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# How Can Saudi Arabia and Egypt Help Confront Toxic Ideologies?

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Brief Analysis

## Two experts discuss how Washington can use its warming relations with Cairo and Riyadh to foster soft-power reform campaigns.

**O**n January 18, Joseph Braude and Samuel Tadros addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Braude is an advisor to Al-Mesbar Studies and Research Center and a senior fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute. Tadros is a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute's Center for Religious Freedom and a distinguished visiting fellow in Middle Eastern studies at the Hoover Institution. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks; video of the full event is available above.

## JOSEPH BRAUDE

**S**ome Saudis outside the government, primarily media figures, have been trying to counter extremist ideologies in their midst for some time. In recent years, they have expressed optimism about Riyadh's new policies and are very interested in international partnerships to improve their effectiveness. These are not dissidents; they are

establishment voices pushing the boundaries of the small space they have been given.

For instance, some of these individuals produced a comedy show called *Tash ma-tash*, which roughly translates to "Either you get it or you don't." In one skit, women call the police to alert them of a burglar entering their house, but when the officers realize that the women's father is away, they say they cannot enter unless a man is present. The satirical skit was even broadcast on an official government channel. Introducing new ideas has not been easy, of course—four out of every ten scripts the producers submitted to the Ministry of Information were rejected. Over time, however, things that were once controversial became more mundane, and such programs were able to make a bit of a dent.

New ideas were also introduced by turning news developments into teachable moments. In 2014, Mansour al-Nogaidan—a former hardline preacher who had become more liberal—was asked what he thought of the government's effort to prevent teachers from recruiting for the Muslim Brotherhood. He replied that the policy should be accompanied by greater efforts to foster tolerance in the kingdom; in particular, he criticized the penetration of Salafi-jihadist ideas in Saudi schools and urged educators to promote inclusiveness toward Shia.

Although the Saudi figures responsible for such initiatives are not policymakers, they are capable of affecting the informational climate in which policies are made. Saudi liberals are especially successful at appealing to the individualistic desires of their society, since many modern Saudis are deeply interested in expanding personal freedoms.

Against this backdrop, the kingdom's new leaders have made a number of decisions that could prove crucial to countering extremism and promoting tolerance. First, the government has been pursuing a major economic overhaul and a more liberal social agenda. Second, Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman has acknowledged that 1979 marked the beginning of a long period of broad, problematic government support for extremist ideologies. Third, he has shown a willingness to use security measures to clamp down not only on violent fringe elements, but also on their sympathizers within the clerical establishment.

Yet the challenge lies in changing not just government policies, but popular opinion as well. In a past clip from Wesal TV, a channel funded by Kuwaitis but largely staffed by Saudis, the narrator bashes Shia Islam and Iran's regional expansion, saying "O Arabs, Iran wants to turn your home into hell." The Saudi government banned the network in 2014, and Bahrain and Kuwait soon followed suit. Two years later, however, a reformist member of the Saudi Shura Council posted a poll on Twitter and found that 82 percent of respondents opposed the closure.

Regarding outside assistance, each agenda item pursued by Saudi liberals includes a role for international players. The first item is a more well-rounded religious education, which entails making textbooks more tolerant and inclusive, training teachers from a more open-minded point of view, and giving space to multiple interpretations of Islam, with the aim of encouraging moderation. The second is the creation of an inclusive Saudi nationalism based not on claims of ideological supremacy, but rather on the success of a national project in which all citizens are vested, including historically marginalized communities. Third is the fostering of a unified Gulf identity, building on Saudi-Emirati cultural osmosis and expanding to the other Gulf Cooperation Council states. At a time when the U.S.-Saudi relationship is improving and a critical mass of Saudis welcome international partnership, Washington has ample opportunities to directly engage reformists on confronting toxic ideologies.

## **SAMUEL TADROS**

**F**or several decades now, America's understanding of the Middle East has waned even as its military has become more involved there. This knowledge gap was partly the result of an academic assault in which serious studies of the region were often accused of fostering a colonialist agenda. Today, political science dominates the conversation about the Middle East, and Westerners know very little about the region's actual residents—their cultures, their lives,

or their concerns. This includes top area scholars, many of whom do not know what the people are reading, watching, or listening to.

For example, at a time when Middle Eastern youths are increasingly willing to question social taboos, more than a dozen novels have been published about Jews who lived in the Arab world. There is also a sense of cultural nostalgia about cosmopolitan Alexandria, as seen in numerous books, films, television shows, and songs. Meanwhile, the term "Arab world" is becoming less and less useful—the region has many different societies with different identities, and what is popular in one culture may not be in another.

To be sure, certain states have been instrumental in spreading ideas across the Middle East over the years, especially Gamal Abdul Nasser's Egypt and the Sunni clerical establishment in Saudi Arabia. This may be why Washington tends to believe there is a lever Riyadh can pull to reverse the spread of radicalism in the region. In reality, though, toxic ideas are much more difficult to contain.

Middle Eastern governments have a crucial role to play in any effort to address this problem. Given their well-established regional influence, Riyadh and Cairo need to take the lead in this endeavor; after all, Egyptian Arabic used to be the most common dialect in Arabic media, and the new Saudi leadership seems keen to play a more assertive role. The United Arab Emirates could also provide robust support for anti-extremist discourse at home and abroad.

In January 2015, Egyptian president Abdul Fattah al-Sisi publicly called for a religious revolution, and Washington hailed his remarks. Three years later, no such revolution has taken place, but this is hardly surprising when one considers that Sisi lacked a plan, the means to enact it, and a base to support it. Fortunately, the opportunity to enact some change in Egypt still exists. Islamists retain many advantages, including a comprehensive worldview and way of life that competing ideologies cannot offer. Yet many Middle Easterners have lived under the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamic State in recent years, and they did not enjoy their experience. This has caused people to reexamine their notions about the role of religion in society.

Social media has a crucial role to play as well. Even as the Sisi government attempts to control the traditional news media, alternative outlets like YouTube are having an impact. Many parodies of Islamic State videos have gone viral, serving as a powerful tool against the group's Islamist narrative. Wider use of alternative media could provide a serious means of countering toxic ideas.

*This summary was prepared by Erika Naegeli. ❖*



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