

# What to Do About Saudi Arabia

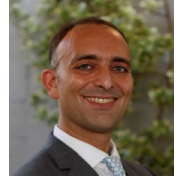
 [fpri.org/article/2016/06/what-to-do-about-saudi-arabia/](https://fpri.org/article/2016/06/what-to-do-about-saudi-arabia/)

Joseph Braude

June 2016

## E-Notes

**Joseph Braude** is a Senior Fellow in FPRI's Program on the Middle East and Adviser to Al-Mesbar Studies and Research Center in Dubai.



***American policymakers share a concern that the Saudi government, Saudi charities, and wealthy Saudi individuals continue to promote extremism around the world. Their assessment, however, tends to rely on findings and assumptions that are imprecise and out of date. Meanwhile, local actors within the kingdom are struggling to fight the extremist strain in their own society. In this E-Note, FPRI Senior Fellow Joseph Braude explains how the situation in Saudi Arabia has evolved in recent years, and explores the implications for American policy.***

On May 21, the *New York Times* [published an investigative report from Kosovo](#) about the radicalization of local youth by Islamists from the Gulf. It finds that over the past 17 years, mosques, Muslim charities, and imams, funded or trained by "Saudis and others," used a combination of inculcation, intimidation, and violence to undermine tolerant local Islamic traditions and foment a new jihadist sensibility among the population. It notes that Kosovo has become Europe's largest per capita exporter of foreign fighters to the Islamic State — and that over the past two years, in a Kosovar security crackdown, 14 clerics were arrested and 19 Muslim organizations shut down. Five Gulf countries and Egypt are fingered as the instigators, but the focus of the piece is Saudi Arabia.



The report was widely discussed in Washington, and became the subject of an [article in Commentary by Max Boot](#). He concludes that Americans should not neglect the Gulf's continuing role in Islamist inculcation worldwide. In Boot's view, "Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states have done more to crack down on outright financing of terrorist groups" since the September 11 tragedy, but "Saudi Arabia has not, as far as I can tell, made as much progress in decreasing its support for mosques and madrassas abroad preaching doctrines of hatred." The kingdom nonetheless remains a U.S. ally to any White House committed to struggling against the Tehran regime, he writes. Given that the present Administration has angered Saudi Arabia by coddling Iran, Boot counsels winning back the Gulf's goodwill by aggressively countering Iran, then parlaying that political capital to apply greater pressure to end the export of Sunni militancy.

Indeed, American pressure matters ever less in Riyadh and allied Gulf states. Their leaderships believe that Obama policies toward Tehran have further emboldened the mullahs to train their Arab Shi'ite proxy militias on Sunni populations and Gulf interests in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, as well as the Gulf countries themselves. But even if a future White House reverses the Obama approach and regains goodwill in the Gulf, addressing the problems described in the *Times* piece will require a strategy more involved than the application of political pressure. To develop one, Americans need a clearer understanding of the present-day sources of Islamist soft power in the Gulf — and to become acquainted with reformist political elements indigenous to the region that are

themselves attempting to weaken them.

## I. Wahhabi distinctions and the Shifting Role of Saudi Charities

The *Times* investigation, which appears to rely largely on the Kosovar security establishment for information and analysis, acknowledges that its account of which ideological forces from the East infiltrated the country and how is “obscure” and “labyrinthine.” Witness the coverage of Kosovar national Zekirja Qazimi, a cleric who influenced hundreds of Kosovars and, according to local authorities, helped steer the campaign of violence. The article says he was indoctrinated by “Egyptian-based extremists and the patronage of Saudi and other Gulf Arab sponsors.” “Preachers like Al-Qazimi” (emphasis mine) were financed by the Balkans-based Saudi charity Al-Waqf al-Islami, which in turn received its funding “mostly” from “Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and Bahrain.” The reporting is also noncommittal as to whether these monies came from governments, government-supported Islamic institutions, or wealthy individuals. Elsewhere the piece reports that Saudi Arabia has reduced its “aid” to Kosovo — a term that would seem to imply government aid — but support for “the same hardline version of Islam” now comes from “Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates.” What is this hardline version of Islam? The reporter uses the term Wahhabism, associated mainly with Saudi religious figures, to describe all cases of radicalism in Kosovo, regardless of which of the myriad countries and players backed them.

In building its case against the Saudi government specifically, the article cites Saudi diplomatic cables intercepted by Wikileaks in 2015 showing that the Saudi consulate in New Delhi had paid stipends to 140 Muslim preachers in India. Who were these clerics and what did they preach? The article does not ask. As to the more salient question of whether equivalent monies were paid to Kosovar clerics by the Saudi embassy in Pristina, the article is silent. (So are the Wikileaks cables, which contain no such record.) Of the 19 Islamic institutions which the Kosovo government shut down, three are named — leaving unclear where most of the organizations originated or how to apportion their host governments' respective roles in that aspect of the indoctrination.

In sum, the article raises more questions than it answers, and lacks information essential to our understanding of what has actually happened in Kosovo.

