

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

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Throughout 2016 and 2017, statements from Riyadh suggested that Saudi Arabia might be on the verge of reorienting its decades-long promotion of Salafism around the world. Given the sheer scale of the kingdom's support for Islamic institutions over the years, the ripple effects of such a shift would be profound. Saudi efforts to propagate its particular brand of Salafism have long been anchored in the Mecca-based Muslim World League, but the ascent of Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman has apparently shunted the MWL in a different direction. Recent initiatives suggest Riyadh has assigned the league a central role in its broader religious reform agenda, at least as it applies to the export of religious doctrine abroad.

In this deeply researched Policy Focus, Sarah Feuer, an expert on Middle East religion and politics, explores the meanings of Saudi reforms, how they are playing out within the MWL, and the broader implications for the U.S.-Saudi relationship. She recommends that Washington expand reporting mechanisms in nations where the MWL is active, pursue avenues to engage directly with the league, and incorporate religious reform into the high-level U.S.-Saudi strategic dialogue, all toward promoting moderation and undermining extremism.

THE AUTHOR

Sarah Feuer is an associate fellow with The Washington Institute's Beth and David Geduld Program on Arab Politics. She was previously a senior fellow and a Soref Fellow at the Institute, where she authored numerous policy papers covering developments across North Africa and religion-state dynamics in the broader Arab world. Her book *Regulating Islam: Religion and the State in Contemporary Morocco and Tunisia* was published in 2018 by Cambridge University Press. Feuer holds a PhD from Brandeis University and currently lives in Tel Aviv, where she is a research fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies.