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2023

Muhammad Haziq Bin Jani (2023). Post-Salafism and its prospects beyond Saudi Arabia. RSIS Commentaries, 019-23.

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/165489>

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Post-Salafism and its Prospects Beyond Saudi Arabia

By Muhammad Haziq Bin Jani

SYNOPSIS

Salafism is undergoing a transformation in Saudi Arabia, but the prospect of an inclusivist global Salafism is limited by the credibility of this top-down Salafism, as well as by local efforts to encourage contextualised and inclusivist interpretations of Islam.

COMMENTARY

Last February, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia [announced](#) a new public holiday – Founding Day – to commemorate “the commencement of the reign of Imam Muhammad Bin Saud, marking his founding of the first Saudi state”. The announcement was to celebrate the Kingdom’s founding in February 1727 instead of 1744, which was previously established as the beginning of the first Saudi State, born out of the covenant between Muhammad Bin Saud and the eponymous founder of Wahhabism, Muhammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab. The latter narrative had long been a [political myth](#) that legitimised the contemporary Saudi state as a political project in the service of Wahhabi Islam.

Further formalising Saudi Arabia’s divorce from Wahhabism, on 3 March 2022, Saudi Arabia’s state-owned media [quoted](#) Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS) as saying “that Muhammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab is not a prophet, he is not an angel. He was just a scholar like many other scholars who lived during the first Saudi state... [He] is not Saudi Arabia.” The quote rippled across Saudi and other Arab Gulf papers in the English and [Arabic](#)-language.

Wahhabism is a term used by scholars to refer to the Saudi brand of [Salafism](#), a branch of Sunni Islam whose adherents claim to emulate the first three generations of Muslims after the death of the Prophet Muhammad as closely and in as many spheres of life as possible. Like many Salafi scholars, Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab wanted to “purify”

Islam, but is most known for his readiness to excommunicate Muslims for not adhering to his position on Islamic monotheism, which became a [precondition for waging jihad](#) (interpreted as war) against them.

Salafism is a diverse phenomenon. In his *Anatomy of the Salafi Movement*, Quintan Wiktorowicz argued that even within Saudi Arabia, Salafism could be [categorised](#) into quietist or purist Salafism, which shuns political activism; political Salafism, which applies Salafi teachings in the political arena; and jihadi-Salafism, which calls for violence and revolution.

Post-Salafism in Saudi Arabia

Besnik Sinani, Research Fellow with the Center for Muslim Theology at Karl Eberhard Tübingen University in Germany, [argues](#) that Saudi Salafism has been undergoing a decades-long transformation in response to changes in Saudi state policies and society, mainly in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks and the emergence of terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda and ISIS. This process, which Sinani terms as post-Salafism, is the result of government pressure on Salafi scholars, which included the arrests of dissenters and extremists; shifts in Saudi public perception regarding the role of religion in the public sphere and internal revisionism of Salafism.

However, the prospects of post-Salafism, beyond a form of Salafism that accommodates Saudi Arabia's domestic, economic, and foreign policy, are at the moment, limited. Several establishment scholars known for exclusivist religious opinions, such as Salih Al al-Shaykh, have moderated their discourse and condemned ideas such as the excommunication of Muslims. However, their affiliation with, and support of the government, has somewhat diminished their religious authority domestically and abroad, particularly among Salafis whose idea of piety has not caught up with loosening social norms amidst MBS' reforms. Revisionist Salafi scholars, such as Dr Sharif Hatim al-'Awni, who challenge key problematic aspects of Salafi theology are also few and isolated.

Post-Salafism's Global Prospects

The main obstacles to post-Salafism making headway in reducing ultra-conservatism and exclusivism beyond the Kingdom are, firstly, that there is [no authoritative figure](#) or institution in Islam to drive change. Setting aside issues of credibility, any inclusivist transformation in Saudi Salafism would not trickle down to a distant Salafi community easily. For instance, exchanging Christmas greetings was once considered [unlawful](#) by Salafi scholars and had become somewhat of a marker of Muslim exclusivism associated with Salafism. In December 2022, Saudi-based Muslim World League Secretary General reiterated that there were no religious texts that prohibited such greetings.

This opinion echoes non-Salafi Sunni views such as that of Egypt's Mufti [Shawki Allam](#), and the offices of the Mufti in [Malaysia](#) and [Singapore](#). Even the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) [extended](#) Christmas greetings. Despite that, a Malaysia-based Singaporean [celebrity](#) expressed to his Instagram and TikTok followers the view that wishing "Merry Christmas" was un-Islamic. Hence, despite the shift in establishment Salafi views on Christmas towards the moderate mainstream, exclusivist-era Salafi

opinions remain extant. Piety can go unabashedly against the grain of the opinion of scholars.

Secondly, while ultra-conservatism and exclusivist attitudes could have [arguably](#) rode on the back of Saudi oil-money and soft power, such attitudes are not held solely by Salafis. In Indonesia and Malaysia, exclusivism [cuts across theological divisions](#), and there are traditionalists who are vocal exclusivists while also [vehement opponents](#) of Wahhabism/Salafism.

Global attention on Wahhabism and Salafi-Jihadism has facilitated the creation of hostile environments for Salafi scholars that promote violence. In countering ultra-conservatism and exclusivism, Saudi Arabia's establishment and revisionist scholars face the challenge of credibility and authority. Their inclusivist turn is easily misconstrued, on the one hand, as bowing to MBS' policy, especially when seen against the backdrop of crackdowns on dissenters, while on the other hand, condoning "decadent" concerts held not too far away from the two holy mosques in Mecca and Medina. A common trope used by Islamists to discredit them is the term [ulama al-sultan](#) (ruler's scholars).

In Malaysia, Salafi religious figures are under no pressure to shed exclusivist or ultra-conservative ideas that are [also expressed by non-Salafis](#) and are, in Malaysia's context, politically acceptable. However, because they rely on political patronage for survival, they may [adjust their views](#) based on their party affiliations. Their place in Anwar Ibrahim's Malaysia Madani is mostly alongside Malay nationalists and traditionalists in the opposition.

In Indonesia, the fear of being targeted by counter-terrorism authorities have led quietist Salafis to be vocal in condemning violence and participation in protests, as well as to be open to non-Muslim political leadership, which sets them apart from political Salafis and traditionalists involved in recent mass mobilisations.

As for Singapore, the government is very clear about the importance of maintaining inter-religious harmony and secularism. In 2017, a Singaporean Salafi preacher was [barred](#) from teaching in Singapore because his teachings were exclusivist and promoted enmity towards other Muslims, other religious communities, and the state. Among other things, he opposed democracy and called for the establishment of an Islamic state.

In Singapore, religious teachers or *asatizah* who are educated overseas have also been required, since 2017, to attend the [Postgraduate Certificate in Islam in Contemporary Societies](#) (PCICS) programme. The programme inculcates *asatizah* with the required knowledge and skills to provide religious guidance that is relevant to Singapore's highly diverse, modern, and cosmopolitan society. As a result of the government's strong stance, and programmes such as PCICS, and efforts by *asatizah* to guide future generations, religious teachers who are alumni of Saudi universities and who had studied in local madrasahs are [overwhelmingly inclusivists](#).

Ultimately, the local context plays an important role in determining the prospects of post-Salafism in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere.

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