It matters to know precisely what doctrine or doctrines the country's foreign-backed clerics embrace, for example. The piece defines Wahhabism as a belief in “the supremacy of Shari'a law as well as ideas of violent jihad and takfirism, which authorizes the killing of Muslims considered heretics for not following its interpretation of Islam.” But the term Wahhabism — evoking the historic alliance between the central Arabian cleric Muhammad bin 'Abd al-Wahhab and Muhammad bin Saud, founder of the first Saudi state — encompasses not one but a spectrum of religious currents inside the kingdom today. Its meaning further dissipates as the field broadens beyond Saudi Arabia to include four other Gulf states and Egypt. Inside the kingdom, contrary to what the reporter suggests, a large contingent of “Wahhabi” clerics do not advocate “takfirism” or call for armed jihad themselves. To the contrary, they preach that only the *Wali al-Amr* — Islamic legal parlance for a Muslim head of state — has the right to declare war, and God alone decides who is a heretic. This large faction may be broadly categorized as “Salafi traditionalist” — as opposed to “Salafi jihadists,” who do arrogate to themselves the right to declare a holy war and decide who has strayed from God's path.

To be clear, proponents of liberal universalist principles will find no takers in either of these camps, both of which maintain a hostile stance toward alternative readings of Islam, the principle of gender equality, and the virtue of pluralism. (With respect to acceptance of Jews and Christians at a distance, there has been some progress in pockets of the traditionalist camp.) Practically speaking, moreover, the dividing line between traditionalists and jihadists is porous. But the distinction becomes important when attempting to parse the role of states, state-backed institutions, and individuals in exporting militant ideology. Saudi establishment support for Salafi jihadists peaked during the Afghan war against Soviet occupation and continued well into the 1990s. Over the past 15 years, however, the government has worked to ensure that traditionalists control the purse strings of clerical endowments. This policy, spurred by September 11, acquired a second wind in the mid-aughts as Al-Qaeda targeted the kingdom itself, and has only intensified in the wake of new attacks by the Islamic State.

The status of Salafi jihadism in Saudi Arabia contrasts with that of Kuwait, where adherents to the movement

essentially control a bloc in parliament. The wealthiest among them have provided most of the funding for a franchise of political parties, "Ahzab al-Umma," which [backs Al-Qaeda affiliates in Syria and has called for a terror campaign within the Gulf itself](#). In Bahrain, a Sunni monarchy ruling a restive Shi'ite majority, Salafism of every stripe has found a sympathetic environment in which to advance its strident Sunni sectarian message. But that cash-strapped government, consumed with domestic instability, does not allocate resources to export much of anything. The UAE, for its part, has declared war on "political Islam" as a whole. Quite to the contrary of what the *Times* report seems to allege, its government supports soft power initiatives to shore up *alternatives* to Salafism and the Muslim Brotherhood — including local traditions of religious tolerance which extremists seek to erode. Due largely to the UAE's policies, the country has been supremely at odds with nearby Qatar, long a backer of the Muslim Brotherhood (a movement which cannot simply be shoehorned into the category of "Wahhabism" either). Yet the *Times* piece arranges the UAE and Qatar side by side.

With respect to donations to Salafi jihadist causes by individual Gulf nationals, as opposed to the government or state-backed institutions, the situation varies as well. The UAE has waged the most stringent clampdown — tough enough to cast doubt on the *Times* allegation of a recent UAE role in Kosovar radicalization. Saudi Arabia, a much larger and more difficult country in which to police the flow of money, has also made serious efforts, acknowledged by the U.S. Government. By contrast, tiny Qatar and especially Kuwait have done far less, and are believed to be the source of more if not most Gulf-based jihadist ideological exportation today.

As to the Salafi traditionalists, however objectionable some of their teachings, when they call for obedience to the Muslim head of state, they do a kind of service to the order of Westphalian sovereignty which groups like the Islamic State oppose. For a sense of how, watch this two-minute excerpt from a March 2016 report by the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY) about its activities in Djibouti (subtitles mine):

WAMY was founded in Saudi Arabia in 1972 by an Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood ideologue at a time when the Brotherhood, too, enjoyed Saudi generosity. In the 1990s, I consumed hundreds of video and audiocassettes distributed by WAMY in the vicinity of Falls Church, Virginia. Sermons railed against nationalism as an un-Islamic "innovation," calling on believers to embrace a transnational Islamist political identity in its stead. Incitement against Israel and "world Jewry" was a mainstay of the content, alongside support for Hamas and other Brotherhood offshoots across the region. In 2004, U.S. Federal authorities raided the WAMY office in Falls Church and found evidence of continuing WAMY support for Hamas.

But 12 years later, the Brotherhood has been considerably weakened within the organization, attacks on Jews are comparatively rare within its published and audiovisual discourse, and calls to reject the integrity of nation-states have ceased. The video report from Djibouti — intended for Arab, not Western, consumption — offers a glimpse into this shift: the narrator affirms the "values of citizenship and identification with the nation-state" as an underlying goal of its charitable works, a premise that would make old-timers at WAMY cringe. In spelling out how the group applies these values, the video notes that it works in coordination with Djibouti's president, Isma'il Omar Guelleh, "May God protect him." WAMY's sponsorship of an indigenous tribal performance, as spotlighted for a moment in the video, reflects a departure from the assault on local cultural traditions which remains a primary goal of Salafi jihadists the world over.

