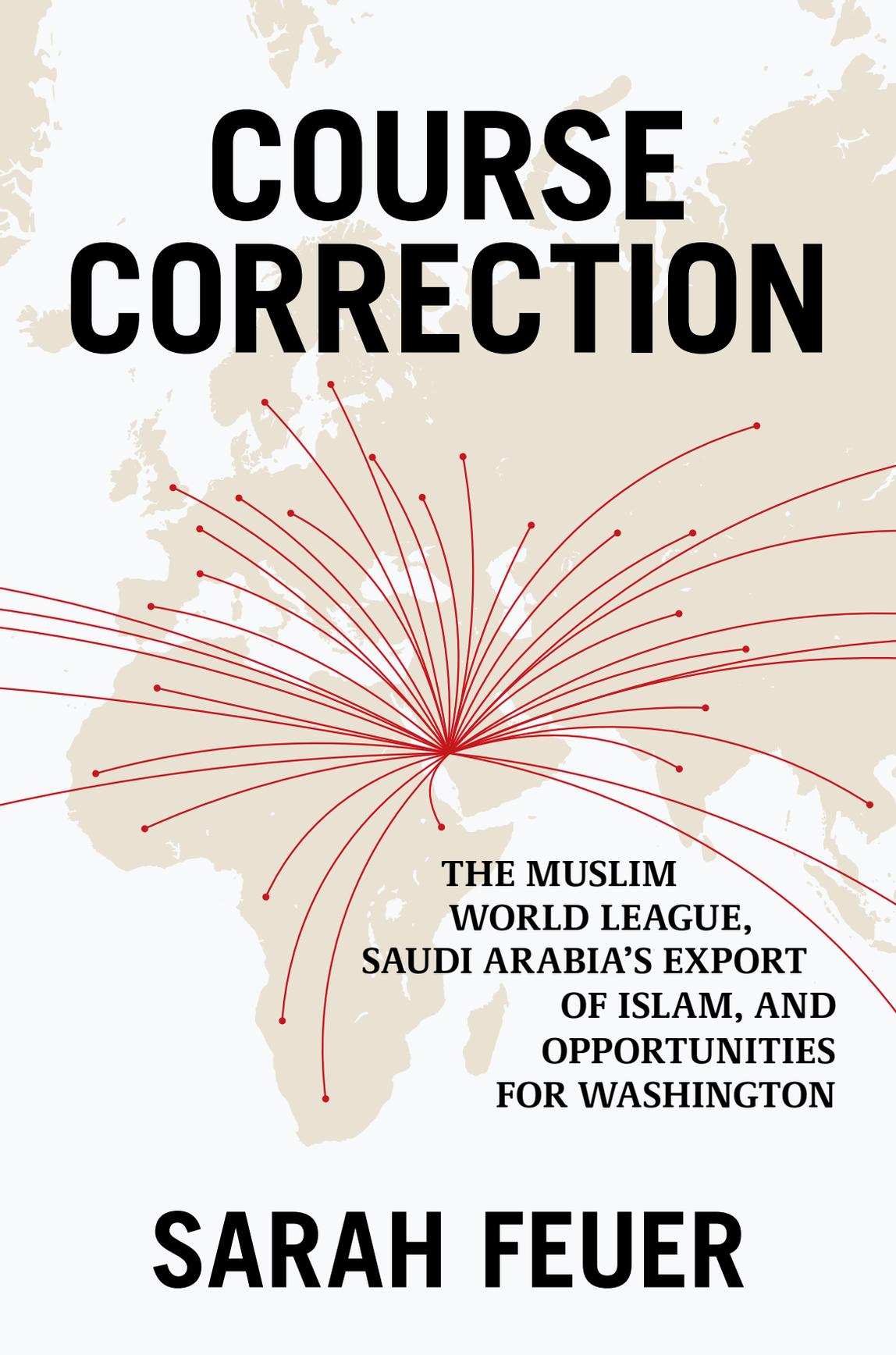


COURSE CORRECTION



**THE MUSLIM
WORLD LEAGUE,
SAUDI ARABIA'S EXPORT
OF ISLAM, AND
OPPORTUNITIES
FOR WASHINGTON**

SARAH FEUER

COURSE CORRECTION

**The Muslim World League,
Saudi Arabia's Export of Islam, and
Opportunities for Washington**

SARAH FEUER

Policy Focus 161

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This monograph is dedicated to the memory of Gina Vailes and Mary Kalbach Horan, two pillars of The Washington Institute whom we lost this year.

Executive Summary

THROUGHOUT 2016 AND 2017, A SERIES OF STATEMENTS EMANATING FROM Riyadh suggested Saudi Arabia might be on the verge of fundamentally reorienting and even scaling back its decades-long promotion of Salafism around the world. The practice is often blamed for spreading Islamic extremism and for nurturing terrorist organizations. Given the sheer scale of the kingdom's support for Islamic institutions and Muslim communities over the years, the implications of a shift in its associated policies would be profound. This Policy Focus assesses recent developments in Saudi Arabia's export of Islam through an examination of the Muslim World League, an organization that for more than half a century has been at the heart of Riyadh's endeavor to promote its particular brand of Salafism worldwide.

Drawing on a close study of league publications dating back to its establishment in 1962; on a review of secondary literature about the history of the league; and on interviews with the current leadership, branch staff persons, and European officials with close knowledge of the league's activities on the continent, this paper argues that the league's rhetoric has undergone a significant shift since the arrival of Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman in 2016. The shift is reflected in:

- a prioritization of Muslims' national identities and adherence to state laws over their transnational (Muslim) identity and fealty to religious law
- a more forceful condemnation of Islamist ideologies fueling terrorism
- an expansion in the league's interfaith work to include an openness to Christian worship within the kingdom
- a series of condemnations of the Holocaust

At the same time, the degree to which such promising policy shifts translate into tangible changes on the ground has been – and may continue to be – limited by the nature of ties between the organization's headquarters in Mecca and beneficiaries around the world, the institution's relationship

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with other Saudi government bodies, and the relative dearth of theological output from the league.

From a policy standpoint, then, U.S. officials should welcome the changing substance of the league's international messaging and initiatives, while constructively engaging Saudi Arabia to encourage and advance its commitment to pro-moderation/anti-extremism reform. The latter will not be easy, given the deep strains currently characterizing the bilateral relationship. Still, engaging the Saudi leadership more energetically on the matter of its religious export offers the best chance of steering Riyadh in a positive direction and of ensuring a long-term commitment by the Saudi government to its reform program.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

SINCE THE ASCENSION TO THE THRONE OF SAUDI ARABIA'S KING SALMAN IN 2015 – and more precisely the emergence of his son, Muhammad bin Salman (MbS), as a key figure in the kingdom's political landscape – Saudi watchers have sought to make sense of the policy decisions and proclamations in Riyadh suggesting the traditionally conservative and cautious country was entering a period of significant change.¹ MbS's statements, particularly throughout 2016 and 2017, outlined a reform agenda covering the kingdom's economic and social – but also, significantly, its religious – realms.

On the economic front, in April 2016 then deputy crown prince Muhammad unveiled an ambitious set of initiatives collectively named Vision 2030, which sought to wean the kingdom from its reliance on oil rents, establish Saudi Arabia as a hub of foreign investment, contract the public sector and domestic budgets, and thereby spur employment among the kingdom's youth.² In the social domain, headline-grabbing moves loosened restrictions on the mixing of genders in public spaces, which laid the groundwork for opening movie theaters and hosting concerts (and professional wrestling matches!) across the kingdom.

And in the religious sector, a new law curtailed the authority of a body attached to the cabinet known as the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (the so-called religious police), which for decades had been tasked with enforcing public adherence to strict interpretations of religious law.³ MbS publicly proclaimed his intention to “return” Saudi Arabia to a “moderate” Islam;⁴ and a series of steps hinted at a move away from the kingdom's historic export of Saudi Salafism, which was long blamed by outsiders for spreading Islamic extremism and providing the ideological underpinnings for terrorist groups around the world.

The unveiling of such potentially sweeping reforms was a welcome development in most Western capitals. On his May 2017 visit to Riyadh, U.S. president Donald Trump captured what was by then a widespread, if cautious, optimism when he praised King Salman for “investing in the future of this part of the world” and noted that “Saudi Arabia's [Vision 2030] is an important and encouraging statement of tolerance, respect, empowering women, and economic development.”⁵ But events

beginning around fall 2018 have tempered much of the initial enthusiasm. Even before the October 2018 killing of dissident Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi by agents of the Saudi royal court close to MbS, skepticism about Saudi Arabia's reform trajectory was mounting in light of delayed projects and crackdowns on grassroots activism.

Implementation of Vision 2030 has led to remarkable cultural reforms and some improvements in public-sector efficiency, but much of the foreign investment on which the Vision relied has not been forthcoming, and the Vision's plan for economic diversification within the kingdom has largely stalled.⁶ The king recently abolished parts of the longstanding male guardianship system, and earlier this year he granted women the right to drive, but some of the women activists who advocated for both reforms have been arrested and reportedly tortured. And notwithstanding unprecedented public discussions about the role of Islam in the Saudi public sphere, tangible and longer-lasting changes in Islam's form and tenor throughout the kingdom (e.g., reformed school textbooks) have remained elusive.⁷

Still, for all the dashed expectations regarding MbS's reform agenda, one of its elements remains largely unexamined: the endeavor to reshape and, in some instances, pare back Saudi Arabia's support for Muslim institutions and communities around the world. Does the recent political shift in Riyadh signal impending change in the Saudi export of Islamic ideology? If such a shift were to materialize, the repercussions would be profound. Since the early 1960s, exporting an ultraconservative variant of Islam has been a central foreign policy of the kingdom. That policy was designed to counteract competing secular nationalist ideologies in the region, to bolster the government's legitimacy in the region and at home, and to extend the kingdom's global influence. At times, this policy aligned with, or at least did little to obstruct, U.S. interests. Throughout much of the Cold War, for example, the Saudis' promotion of Islam was viewed as an important asset in the effort to contain Soviet Communist ideology and influence in the Middle East. Since the 1990s, however, Saudi support for Islamic streams outside the kingdom – sometimes in ways that benefited the agenda of terrorist organizations and of organizations with demonstrated ties to terrorist groups – has been decidedly inimical to U.S. interests. Perhaps the most recent and glaring example was the so-called Islamic State's use of Saudi textbooks in its schools throughout 2015.⁸

Saudi Arabia has never been alone in the endeavor to sponsor and project Islamic doctrine beyond its borders. In the Arab world, Egypt has for decades sought to extend its influence through state sponsorship of Al-Azhar, one of the world's oldest and most venerated Islamic seminaries.⁹ In the early 2000s, Morocco launched a comprehensive set of religious reforms, including efforts to train religious functionaries from neighboring West and North African states and from Europe.¹⁰ In the non-Arab parts

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of the Muslim world since 1979, Iran has invested substantial resources in exporting “revolutionary” Shiism not only across the Middle East, but throughout Africa and South America as well.¹¹

The focus on Saudi Arabia in this study should not distract readers from the importance of other predominantly Muslim countries’ efforts to stake out their corners of the religious market. At the same time, the sheer scale of the Saudis’ support for Islamic institutions around the world is estimated by some U.S. intelligence officials to have reached \$90 billion by the early 2000s. For the Saudi leadership, that support is coupled with being the “custodian of Islam’s two holy sites,” the cities of Mecca and Medina, a status that renders the Saudi enterprise unique among its competitors, thus making the possibility of a shift in that enterprise all the more significant.¹²

This Policy Focus examines recent developments in Saudi Arabia’s export of Islam and assesses implications for U.S. policy. President Trump’s 2017 speech in Riyadh and the administration’s National Security Strategy released later that year noted the importance of cooperation with allies such as Saudi Arabia in countering extremist Islamic ideology as part of a broader global effort to combat terrorism. From a U.S. policy standpoint, decisionmakers in Washington have a clear interest in understanding recent developments that pertain to the Saudi export of Islam, in assessing current and prospective shifts therein, and in evaluating the implications and potential limitations of pledges emanating from Riyadh.

This study offers a starting point in that endeavor through an examination of the Muslim World League (MWL), an organization that has been at the heart of Saudi efforts to propagate its particular brand of Salafism for more than half a century. Leadership changes and high-profile initiatives of the league since MbS’s arrival on the scene suggest the Saudi government has assigned a central role to the MWL in its broader religious reform agenda, at least insofar as this agenda extends to Saudi Arabia’s export of religious doctrine beyond its borders. The MWL is not the only vehicle of Saudi religious export; other institutions, such as the Islamic University of Medina, have likewise played key roles therein.¹³ Still, any discussion of the Saudi endeavor to spread Salafism around the world calls for concentrated attention to the league, and evaluating the league today offers a lens through which to assess the prospects of Saudi-led religious reform more generally.

From this evaluation, four conclusions emerge. First, although the league has been engaged in a mix of religious, diplomatic, and advocacy functions, it has first and foremost served a political purpose insofar as the organization’s orientation and sponsored activities have consistently sought to advance the Saudi leadership’s interests and to protect it against perceived threats to its survival. If the historical record is any guide, the future trajectory of the league’s endeavors – including those bearing on religious reform – will necessarily reflect the monarchy’s

broader strategy of self-legitimization and its evolving perceptions of threats lined up against it.

Second, the league's policies – as reflected principally in official statements and publications disseminated in print and online – have undergone a significant shift since MbS's arrival and the subsequent appointment of a new secretary-general for the league: His Excellency Mohammad bin Abdul Karim Al-Issa. The elements of this shift have included the following: a prioritization of Muslims' national identities and an adherence to state laws over their transnational (Muslim) identity and fealty to religious law; a more forceful condemnation of radical Islamist ideas and ideologies fueling terrorism, along with a concomitant elimination of exceptions to justifications for terrorist acts; and an expansion in the league's interfaith work to include an openness to Christian worship within the kingdom, as well as condemnations of the Holocaust.

Third, despite such promising discursive shifts, the organizational particularities of the league – including the nature of ties between the organization's headquarters in Mecca and beneficiaries around the world, the institution's relationship with competing Saudi government bodies, and the relative dearth of theological output from the league – may ultimately limit the extent to which those shifts permeate institutions and communities around the world that benefit from the league's patronage.

Fourth, the potential for and the inherent limitations on religious reforms advanced by the league suggest U.S. officials should welcome the changing substance of the league's international messaging and initiatives, while constructively engaging Saudi Arabia in its pursuit of reforms. Notwithstanding the league's insistence that it remains independent of the Saudi state, the United States will need to establish a more robust partnership with Riyadh – at least on the specific matters of religious export and countering extremism – in order to take advantage of the countries' shared interests in containing this extremism. Doing so will not be easy, given the deep strains currently characterizing the bilateral relationship. Still, engaging the Saudi leadership more forcefully on the matter of its religious export offers the best chance of steering Riyadh in a constructive direction.

The ensuing pages will develop these points through a brief historical account of the league, a discussion of the organization's present-day structures and activities, and an analysis of rhetorical and tangible changes implemented by the league since 2016. Along the way, the paper also addresses the matter of the league's financing and its problematic historical ties to terrorism. A concluding section reviews the implications of the paper's main findings for U.S. policy. Research for the study entailed an examination of the league's flagship publications dating back to the 1960s (in Arabic and English); a review of secondary literature about the organization; and interviews with the current secretary-general, with the interim

director of the league's center in Brussels, and with Belgian government and intelligence officials involved in the league's operations there. All translations are the author's, unless otherwise stated.

