jamiis are absolute loyalists. As a matter of doctrine and not merely politics, these clerics consider that one must support the ruler even if he violates Sharia (the Islamic legal code). The Madkhalis thus consider support for the ruler to be a religious obligation. Their understanding of correct clerical-state relations is one in which the proper role of the clerics is to support every ruler's actions, no matter how transgressive. This interpretation—that a ruler, and only a ruler, makes decisions in the interest of the public, and so has the supreme and unimpeachable authority to act according to his own judgment—finds some justification within the Salafi tradition, even if only a minority of Salafis accept it.

Criticizing the ruler, it is believed, will only create hostility, instability, and dissension.

It is upon this doctrinal footing that clerics such as Abdullatif have no qualms regarding their unstinting support for MBS and whatever he does, while also maintaining their Salafi identity. Absolute loyalism is a transnational trend; many of its adherents are not even Saudi nationals. The Kuwaiti Salim al-Taweel and the Egyptian Said Raslan have both delivered lectures defending MBS from a Madkhali perspective.¹⁷

The Board of Senior Clerics has, on occasion, pushed back against the religious reforms advocated by the radical loyalists. In early 2023, Saleh al-Maghamsi called for a new jurisprudential school to be created to adapt to the changing circumstances in Muslim societies. Al-Maghamsi is known to be close to MBS and regularly appears on television programs. He argues that unlike the Quran itself, the teachings disseminated at existing jurisprudential schools can be reinterpreted.¹⁸ The Board dismissed al-Maghamsi's opinion, however.¹⁹

A third trend to have emerged among Saudi religious clerics has been the appearance of "repentant activist" Salafi preachers: mostly former Sahwa clerics who regularly commented on political issues and called for political change in the region. These clerics now only sing the praises of Mohammed bin Salman's version of "moderate Islam" and renounce their past activism. They include Muhammad al-Arifi and Aaidh al-Qarni, who appear regularly in photo opportunities and gatherings with the Crown Prince.²⁰ In 2019, al-Qarni appeared on a television program to show his support for MBS's call for moderate Islam. He even criticized his own past activism and association with the Sahwa movement and emphasized that the Sahwa restricted religious freedoms. Since then, al-Qarni regularly delivers lectures that focus on the subjects of piety, religious rituals, and respect for the ruling family.

Al-Arifi supported the Qatar boycotts initiated by Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE, and Egypt in June 2017, which was uncharacteristic of the popular cleric. There are reports that al-Arifi has disappeared from Saudi religious settings. There are also unverified rumors published by the prominent Saudi anonymous Twitter (now X) account *Al-Mujtahid* that al-Arifi's social media account is now controlled by Saudi intelligence authorities.²¹ Given al-Arifi's twenty-two million Twitter (now X) followers, it is not surprising that the state would have an interest in co-opting al-Arifi into its agenda in some way.

Finally, a fourth trend among Saudi religious clergy involves those who have been arrested by the state on various unverified charges, including well-known reformists such as Salman al-Awdah and Awad al-Qarni. These clerics

remain in prison, with supporters trying to draw attention to the human rights violations they have endured. Far from reactionary conservatives, these clerics are often known for their progressive views on issues including women's rights and the rights of minorities. It is their calls for political reform that have landed them in prison. Other imprisoned clerics are known for their conservatism and attempts to offer advice to MBS. They include Nasser Al-Omar and Safar al-Hawali.

Some clerics, for fear of the state, have left the country and are operating in obscurity in Turkey or the UK. In March 2023, for example, Emad al-Moubayed arrived in London after criticizing social liberalization in Saudi Arabia and urged MBS to "fear Allah."²² The cleric stated in a video²³ that he was compelled to find a safe locale after giving advice to King Salman (2015-present) and the Crown Prince that they did not want to hear. He drew attention to the fate of other clerics who had criticized the state.

CONCLUSION

Although social reforms and subjugation of the religious establishment were not uncommon in Saudi Arabia under previous Saudi rulers, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has forcefully challenged the position of the Salafi/Wahhabi tradition within the kingdom and rapidly executed his agenda in this regard. He has effectively subdued the religious establishment and reduced its capacity to challenge social reforms. In the past, religious circles, especially government-sanctioned clerics, were able to comment, exert pressure and lobby against social reforms, and even discreetly disagree with the ruler. This is no longer the case under MBS. Any hint of criticism is met with repression, and arrests have been the norm for clerics who challenge his popularity, have a history of political activism (even if they are socially progressive), or are critical of his social reform agenda from a traditionalist perspective. Alongside this agenda has been the reconstruction of a new Saudi nationalism that maintains the importance of the religious tradition but makes clear that the kingdom's identity is defined by more than just Islam.

Despite this, MBS has not made any attempt to dismantle the Salafi/Wahhabi religious establishment in Saudi Arabia or to replace the Salafi/Wahhabi religious tradition with an alternative school of thought. MBS also demonstrates respect for Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab and Ibn Baz, who founded and preserved Salafi/Wahhabi thought, respectively. His criticisms are directed towards the distortion of the tradition by so-called "extremists." Although operating in a much more constrained environment, Saudi Arabia's religious institutions remain intact. This includes the kingdom's highest institution, the Board of Senior Clerics.