The leadership of WAMY in Djibouti understands that were it to allow a firebrand like Kosovar national Zekirja Qazimi to in any way benefit from the group's support, the charity would be held accountable to President Guelleh and his security apparatus.

Across Sunni Arab lands in which the largest Saudi endowments are active, one may draw a similar contrast between the strident message various Saudi "aid workers" advanced in the 1990s and their more recent, quietist bent. Witness Morocco: in 2003, after triple suicide bombings rocked Casablanca, Moroccan king Mohammed VI declared war on ideologies "from the East" which had infiltrated his country's mosques, radicalized young people, and weakened tolerant indigenous traditions of Sufism and Maliki Islamic law. From the standpoint of the Moroccan kingdom's security sector, fighting this war entailed a purge of mosques which had been oiled and influenced by Salafi jihadist elements in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf. From the standpoint of the Moroccan Ministry of Islamic Affairs, waging the war meant reinvigorating local Islamic traditions of tolerance and royalism. These measures have been taken in full force — yet the Saudi kingdom, a staunch Moroccan ally, remains a prominent

benefactor to Moroccan mosques. Present-day oversight and close coordination between the two countries' leaderships ensure that *only* Morocco decides what role Islam should play in public life, and how its mosques and seminaries should be run.

This shift becomes important in assessing the relationship between Saudi Islamic charities and the problem of "foreign fighters," which frames the *Times* story about Kosovo. In the Islamic State, most foreign fighters hail not from Europe and North America but from Arab Muslim countries, including Morocco. Yet in these countries, Saudi Arabia's official charities now support whatever strategy the local leadership devises to counter radicalization within its borders. In other words, Saudi largesse — in these environments — is as benign as the autocrat who accepts it ("May God preserve him").

So what sources of indoctrination *do* contribute to the pathology of foreign fighters? Moroccan authorities worry about Salafi jihadist outreach to their young people from many places — including Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, other Arab countries, the West, and ISIS land itself — via social media. They worry about extremist satellite television, including Arabic networks broadcasting from the Gulf, Iran, Iran-backed militias in Arab lands, and Europe. They worry about purely indigenous radicalism. Relatedly, they worry about the half-life of Salafi jihadism on Moroccan territory — a legacy of pre-2003 indoctrination which older clerics pass on to young people under the noses of the government. Finally, they remain concerned about the indoctrination of Moroccan youth during sojourns in the Arabian peninsula, where it is indeed harder to control whom they learn about Islam from. As a remedy, Morocco requires that its clerics in training go through their own country's seminaries as a condition for their license to preach. Interestingly, the local seminaries have begun to attract some *Saudi* students of Islam, among others from the Gulf. In this respect, Morocco, having reclaimed sovereignty over its religious institutions, has also become a modest exporter of Islamic soft power Eastward. In doing so, it contributes, however slightly, to the longterm goal of transforming Islamic leadership in the lands where Salafi jihadism started. (I'll return to this goal and some of its champions later.)

Such is the rich and subtle give-and-take between an oil-poor Arab Muslim autocracy on the one hand and its Saudi benefactors on the other. It does not resemble the situation in Kosovo as described in the *Times* piece, where security officials look Eastward and apparently see a monolithic "Wahhabism" at war with their nation and traditions. Kosovo is, after all, a European country: government and police lack the Arabic fluency or command of Islamic proof texts which they would need to negotiate doctrinally on equal terms with the people of the Arabian peninsula. Kosovo has also adopted a Western democratic model of governance, structurally averse to the kind of top-down ideological impositions one finds in an Arab national security state. Kosovars, like Americans, need to better understand the forces they are dealing with, and to develop their own informed policies toward them which befit the values of a democracy.

## **II. Saudi Reformists and Their Own Struggle against Extremism**

Ending support for extremism by governments, government-backed institutions, and individual donors throughout the Gulf is a highly ambitious aspiration. All of the above are products of their own society. As long as the society harbors a critical mass of extremist sympathizers, whatever crackdown the ruler attempts will meet entrenched opposition — within the state, from religious institutions, and among the population. To reverse this trend, not only must the autocrat throw his weight behind the effort, but a critical mass of reformists within the society must also come together to galvanize public support and undermine extremist forces.

Is there such a critical mass? In Saudi Arabia, by far the largest Gulf Cooperation Council member state, millions object to the cultural hegemony of hardline Salafi clerics. Some are in government — for example, among the security sector, which bears responsibility to clean up the mess of militancy clerics have made; within the information ministry, home to a revolving door between the state on the one hand and cosmopolitan Saudi-owned media in Dubai and London on the other; and within the king's own court and consultative council. Others are young people who simply crave the freedom to experience the culture of the "global village" in their homeland's public space. Others are parents who worry about the indoctrination of their children.