Notes

1. Muhammad bin Salman, or Mbs, as he is known, was named defense minister and deputy crown prince in 2015, and two years later his father appointed him crown prince.
2. The Vision 2030 Plan is available online at <https://vision2030.gov.sa/en>.
3. Nathan J. Brown, "Saudi Arabia Is Moving to Rein in Its Religious Police. Sort Of," *Washington Post*, August 16, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/08/16/saudi-arabia-is-moving-to-rein-in-its-religious-police-sort-of/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.7e70b78e612a.
4. Martin Chulov, "I Will Return Saudi Arabia to Moderate Islam,' Says Crown Prince," *Guardian*, October 24, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/24/i-will-return-saudi-arabia-moderate-islam-crown-prince>.
5. White House, "President Trump's Speech to the Arab Islamic American Summit," May 21, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-trumps-speech-arab-islamic-american-summit/>.
6. For assessments of Vision 2030's implementation, see Simon Henderson, "Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, One Year On," PolicyWatch 2790, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 27, 2017, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/saudi-arabias-vision-2030-one-year-on>; and Nader Habibi, *Implementing Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030: An Interim Balance Sheet*, Middle East Brief no. 127 (Waltham, MA: Crown Center, 2019), available at <https://www.scribd.com/fullscreen/407307105>.
7. David Andrew Weinberg, "Saudi Arabia's Troubling Educational Curriculum," testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, July 19, 2017, <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA18/20170719/106289/HHRG-115-FA18-Wstate-WeinbergD-20170719.pdf>. In early 2018, it was reported that an initiative launched within the Saudi Education Ministry a year earlier to remove extremist content from school textbooks had been suspended because its director was accused of sympathizing with the Muslim Brotherhood, a movement Saudi Arabia had recently designated as a terrorist organization. See Ahmed al-Omran, "Saudis Struggle to Check Extremism in Schools," *Financial Times*, January 16, 2018. However, signs of another potentially significant change in the educational sphere came on December 29, 2018, when a spokesperson for the Saudi Ministry of Education announced that veils would henceforth be optional for girls attending school. See <https://twitter.com/hayaalawad/status/1079070108952219651>.
8. Jacob Olidort, *Inside the Caliphate's Classroom: Textbooks, Guidance Literature, and Indoctrination Methods of the Islamic State*, Policy Focus 147 (Washington DC: Washington Institute, 2016), 9, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/inside-the-caliphates-classroom>.
9. For historical examples of Egypt's efforts to project its influence through Al-Azhar, see Martin Kramer: "The Divided House of Islam," in *Middle East Contemporary Survey*, vol. 7, ed. Colin Legum (Tel Aviv: Shiloh Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, 1982–83), 248, and "The Routine of Muslim Solidarity," in *Middle East*

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- Contemporary Survey*, vol. 9, eds. Itamar Rabinovitch and Haim Shaked (Tel Aviv: Shiloh Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, 1984–85), 151.
10. For more on Morocco's reform program, see Sarah Feuer, *State Islam in the Battle Against Extremism: Emerging Trends in Morocco and Tunisia*, Policy Focus 145 (Washington DC: Washington Institute, 2016), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/state-islam-in-the-battle-against-extremism>.
 11. To cite one example of Iran's investment in the export of Shiism and Khomeinist ideology, in 2016 the annual budget allocated to al-Mustafa International University, one of the country's leading institutions engaged in disseminating Shia doctrine abroad, was \$74 million. Currently, 40,000 foreign students are enrolled in the university. See Jordan Steckler, "Iran's Ideological Expansion," United Against Nuclear Iran, June 2018, <https://www.unitedagainstnucleariran.com/ideological-expansion>.
 12. In 2005, James Woolsey, who had directed the Central Intelligence Agency from 1993 to 1995, cited this figure in public remarks delivered at the American Enterprise Institute. See Evgenii Novikov, "The Muslim World League: Agent of Wahhabi Propagation in Europe," *Terrorism Monitor* 3, no. 9 (May 6, 2005). The British government in 2015 came to a similar conclusion; it estimated that Saudi Arabia had spent at least 67 billion pounds (roughly \$85 billion) in the previous three decades "promoting the kingdom's hardline interpretation of Wahhabi Islam globally." See Tom Wilson, *Foreign Funded Islamist Extremism in the United Kingdom*, Centre for the Response to Radicalisation and Terrorism, Research Paper no. 9 (July 2017), 2. A substantially larger estimate has come from Pierre Conesa, the French writer and former Defense Ministry official. He surmised in 2016 that the Saudis had in the preceding decades spent \$6 billion to \$7 billion annually on "religious diplomacy," roughly the same amount the kingdom had devoted to foreign weapons purchases. See Pierre Conesa, "Un demi-siècle de diplomatie wahhabite," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, June–July 2016.
 13. The Islamic University of Medina (treated "Madinah" on the university's website, <https://enweb.iu.edu.sa/>) was established in 1961 with the aim of educating non-Saudi men who would then return to their home countries and "offer guidance to Muslim communities seen as having deviated from orthodox belief and practice." By 2011, the institution had granted degrees to more than 30,000 non-Saudi students hailing from nearly every country in the world. See Michael Farquhar, *Circuits of Faith: Migration, Education, and the Wahhabi Mission* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017), 3.

CHAPTER 2

Islam, Ideology, and Interests: The League in Historical Perspective

IN MAY 1962, SAUDI ARABIA'S THEN CROWN PRINCE, FAISAL, THE SON OF THE late King Abdulaziz al-Saud (aka Ibn Saud, who founded the modern kingdom in 1932), convened a meeting of twenty-two religious scholars in Mecca. The communiqué issued after the meeting adjourned indicated that attendees had discussed a range of topics. Among them were the importance of promoting and protecting Islam in the face of competing primordial identities (*asabiyya*), cooperation between Muslim communities, Palestine, and the status of Muslim minorities around the world. Buried in the communiqué's thirteenth of fourteen items was reference to the establishment of a Muslim World League, which is charged with

performing God's duty in spreading Islam (*dawat al-Islam*), explaining its principles and teachings, refuting interpretations which disfigure it, fighting conspiracies that seek to sow sedition among Muslims and undermine their unity and brotherhood, and taking into consideration Islamic issues so that the interests and hopes of Muslims may be achieved and their problems resolved. [*For the full text of the Muslim World League's founding declaration, see the appendix.*]

Thus was born the organization that went on to constitute a primary vehicle of Saudi religious outreach and influence around the world for more than half a century.

The main impetus for the league's creation was a desire on the part of the Saudi leadership to check the ambitions of Egyptian president Gamal Abdul Nasser and to stem the widening appeal of Nasser's brand of Arab nationalism. Prince Faisal was a key figure in this regard. In 1956, while still crown prince, he publicly declared that "Islam must be at the center of the kingdom's foreign policy."¹ In 1968, four years after ascending the throne, he delivered a speech in Mecca during the pilgrimage season (Hajj), asserting: "We want an Islamic rebirth without nationalism, ethnic groups, and political parties, but with the call of Islam and the call of jihad to

defend our religion.”² In practice, Prince Faisal’s prescription translated into a form of Saudi religious export and diplomacy aimed at shoring up the monarchy’s international legitimacy against ideological competitors and threats. In the ensuing years, the content of that diplomacy shifted, depending on the nature of the perceived threats.³

At the time of the league’s founding, Riyadh assessed that Nasser’s secular Arab nationalism constituted the leading threat. (A secondary threat was perceived in movements espousing communism, particularly after they cropped up in neighboring South Yemen.⁴) It is difficult to overstate the importance of Saudi Arabia’s geopolitical rivalry with Egypt in the creation and early evolution of the league. In its efforts to undermine Egypt’s political and cultural dominance in the region, Saudi Arabia, through organizations such as the league, began exporting its own variant of ultraconservative Islam. That variant is often described by its followers as Salafism and by its detractors as Wahhabism, after Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab, the eighteenth-century theologian who had formed an alliance with the al-Saud dynasty in its bid for political hegemony across the Arabian Peninsula.⁵ In keeping with its desire to chip away at Egypt’s clout, a year before the league’s founding, Saudi Arabia established the Islamic University of Medina as its own counterweight to Egypt’s Al-Azhar, which was long considered the world’s leading Sunni theological seminary.

The House of Saud’s preoccupation with undercutting Nasser’s Egypt was also reflected in the league’s early ties to the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). In 1966, when the Nasser regime executed Sayyid Qutb, a leading MB ideologue, many members of the Islamist movement fled Egypt and settled in Saudi Arabia, where they took up posts in universities, public administration, and ultimately international organizations such as the league.

Several secondary sources on the MWL have reported that Said Ramadan, a grandson of MB founder Hassan al-Banna, was instrumental in founding the league, a claim the MWL website strenuously denies.⁶ Whether or not Ramadan was present at the outset, senior Brotherhood figures later occupied top positions in the league’s offices across Europe and in Pakistan. The league regularly hosted conferences offering a platform to prominent Brotherhood figures such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi. More generally, the Brotherhood imprint was apparent in the league’s work insofar as mosques funded and managed by the league tended to contain not only prayer spaces but also libraries and classrooms. The mosques reflected the Brotherhood’s efforts to blend religious practice with social and educational activities that are collectively aimed at instilling Islam as an all-encompassing framework structuring the social and political lives of Muslims, including those living in non-Muslim-majority countries.⁷

Pascal Menoret, an ethnographer and historian of Saudi Arabia, has argued that until 1979 the Saudi leadership pursued two distinct strategies

of self-legitimization: one aimed at its domestic audience and one targeting the world stage. Whereas it built its domestic legitimacy largely on claims to be a modernizing force, Riyadh found it advantageous to construct its international legitimacy on religious grounds, touting the kingdom's role as a defender of Islam and later the custodianship of Islam's two holiest sites. Following Iran's 1979 revolution and the ensuing economic crisis brought on by the drop in oil prices, religion took on an increasingly central role in the Saudis' domestic legitimization strategy as well.⁸

The league's alliance with the MB paralleled this broader pattern of government legitimization. That alliance long outlasted its initial purpose of undermining Nasser's pan-Arabism, which in any event was discredited following the Arab defeat in the 1967 war against Israel. Thereafter, Brotherhood ideology proved useful to the Saudi leadership in pushing back against new threats that emerged from the 1979 revolution in Iran.

To that end, the league began funding Brotherhood and derivative Islamist movements abroad that were seen as balancing against Iran's revolutionary Shiism and bolstering Saudi Arabia's speakership of "authentic" Islam.⁹ Meanwhile, back at home, the 1979 siege on the Grand Mosque in Mecca by armed extremists – the leader of whom had graduated from the Islamic University of Medina – was interpreted by the kingdom's leaders as a threat to their domestic legitimacy. The siege spurred Riyadh to begin Islamizing the public sphere in a process that would culminate in the relevant regulations of the 1992 Basic Law of Governance.¹⁰

The government's two-pronged approach of promoting anti-Shia Islamist strains abroad while enhancing its religious bona fides at home continued until Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, when the Saudi Grand Mufti, Abdul Aziz ibn Baz, issued a fatwa sanctioning the presence of U.S. troops on Saudi soil. The ensuing backlash by Sunni jihadist movements such as Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda prompted the MWL to once again shift its orientation toward more narrowly supporting Saudi-friendly Islamist strains abroad and, especially in Europe, assuming the role of interlocutor between the continent's Muslim communities and state authorities.¹¹

Throughout this period, the league's relationship with the Brotherhood remained largely harmonious, and the organizations' interests and personnel continued to overlap. Consider, for example, the figure of Kemal Helbawy, an Egypt-born, London-based activist who served in MWL leadership positions while occupying top roles in the MB.¹² Or consider Qaradawi, who was reportedly close to Abdullah al-Turki, the MWL's secretary-general between 2000 and 2016. Qaradawi frequented the Islamic Center of Kensington, a mosque that the league had opened in London in 2004. As a member of roughly fifteen sharia compliance boards of Islamic banks in Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Pakistan, and Switzerland, he oversaw a process whereby mosques and Islamic cultural associations in Europe applied for funding from Gulf patrons, including

the MWL.¹³ In a similar vein, Abdullah Basfar led the league's commission on Quranic memorization and regularly attended the annual meeting of the Union of French Islamic Organizations, an outlet widely seen as affiliated with the Brotherhood.¹⁴

Still, in some instances, figures within the league hewed more closely to the traditionally quietist Saudi religious establishment and remained critical of the Brotherhood's political aims, expressing concern over the close ties between Brotherhood figures and local MWL representatives. In the late 1990s, the league's secretary-general, Abdullah bin Saleh al-Obeid, issued a fatwa discouraging Belgian Muslims from following the teachings of one Mustafa Kastit, a Moroccan-born cleric who had studied in Saudi Arabia with Salafists known to sympathize with the Brotherhood. Kastit had returned in the early 1990s to Belgium, where he was widely believed to be promoting a variant of political Salafism. In 1998, the local office of the league had engaged his services, thus prompting the secretary-general's fatwa.¹⁵

Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the MWL took up the cause of combating Islamophobia and countering incitement against Muslims. Such was the premise of the league's decision to join with the Union of French Islamic Organizations and the Paris Grand Mosque in suing the editors of the French satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo* for publishing caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad in 2006. A French lower court ruled in *Charlie Hebdo's* favor, and in 2008 an appeals court reaffirmed the acquittal. In 2015, after a terrorist killed twelve *Charlie Hebdo* staffers and seriously wounded seven others, Saudi Arabia issued a statement condemning the attack as a "cowardly terrorist attack that was rejected by the true Islamic religion."¹⁶

A year after the *Charlie Hebdo* attack, against the backdrop of the Saudi crown's announced reforms aimed at diversifying the kingdom's economy and partially liberalizing its social and religious spheres, the league once again sought to redefine itself as the world's leading representative of Muslims. This time, the league presented itself as working to combat extremism and to "clarify the true message of Islam."¹⁷ The latest reorientation has entailed a significant deterioration in the league's relationship with the MB. That deterioration followed Riyadh's designation of the group as a terrorist organization in 2014 and evidently reflected the monarchy's broader calculation that since the Arab Spring, the flagship transnational Islamist movement has come to pose a threat to like-minded (i.e., Islamically oriented but non-MB) governments and to regional stability more generally. As in the past, the league's recent shift reflects a concern to preserve the interests of the Saudi leadership.

Structures and Activities

The league has advanced those interests by operating a headquarters in Mecca, an additional office in Riyadh, and branches located in approximately 120 countries around the world. The branches take two forms: “external offices” and “external centers.” The former denotes MWL administrative offices that are intended to serve as the main link between the General Secretariat in Mecca (and its affiliate in Riyadh) and Muslims in the given country. The latter refers to mosques and Islamic cultural centers receiving direct assistance from the league and in some cases displaying the league’s logo on their mastheads. For example, Belgium’s Centre Islamique et Culturel de Belgique (CICB) was the first of its kind to be established in Europe and until recently was a flagship MWL external center. (The CICB is discussed in greater detail later.)