What has significantly changed under MBS is the proliferation of liberalized spaces for others on a massive scale—artists, musicians, and ordinary citizens who are happy to embrace social reforms, albeit within a repressive political environment.

Sunni religious circles in the country have responded in various ways. The “radical loyalist” clerics—especially the Madkhali strain of hard-core loyalist clerics—justify MBS’s reform projects on religious grounds and support his “moderate Islam” project, thereby hoping to preserve as much as possible of the Salafi/Wahhabi religious tradition. They also denounce his detractors. Non-loyalists are either repentant of their past conservatism or political activism and have become loyalist, or else are in prison or operating in exile. Utmost loyalty must be displayed by clerics who would like to survive—or for some, thrive—under MBS.

ENDNOTES

1. [Frank Gardner, “London 2012 Olympics: Saudis Allow Women to Compete,” *BBC News*, June 24, 2012.](#)
2. Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993), 211.
3. [Martin Chulov, “I Will Return Saudi Arabia to Moderate Islam, Says Crown Prince,” *The Guardian*, October 24, 2017.](#)
4. Ibid.
5. *Al-Lajnah al-Da’imah lil-Buhuth al-‘Ilmiyya wal-Ifta’*, *Majmu’ Fatawa al-Lajnah al-Da’imah bi al-Su’udiyah* [The Permanent Committee for Scientific Research and Legal Opinions, Collection of Fatwas of the Permanent Committee of Saudi Arabia], vol. 2, compiled by Ahmad Ibn ‘Abd al-Razzaq (Riyadh: Dar al-Muayyad, 2000), (‘Aqidah), pp. 378–80.
6. [Madawi Al-Rasheed, “The New Populist Nationalism in Saudi Arabia: Imagined Utopia by Royal Decree,” LSE, May 5, 2020.](#) See also [Eman Alhusein, “Saudi First: How Hyper-nationalism Is Transforming Saudi Arabia,” ecf.eu, June 19, 2019,](#) and [Sultan Alamer, “The Saudi ‘Founding Day’ and the Death of Wahhabism,” Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, February 23, 2022.](#)
7. The twenty-four episodes of “Saudi Idol” can be accessed through Saudi MBC Broadcast.
8. [Jon Hoffman, “The Evolving Relationship between Religion and Politics in Saudi Arabia,” Arab Center Washington DC, April 20, 2022.](#)
9. See Raihan Ismail, “Reclaiming Saudi Salafism: The Saudi Religious Circles and the Threat of ISIS,” *Journal of Arabian Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2 (2019), pp. 164–81.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid. It must be noted that a small class of Salafi ‘ulama have offered a different perspective, and identify the foundational works of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab and his followers as problematic. This is beyond the scope of this Brief, but it does indicate that debate within the Salafi tradition remains vibrant.
12. “Muhammad Ibn Salman ‘an Muhammad Ibn ‘Abdel Wahhab [Mohammed bin Salman on Muhammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab],” *Al-‘Arabiyyah*, March 2022.
13. Note that trends within the Salafi tradition are fluid and should not be taken as set in stone. These trends are not new, but their power dynamics and place in Saudi society have been reconfigured under MBS.
14. [“Ta’liq Hay’at Kibar al-‘Ulama ‘ala Qarar Qiyadah al-Mar’ah fi al-Su’udiyah \[Board of Senior Clerics Comment on the Decision of Women Driving in Saudi Arabia\],” *Al-‘Arabiyyah*, September 27, 2017;](#) the clip is no longer available, however.

15. Reformist Salafis have for many years spoken in favor of granting women the right to drive. They have also argued that the niqab is not a religious obligation.
16. Roel Meijer, "Conclusion," in *Salafism after the Arab Awakening*, edited by Roel Meijer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 236.
17. Raihan Ismail, *Rethinking Salafism: The Transnational Networks of Salafi 'Ulama in Egypt, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 183–84.
18. "Salih al-Maghamsi [Saleh al-Maghamsi]," *Finjaan* (podcast).
19. "Salih al-Maghamsi: Kaifa raddat hay'at kibar al-'Ulama 'ala da'wah li'iqamah madhhab Islami jaded [Saleh al-Maghamsi: How did the Board of Senior Clerics respond to his call to establish a new Islamic school?]," *BBC News*, April 2023.
20. Ibid.
21. "Aina al-Da'iyah al-Su'udi Muhammad al-'Arifi? [Where is the Saudi preacher Muhammad al-Arifi?]" *Majallah Mim*, February 2023.
22. "Saudi Cleric Who Criticised Government Has 'Left the Country,'" *Middle East Eye*, March 6, 2023.
23. "Saudi Sheikh Flees to the UK after Advising MBS to 'Fear Allah,'" video.

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