Saudi Arabia is also home to public intellectuals and civic actors who give voice to these sentiments. They are sometimes referred to collectively as "Saudi liberals" — though Saudi researcher and writer Abdullah al-Rashid,



in his [important study of how "Saudi liberals" responded to the "Arab spring,"](#) notes that they hail from a variety of social and political streams, ranging from Arab socialism to neoliberalism. A handful had been Nasserist dissidents in their youth. Others are former jihadists who underwent a profound intellectual transformation. The few who draw substantial attention in the West, mostly by way of human rights activists, are revolutionary liberals — dissidents opposed to the monarchy and clerics alike. But the ones who truly frighten the clergy are liberal reformists, who engage the monarchy, the state, the public, and even pliant strands within the religious leadership in order to influence the culture and its institutions incrementally. Their give-and-take with the establishment poses a threat, in clerics' eyes, to the exclusivity of their historic pact with the royal family. Liberal reformists have won positions in government and achieved a leadership role in some of the largest Saudi media companies. Over the past decade, they caused enough of a stir to provoke a backlash from clerics, who lobbied successfully for "liberalism" to be designated a form of terrorism in 2014. In response, many liberal reformists disavowed the label — but not its component values of egalitarianism, cultural and intellectual pluralism, tolerance, critical thinking, and the rule of law. These days they simply call themselves "reformists." So will the rest of this essay.

Clerical elites remain considerably stronger than any rival social force. Yet every so often — and increasingly — a groundswell of popular opposition to their excesses manifests openly. When it does, reformists step in to use their own capacities, in media and public policy institutions, to magnify the sentiments and shape them into a cause. The crescendoing agitation becomes its own force to be reckoned with, and, eventually, a factor in new government policies. A recent outcome of such a process was the government directive issued on May 3 to strip the Saudi religious police — named the "Organization to Promote Virtue and Prohibit Vice," after the Qur'anic injunction to do so — of its authority to make arrests. The move, pushed through by the royal family, was preceded by years of both spontaneous and organized social action. Saudi youth used their smart phones to film hundreds of [incidents of abusive behavior by the religious police](#). Posted to YouTube and spread via social media, they sometimes garnered tens of thousands of views apiece. These clips, in turn, became fodder for news segments on Arabic satellite channels with tens of millions of viewers, including Al-Arabiya and Rotana, which granted aggrieved women a platform to lament their mistreatment and [forced the police into a defensive position](#).

Building on this momentum, reformist intellectuals with connections to the establishment began to make arguments against the religious police within the framework of Islamic tradition. For example, a few months before the May 3 decision, Ibrahim al-Buleihi, a member of the king's consultative council, gave a television interview in which he argued as follows: since Saudi Arabia is governed by Islamic law, *all* institutions of the state are bound by the Qur'anic injunction to "promote virtue and prohibit vice." It is therefore inconsistent with Islamic tenets for one government subdivision to claim a monopoly over the service. Other intellectuals meanwhile contributed opinion pieces to the Saudi press: given that the religious police is deeply entrenched within the structure of the state, they suggested that rather than disband it, the government should strip its officers of their power to make arrests — leaving them to "promote virtue" through persuasion alone.

The May decision to chasten the Saudi religious police was of course taken, as all major decisions are, by the royal family. But reformist actors crucially informed the ambient cultural and informational climate. In doing so, they magnified and consolidated public support for the decision, such that when [some of the country's senior clerics reacted vehemently](#), the state more easily sustained and weathered the blow. To put it differently, the recent outcome was not a function of the work of some liberal cabal. Success has a thousand fathers, and in a patriarchal dynastic system, one particular "father" matters more than all the rest. Yet in the diffuse informational environment of 21st century Arabia, social trends are fluid, and figure more prominently into political deliberations. The stronger reformists become, the greater the role they play in realizing the values they stand for.

From the vantage point of global concern about the export of extremist teachings, why does it matter whether bearded boys in sandals get to jail a married couple for holding hands in a Riyadh shopping mall? In a kingdom of competing ideals, the religious establishment's ability to inculcate disproportionately relies on its ability to coerce — in particular, through Islamic courts and the power of enforcement. These awesome tools make it unnecessary for extremists' teachings to stand on their merits. They simply use their platforms of indoctrination to saturate Saudi youth while intimidating any public opposition. Their many disciples grow up to join the country's

institutions, including Islamic charities — as well as act unilaterally, whether as individual donors to a militant enterprise or as combatants themselves. If, on the other hand, clerics lose the power to coerce, they must descend into the fray of a level marketplace of ideas — patrolled exclusively by *real* police — in which the entire society deliberates over the best way to live by Islam, develop the country, and engage the world. As extremists begin to lose their arguments, they begin to look like losers. Saudi society, in stigmatizing them, becomes the world's first line of defense against would-be exporters of militancy within the country. The Saudi security sector becomes the second. Scour the discourse of Saudi reformists and you will find little discussion of the “export of Wahhabism.” But their agenda of domestic reform addresses the foundations of that problem with which outsiders are the most concerned.

What do Saudi reformists hope to accomplish next? How feasible are their plans? What conditions would prove most advantageous to their efforts? What is the relationship between American policies toward Saudi Arabia on the one hand and the internal dynamics of reform on the other? These questions, seldom posed, belong at the heart of the American discussion of “what to do about Saudi Arabia.”