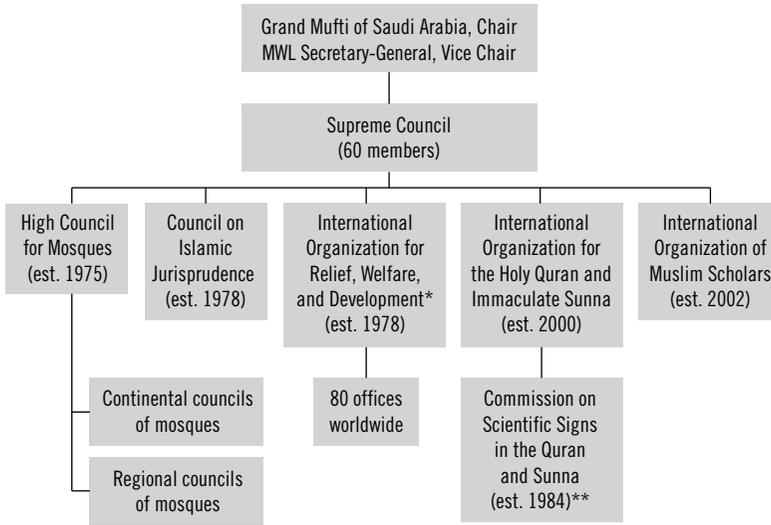
Since the league’s founding, a Supreme Council of up to sixty religious scholars has served as the main decisionmaking body.¹⁸ The scholars review and sanction the organization’s general orientation as outlined by the secretary-general, who has always been a Saudi national appointed by the Supreme Council but presumably approved, if not selected outright, by the king. While the league’s secretary-general serves as the vice chair of its Supreme Council, the chairman of the league’s executive body is the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, who has always been a descendent of ibn Abdul Wahhab and also presides over the kingdom’s highest government religious body, the Council of Senior Scholars.

Though the scholars on the league’s Supreme Council hail from different countries, they do not represent those countries on the council. Unlike bodies such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), which comprises member states, the league has been keen to remain an organization representing Muslim communities. That fact has probably immunized the league from the kind of geopolitical gridlock afflicting organizations such as the OIC.

In 1975, the league established a High Council for Mosques, which was charged with building and revitalizing mosques around the world. Three years later, a Council of Islamic Jurisprudence (*fiqh*) was created to periodically weigh in on legal matters arising in Muslim communities. The body, however, does not seem to have convened regularly or produced a corpus of work – a fact that has more recently carried implications for the organization’s efforts to push back against extremist interpretations of Islamic doctrine. (The paper discusses such efforts later in more detail.)

In 1978, the league also established an International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO) to serve as its humanitarian arm. IIRO was tasked with running orphanages, building mosques, and operating Islamic schools around the world. The organization would ultimately be implicated in terrorism including the 9/11 attack, and it has been renamed the International

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*Originally established as the International Islamic Relief Organization
 **No longer officially listed as an MWL-affiliated organization

FIGURE 1. STRUCTURES OF THE MUSLIM WORLD LEAGUE, 2019

Organization for Relief, Welfare, and Development. It currently boasts more than eighty offices worldwide.

Since the year 2000, the league has overseen an International Organization for the Holy Quran and Immaculate Sunnah, which is principally involved in promoting Quranic study and memorization around the world. (An earlier affiliated organization, the Commission on Scientific Signs in the Immaculate Quran and Sunnah, was founded in 1984 but is no longer listed as part of the MWL.) Finally, in 2002, the league created an International Organization for Muslim Scholars,¹⁹ with the aim of convening Muslim intellectuals and theologians to issue opinions about a variety of questions confronting Muslim communities around the world.

These structures have facilitated four principal types of activities over the years:

FUNDING, CONSTRUCTION, AND MANAGEMENT OF MOSQUES, ISLAMIC SCHOOLS AND SEMINARIES, ORPHANAGES, AND LOCAL MUSLIM ORGANIZATIONS

The bulk of the league’s work has reflected the leading item in the organization’s founding mission statement, namely to spread Islam. It has done so by financing mosque construction, distributing Qurans and associated literature, managing religious schools and orphanages, and subsidizing local Islamic associations. In its early years, the league prioritized *dawa* in

countries throughout Africa and Southeast Asia, most often through the work of “Continental Councils of Mosques” that, in turn, coordinated the activities of regional councils created to build places of worship.²⁰

In the early 1980s, the league opened its first European branches in Brussels and Geneva, reportedly chosen for their importance as the sites of international multilateral organizations. The Brussels location served as the hub for a Continental Council of European Mosques and Centers, with the goal of bringing all European mosques receiving Saudi support under the umbrella of the league’s High Council of Mosques (founded five years prior).

Across the continent, mosques built and subsidized by the MWL have most often been managed by Saudis serving in the local embassies as attachés of the Islamic Affairs Ministry.²¹ In North America, the league has worked alongside organizations such as the World Association of Muslim Youth, and it has subsidized the Muslim Students’ Associations of Canada and the United States.²²

PUBLICATIONS

In 1962, the league began publishing a monthly journal, *Majallat Rabitat al-Alam al-Islami* (Journal of the Muslim World League), and three years later an English equivalent appeared. Both remain in circulation today. Those publications have typically contained mixes of religious commentary (e.g., brief exegeses of Quranic passages), editorials on contemporary issues affecting Muslim communities around the world, and articles highlighting the league’s activities in featured countries. The league has also published an Arabic weekly in Mecca, *Akhbar al-Alam al-Islami* (News of the Muslim World), and a weightier Arabic monthly, *Dawat al-Haqq* (The Call for Righteousness). Both feature essays by outside contributors who address a blend of theological questions and political matters such as the status of Muslims in Europe.

CONFERENCES IN MECCA AND INTERNATIONALLY

Since its inception, the league has hosted an annual gathering of Muslim religious scholars in Mecca on the eve of the pilgrimage season. Over the years, the organization has also sponsored international conventions addressing matters of ostensible relevance to Muslim communities around the world, and it has convened symposia in response to political and diplomatic developments.

To cite a few examples, in September 1990, the league held an international conference in Mecca, after which the attendees issued a statement that Saudi Arabia’s hosting of foreign forces on its soil “was necessitated by legitimate need, and that Islamic law allows such a measure as long as it falls within the confines defined by the law.”²³ In 2008, the league began sponsoring interfaith dialogues, including the participation of Jewish religious leaders.²⁴ And in December 2018, the league sponsored

an international “Islamic Unity Conference” in Mecca for 1,300 Muslim scholars and clergy members to discuss matters related to discord and sectarianism in Muslim communities around the world. (Some of those are discussed later in more detail.)

DIPLOMATIC ENGAGEMENT

The league enjoys observer status at the United Nations and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and it is a member of UNESCO and UNICEF. Over the years, it has issued statements and engaged in activities normally considered the purview of a foreign ministry. At times, it has provided the Saudi ruling class with an unofficial means of conveying diplomatic positions. One such instance occurred in 1979 when the Palestine Liberation Organization requested that a Saudi-hosted conference of endowments ministers from various Muslim countries formally denounce Egyptian president Anwar Sadat’s negotiations with Israel. The hosts declined the request out of concern it would be viewed as constituting an official Saudi position, but they cited a statement to the same effect issued by the league’s High Council of Mosques several days prior.²⁵

Other examples of the league’s quasi-diplomatic activities have included the following: denouncing the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, asking France to grant independence to Djibouti in the early 1980s, condemning the ethnic cleansing of Bosnian Muslims at the hands of Serbs in the former Yugoslavia, sponsoring reconciliation efforts between Chechen rebels and the Russian government, and opening an office in Beijing two years before bilateral ties between Saudi Arabia and China were formally established.²⁶

When the first Gulf War broke out in late 1990, MWL offices across Europe were engaged in promoting the Saudi position that Saddam Hussein had to be pushed back and punished for having invaded Kuwait.²⁷ And in 2011, the league’s secretary-general denounced Iranian interference in Kuwait and Bahrain and accused Tehran of “planting espionage networks... to arouse division and sectarian sedition.”²⁸

FUNDING

Estimates of the league’s budget have varied widely over the years. Moreover, the figures cited in secondary accounts are often incomplete or inconsistent, and they do not distinguish between the league and subsidiary organizations such as the IIRO. The author’s request for budgetary information from the league went unanswered, but some accounts suggest MbS has reduced the funding allotted to organizations responsible for exporting religion.²⁹

In general, funding for the league’s activities has come from Saudi government support, from contributions from communities represented on the league’s Supreme Council, and, since the end of the first Gulf War, from private donations. Regarding the latter, one scholar found that beginning

in the early 1990s, the MWL sought to diversify its funding by appealing for private donations from wealthy Saudi individuals, a source that had eluded the organization up to that point. This effort coincided with an attempt to control the distribution of MWL funds in a more targeted fashion so as to ensure that “funds would go to charitable causes that had been proven loyal, and not to the war chests of unapproved political movements.”³⁰ Still, it remains unclear to what extent the effort to amass private funding has expanded the MWL’s resource base. Given the limited amount of credible data or documentation, the piecemeal figures cited next should be taken with caution.³¹

Concerning the total amount spent on league activities, the following estimates are suggestive:

- In 1983, the league’s High Council of Mosques’ annual budget was reportedly 25 million Saudi riyals (\$7 million at the time).³²
- In 1991, the league reportedly approved a budget of 38 million SR (\$10 million at the time) for building mosques, schools, and hospitals abroad.³³
- Between 1987 and 2001, the league spent approximately \$709 million (the equivalent of \$50 million/year in 2001) on humanitarian-related development projects around the world. The largest recipients of this funding were “donations in kind” (24%), “administrative and other expenses” (23%), “emergency relief” (19%), and “social development” (19%), as documented in a report written by an economic advisor to the league.³⁴
- In 2002, the IIRO reportedly had an annual budget of \$500–600 million.³⁵
- By 2015, Saudi Arabia was reportedly spending \$4 billion annually on funding for Islamic seminaries, schools, and mosques worldwide through organizations including the league.³⁶

Concerning the degree to which the league has relied on Saudi royal patronage, the available evidence suggests a robust and consistent level of support:

- In 1962, the Saudi government provided around a quarter of a million dollars to the league. By 1980, this contribution had reportedly grown to \$13 million.³⁷
- In 1997, the *New York Times* reported that the league’s secretary-general had publicly thanked King Fahd for Saudi Arabia’s support of the league, including more than \$1.33 billion in financial assistance since its founding.³⁸

- The network of IIRO offices has been funded by charitable donations, principally *zakat* (Islam's form of obligatory alms-giving) and gifts from the royal family. The donations were deposited in the al-Rajhi Banking and Investment Corporation in Riyadh and then managed by the Islamic Affairs departments of Saudi embassies around the world. In 1987, the IIRO established an endowment called the *Sanabil al-Khair* (Seeds of Charity) with headquarters in Riyadh and offices around the world, including outside Washington. King Salman reportedly exercised control over the endowment's funds when he was governor of Riyadh.³⁹
- In 2002, the Saudi government claimed the state had spent "many billions of Saudi riyals" subsidizing "210 Islamic centers wholly or partly financed by Saudi Arabia, more than 1,500 mosques and 202 colleges, and almost 2,000 schools for educating Muslim children in non-Islamic countries in Europe, North and South America, Australia, and Asia..."⁴⁰
- The scale of the league's funding for its activities around the world, coupled with the House of Saud's demonstrated involvement therein, ultimately became liabilities for the organization in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

The Terrorism Connection

On September 28, 2016, the U.S. Congress overrode a presidential veto to pass the Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act (JASTA), thereby stripping the Saudi government of immunity against lawsuits that sought to hold the kingdom accountable for alleged involvement in the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Six months after the passage of JASTA, the league became a named defendant in a number of lawsuits filed against the kingdom, including one on behalf of the victims of 9/11 and another on behalf of more than two dozen insurers seeking to recoup funds paid to policyholders who had suffered as a result of the attacks.⁴¹ The lawsuits' targeting of the league (among other Saudi charities and organizations) rests on three core claims: first, alleging the league has always been an organ of the Saudi state; second, alleging the league provided material support to individuals affiliated with al-Qaeda between the terrorist group's formation in 1988 and September 11, 2001; and third, alleging those individuals were directly implicated in the 9/11 attacks.

There is ample evidence in the public record to support some of those claims; although a comprehensive account of that evidence exceeds the scope of this paper, several examples are worth highlighting. Regarding the degree to which the league has been an extension of the Saudi government, U.S. intelligence operations have exposed direct funding links between members of the royal family, various Saudi banks, the Islamic Affairs Ministry,

Saudi embassies and consulates abroad, and the league.⁴² Moreover, Saudi officials themselves have boasted over the years about the royal family's direct support for organizations such as the MWL, often in an effort to demonstrate the state's promotion and support of Islamic activities outside the kingdom.⁴³ The current secretary-general, H.E. Mohammad Al-Issa, refers to the league as an "independent" or "international" body, but at least until his appointment in 2016, the historical record suggested otherwise.

Regarding the league's ties to individuals implicated in terrorism (including in the 9/11 attacks specifically), the earliest known record of such ties dates to the late 1970s, when Abdullah Azzam, a leading figure in the Jordanian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood and thereafter one of Osama bin Laden's university professors in Saudi Arabia, was appointed to run the MWL office in Peshawar, Pakistan. Azzam would eventually be joined by bin Laden himself, and the office would form the nucleus of al-Qaeda following the Soviet retreat from Afghanistan.

Around the time of al-Qaeda's formation in 1988, the MWL secretary-general, Abdullah Omar Nasif, personally met with Osama bin Laden and several of his associates to discuss possible collaboration.⁴⁴ An undated handwritten account on IIRO stationery details a meeting of bin Laden's associates that was believed to have taken place around the same time, purportedly indicating a decision to use the league's offices in Pakistan as a headquarters for staging attacks.⁴⁵ Known al-Qaeda operatives such as Muhammad Jamal Khalifa (bin Laden's brother-in-law) and Wael Hamza Julaidan (a founding member of the group) used MWL offices in the Philippines and Pakistan, respectively, to plan and carry out attacks.⁴⁶

In 2003, the Saudi government introduced banking regulations aimed at prohibiting private donations to charities from being sent abroad until they could be properly monitored and confirmed not to be financing terror. Those regulations, however, exempted charities such as the league and the IIRO. Then in 2008, following U.S. terrorism designations of IIRO branches and affiliated individuals in the Philippines and Indonesia, Riyadh introduced a new set of rules for bodies such as the league. Henceforth, transfers from the accounts of those organizations to any party outside the kingdom would need to be approved by the Saudi Arabian Monetary Authority and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.⁴⁷ In the ensuing years, complaints about the league shifted from accusations concerning the organization's direct links to terrorism to a broader focus on the extremist ideas thought to be fueling such terrorism – ideas that the league was accused of having disseminated through its educational materials and sponsorship of imam training programs.

Here, too, the evidence fueling such accusations is robust, as even a cursory look at the league's publications, curricular materials, and public pronouncements over the years attests. For decades, the league was part of an institutional ecosystem, one that included Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Islamic Affairs and educational institutions such as the Islamic University

of Medina. That ecosystem collectively facilitated the use of instructional materials rife with xenophobic, anti-Semitic, anti-Christian, anti-Western, and sectarian themes, both through the dissemination of written products and the training of religious leaders in Saudi Arabia who then returned to their home countries in Europe, Africa, Southeast Asia, and elsewhere.⁴⁸

In a sense, the JASTA legislation of 2016 renewed what was by then a dormant conversation about Saudi Arabia's direct culpability for terrorist acts, but arguably the more consequential debate concerns the role of organizations such as the league in promoting deeply problematic ideas, many of which will undoubtedly survive the ongoing kinetic operations against terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda and more recently the so-called Islamic State. It is in the context of this broader debate that the league's recent shifts are worth assessing.

Notes

1. Pierre Conesa, "Un demi-siècle de diplomatie wahhabite," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, June–July 2016.
2. Rainer Hermann, "The Breeding Ground of Terror," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, November 28, 2015.
3. For an analysis of how Arab states such as Saudi Arabia have historically perceived and reacted to ideational threats, see Lawrence Rubin, *Islam in the Balance: Ideational Threats in Arab Politics* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014).
4. I thank Elana DeLozier for bringing this to my attention.
5. Salafism is a strain of Sunni fundamentalism that claims to reinstate the original form and tenor of Islam as practiced by the Prophet Muhammad and the earliest generations of his followers. Key tenets of Salafism include a literal reading of the Quran and (certain) hadith, a rejection of the Islamic legal schools of thought that developed after the earliest generations, a rejection of non-Sunni (especially Shia) streams of Islam, and a rejection of Sufism. Salafists embrace certain medieval and modern scholars who have adopted their outlook, including (most relevant for this study) Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab.
6. The claim that Ramadan was present at the league's founding appears, for example, in J. Millard Burr and Robert O. Collins, *Alms for Jihad* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 33; Samir Amghar, "La Ligue Islamique Mondiale en Europe: Un Instrument de Defense des Intérêts Stratégiques Saoudiens," *Presses de Sciences Po* (PFNSP), no. 51 (2011–2012): 117–18. The league's website states: "It is noteworthy that Dr. Said Ramadan was banned from coming to Saudi Arabia to participate in any of the Rabita's [league's] activities. Hence, he wasn't a founder [sic] member of the Muslim World League as it is stated." See <http://en.themwl.org/mwl-history> (accessed May 28, 2018).
7. Amghar, 117–19. For more on the early and evolving ties between the league and the Muslim Brotherhood, see "Muslim World League and World Assembly of Muslim Youth," Pew Research Center, September 15, 2010, p. 29, <https://www.pewforum.org/2010/09/15/muslim-networks-and-movements-in-western-europe-muslim-world-league-and-world-assembly-of-muslim-youth/>; also see Boris Thilay and Besma Lahouri, "L'argent de l'Islam," *L'Express*, November 21, 2002.

8. See Pascal Menoret, "Pouvoirs et oppositions en Arabie Saoudite: de la contestation armée à l'institutionnalisation de l'islamisme," *Maghreb-Machrek* 177 (2003): 26.
9. Amghar, 122.
10. Menoret, "Pouvoirs et oppositions en Arabie Saoudite," 26.
11. Amghar, 125.
12. Pew 2010, 29.
13. Thilay and Lahouri, "L'argent de l'Islam."
14. Amghar, 117–18.
15. *Ibid.*, 119.
16. *Ibid.*, 125–26. See also Thierry Leveque, "French Court Clears Weekly in Mohammad Cartoon Row," Reuters, March 22, 2007, <https://www.reuters.com/article/industry-france-cartoons-trial-dc/french-court-clears-weekly-in-mohammad-cartoon-row-idUSL2212067120070322>; Ian Black, "Charlie Hebdo Killings Condemned by Arab States – but Hailed Online by Extremists," *Guardian*, January 7, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/07/charlie-hebdo-killings-arab-states-jihadi-extremist-sympathisers-isis>.
17. This phrasing appears throughout the MWL's website, <https://themwl.org/en/homepage>.
18. Currently, the league's Supreme Council comprises forty-four individuals. See <https://themwl.org/node/34253> (accessed July 11, 2019).
19. The MWL's International Organization of Muslim Scholars should not be confused with the International Union of Muslim Scholars. The latter was established in 2004 and is headed by Yusuf Qaradawi. The IUMS, which is currently headquartered in Qatar, is considered the global representative of the Muslim Brotherhood.
20. Georges de Bouteiller, "La Ligue Islamique Mondiale, Une Institution Tentaculaire," *Revue Défense Nationale*, no. 439 (January 1984): 75.
21. Amghar, 115, 121.
22. Burr and Collins, 263.
23. Martin Kramer, "The Invasion of Islam," *Middle East Contemporary Survey*, vol. 14, ed. Ami Ayalon (1990): 201.
24. For more on Saudi interfaith initiatives, see Turan Kayaoglu, "Explaining Interfaith Dialogue in the Muslim World," *Politics and Religion* 8 (2015): 251–57.
25. Embassy Jidda, "Khalid Supports Islamic Ministers' Resolutions," WikiLeaks cable: 1979JIDDA02490_e, dated March 26, 1979, http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1979JIDDA02490_e.html.
26. Bouteiller, 78. See also Amghar, 120.
27. Amghar, 124.
28. "Muslim World League Condemns Iran's Interference in Kuwait's Affairs," *KUNA* (Kuwait), April 7, 2011. Cited in Teresa Harings, "The Muslim World League: Creeping Wahhabi Colonialism?" *Tel Aviv Notes*, Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel Aviv University, 2012.
29. Stephane Lacroix, "Saudi Arabia and the Limits of Religious Reform," *Review of Faith and International Affairs* 17, no. 2 (2019): 98.
30. Martin Kramer, "Islam in the New World Order," *Middle East Contemporary Survey*, vol. 15, ed. Ami Ayalon (1991): 179.
31. The league declined the author's request to provide updated budgetary information.
32. Martin Kramer, "Muslim Statecraft and Subversion," in *Middle East Contemporary Survey*, vol. 8 (1983–1984), eds. Haim Shaked and Daniel Dishon, 165.
33. Kramer, "Islam in the New World Order," 179.

COURSE CORRECTION

34. Khalif bin Suliman al-Nimry, *Ishamat Rabitat al-Alam al-Islami fi Bina Iqtisad Islami Bayna al-Duwl al-Islamiyya* [Contributions of the Muslim World League in building an Islamic economy among Islamic nations] (2005): 44–45. The report is available online at <http://iso-tec-demos.com/islamfiqh/dataentry/ar/node/669>.
35. Thilay and Lahouri.
36. Wilson, “Foreign Funded Islamist Extremism in the UK,” 3.
37. Pew 2010, 2.
38. Harings, 2; Burr and Collins, 34.
39. Burr and Collins, 35.
40. See “Saudi Government Paper: ‘Billions Spent by Saudi Royal Family to Spread Islam to Every Corner of the Earth,’” Middle East Media Research Institute, Special Dispatch no. 360, March 27, 2002, <https://www.memri.org/reports/saudi-government-paper-billions-spent-saudi-royal-family-spread-islam-every-corner-earth>.
41. See *Plaintiffs v. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia; Saudi High Commission for Relief of Bosnia & Herzegovina*. U.S. District Court, Southern District of New York, No. 03 MDL 1570 (Consolidated Amended Complaint Filed 3/6/2017); *Charter Oak Fire Insurance Co. et al. v. Al Rajhi Bank et al.*, U.S. District Court, Southern District of New York, No. 17-02651 (Complaint Filed 4/12/2017).
42. On funding ties between members of the royal family and the MWL and affiliated organizations such as the IIRO, see Burr and Collins, 35; Dore Gold, “Saudi Arabia’s Dubious Denials of Involvement in International Terrorism,” Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, October 1, 2003; *03 MDL 1570 Plaintiffs v. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia; Saudi High Commission for Relief of Bosnia & Herzegovina* (Consolidated Amended Complaint, p. 19).
43. For examples of Saudi officials’ boasting of such ties, see Anthony Cordesman, *Saudi Arabia Enters the Twenty-First Century* (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2003), 167; MEMRI’s dispatch, “Saudi Government Paper: ‘Billions Spent by Saudi Royal Family to Spread Islam to Every Corner of the Earth.’”
44. *03 MDL 1570 Plaintiffs v. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia; Saudi High Commission for Relief of Bosnia & Herzegovina* (Consolidated Amended Complaint, p. 19).
45. Glenn R. Simpson, “List of Early al Qaeda Donors Points to Saudi Elite, Charities,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 18, 2003.
46. On Khalifa and Julaidan, see *03 MDL 1570 Plaintiffs v. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia; Saudi High Commission for Relief of Bosnia & Herzegovina* (Consolidated Amended Complaint, pp. 19–20).
47. See Alfred B. Prados and Christopher M. Blanchard, “Saudi Arabia: Terrorist Financing Issues,” Congressional Research Service (September 14, 2007), p. 19; “Combating Terrorism: U.S. Agencies Report Progress Countering Terrorism and Its Financing in Saudi Arabia, but Continued Focus on Counter Terrorism Financing Efforts Needed,” U.S. Government Accountability Office, September 2009, p. 35. In 2016, the United States removed its designations of the Philippines and Indonesia IIRO branches. See U.S. Department of Treasury, “Kingpin Act Designations; Counter Terrorism Designations Removals,” August 16, 2016, <https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/OFAC-Enforcement/Pages/20160816.aspx>.
48. For a sample of this problematic record, see “Yahud al-Ardh al-Muhtallah” [Jews of the occupied territories], *Majallat Rabitat al-Alam al-Islami* 18, no. 8 (July 1980): 32–35; “Jihad al-Shaab al-Afghani wal-Muslim” [The struggle of Afghan Muslim youth], February 1, 1992, Muslim World League, <http://bit.ly/2Huwr6v>; “Al-Mubadun Shahid Hayy ala al-Irhab al-Israeli” [Those who were expelled are living martyrs of Israeli terrorism], *Majallat Rabitat al-Alam al-Islami*, no. 341 (June 1993),

18–19; Muhammad Hassan, “Muhawalat Qadhra li-Tarwiji Kitaab Yahudi Biwasitat Fatawa Ilmiyya” [Dirty attempts to promote a Jewish book by scientific fatwas], *Majallat Rabitat al-Alam al-Islami* 40 (August–September 2002), pp. 31–32; Hasan al-Ahdal, “Christian Missionary Campaign in the Gulf,” *Muslim World League Journal* 9, no. 7 (May 1982): 51; Muhammad Asad, “The Spirit of the West,” *Muslim World League Journal* 32, nos. 1 and 2 (March/April 2004): 42–48; Abdul Majid Bakkar, “Al-Aqaliyyat al-Muslima fi Euruba” [Muslim minorities in Europe], *Dawat al-Haqq* (1980); Anwar al-Jindi, “Suqut al-Idiolojiyyat wa Kayfa Yumla al-Islam al-Firagh” [The fall of ideologies and how Islam is filling the void], *Dawat al-Haqq* (1993); Othman Abu Zied Othman and Muhammad Waqi Allah Ahmad, “Al-Wujud al-Islami fi Amerika: al-Waqi wa-Amal” [The Muslim presence in America: reality and hope], *Dawat al-Haqq* (2006); Farah Pandith, *How We Win: How Cutting-Edge Entrepreneurs, Political Visionaries, Enlightened Business Leaders, and Social Media Mavens Can Defeat the Extremist Threat* (New York: HarperCollins, 2019), chap. 3; Wilson, “Foreign Funded Islamist Extremism in the United Kingdom”; and “La formation des imams et des professeurs de religion islamique en Belgique: Le cas du Centre islamique et culturel de Belgique (CICB)” [The training of imams and professors of Islam in Belgium: The case of the Islamic and Cultural Center of Belgium] (Brussels: OCAM, 2016).

CHAPTER 3

The Promise and Limits of Reform: The League of H.E. Mohammad Al-Issa

ON AUGUST 12, 2016, THE LEAGUE ANNOUNCED THE APPOINTMENT OF MOHAMMAD bin Abdul Karim Al-Issa as the organization's eighth secretary-general. Al-Issa, then fifty-one years old, replaced Abdullah bin Abdul Mohsin al-Turki, who had served as the league's director since 2000. Al-Turki, an advisor to King Fahd, had received a doctorate from the Faculty of Sharia and Law at Egypt's Al-Azhar University in the early 1970s; while in Egypt, he had reportedly developed ties to the Brotherhood.¹ Al-Issa, by contrast, is entirely a product of Saudi schooling, having obtained his bachelor's degree in comparative Islamic jurisprudence, and master's and doctoral degrees in comparative juridical studies and public law, from Saudi universities. In 2009, King Abdullah appointed Al-Issa minister of justice in a cabinet shake-up widely perceived to reflect a broader reform push, replacing older, more conservative incumbents with younger moderates.

Indeed, as justice minister, Al-Issa developed a reputation for his relatively progressive views, particularly concerning gender relations. In an interview that aired on Al-Arabiya in April 2013, some three months after King Abdullah had made the unprecedented move of appointing thirty women to Saudi Arabia's Shura Council, Al-Issa was asked about the ongoing prohibition against women driving, and he responded that the ban had no basis in law but rather "has to do with the will of Saudi society. It has to do with culture and will. If Saudi society – given its culture – wishes for women to drive, it's fine, but if society has any reservation, for whatever reason, that's fine too."² While at the ministry, Al-Issa also introduced a reform allowing Saudi women lawyers to serve as notaries and to represent women in personal-status cases dealing with matters such as divorce, alimony, and child custody. The reform would ultimately be implemented in 2013, when the first Saudi women were granted licenses to practice law.³

It bears noting that Al-Issa's apparent progressivism on social matters such as gender relations has never been accompanied by calls for political liberalization, a fact that may puzzle or frustrate liberally oriented observers of the kingdom but that is entirely in keeping with the top-down model of reform preferred by monarchs such as Abdullah and, more recently, by

MbS. Indeed, the league under Al-Issa has maintained its fundamental commitment to backing the palace. For example, in the face of growing criticism of the kingdom's leaders following Khashoggi's murder, the league declared that "[the] Kingdom's stability and security are a red line."⁴ Still, at least with respect to social reforms, Al-Issa's tenure at the Justice Ministry was sufficiently groundbreaking to prompt petitions to the king from conservatives angered by what they termed "the Westernizing stench of reform." Upon Abdullah's death, Salman's decision to replace Al-Issa was interpreted as signaling a more conciliatory approach to the conservatives who had been sidelined under Abdullah.⁵

After being relieved of his duties at the Justice Ministry, Al-Issa was asked to run a newly established office within the Ministry of Defense known as the Center for Ideological Warfare (*Markaz al-Harb al-Fikriya*), created in December 2015 with the aim of "exposing mistakes, allegations, suspicions and deceptive techniques promoted by extremists and terrorists."⁶ The center, which has since been engaged mostly in combating online propaganda and incitement, became fully operational only on the eve of Trump's visit to Riyadh in spring 2017, by which time Al-Issa had been appointed to direct the league.⁷

Several months after being named secretary-general, Al-Issa was also appointed to the Council of Senior Scholars, Saudi Arabia's top government religious body and traditionally a bastion of conservative Salafism. His appointment to the council was widely seen to reflect an ongoing effort to break the conservatives' longstanding hold on such institutions.⁸

If Al-Issa was a known entity within elite Saudi circles by 2016, his appointment as director of the league has since given him an international platform to convey a host of reformist messages that, though associated with MbS today, might be seen as a continuation and expansion of the initiatives launched under King Abdullah.⁹

The job Al-Issa accepted in August 2016 presented a formidable task insofar as he inherited an organization that for decades had been associated with Saudi Arabia's export of Islamic extremism and alleged support for terrorism. In interviews and public engagements, Al-Issa prefers to focus on the league's current campaigns rather than to address the organization's problematic history, but it is safe to assume that he is well aware of the baggage associated with the organization he now leads.