### III. Competing Visions of “Vision 2030”: Clerics’ Tools, Reformists’ Tactics

The arena of contest between reformists and clerical elites is itself convulsing amid tumult in the region and seismic shifts in Saudi governance. With Iran on the march and a White House in denial, the kingdom is leading a Sunni Arab struggle against Iranian Shi’ite proxies in Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, as well as the Islamic State. It is safeguarding stability in Egypt and the oil-poor monarchies while shoring up the defenses of its GCC neighbors. It wages these costly endeavors with the price of oil at historic lows. Consequent strains on the Saudi economy are hastening the arrival of a time when the welfare state, which binds the population to the monarchy, will become untenable. In response, the powerful 30-year-old deputy crown prince, Muhammad bin Salman, has laid out “Vision 2030,” an aggressive economic reform project. It calls for austerity measures such as lifting domestic energy subsidies, a VAT tax, and a shrinkage of government, together with a new reliance on the private sector to replace lost jobs and create new ones. A cornerstone of the endeavor will be the partial privatization of Saudi Aramco, the world’s largest company. That process will subject a notoriously opaque government enterprise to the scrutiny of foreign investors.

This maelstrom of change has mixed implications for the country’s machinery of Islamist indoctrination. On the one hand, the struggle against Iran enhances the relationship between the royal family and Sunni Islamists, both inside and outside the kingdom, who firmly back the kingdom’s present war footing. Relatedly, the region-wide killing of Sunnis by Shi’ite militias enrages the Saudi population and adds to the appeal of clerics’ fierce sectarian rhetoric. Among the beneficiaries of the latter trend, for example, is *Wesal*, a Salafi TV network featuring numerous Saudi clerics. It has seen a considerable spike in ratings over the past two years. In 2015, the kingdom’s information ministry shut down *Wesal*’s Riyadh offices after a finding that its incitement had caused the shooting of Saudi Shi’ite worshippers during the festival of Ashura. But a large contingent of Saudis disagreed with the government’s decision: in April 2016, Issa al-Ghaith, another reformist member of the king’s consultative council, [conducted an opinion poll via Twitter](#) which he had hoped would bolster support for further counter-extremist measures by the government. He posed a leading question: “Since the *Wesal* channel incites sectarian strife and serves a factional agenda in tune with ISIS, do you support its closure?” Of the 24,991 responses, 82 percent said “no.” Though the tally was probably skewed by a self-selecting pool of responders, it demonstrates well enough that when the government does move to clamp down on incitement — taking the kind of measures outsiders want — a large swath of the society rejects the decision. In this context, an argument expressed earlier bears repeating: absent an aggressive and sustained campaign for cultural change, top-down crackdowns on the export of extremism will remain compromised by the disapproval of a large segment of Saudi society.

On the other hand, in some quarters, the feeling of embattlement provoked by Iran and the Islamic State has inspired a healthy kind of Saudi nationalism — that is, not jingoism but a yearning for true national unity based on acceptance of sectarian difference. This strain in public sentiment has its own manifestations on social media: as [noted in a prior E-Note](#), when a government-backed “national dialogue” organization released an animated video calling on Saudis to reject ideologies of hate, it garnered 150,000 views in 48 hours. The film resonated with the many young people who believe in the necessity of fostering an inclusive, trans-sectarian Saudi identity

lest the country go down in flames. They amount to a new base of support — and demand — for further measures to rein in extremist teachings and authority.

As to the ambitious economic “vision,” if implemented as advertised it has the potential to weaken the historic pact between royals and clerics which has been a mainstay of Saudi politics since George Washington was President of the United States. Its plan to expand the private sector, for example, prescribes changes to the educational system based on “market needs.” Optimistic translation: a new mandate for reformists to encroach on clerical domination of schools on the valid pretext that a seventh century core curriculum does not satisfy market needs. If the Vision’s call to “cut tedious bureaucracy” and reduce government spending applies to all ministries, then it would include a reduction in manpower and money at the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Endowments, Da’wa, and Guidance — the very foundation of religious soft power exports. As to the intended opening of public entertainment venues and a secular tourist industry, it would entail confrontation with the many religious figures who have long opposed both.

Hardline clerics may be counted on, however, to develop their own “Vision 2030.” They believe that as China introduced market capitalism without political reform, Saudi Arabia can do the same without religious or cultural reform. The country’s Shari’ah courts have decades of experience finessing the legal requirements of banks and oil companies, as well as privatization initiatives, such as the successful breakup of the Saudi Telecommunications Company in 2003. Salafi education ministry officials, for their part, know how to metabolize new coursework in business administration, engineering, construction, and the like: such classes are justifiable in Islamic law as a variety of *‘Ulum al-Naql* (transmitted knowledge) as opposed to *‘Ulum al-‘Aql*, (the knowledge of reason). As long as “reason” is ceded to the religious leadership — leaving the ban on philosophy in Saudi schools undisturbed, for example — there will be little trouble. Plenty of American corporate CEOs made do without studying philosophy either, after all — and plenty of American consulting firms, paid handsomely to advise the Saudi government, will happily say as much if called upon to justify the appeasement of clerics. Witness McKinsey & Company’s contract to advise Bahrain on economic and educational reform on the eve of the “Arab Spring.” The consultants agreed at the outset not to weigh in on aspects of schools curricula which the government deemed “culturally sensitive” — ensuring that nothing they proposed would touch, for example, the challenges of religious education in a polarized society. How valuable was McKinsey’s advice about “flow,” “fact bases,” and “knowledge creation” when stripped of any discussion of who the students feel they are; how they relate to classmates — future co-workers — whom they perceive to be different; and what ethical and moral reasoning they employ to resolve a dispute? Now McKinsey is advising Saudi Arabia on Vision 2030.