The Promise of Reform: Policy Changes Since 2016

Since Al-Issa's entry onto the scene, the league's discourse – as reflected in his statements and in the organization's flagship publications – has undergone three noteworthy shifts. The first concerns the components of Muslim individuals' identities, the second is discernible in the league's

discourse on terrorism, and the third has implicated the league's interfaith engagement.

1. On national and religious identities

Whereas for decades the league was urging Muslims residing in non-Muslim-majority countries to prioritize their religious identity as members of a global Muslim community (*umma*) over their fealty to a given nation-state, Al-Issa has in recent years been emphasizing the primacy of one's national loyalties, even when the latter conflicts with an individual's commitment to traditional Islamic law and rituals.

Consider a 1980 edition of the league's *Dawat al-Haqq*, which was dedicated to the matter of Muslim minorities in Europe and in which the author asserted the following:

The fundamental issue of Islamic life from the standpoint of minorities, and whether they will maintain their Islamic character or assimilate into the majority societies, depends on their faith in Islam. Therefore, it is imperative that [Muslim minorities] discard the nationalist sentiments which divide them and which have created links between them and non-Muslims. The latter secretly harbor animosity toward Islam and toward Muslim minorities, undermining Islamic *dawa* in the countries of the Diaspora, and causing members of those minorities to distance themselves [from one another] and turn their attention to inconsequential matters of little value...¹⁰

Over a decade later, the messaging had changed little. A 1993 edition of *Dawat al-Haqq*, titled "The Fall of Ideologies and How Islam Is Filling the Void," noted the following:

Muslims must ensure an Islamic identity which combines their transnational Islamic identities and the original national identities they brought to their new homes [in non-Muslim lands], so that the opponents of Islam will not find and exploit weaknesses therein... Muslims have their own authentic approaches and their particular way of life, and their need for Western thought is limited to the hard sciences only, sciences they originally participated in building. From those sciences they extract only the concepts which are not at odds with Islamic concepts and values, especially what Islam has ordained regarding humanity's mission on earth as carried out through individual responsibility, moral obligations, the resurrection, [etc.].¹¹

After 9/11, there were signs of a somewhat softened approach to the matter of Muslim integration into non-Muslim-majority societies, although the league's literature remained broadly critical of those societies. A 2006 edition of *Dawat al-Haqq*, which was devoted to "The Islamic Presence in America," featured a section titled "Islam in Public Life," wherein the author acknowledged a middle way between full assimilation and complete isolation from the majority society:

The third direction is what advocates call "smart integration," settled on the combination of commitment to the religion of Islam and belonging to the American homeland. This is a middle ground for those who wanted to benefit from the whims of that community while adhering to the covenants of religion... The Islamic aspect of the family and community cohesion, and the values of honesty and generosity among Muslims, are admired by Americans...These habits have been abandoned by the Americans for the sake of individual advancement. It is possible that the Islamic presence has begun adding the positive effort of Muslims to American social, scientific and cultural life, especially in the area of values that America lacks most.¹²

By contrast, consider the opening lines of a communiqué issued at the conclusion of the league's "Islamic Unity Conference" held in Mecca in December 2018:

The conference encourages minorities in non-Muslim countries to achieve positive national integration and reject attacking the followers of sects, along with reinforcing relations [between] the sects and the Muslim communities by consolidating the common constants and understanding the [local] jurisprudence.¹³

The closing statement likewise noted that fatwas issued by Muslim religious authorities should offer guidance only to Muslims residing in the same state as the issuing body: "The conference warned against exporting fatwas outside their spatial scale, as each community has its special customs, norms and traditions[,] and every state issues laws and regulations according to its spatial geography[,] without interfering in its internal affairs."¹⁴ This last point was reiterated in the "Charter of Mecca," a remarkable document released upon the conclusion of the league's May 2019 conference featuring 1,200 imams from around the world. Reflecting the league's, and Al-Issa's, broader emphasis on national identity over religious fealty, the charter condemns the issuing of religious edicts (fatwas) "without respect for local circumstances

and social conventions” and considers such endeavors to constitute a “flagrant violation of sovereignty.”¹⁵

Al-Issa himself has stressed the importance of what he calls “positive integration” (*al-indimaj al-ijabi*), whereby Muslims adhere to the civil laws of the countries in which they live (even if this injunction rubs up against their religious inclinations), and states in return strive to respect the rights of religious minorities. In May 2017, for example, he stated that Muslim women living in Western countries where the veil was banned must respect such laws or move to a country in which they could freely wear it.¹⁶ A year later, in an interview with the author, the secretary-general asserted the following:

Whatever the decision of the state, whatever the constitution of the state, you must respect it. Take, for example, the issue of the veil in France. [Muslims] demanded the right to wear the veil. But the government rejected it[;] the parliament rejected it. So what is to be done? You must respect the law, the constitution of the country in which you live, because you entered that country [as an immigrant] and must respect its laws as such.¹⁷

Interestingly, Al-Issa has promoted the idea of positive integration even in majority-Muslim countries, as he did during a recent trip to Comoros and Burundi in Africa.¹⁸

The prioritization of one’s national identity over his or her religious identity also seeps into the league’s recent condemnations of the Muslim Brotherhood after decades of cordial relations and, as we have seen, overlapping goals and activities. A year after the league revoked Yusuf al-Qaradawi’s membership because of his leadership in the Brotherhood,¹⁹ Al-Issa was asked for his view of the Islamist organization, and he responded as follows:

We are all Muslims[;] we all advocate the implementation of Islam...[W]e don’t have an argument [with the Brotherhood] on this point. But what is your interpretation of Islam? What’s your program for implementing it? The program of the Muslim Brotherhood is opposed to the nation-state (*dhid al-dawla al-wataniya*). Can you have others governing? No, you want to govern everything yourselves. Can you have multiple Islamic parties? No, just yourselves. They ultimately killed Sadat[;] they supported and welcomed Khomeini’s revolution in Iran. They adhere to political Islam in the extreme sense of rejecting nation-states. Their ultimate goal is to govern over all Muslim countries. They adhere to a violent form of political Islam...²⁰

To be sure, the league's posture toward the Brotherhood principally reflects Riyadh's perception that the region's leading Islamist movement poses a threat to the Saudi government and others like it. That perception only deepened after the Arab Spring, when Brotherhood derivatives briefly appeared ascendant. Al-Issa's decision to expel Qaradawi, then, is consistent with the league's longstanding commitment to ensuring the survival of the Saudi powers that be. Still, it is telling that rather than resort to arguments about the Brotherhood's purported links to terrorism, Al-Issa's critique of the movement rests largely on arguments about the importance of the nation-state.

2. On extremist ideologies and the terrorism they breed

A second shift has been discernible in the league's evolving rhetoric on terrorism. Already in the decade after 9/11, the league had begun to denounce not only terrorist acts but also the extremism presumably fueling those acts. Still, such denunciations remained mostly confined to anodyne statements calling for "moderation" and adherence to "true Islam." A 2004 English-language edition of the *Majallah* was typical in this regard:

...Islam calls for moderation in all the matters and prevents [...] all types of extremism. [Secretary-General Abdullah al-Turki] said that Muslims should adopt the moderation, which Allah has chosen for them: "Thus have We made of you an Ummah justly balanced, that you might be witnesses over the nations and the Messenger a witness over yourselves" (Quran, 2:143). He underlined the necessity of inculcating these teachings and values in the minds of Muslim youth through educational curricula, the mosque sermons, information media, cultural activities[,] and programs of the Muslim organizations and institutions...²¹

Similarly, in a 2009 league-sponsored conference on "Problems of Muslim Youth in an Age of Globalization," Secretary-General al-Turki referred to "enemies" within the Muslim community responsible for "an attempt to hijack moderate Islam," and he encouraged conference organizers to issue a direct message to youth groups that they should embrace "moderation and balance" and "avoid extremism, immoderation, and those seeking to divide Muslims from others."²² Al-Turki's rhetoric somewhat sharpened by the end of his tenure. At a gathering of Islamic scholars in February 2015, he asserted: "The terrorism that we face within the Muslim Ummah and our own homelands today...is religiously motivated. It has been founded on extremism, and the misconception of some distorted Sharia concept."²³

Al-Issa's tenure has been marked by greater attention to such links between Islamic extremism and acts of terror. "Fighting extremist thought

is of paramount importance,” he asserted in a 2017 summit in Riyadh. “After the Taliban, which created al-Qaeda, were toppled, their thought continued to spread. This proves that the battle against extremism cannot be fought exclusively through military action, but rather [must] include fighting extremist ideologies that spread their deviant thought.”²⁴ A year later, he pointedly acknowledged that it made little sense to claim extremists have no connection to Islam when they themselves invoke the religion:

[T]here are some who raise the banner of Islam and are extremists, and some who raise the name of Islam and speak in the name of Islam, and are terrorists. Since this person is of Islamic origin and speaks with his extreme concepts of texts, then I cannot say that he is not of the Islamic environment or Islamic origin, but he speaks of Islam in accordance with his point of view; the Islam whose truth he hijacked with his extremist ideology.²⁵

Notwithstanding the league’s post-9/11 calls for “moderation,” its messaging on terrorism had remained problematic even after 9/11.²⁶ In 2004, for example, Abdullah Muslih, then chair of the league’s Commission on Scientific Signs in the Quran and Sunna, declared in his weekly television program (which aired on Saudi Arabia’s Iqraa TV) that suicide attacks were permissible so long as the targets were residing in non-Muslim countries. “There is nothing wrong with [suicide attacks] if they cause great damage to the enemy,” Muslih explained. “This is when we talk of *Dar al-Harb*. But if we speak of what happens in Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia, some areas in Muslim Algeria, or as we heard a few days ago, in Syria, this is forbidden, brothers! This is the land of the Muslims. We must never do this in a Muslim country.”²⁷ Likewise, in 2005, Abdullah Basfar, director of the league’s International Organization for the Holy Quran and Immaculate Sunnah, declared on Iqraa TV that it was an obligation for Muslims to send material support to Palestinians “waging jihad” in the “al-Quds intifada.”²⁸

Such exceptions to denunciations of terrorism have largely disappeared since Al-Issa arrived on the scene. The secretary-general himself ruled them out in an interview he gave in Washington on May 3, 2018. Asked whether his “view on prohibiting or criminalizing attacks against innocent civilians appl[ies] everywhere, from Cairo to Tel Aviv to New York to Paris,” Al-Issa responded: “About Islam, I would like to say, a general rule is that Islam is against attacks on civilians; it criminalizes attacks on civilians anywhere in this world.”²⁹

The key reference here was to Tel Aviv, insofar as Al-Issa’s statement meant attacks against Israeli citizens could no longer be excused, as the league’s discourse had previously implied. Publications of the league have remained critical of Israeli policies in the West Bank and Gaza, as in 2017 when the

Muslim World League Journal echoed the Saudi Council of Senior Scholars' characterization of such policies as "state terrorism," but its official discourse has ceased condoning terrorism committed against Israeli citizens.³⁰

More generally, the league's rhetoric on Israel has softened considerably. Contrast, for example, the 2017 edition of the *Muslim World League Journal* highlighting the Saudi government's condemnation of Israeli "state terrorism" to the language of a 1982 edition that alleged "the second Zionist attempt to burn the Sacred [Al-Aqsa] Mosque...yet another evidence of the Israeli authorities' continuous desecration of the Islamic holy places, repeated violations of human rights and systematic efforts to Judaize the Muslim sanctuaries." The 1982 edition went on to forcefully denounce Israeli policies in the league's name:

Shaikh Muhammad Ali al-Harakan, Secretary-General of the Muslim World League, strongly denounced the atrocities perpetrated by the Israeli occupation authorities against the innocent men, women[,] and children of the Holy Land of Palestine...Shaykh al-Harakan said the present upheaval in the Israeli-occupied Arab territories...added a new chapter to the Jewish barbarism against the unarmed civilian population. As an international Islamic organization of the Muslim peoples, the MWL condemns and denounces the Zionist barbarities which were in flagrant violation of all human norms...³¹

Such language has not appeared since Al-Issa's arrival. Moreover, two additional initiatives concerning Israel deserve mention. The first occurred in October 2018, when Al-Issa proposed to launch a "peace caravan" of Muslims, Jews, and Christians traveling to Jerusalem. Were the idea to materialize, it would amount to a de facto recognition of Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem. The second initiative was reflected in Al-Issa's highly publicized meeting with Jason Greenblatt, President Trump's special envoy for Middle East peace, at the White House in May 2018, mere days after Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas had delivered a speech in which he suggested Jews had been persecuted historically due to their own conduct. Following the White House meeting, Al-Issa and Greenblatt issued a joint statement condemning all attempts to deny or distort the historical record concerning the Holocaust. The statement was widely seen as a riposte to the anti-Semitic tropes that had peppered Abbas's speech several days prior.³²

3. On interfaith engagement

A third shift has been discernible in the league's outreach to Christians and Jews. Interfaith engagement is not new to the league or even to Saudi Arabia. Since 2003, the league has sent representatives to interfaith dialogues organized or hosted by the Vatican (among others). In 2008,

King Abdullah convened the first Saudi-sponsored interfaith dialogue and brought together Muslim, Christian, and Jewish faith leaders, as well as representatives of Buddhist, Hindu, and Sikh communities. That gathering took place in Madrid, because of the kingdom's prohibition against the entry of non-Muslims for religious purposes.³³ Indeed, until recently, Saudi interfaith initiatives – in which the league has always featured prominently – did not take place on Saudi soil. Thus, for example, the Saudi rulers hosted an interfaith conference at the United Nations in 2009. And in 2012, the kingdom established the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue in Vienna, Austria (though the activities of the center were reportedly sparse).³⁴

Since MbS's ascension and the appointment of Al-Issa as MWL secretary-general, the kingdom's interfaith initiatives have for the first time included visits by prominent non-Muslim religious leaders to Saudi Arabia. In April 2018, five months after Al-Issa's headline-grabbing meeting with Pope Francis in the Vatican (the first such meeting for an MWL secretary-general, though not for a Saudi king, given that Abdullah met with Benedict in the Vatican in 2007), Cardinal Jean-Louis Pierre Tauran, president of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, led a delegation of high-ranking Christian leaders to Saudi Arabia. There, the cardinal met with King Salman, and he and Al-Issa signed an agreement establishing a joint coordinating council that is set to meet annually. Then in late November 2018, Coptic Bishop Ava Morkos of Shubra al-Khayma in Egypt visited Saudi Arabia, where he met with Al-Issa and led a Coptic mass in Riyadh – the first ever openly conducted Christian service in the kingdom. Saudi law continues to prohibit the building of churches in the kingdom, but against the backdrop of such visits, reports surfaced that MbS was planning to drop the prohibition. In the meantime, the kingdom appears to have taken the noteworthy step of forbidding harassment of private worship.³⁵

A second prominent element of the league's shifting approach to interfaith work has come in Al-Issa's outreach to Jewish communities and more specifically in his public denunciations of the Holocaust. On January 25, 2018, Al-Issa sent a letter to Sara Bloomfield, director of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, on the occasion of International Holocaust Remembrance Day. In that missive, he referred to the Holocaust as "an incident that shook humanity to the core, and...an event whose horrors could not be denied or underrated by any fair-minded or peace-loving person."

Three months after the letter was publicized on the league's website (in both English and Arabic), Al-Issa became the highest-ranking Muslim scholar to visit the museum in Washington.³⁶ A year later, he published an op-ed in the *Washington Post* urging Muslims to study the Holocaust, and once again he denounced "the horrors of a diabolical plan to implement a hateful idea of racial purity that ultimately led to the murder of millions of innocent men, women and children – including six million Jews."³⁷ The

op-ed's reference to Jews was noteworthy in that no such explicit mention had appeared in Al-Issa's original letter to Bloomfield. Al-Issa has also announced the league is developing plans to insert Holocaust education into the curricula of Muslim countries, and in January 2020 he will become the most senior Muslim cleric to visit Auschwitz, marking the seventy-fifth-year commemoration of the death camp's liberation.³⁸

Of all the initiatives Al-Issa has spearheaded during his time as secretary-general of the league, his discourse on the Holocaust appears to have elicited the most intense public reaction, if the popular press and social media are any indication. In his *Washington Post* op-ed, Al-Issa noted that in response to his letter to Bloomfield condemning the Holocaust and its deniers, he had "received a flood of calls, text messages, emails and letters from Muslim religious scholars endorsing the view I had expressed. Not a single reputable scholar has stood up to oppose this view. None could dispute the indisputable."³⁹

It is impossible to verify the claim about the personal correspondence that Al-Issa received, but a scan of the public record suggests his statements about the Holocaust did not elicit any rebuttal from recognized Islamic scholars. Among the general public, however, reactions were mixed. Editorials in Saudi press outlets were largely, and perhaps not surprisingly, supportive of Al-Issa's gesture, though in several instances the writers asserted that denunciations of crimes against Jews should extend to condemnations of all massacres and include denunciations of crimes against Palestinians.⁴⁰

On social media, criticism of Al-Issa's Holocaust-related statements appeared in several Twitter accounts recognized as those of Qatari users or as known Saudi critics of the kingdom.⁴¹ Predictably enough, a Hamas-affiliated newspaper ran a column harshly critical of Al-Issa's statements. It denied the Holocaust had happened and called on Arabs to support Palestinians. The Hamas columnist asserted that Al-Issa's rhetoric was politically motivated and principally reflected a Saudi effort to normalize relations with Israel and curry favor with the West, a critique echoed in other mainstream Palestinian and Qatari outlets, as well as in negative comments posted on the league's Arabic-language Twitter account.⁴²

AT THE POLICY LEVEL, AL-ISSA'S TENURE HAS CLEARLY BROUGHT SIGNIFICANT changes, as reflected in the league's messaging and in the content of its flagship publications. The drive to prioritize one's civic obligations over a fealty to one's religious identity when the two come into conflict, the acknowledgment of the religious basis of extremism and the push to eliminate justifications for the terrorism that extremism can breed, and the expanding outreach to Christians and Jews – all suggest a concerted effort to reverse course after many years of deeply problematic discourse. But how are Al-Issa's policy shifts translated into changes on the ground in

places where the league has been active? Here the picture is less clear and less encouraging, at least thus far. To understand why, it is helpful to zoom in on one such locale and to examine developments there since Al-Issa's arrival on the scene.

The Limits of Reform: The Brussels Grand Mosque as a Case Study

In February 2018, the league relinquished control of the Brussels Grand Mosque and the accompanying Centre Islamique et Culturel de Belgique (CICB) to the Belgian government, prematurely terminating a ninety-nine-year lease on the building, which the Belgian government had granted to Saudi Arabia in 1969. The move followed months of pressure on the part of the Belgian government stemming from concerns that the mosque had been the site of extremist preaching after it came to light that Islamist militants in Brussels had plotted a series of suicide bombings responsible for 130 deaths in Paris in November 2015 and 32 deaths in Brussels in March 2016.⁴³

For decades, the league had nominally managed the operations at the Grand Mosque, and the CICB had served as the league's headquarters for training imams in Belgium and across Europe. The story of the league's ultimate divestment from the institution is instructive for what it suggests about Al-Issa's reforms and the limitations therein.

Saudi Arabia's involvement in the religious life of Belgium's Muslim community dates to the early 1970s, but in a deeper sense, the origins of that involvement can be understood only in reference to the relationship between religion and state in Belgium (as codified in its constitution of 1831). Strictly speaking, there is no clear separation between the two. Rather, the relationship is what Belgians characterize as one of "mutual independence." Since the Napoleonic era, the Belgian state has paid the salaries of clergy of formally recognized religious groups and has partially financed their institutions. Beyond that, the state is constitutionally required to remain neutral and refrain from intervening in the religious activities of recognized sects.⁴⁴

In 1974, Belgium granted formal state recognition to Islam and began subsidizing the salaries of imams and of Muslim chaplains in army hospitals and prisons. Formal recognition also meant that, henceforth, Islam would be taught in the public schools alongside other formally recognized faiths. The timing of the decision to grant recognition was not coincidental. Against the backdrop of the 1973 Arab oil embargo, Riyadh conveyed to Brussels that continued access to Saudi oil would require formally recognizing Islam as a state-supported religion. The Belgian government complied, but the ensuing recognition came before Belgium's Muslim community had been able to meet the legally required criteria, including the

establishment of a representative body to liaise with the state. In 1978, the CICB was created to temporarily serve that function, and Belgian officials at the time concluded that because of the holy status of Mecca and Medina in Islam, Saudi Arabia was a natural candidate to help manage the center and more generally to advocate on behalf of Belgium's Muslim community.

This dynamic, whereby a state's legal restrictions against intervening in the religious lives of its citizens paved the way for foreign interference, was not unique to Belgium. Rather, the pattern played out elsewhere in Europe, where Muslim-majority countries such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Morocco increasingly became implicated in the religious lives of Muslim communities across the continent. Saudi Arabia's involvement may have differed in scale, and unlike Turkey and Morocco, Saudi Arabia never had a substantial diaspora community in Europe. But the basic phenomenon was common to all three.⁴⁵

Consider France, where, as an unintended consequence of strict regulations limiting state support for religious institutions, foreign funding remains the leading source of income for mosques. For example, the Muslim community of Toulouse bought a property in 1987 for 1.7 million francs (around \$309,000 at the time) and the league provided 9 percent of the cost. In 2000, the MWL bought the Ibn Abdelaziz Mosque in Mantes-la-Jolie, which had been built in 1981 with Libyan funds, and thereafter paid the salaries of two (Moroccan) imams (1,000 euros per month) along with all operating costs, totaling roughly 120,000 euros per year. And in Évry, where the mosque was originally donated by the (Moroccan) Hassan II Foundation, the league donated 9 million euros between 1984 and 1995 to rebuild it. Today the league manages the taxes of the mosque and a local halal butcher.⁴⁶

In 1984, the CICB formally became an external center (*markaz khariji*) of the league, which also assumed responsibility for running the mosque. The CICB, which until recently was employing around thirty people, principally served as a training center for aspiring preachers. As such, it offered a four-year imam training program that was taught in Arabic, and it became Belgium's main Islamic theological seminary. The center also offered a two-year, less-intensive program in French and a smaller program for women.

Although no credible documentation is available, Belgian intelligence estimates place the number of individuals studying in those programs at twelve to fifteen per year in the Arabic program and an additional thirty students per year in the French program.⁴⁷ A key dynamic developed whereby second-generation Moroccan Belgians who were studying at the center received scholarships from the Saudi government (administered through the embassy in Brussels) so that they could study at the Islamic University of Medina. Thereafter, they returned to Belgium and began preaching in mosques often subsidized by the league. Other graduates of the center went on to teach Islamic education courses in Belgian public high schools. Thus, indirectly at least, the league was for decades exercising

some influence on the religious instruction that Belgian public school children were receiving.⁴⁸

Such an arrangement may never have caused a stir were it not for the instructional materials found at the center. A classified Belgian intelligence report that was later leaked to the public found that as recently as 2017, textbooks for the four-year imam training program were urging Muslim citizens to engage in armed struggle aimed at instilling Islamic law (*ahl al-sunna wal-jamaa yaghzuna min ajli iqama sharai al-islam*) and killing those who strayed from its precepts (*yuqatilu man kharaja an shariat al-islam*).⁴⁹ The texts likewise advanced anti-Semitic, homophobic, xenophobic, and exclusionary precepts familiar to scholars of radical Salafi interpretations of Islam. The authors cited in those texts were often professors at the Islamic University of Medina or its peers, Umm al-Qura University in Mecca and the Imam Mohammed ibn Saud Islamic University in Riyadh. (The same evaluation found that the two-year program's instructional materials were not as extreme.⁵⁰)

Moreover, Belgian officials found that the center was teaching students of Moroccan origin courses in Maliki jurisprudence. Malikism is the predominant school of Islamic law in Morocco, but the CICB textbooks reflected an effort to "Salafize" the Malikism by, for example, replacing interpretations of classical texts by well-known scholars with interpretations by Saudi clerics such as the former Grand Mufti of the kingdom, Abdul Aziz ibn al-Baz. Likewise, courses at the center were emphasizing the sayings of the Prophet and were generally neglecting the classical schools of Islamic jurisprudence that developed later on, thereby reflecting a prioritization central to Salafi doctrine.⁵¹

Armed with such evidence and channeling a public anger still raw from the 2016 Brussels terrorist attack, a high-level delegation of Belgian officials visited Riyadh in November 2017. Belgian officials in the Justice Ministry and intelligence services later recounted that the purpose of the trip was to convey to Saudi officials in the Foreign Affairs and Islamic Affairs Ministries, as well as at the league, that Belgium would no longer permit the league to continue interfering with Islamic instruction and preaching back home.

It was in those meetings that Al-Issa, at the urging of Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir, reportedly agreed to shut down the center.⁵² Al-Issa later sought to appeal the decision, but the request was denied. Although the CICB no longer offers the four-year program, it has continued to offer courses to youth up to the age of twelve, and it has reportedly begun seeking to reestablish the original imam training program in other mosques around the city.⁵³

The assumption that the league was at least cognizant of and perhaps responsible for the objectionable content and problematic activity at the CICB was reasonable, given that the league (along with the Islamic Affairs Ministry) had been partly subsidizing the salaries of CICB employees and

covering the mosque’s operating budget, which amounted to a contribution of approximately 2 million euros per year. Neither Al-Issa nor Tamer al-Saud, the interim director he hired to take control of the CICB in 2016, has disputed the findings of the Belgian intelligence community’s report. Rather, they have argued that the league’s new leadership is being punished for the sins of its predecessors. That claim has not found receptivity in Brussels, but the messy reality of the CICB’s management over the years lends some support to it.

Notwithstanding the league’s financial support for the center and the Grand Mosque, its management of day-to-day operations was highly dysfunctional, if not altogether absent. At its inception in the early 1980s, the CICB assigned responsibility for its own administration to a governing board comprising ambassadors to Belgium from Muslim countries. The presidency of the board was reserved for the Saudi ambassador to Belgium, and the directorship of the center was likewise supposed to go to a Saudi national, in recognition of the Saudis’ outsized financial contributions to the institution. But in the ensuing years, the governing board rarely met, and the outgoing director’s testimony to the Belgian parliament in the wake of the 2016 terrorist attack made clear to Belgian officials that the league had not been conducting even the most basic accounting and oversight functions at the mosque.⁵⁴

The league’s (mis)management of the CICB reflected the broader institutional ecosystem facilitating Saudi religious export (see figure 2).

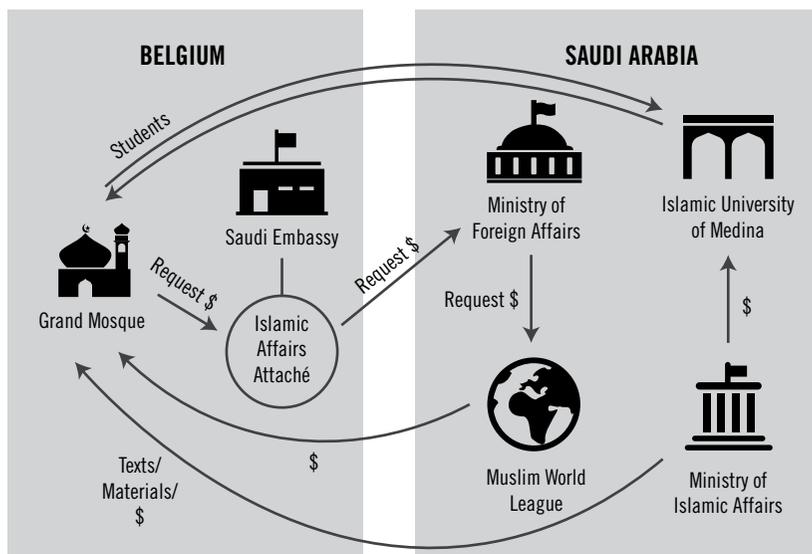


FIGURE 2. THE INSTITUTIONAL ECOSYSTEM OF SAUDI RELIGIOUS EXPORT: BELGIUM AS A CASE STUDY

Typically, a Belgian individual or community wishing to open a new mosque would approach the Saudi embassy in Brussels to ask for financial assistance. There, an attaché of the Islamic Affairs Ministry would handle the request and pass it on to the Foreign Affairs Ministry in Riyadh, which, in turn, would redirect the request to the league's headquarters. An affirmative response would trigger the disbursement of funds from the league back to the approved recipient. But beyond this funding, the league's involvement in the beneficiary's activities thereafter remained limited. It is not even clear to what extent the league maintained a close watch on the curricular materials disseminated in those institutions.

For example, the CICB textbooks later found to be so problematic had been produced in Saudi Arabia, but that process was overseen by the Islamic Affairs Ministry, not the league. And to the extent Belgians were returning home from their studies in Saudi Arabia armed with extremist ideologies, the more likely culprit would have been the Islamic University of Medina.

The observations are not meant to absolve the league of its responsibility for what took place in beneficiary institutions such as the CICB, but rather to suggest that the mechanism of Saudi religious export has been considerably more complicated than is sometimes presumed. Al-Issa's engagement with the CICB has resembled that of an absentee landlord haggling over the legal liability for damage inflicted on his property by problematic tenants. The landlord undeniably bears a legal responsibility in such situations, but the tenants are not entirely blameless either. Arguably, the league has been expelled from the CICB at precisely the moment its leadership was expressing a willingness to assume this liability and to begin engaging directly with the tenants to refurbish the property after years of neglect.

In the case of the CICB, an additional complicating factor has been the role of the Exécutif des Musulmans de Belgique (EMB), a body created in 1998 to serve as the official representative of Belgium's Muslim community. The EMB ostensibly obviated an externally funded organ such as the CICB, but it, too, quickly became beset by its own dysfunctions. Those dysfunctions were exacerbated by internal disputes between Muslim citizens from Turkey and Morocco; by foreign funding pouring in; and even by rivalries between Muslims from Brussels, Wallonia, and Flanders. The EMB has assumed control of the Grand Mosque now that the league's relationship with the CICB has been severed, and plans are reportedly under way to develop a local imam training program under the EMB's supervision.⁵⁵

Whether the league could have succeeded in implementing a deeper change at the Grand Mosque will remain an open question. Beyond replacing the CICB's director (no doubt a much-needed step), at least two additional measures would have been necessary. First, short of a major overhaul within the Saudi Ministry of Islamic Affairs (where, as one Belgian official

noted, “the real power lies”),⁵⁶ the league would have had to assert sole authority over the content of the training programs and pedagogical materials in use at the CICB. This has not happened, for reasons that are difficult to discern but that likely reflect challenges associated with bureaucratic reform within the kingdom.