Yet reformists believe that in all of this uncertainty, the arc of change bends in their favor because they have a friend in deputy crown prince Muhammad bin Salman. However value-neutral his American consultants may be, the Saudis he turns to for counsel include reformists who think deeply about the relationship between the economy and social progress. However vital clerics’ backing for his war effort may be, realpolitik did not stop him from demoting the religious police — or [arresting a popular preacher](#) for criticizing the decision in a Tweet. Some of the reformists he listens to are intellectuals who, in their worldliness, have lost the knack for appealing to a down-home Saudi crowd. The deputy crown prince, by contrast, is a millennial and a “good ole boy,” schooled entirely in the kingdom, who enjoys enormous popularity with the country’s youthful majority. He has the talent and charisma to sell whatever decisions he wants to make. Only time will tell, of course, how he uses these strengths.

While there is an economic “Vision 2030” [available for anyone to read](#), there is no master plan for Saudi social reform. There is a communal sensibility — a political instinct, shared by like-minded actors — that enables loose coalitions to form around a given niche campaign. These actors aspire to help achieve, in 15 or 20 years, changes that might otherwise take a century. They draw energy from the creative tension between their longterm, generational outlook and their hunger for shortcuts and accelerants.

Witness the range of long- and short-term reformist ideas about how to soften the religious culture of the kingdom. None foresee — and most don’t want — a future free of strong Islamic leadership in the land of the “Two Holy Mosques.” But they aspire to Islamic pluralism: an end to the monopoly of Hanbali Islamic law and a re-legitimization — even a celebration — of the other three Sunni legal schools, authentic Shi’i currents, and Sufism, Islam’s mystical strand. If they succeed, they will transform the religious message Saudi endowments

preach to the world. Their vision is, of course, dystopian in the eyes of most clerics who presently reign. So reformists train their gaze on the youngest seminary students, and consider how to change the educational milieu in which they will come of age. One prescription calls for breaching the insularity of the three institutions that certify clerics — Al-Imam Muhammad University in Riyadh, the Islamic University in Madinah, and Umm al-Qura University in Mecca — by introducing new, non-Islamic faculties, on the theory that diversity in learning breeds moderation. Two of the three universities now have medical and engineering departments. Clerics more easily stomach these fields — as they do the science of business administration — because they perceive them as “transmitted knowledge.” A more dramatic achievement would see the introduction of humanities departments: philosophy, comparative literature, even comparative religion. Another measure would temporarily extricate clerics-in-training from Saudi institutions altogether, to seek knowledge in Muslim countries where other readings of Islam prevail — like Morocco, where, as noted earlier, a few Saudis have already begun to study Islam.

None of these longterm prescriptions will save today’s Saudi schoolchildren from learning about Islam from yesterday’s trainees — a problem acknowledged in 2014 by education minister Khalid al-Faysal: “The [educational] domain was totally left to [hardline clerics],” he lamented. “There was no chance for Saudi moderate thought and [to teach] a moderate way of life. We abandoned our sons and daughters and they kidnapped them.” With this problem in mind, some reformists advocate a stopgap measure: limit the schools’ purview, for now, to only the essential precepts of Islam, leaving parents to elaborate on them with their children. This preference for parents’ common sense enjoys its own Islamic pedigree: Ibn Khaldun, the fourteenth-century giant of Islamic literature, was in favor.

Beyond seminaries and schools, reformists look for opportunity in every sector and venue that drives social trends — from the workplace to the marketplace, to the industry where they are strongest: the media. From foreign beachheads — primarily the great Saudi broadcasting hub in Dubai and its sister publishing hub in London — they beam their ideals into Saudi living rooms. In doing so, they also serve as channels for osmosis between their home country and the more permissive environments from which they operate. They pin high hopes on other forms of osmosis as well. For example, hundreds of thousands of Saudis study abroad, the lion’s share in the United States. In the past, the presence of hardline clerics in the countries where they studied — including the United States — together with the universal tendency of foreign students to self-ghettoize, conspired to undermine their prospects to soak up new ideals and make lasting personal inroads to their host country. Reformists would like to address the problem by partnering with American institutions, for example, to design new programs that foster such connectivity.