Consolidating control over the content of foreign programs under one body, such as the league, would likely invite resistance from competing structures, such as the Islamic Affairs Ministry, which have presumably grown accustomed to exercising at least partial control over such programs. Whatever the reasons preventing a streamlining of administrative control over Saudi-funded institutions outside the kingdom, strong rhetorical commitments to reform on the part of the league’s leadership will go only so far if the organization has no mandate to translate those commitments into changes on the ground.

Relatedly, the league would have had to present a more robust intellectual response to the ideological extremism fueling the attacks in Belgium and other European capitals. In a meeting with Al-Issa and an advisor to the Islamic Affairs Ministry in Riyadh, the Belgian delegation reportedly asked them what they meant by “moderate Islam,” and the delegation was told the concept referred to the sayings and behaviors of the Prophet and his companions. The response left some members of the delegation unconvinced that the league would be offering an alternative to the rhetoric often espoused by radical, even jihadist, groups.⁵⁷

This response points to a central challenge facing Al-Issa and the league today, namely providing a sufficiently credible intellectual counterweight to the religious extremism that they are denouncing. The task is complicated by the fact that the league itself never produced a substantial body of Islamic scholarship, let alone one that could be used to counteract more extremist interpretations of the classical texts. (Documents such as the recent “Charter of Mecca,” described in greater detail shortly, may very well reflect an effort to begin developing and disseminating such scholarship under the league’s auspices.)

Furthermore, the directors of local branches such as the CICB typically have not been extensively trained religious scholars. Instead, they are most often former Saudi ambassadors who are in retirement following their careers at the Foreign Ministry. For his part, Tamer al-Saud, the interim director whom Al-Issa appointed to take over the CICB in 2016, is an Egyptian native with Swedish nationality and a background in business and finance. He is well suited to the task of cleaning up the mosque’s accounting and administration but less equipped to credibly transmit religious ideas.

It remains to be seen whether Al-Issa will manage to construct a sufficiently strong intellectual response to the more radical interpretations of Islamic texts and traditions, but initial indications suggest the league is at least aware of the need to do so. In 2018, Al-Issa was once again asked to

explain what he meant by “moderate Islam.” His response, which was more elaborate than the one he reportedly offered to the Belgian delegation in Riyadh a year prior, suggested he was aware that messengers of reformist ideas need to possess theological bona fides in order to present authentic alternatives to the ideas extremists have been peddling:

I specialize in Islamic law and studied these texts[,] and I am a religious person and know the truth of these texts and what they aim at. All Islamic texts respect everyone, respect diversity. In Islam there is a Quranic text that says: “There is no compulsion in religion.” And another Quranic text that calls for tolerance and beneficence with all Muslims and non-Muslims. It is a clear one. We cannot find extremists who inquire about this text; they do not mention it or do not want it.... [The Prophet Muhammad’s] neighbor was a Jew. And when his neighbor was sick, the Prophet Muhammad visited him. This is a fact. It’s not from an article that I have read, and it’s not fake history; it is attested by the Islamic texts transmitted to us...⁵⁸

In a similar vein, Al-Issa noted in a recent interview that the league’s efforts to combat extremist ideologies through education, engagement with traditional and social media, and conferences were aimed at tackling the problem by “trying to get deeper into [extremists’] ideology and by dismantling this ideology from within.”⁵⁹

A noteworthy example of such conferences occurred this past May, when, as noted, the league invited around 1,200 Muslim scholars to Mecca to explore problems related to Islamic extremism and proposals for combating the phenomenon. The declaration of principles issued upon the adjournment of the conference, known as the “Charter of Mecca” and endorsed by all 1,200 imams, was significant in several respects. Declaring that all human beings are “equal under God,” the document rejects all claims of religious superiority, and urges Muslims around the world to “establish a noble and effective alliance that goes beyond theory and empty slogans” in tackling “the root causes of terrorism.” The declaration also stipulates that women should be granted the right to equal wages and opportunity in religious, academic, political, and social spheres.⁶⁰ It remains to be seen whether specific initiatives, intellectual or otherwise, will emerge from this initial gathering, but the document suggests a more pointed attempt to confront religious extremism than at any time in the league’s history.

In the meantime, from the standpoint of Brussels, the damage has been done, and there is little appetite for seeing the league remain active in Belgium. More generally, the Belgian case demonstrates that as remarkable and laudable as the league’s recent policy shifts have been, several factors

have limited the extent to which such shifts have translated into tangible changes on the ground in places benefiting from the league's patronage.

Notwithstanding the league's official sponsorship of institutions such as mosques and schools outside Saudi Arabia, such sponsorship has evidently not always translated into tight or exclusive control over those institutions' day-to-day activities, personnel, and educational materials. Rather, to the extent the league *is* exercising such control, it is usually sharing the proverbial stage with other Saudi bodies back at home – principally, the Islamic Affairs and Foreign Affairs Ministries and the various relevant universities, all of which have played key roles in training the beneficiary institutions' personnel, producing the texts used in those institutions' libraries and classrooms, and partially paying the salaries of the relevant staff persons. Those agencies are unlikely to easily relinquish their involvement.

Finally, the league itself has not produced a compelling body of theological or jurisprudential commentary, which potentially limits the degree to which it can present itself as a religious authority or provide an intellectual counterweight to the ideological extremism that MbS and Al-Issa have sought to discredit. Those counterweights certainly exist, but they have yet to find an intellectual home in the relevant institutions of the Saudi religious establishment.⁶¹ Although the new Saudi minister of Islamic affairs, Sheikh Abdullatif al-Sheikh, is thought to be a reformist, he has not introduced dramatic changes at his ministry since assuming his post in 2018. As long as the league remains the junior player in the broader landscape of Saudi institutions responsible for providing content for, if not funding of, the kingdom's religious export, and as long as the dominant players in this regard remain unreformed, the league will likely face difficulty convincing observers that it is aligning its policies with its stated reform agenda. But here is where U.S. engagement may have a role to play.

Notes

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2. "Saudi Justice Minister Muhammad Al-Issa: Women Driving Not Illegal, But Depends on Will of Society," MEMRI clip no. 3819, April 26, 2013. Available at <https://www.memri.org/tv/saudi-justice-minister-muhammad-al-issa-women-driving-not-illegal-depends-will-society>. On the decision to appoint women to the Shura Council, the MWL issued a statement noting that men and women are equal in Islam and citing the Prophet Muhammad's record of consulting with his wives as evidence. See Y. Admon, "Women's Rights in Saudi Arabia: Historic Nomination of Women to Shura Council – Alongside Harsh Action by Regime Against Women's Rights Activists," MEMRI Inquiry and Analysis Series no. 986, June 21, 2013, <https://>

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 5. Angus McDowall, "Sacking Two Reformers and Handing Out Cash, New Saudi King Signals Approach," Reuters, February 3, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-succession-reform/sacking-two-reformers-and-handing-out-cash-new-saudi-king-signals-approach-idUSKBN0L70MV20150203>.
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 7. Sylvia Westall, "Saudi to Open Militant-Monitoring Center During Trump Visit," Reuters, May 20, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-gulf-centre/saudi-to-open-militant-monitoring-center-during-trump-visit-idUSKCN18G09P>.
 8. Eman Alhoussein, "The Enlightened Sheikhs of the New Saudi Arabia," Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, June 27, 2018, <https://agsiw.org/the-enlightened-sheikhs-of-the-new-saudi-arabia/>.
 9. For more on Abdullah's reformism, see Louise Lief, "With Youth Pounding at Kingdom's Gates, Saudi Arabia Begins Religious Police Reform," *Christian Science Monitor*, May 23, 2013; Admon, "Women's Rights"; Alhoussein, "The Enlightened Sheikhs of the New Saudi Arabia"; and Sharon Ahmad (senior reviewer), "The State of Tolerance in the Curriculum of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia," International Center for Religion and Diplomacy, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/08/17/international-home/document-state-dept-study-on-saudi-textbooks.html>.
 10. Abdelmajid Bakkar, "Al-Aqaliyat al-Muslima fi Euruba" [Muslim minorities in Europe], *Dawat al-Haqq* (1980), 53.
 11. Jindi, "Suqut al-Idiolojiyat" [The fall of ideologies], 13.
 12. Othman Abu Zayd Othman and Muhammad Waqi Allah Ahmad, "Al-Wujud al-Islami fi Amerika: al-Waqi wal-Aml" [The Muslim presence in America: Reality and hope], *Dawat al-Haqq* (2006): 69–70.
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 14. *Ibid.*, 36.
 15. For an unofficial translation of the charter, see <http://bit.ly/2NZO3KU>.
 16. *Asharq al-Awsat* (London), May 25, 2017. Cited in "On Social Media, Criticism of Muslim World League Secretary-General's Condemnation of Holocaust – but in Saudi Press, Support for It," MEMRI Special Dispatch no. 7368, March 6, 2018, https://www.memri.org/reports/social-media-criticism-muslim-world-league-secretary-generals-condemnation-holocaust-%E2%80%93-saudi#_ednref2.
 17. Author interview with Al-Issa, May 5, 2018, Washington DC.
 18. "Al-Issa: al-Indimaj al-Ijabi lil-Tanawu al-Watani Laysa Khiyyari bal dhourouri li-Wi'am al-Shuub wa-Salam al-Duwal" [Al-Issa: "Positive national integration of diversity is not merely a choice but a necessity for harmony among peoples and

- peace among the nations”], *Majallat Rabitat al-Alam al-Islami*, no. 629 (February 2019): 18, <https://themwl.org/sites/default/files/629.pdf>.
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 29. “Toward a More Moderate and Tolerant Islam.”
 30. See Mozammel Haque, “The Closure of al-Aqsa Mosque and the Reaction of the Muslim World,” *Muslim World League Journal* 46, no. 1 (October 2017): 31.
 31. See “Sacrilege Against Al Aqsa Mosque” and “MWL Condemns Israeli Barbarism” in *Muslim World League Journal* 9, no. 7 (May 1982): 18–19. Additionally, statements issued from meetings of the MWL Supreme Council in September 1981, September 1983, and February 1992 were critical of Zionists. The links have since been taken down, but the author retains copies of the texts.
 32. For the text of the joint statement, see https://twitter.com/MWLOrg_en/status/994056588397895680/photo/1. Concerning Abbas’s widely panned speech, see Oliver Holmes, “Mahmoud Abbas Apologizes for Holocaust Speech,” *Guardian*, May 4, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/04/mahmoud-abbas-apologises-for-holocaust-speech-palestinian-president-accused-antisemitism>.

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36. Robert Satloff, “A Historic Holocaust Awareness Awakening in Saudi Arabia, of All Places,” *New York Daily News*, January 26, 2018. For Al-Issa’s letter in Arabic, see <http://bit.ly/2kBumxa>.
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38. Irina Tsukerman, “Sheikh Works to Clarify Islam, Understand Judaism,” *Jewish Journal*, April 24, 2019, <https://jewishjournal.com/analysis/297546/sheikh-works-to-clarify-islam-understand-judaism/>. For more on the initiative to bring Al-Issa to Auschwitz, see “Muslim World League, American Jewish Committee Memorandum of Understanding Paves Way for Most Senior Islamic Delegation Ever to Visit Auschwitz,” *AJC Global Voice*, April 30, 2019, <https://www.ajc.org/news/muslim-world-league-american-jewish-committee-memorandum-of-understanding-paves-way-for-most>.
39. *Ibid.*
40. “On Social Media, Criticism of Muslim World League Secretary-General’s Condemnation of the Holocaust – but in Saudi Press, Support for It,” MEMRI Special Dispatch no. 7368, March 6, 2018, <https://www.memri.org/reports/social-media-criticism-muslim-world-league-secretary-generals-condemnation-holocaust-%E2%80%93-saudi>.
41. *Ibid.*
42. See, as examples, Ibrahim Darwish, “Al-Ikonomist: Ma Wuwa Sirr Ihtimam al-Anthama al-Diktatoriyya bil-Turath al-Yahudi fi al-Alam al-Arabi?” [*The Economist: What is the secret of the interest of dictatorial regimes in the Jewish heritage of the Arab world?*], *al-Quds al-Arabi*, April 5, 2019, <http://bit.ly/2lEHKRt>, and “Rabitat al-Alam al-Islami Tatajahil Hisar Qatar wa-Tatabana Huquq al-Yahud!” [The Muslim World League ignores the siege on Qatar and embraces the rights of Jews!] *al-Sharq*,

- May 10, 2018, <http://bit.ly/2k8yYUq>. In general, the league's Arabic-language Twitter account has received a handful of negative comments in instances in which it mentions initiatives in the West, including Al-Issa's outreach to the Holocaust museum. Meanwhile, the league's English-language Twitter account has received numerous Islamophobic comments.
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 45. Author interview with the cabinet of the Belgian minister of justice on November 28, 2018, Brussels.
 46. Thiolay and Lahouri, "l'Argent de l'Islam."
 47. Author interview with the Office of Coordination for Threat Assessment (OCAM) on November 27, 2018, Brussels.
 48. Ibid. For a comparison, see the discussion of Saudi influence on the religious education received in public schools across the United Kingdom in Wilson, "Foreign Funded Islamist Extremism in the UK," 6.
 49. "La formation des imams et des professeurs de religion islamique en Belgique: Le cas du Centre islamique et culturel de Belgique (CICB)" (Brussels: OCAM, 2016), 17.
 50. Ibid., 11–12.
 51. Author interview with OCAM on November 27, 2018, Brussels.
 52. Author interview with OCAM on November 27, 2018, Brussels.
 53. Author interview with the cabinet of the Belgian minister of justice on November 28, 2018.
 54. Author interviews with the cabinet of the Belgian minister of justice and a local CICB staff person on November 28, 2018, Brussels.
 55. Author interview with the cabinet of the Belgian minister of justice on November 28, 2018.
 56. Ibid.
 57. Author interview with OCAM on November 27, 2018, Brussels.
 58. "Toward a More Moderate and Tolerant Islam."
 59. Tsukerman, "Sheikh Works to Clarify Islam," <https://jewishjournal.com/analysis/297546/sheikh-works-to-clarify-islam-understand-judaism/>.
 60. See <http://bit.ly/2NZO3KU>.
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CHAPTER 4

Saudi Religious Export and Implications for U.S. Policy

THE EVOLVING NATURE AND EXTENT OF SAUDI ARABIA'S RELIGIOUS EXPORT, AS facilitated through institutions such as the Muslim World League, will continue to affect U.S. efforts to counter the spread of Islamic extremism and to contain the groups espousing it. As such, the overarching goal from Washington's standpoint should be to ensure that the ongoing activities of the league and affiliated organizations with Saudi backing ultimately serve the broader interest of containing this extremism.