Another aspiration for osmosis is more local: promote deeper structural ties between Saudi Arabia and its more liberal Gulf neighbors. As noted earlier, several GCC states harbor and even sponsor Islamist radicals themselves. At the same time, all are home to pockets of progressivism. Kuwait, the most advanced political system in the GCC, hosts the finest and [oldest standing musical conservatory in the area](#), devoted to the preservation of the Gulf’s hybrid musical heritage. It has been a pioneer in theater, and a scene of political intellectual ferment. In the twentieth century, both Kuwait and Bahrain had small Jewish communities — a handful still live in the latter — and protected them more consistently than did most other Arab societies. Among youth in these countries, there has been a [recent surge in curiosity](#) about this aspect of their national history. A decade before the Bahraini wave of sectarian strife that came to a roaring boil in 2011, its Sunni elite still featured a few bleeding heart liberals, who saw the virtue of noblesse oblige and the need for a more equitable distribution of opportunity across the sectarian divide. Women still head institutions there. A viable labor union still struggles for social justice there. Oman, the global capital of the heterodox Ibadi sect of Islam, has gone further than its neighbors in institutionalizing religious pluralism, and fostered a national culture that, to date, has produced not a single ISIS recruit. Both Qatar and the UAE have made great strides in the globalization of their economies. Between the two, it is the UAE that has most successfully tied economic growth to social development and counter-extremism — through a purge of Islamists from schools and mosques, [education for the rule of law](#), the liberalization of media, and proactive measures to enfranchise its citizens. Its experience speaks to the promise of the Saudi “Vision 2030,” and can offer guidance to ward off disaster.

In 2012, the late Saudi king Abdullah bin Abdelaziz proposed a “Gulf Union,” to augment the security partnership that frames the “Gulf Cooperation Council” with new interconnections in politics, economy, and culture. It was perceived internationally as a proposal to rally the Gulf states against Iran, which is also true. Yet some of the



most strident advocates for a Gulf Union within the kingdom were reformists, who saw a potential systemic means to incorporate the best achievements of neighboring states into the development of Saudi Arabia. In the realm of culture in particular, they held out a further hope: the pursuit of a “union” would require the construction of a unifying Gulf identity — an inclusive narrative, woven from the region’s diverse ethnic and religious strands, to imbue the peoples of the Gulf with a sense of common purpose. Islamic but not pan-Islamist, Arab but not pan-Arabist, it would help insulate Gulf nationals from Middle Eastern trends that have been among the greatest drivers of killing and misery in the area in over a thousand years. As a political project, the “Gulf Union” has since been shelved — yet these ideas are alive and well.

#### IV. Rethinking American Policy toward Saudi Arabia

Returning to the United States, let us review the formulation in Max Boot’s article:

“There is no obvious or easy way to wean the Saudis away from their proselytizing in favor of Wahhabism. But the U.S. would have a stronger case to make if it showed that it is truly committed to Saudi security by fighting the menace that is the new Persian Empire. ... In return for a greater commitment to Saudi security, the U.S. could reasonably demand of the royal family that they decrease not only funding for terrorism — where significant progress has already been made — but also for Wahhabism in general, which remains an area where there is still much room for progress. The U.S. needs to apply similar pressure to other Gulf Arab allies.”

Boot is wise to call on Washington to rejoin the resistance to Iranian expansionism. But his pivot to “pressure” is too quick. There is now an internal dynamic in Saudi Arabia whereby indigenous elements, gravely threatened and more deeply familiar with the problem of extremism than outsiders will ever be, are *themselves* applying pressure. Royals are responding favorably. No approach by the world’s superpower will prove constructive if it undermines this process. Policies that can potentially help are ones that, instead, support and accelerate it. Frontal pressure, absent such policies, will be unhelpful and possibly counterproductive.

Some may read this argument simply as a call to “lay off Saudi Arabia,” and react with skepticism. Ten years ago, when many in Washington called for ramping up political pressure on the Assad regime, Emad Mustapha, the flamboyant Syrian ambassador to the United States, routinely made such arguments. He would bring policymakers into his office, put on a tortured expression, and swear them to secrecy. *There are forces within my government that are struggling to change it from within*, he said. *It’s very dangerous work. You have to help us. Tell your friends in government that when they apply pressure, it imperils these brave souls.* His plea was nothing more than a shtik; Mustapha, a stalwart of Baathist sectarian apartheid, aimed to dupe Americans into inaction. Conditions in Saudi Arabia are incomparable: the struggle between reformists and hardline clerics plays out noisily in the public sphere for any Arabic speaker to observe online, and the state’s intra-systemic conflicts are discernible through in-country research. Saudi reformists are not “imperiled” by outside pressure — but when pressure comes, the system closes ranks, and internal differences are set aside.

The Arabic Tweet by a prominent cleric in which he castigated the royals for weakening the religious police — landing himself in jail — was shrewdly manipulative, in that it played to Saudis’ bitter experience of American (and European) policy toward their country. “There are rulers who think that if they renounce their religion to satisfy apostates, the pressures on them will be stopped,” he wrote. “[But] each time you renounce a bit, they push you to renounce more to make you follow their way.” In much the way some Americans and Kosovars look East and see a Saudi Wahhabi monolith, many Saudis look West and perceive a coordinated political-psychological assault. In their eyes, the American media work hand in glove with the U.S. Government to prime public opinion for an alliance with Iran, by portraying the Mullahs as moderate while denigrating Saudi Arabia as the “[Kingdom of Backwardness](#).” When Saudi clerics spew hate, it’s a headline; when reformists respond, it’s a footnote. The only measure of women’s advancement is whether they win the right to drive. The only Saudi liberals worth talking about are the ones who go to prison.

This is of course a selective and simplified reading of American policies and discourse, and American critiques of Saudi religious incitement, gender inequality, and human rights abuse are of course warranted. Yet in the Saudi political analysis of America lies more than a grain of truth, while the American gloss on Saudi Arabia is itself selective to the point of distortion: most liberal-leaning Saudi actors are *not* in prison; they have rather calculated

that systemic action in the country actually works — however slowly — and merits pulling punches. The denial of driving rights to women provides an outrageous specimen of Arabian misogyny, but does *not* sum up the [shifting status of women in the kingdom](#). Nor, for that matter, will the eventual lifting of the ban mean that the struggle for gender equality is near victory.

Many Saudis, in lamenting the American fixation on their disgraces, do not fully grasp how hard it is to focus the attention of a distant audience on their long, uneven process of incremental reform. *What's the headline?* a reporter asks. *Where's the bloodshed?* But neither the pace of the news cycle nor any bias for superficiality appears to dissuade some American institutions from devoting considerable time and resources to documenting extremism in Saudi textbooks, for example. *Where is the commensurate American outreach to educational reformists in Saudi Arabia?* Saudis ask. *Where are the American advisors to help envision alternative curricula?* Saudi reformists can, must, and want to benefit from lessons in international comparative education as to how transitioning societies have used schools to overcome supremacism and xenophobia, among other challenges the country also faces. Americans who care about Saudi textbooks should recognize that in dwelling chiefly on denunciation, they fuel Saudi suspicions that the “anti-incitement campaign” is purely a bludgeoning device, as the cleric’s Tweet suggested. Advice to American trackers of Saudi textbooks: even the religious police know not only to “prohibit vice” but also to “promote virtue.”

The limited American discussion of Saudi students in the United States generally assigns value to their presence as an opportunity for “public diplomacy”: *Let's fight the demonization of America by showing them who we really are*, Americans say. *Let's find ways to make sure they enjoy their time here. They'll bring a message of goodwill back home.* These are worthwhile goals. But a more elaborate agenda prevails in Moscow, for example, where a smaller number of Saudi students go to learn. Since Cold War days, the Russian government has maintained a regimented inter-agency program to forge deep and lasting ties with foreign students. Through programs tailored to their specific interests and future aspirations back home, Russians nurture their intellectual and professional development while cultivating them as allies. In the U.S., by contrast, Saudi students are mostly left to fend for themselves. Watch them attempt to find their own way in America via [the Twitter handle “Sa’udiyun fi America” \(Saudis in America\)](#), a mutual support group sponsored by the kingdom which has garnered 144,000 followers: *Does anybody know a good ESL course in Boston? Where can I do a Masters in comparative religion?* Some convey frustration that no media company or think tank wants to take them on as interns. Others say they find it hard to acclimate. Last year, the number of Saudi foreign students reached 200,000 — 60,000 of whom chose the United States — thanks to a \$6 billion government scholarship fund. This year, due to strains on the Saudi economy, government support will fall off sharply, reducing the number of foreign students. But the opportunity to engage the substantial number who do arrive remains strong. They are a window into their country’s social trends. They will join its future political class, private sector, media industry, and even religious leadership. Every measure to support youth who want to lead their institutions in a positive direction is a smart investment.

As indicated earlier, some efforts in Saudi Arabia are underway to prepare tomorrow’s clerics to support greater pluralism and tolerance through the country’s religious institutions. Some outcomes have begun to emerge: young Imams who differ with their forbears; adjustments to the environment in which they train. Who are the parties involved? How can they help clear up outsiders’ “murky” understanding of the Saudi clergy? What forms of assistance could they use in order to hasten the reforms to which they aspire? Answering these questions is not rocket science. In 2006, after the Kingdom of Jordan introduced a plan to reform its own Islamic institutions, I asked to “embed” as a researcher in the Ministry of Islamic Affairs. Officials who were empowered to grant such requests permitted me to spend time within the institution for about a month. Within the first few days, the dog and pony show had exhausted itself, and clerics began to share their outlooks, as well as appraise their peers. The government had gambled that a fair-minded researcher would find some merit in its efforts, and in the end I did. Saudi Arabia of course bears vastly more importance for the future of the Muslim world. Its religious institutions are of course vastly larger, vastly more complex, and vastly more opaque. An equivalent “embed” experience in the country would take a different form. The purview would be more limited. But if there are any volunteers, I would wager that they will gain valuable insight for their trouble. They would also establish inroads for joint effort toward goals Americans share with Saudi reformists.

Viewed together, these and dozens of other realistic little exercises in competitive soft power — in media, in civil

society, in business, in justice — offer a potentially transformative adjustment to American foreign policy in Saudi Arabia. To plan them well, Americans need to augment their conventional study of the kingdom's oil, arms, and royal court intrigue with a deep understanding of Saudi social trends and the people who shape them. Americans also need to engage Saudi actors in each sector *personally* — as expeditionary diplomats, social entrepreneurs, and thought partners. Such endeavors, by their nature, can only be waged consensually, meaning that in most cases, senior decision makers have to permit and preferably support them. Are such accessions won through “pressure?” Pressure is a loaded word. There is a need for leverage. There is a role for cajoling. There is a place for voices of uncompromising moral purity. Above all, there is a requirement to build bonds of friendship and trust — whereby allies bridge their differences and adversaries lose their grip.