Underlying the pursuit of this goal is an assumption worth spelling out – namely, that Saudi Arabia and organizations like the league have a role to play in countering Islamic extremism and, thus, ought to be doing so more effectively. Given the kingdom's history of both channeling support to problematic institutions abroad and embracing an acutely intolerant strain of Salafism at home, the notion that Saudi Arabia would now be in a position to lead the charge against extremist ideas and their adherents has struck some observers as fanciful or downright disingenuous. A related argument contends that Riyadh's problematic human rights record and a broader reluctance to engage in political liberalization undermine its credibility when pushing for religious reforms.¹

For others, Riyadh's divestment from Islamic institutions such as the Brussels Grand Mosque should be welcomed and encouraged elsewhere. Indeed, a handful of countries, such as Norway and Australia, have recently enacted legal regulations limiting foreign, particularly Saudi, funding for Islamic institutions. Still, recent agreements granting the league responsibility for overseeing imam training in places like Russia suggest moves to limit Saudi interference remain the exceptions to the rule. (Given Russia's hostility to anything hinting of Islamic extremism, the Kremlin's decision to entrust the MWL with training the next generation of Russian imams speaks volumes about Moscow's confidence in the organization's ability to counter this extremism.) Even in places like Belgium and Britain, where the league and Saudi Arabia more generally face hostility for their past involvement in exporting extremism, there remains no legal impediment to Saudi engagement with local Muslim communities.²

The anger and frustration directed at Saudi Arabia by communities around the world affected by Sunni extremism is understandable and well

founded, but three considerations should be borne in mind before ruling out a role for Riyadh in pushing back against the extremism that it played a critical role in spawning.

First, few questioned Saudi Arabia's credibility throughout the period it was disseminating extremist interpretations of Islamic teachings and traditions. Therefore, to claim that its promotion of more moderate strains of the religion lacks sincerity risks implying that there is something more authentically Islamic about the extremist variants. As the history of the league demonstrates, Riyadh's export of Islam has *always* been driven principally by political considerations, so it is difficult to see why those considerations should render the promotion of moderate ideas any less credible than the export of more radical ones. Saudi Arabia is manifestly already affecting religious discourse beyond its borders, so all else being equal, it is in Washington's interest to see a Saudi government advancing the ideas that Al-Issa is promoting rather than their extremist alternatives.

Second, notwithstanding the resentment that some Muslim communities bear toward the Saudis for their interference in local religious rituals and practice, the holy status of Mecca and Medina means that some form of Saudi influence on Muslim communities, however indirect, will likely always be operational. It is doubtful the Saudis would have managed to interfere quite so effectively over the years without minimal local receptivity. That receptivity partly stemmed from the special place Mecca and Medina occupy in Islam and partly from the Saudi largesse that accompanied its sponsorship of local programs and activities.

To be sure, Riyadh will continue to face competitors in the religious marketplace, and much of Al-Issa's work today seems aimed at ensuring that the league – and by extension Saudi Arabia – continues to dominate the market.³ The league's prime competitor today is Al-Azhar, long considered the world's leading Islamic seminary. But for reasons ranging from bureaucratic inertia to outright refusal, Al-Azhar has evidently been unable or unwilling to launch the kinds of reforms many in the Muslim world (including Egyptian president Abdul Fattah al-Sisi) have sought.⁴ From the U.S. perspective, then, the campaign to contain and ultimately stamp out Islamic extremism will likely be more successful if the league under Al-Issa trounces Al-Azhar in the competition. And to the extent Al-Issa succeeds, the very "success" of the league and affiliated organizations in spreading extremist ideas over previous decades suggests that a concerted Saudi investment in Muslim communities around the world can yield substantial returns. The challenge is in guaranteeing that this investment supports a religious education compatible with, at minimum, basic notions of human dignity, pluralism, local cultural and religious practices, mutual respect, and tolerance for conflicting viewpoints.

Third, although the rise of non-state Islamic movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood and anti-state jihadist movements such as al-Qaeda

has led some to question the relevancy and reach of state-linked religious institutions in Muslim-majority countries, the available evidence points to a significant and enduring role for the latter.

Although it may seem counterintuitive to Western, especially U.S., observers who are accustomed to a clearer separation between religious and state authorities, state-linked religious leaders and institutions garner substantial public support and retain considerable influence in Muslim-majority countries. Several examples are instructive. In the case of Saudi Arabia, a recent study found that *ulama* associated with the state were *more*, not less, likely to be trusted than were their non-state peers.⁵

In Egypt, an estimated 2 million schoolchildren are being educated in Al-Azhar's network of primary and secondary schools.⁶ And to the extent that social media offers a platform for institutional reach today, the Muslim World League boasts 3.5 million followers on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube combined, so it makes little sense for Washington to construct a policy for countering Islamic extremism without recognizing a role for state-linked religious institutions such as the league.⁷

Such a policy would ideally involve improved methods of both tracking and reporting on Saudi progress in reforming its religious operations overseas, and the enhancements in the bilateral relationship with Riyadh. Specifically, the Trump administration should do the following:

- **Augment the relevant reporting mechanisms of U.S. embassies in countries where the league remains active.** Although political counselors in U.S. embassies around the world regularly report about key developments within their assigned countries, to date there has not been systematic reporting about the nature and extent of Saudi (or, for that matter, other external) involvement in religious institutions and programs in those countries. The U.S. State Department should direct posts around the world to regularly report about such involvement, with a view to better understanding the evolving form and tenor of Saudi religious export.
- **Create a standalone mechanism of consultation and intelligence sharing covering religious export by Saudi Arabia (and others).** U.S. counterterrorism officials in the State Department and the National Security Council have reportedly begun devoting greater attention to countries' export of extremism, including but not limited to the actions of Saudi Arabia.⁸ A next step would be to institutionalize this attention by establishing an interagency body tasked with consolidating information – as gleaned principally from U.S. diplomatic offices abroad – about the relevant countries' proselytization efforts beyond their respective borders. Then the officials could relay this information back to U.S. allies and collectively devise ways to ensure this proselytization does not fuel extremism.

- **Incorporate religious reform into high-level consultations that comprise the bilateral strategic dialogue.** Beyond enhancing the reporting function of staff in the relevant U.S. embassies, Washington should incorporate the matter of Saudi religious reform – both within the kingdom and as it pertains to the leadership’s religious export – into regular, high-level consultations that make up the bilateral strategic dialogue. Although the United States cannot be in the business of reforming other countries’ internal religion-state dynamics, the history and structural particularities of the league demonstrate that the content of Saudi Arabia’s religious export is intimately tied to its domestic religious consumption. As long as that stays true (e.g., as long as Saudi agencies such as the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Ministry of Education continue to produce the content of textbooks and curricular materials exported beyond the kingdom), Washington will need to continue holding Riyadh accountable for any problematic material that surfaces in beneficiary institutions abroad. The most natural candidate to take the lead on this would be the U.S. ambassador in Riyadh, ideally working in concert with the assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs.

The current Saudi leadership’s stated commitment to rolling back Islamic extremism presents an opportunity to engage Riyadh as a partner in pursuing precisely the kinds of religion-related reforms to which MbS has committed his country. An important first step would be to convey that however the Saudi government chooses to structure and regulate the institutions tasked with producing and disseminating religious materials, Washington hopes to see a clear line of responsibility emerge in such a way that the kingdom’s policies on the ground align with its stated reform goals.

- **Pursue opportunities for direct engagement with the league.** Notwithstanding the traditional, and understandable, U.S. ambivalence toward interfering with religious institutions and organizations at home and abroad, recent years saw the emergence of several initiatives within the U.S. government aimed at engaging religious leaders around the world on a range of issues. The State Department’s Office of Religion and Global Affairs, for example, worked from 2013 to 2017 to advise the secretary on religious affairs and establish partnerships with religious actors in the pursuit of shared interests. Although budget cuts in 2017 effectively eliminated this office, reinstating it would provide a useful mechanism for engagement with the MWL today. Short of that, entrusting an existing bureau, such as the Bureau of International Organization Affairs, with outreach to the league would open avenues for constructive engagement. Three examples of such engagement bear mention:

First, whereas the league dramatically reduced its footprint in the United States following the FBI’s raids of its affiliated Virginia offices in

2001, Al-Issa has indicated he plans to reestablish a permanent presence for the league in New York. A more direct engagement with the league would help ensure that the reforms Al-Issa has outlined extend to, and benefit from the input of, Muslim communities in the United States.

Second, more direct U.S. government engagement with the league would help identify areas of potential partnership surrounding the league's extensive humanitarian and interfaith work. For example, in 2018 the league opened a relief center in Bangladesh to provide basic healthcare and educational services to Muslim refugees fleeing persecution in Myanmar. The involvement of American relief organizations, governmental and nongovernmental alike, in such initiatives would bring assistance to communities in need, but also serve a key public diplomacy function, to the extent that such engagement enhances U.S. relations with Muslim communities around the world.

Finally, direct engagement would provide a mechanism through which the United States could seek to change certain policies of the league. Consider the organization's muted stance on China's detention of nearly one million ethnic Uyghurs and other Muslims in Xinjiang province. A permanent channel of communication and engagement with the league would provide U.S. officials a means of conveying American concerns and perhaps even convincing the league to develop an alternative approach.

- **Work with Congress to establish a unified front vis-à-vis Riyadh.** Any U.S. effort to engage Saudi Arabia in the fight against extremism will be hampered to the extent the White House and Congress continue to be at odds over the viability and merits of the bilateral relationship more generally. The murder of Jamal Khashoggi, the Saudis' involvement in the ongoing war in Yemen, and MbS's autocratic leadership style have left Riyadh with few allies on Capitol Hill, where legislators from both parties have sought to advance punitive measures against the kingdom and to significantly downgrade the alliance.

The White House needs to quietly but actively reach out to lawmakers and explore ways to reestablish a minimal degree of consensus on the bilateral relationship. In so doing, the White House and Congress would bolster each other's leverage on Riyadh, with congressional expressions of concern boosting the administration's credibility and influence in raising such issues with Riyadh, while ensuring the executive branch does not lose sight of the serious threats associated with the proliferation of extremist groups. Constructive relations with Saudi Arabia, fraught as they may be, remain critical to U.S. interests, not least the endeavor to combat the spread of extremist ideologies.

Notes

1. For a recent exposition of this argument, see Hala Al-Dosari, “Saudi Arabia’s Intolerance Weakens Its Islamic Leadership,” *Washington Post*, April 22, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/04/22/saudi-arabias-intolerance-weakens-its-islamic-leadership/?utm_term=.530ef5532831.
2. For more on the agreement to train imams in Russia, see https://twitter.com/MWLOrg_en/status/1112032991096786944/video/1 and “Muslim World League Makes History with Moscow Summit,” *Arab News*, March 30, 2019, <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1475061/saudi-arabia>. On the legal framework for foreign funding of Islamic institutions in Britain, see Wilson, “Foreign Funded Islamist Extremism in the UK,” 7–9. For a more general overview of European countries’ recent efforts to limit foreign funding for Islamic institutions, see Doris Fiala, “Regulating Foreign Funding of Islam in Europe to Prevent Radicalisation and Islamophobia,” report for the Parliamentary Assembly, Council of Europe (September 11, 2018), <http://website-pace.net/documents/18848/4457779/20180911-ForeignFundingIslam-EN.pdf/ea75521c-6602-47b0-80ad-7922c7aff80f>.
3. Consider, for example, the league’s agreement with Japan to be the exclusive distributor of halal-certified meals at the 2020 Olympics. See “Muslim World League to Supply Halal Meals for Japan and 2020 Olympic Games,” *Arab News*, March 18, 2018, <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1268396/saudi-arabia>. In a similar vein, Al-Issa was reportedly critical of the “Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together,” recently signed in Abu Dhabi by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmed al-Tayeb, not so much because of the document’s contents as because of the elevated status it implicitly conferred on Al-Azhar. The document is available at <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2019-02/pope-francis-uae-declaration-with-al-azhar-grand-imam.html>.
4. For more on Al-Azhar’s struggles to reform, see Nathan J. Brown, “Post-Revolutionary Al-Azhar,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 3, 2011, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/al_azhar.pdf. See also Brown, “The Battle over Al-Azhar,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 31, 2017, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/70103>.
5. Courtney Freer, *Religious Authorities in Wahhabi States* (Houston: Baker Institute for Public Policy, 2019), <https://www.bakerinstitute.org/media/files/files/d699be8b/brief-050619-cme-luce-freer.pdf>. For more on the historical trajectory and contemporary import of state Islam, see Sarah J. Feuer, *Regulating Islam: Religion and the State in Contemporary Morocco and Tunisia* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Feuer, *State Islam in the Battle Against Extremism*; and Peter Mandaville and Shadi Hamid, “Islam as Statecraft: How Governments Use Religion in Foreign Policy,” Brookings Institution, November 2018.
6. Brown, “Post-Revolutionary Al-Azhar,” 4, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/al_azhar.pdf.
7. The league appears to enjoy the largest social media following of any state-linked Muslim religious institution worldwide. Still, non-state organizations and individuals affiliated with movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood continue to attract substantial followings. Consider, for example, Yusuf al-Qaradawi’s 4.6 million followers or the Saudi cleric Aidh al-Qarni, a leading figure in that country’s *sahwa* (Islamic revival) movement of the 1990s who enjoys 18 million followers on Twitter alone.
8. John Hannah, “It’s Time for Saudi Arabia to Stop Exporting Extremism,” *Foreign Policy*, May 3, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/05/03/its-time-for-saudi-arabia-to-stop-exporting-extremism/>.

Appendix

Founding Declaration of the Muslim World League, 1962

THE FIRST GENERAL ISLAMIC CONFERENCE

Country: Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

City: Mecca

Start of conference: May 18, 1962

End of conference: May 20, 1962

The first General Islamic Conference was held in Mecca with the attendance of many Muslim leaders and scholars. The attendees decided at the end of the conference to form a popular Islamic body that will be headquartered in Mecca and that will be named the Muslim World League. The membership of the league will include scholars (*ulama*) and Muslim thinkers who can promote Islamic cooperation and ensure that the message of Islam is communicated and disseminated throughout the world.

The conference concluded after the attendees determined the most pressing concerns for Muslims from different areas of the world regarding their religion. Decisions and recommendations were made on such matters as:

- First: Islam over factionalism
- Second: Social justice
- Third: Islamic cooperation
- Fourth: The Islamic University
- Fifth: Mending Islamic societies
- Sixth: The Palestinian issue

APPENDIX

- Seventh: Islamic issues
- Eighth: Abyssinian/Ethiopian Muslims
- Ninth: Muslims in India
- Tenth: The African continent
- Eleventh: Nuclear tests
- Twelfth: Muslim minorities
- Thirteenth: Establishment of the Muslim World League

The attendees of the Islamic conference, held in Mecca on May 19, 1962, have decided to establish an Islamic body headquartered in Mecca and named the “Muslim World League.”

Goals of the league: performing God’s duty in spreading Islam, explaining its principles and teachings, refuting interpretations that disfigure it, fighting conspiracies that seek to sow sedition among Muslims and undermine their unity and brotherhood, and taking into consideration Islamic issues so that the interests and hopes of Muslims may be achieved and their problems resolved

- Fourteenth: Thanking His Excellency the King

The conference decided to offer its thanks and gratitude to His Excellency King Saud bin Abdulaziz of Saudi Arabia for his honest efforts in promoting Islam and for advocating Muslim causes. The conference also thanks the king for his work in establishing the Muslim University in Medina and for his efforts in raising its reputation. His Excellency has also been praised for his facilitation in holding this conference in Mecca, which has enabled participants to address issues affecting Muslims, to promote cooperation between them, and to help establish the Muslim World League as a vital tool for defending the general interests of Muslims and for solving their issues in accordance with Islamic guidance.



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