

Islam

How Mohammed bin Salman curbed Saudi Arabia's clerics

Prince Mohammed bin Salman has sidelined hardliners and sought to remake Islam in a country long seen as exporting radicalism



Mohammed bin Salman © FT montage/AFP/Getty Images

Ahmed Al Omran in Mecca

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Shortly after Prince Mohammed bin Salman rose to power, the top cleric in Saudi Arabia was asked what he thought about the kingdom's plan to lift the ban on public entertainment.

"We know that music concerts and cinema are harmful and corrupting," the grand mufti, Sheikh Abdulaziz al-Alsheikh, said in one of his regular live call-in shows in 2017, warning that such forms of entertainment were "promiscuous" and would damage Muslim culture and values.

But Prince Mohammed paid little heed, lifting the restrictions soon after, sidelining the traditionalist cleric — who died last week — and vowing to destroy "extremist ideas". "We want to live a normal life, a life that translates our tolerant religion and our good values and norms," he said at the time.

In the years since, the crown prince has embarked on the most ambitious liberalisation of Islam in Saudi Arabia, where the faith originated, since his ancestors

liberalisation of Islam in Saudi Arabia, where the latter originated, since his ancestors joined forces with the Sunni fundamentalist Wahhabis to establish the first Saudi state in the 18th century.

He has curbed the powers of the religious police, limited the abilities of judges to interpret sharia law, cut the amount of religious studies taught in schools and all but abandoned public gender segregation.



Mohammed bin Salman, left, and Abdulaziz al-Alsheikh in Riyadh in 2017. MBS later sidelined the grand mufti © Bandar Algaloud/Saudi Kingdom Council/Getty Images

These reforms have transformed life for many of the kingdom's 36mn people, helping underpin Prince Mohammed's ambitious modernisation agenda. They have also reverberated globally as a country long accused of exporting radicalism, particularly after the 9/11 attacks, seeks to rebrand its form of Islam around the prince's vision.

"The message that comes from Mecca resonates through the Islamic world, and the money that comes from Riyadh resonates throughout the Islamic world. And it did promote an intolerant view," said David Rundell, a former US chief of mission in Saudi Arabia. "What they're doing is making a more tolerant version of Islam."

Prince Mohammed deserves credit as "the first Arab leader to intellectually and seriously take on Islamists" in the home of Islam's two holiest sites, said a western

seriously take on Islamists. In the home of Islam's two holiest sites, said a Western diplomat in Riyadh. "For someone like me, who has spent the last 20 years dealing with the fallout of 9/11, it's a significant strategic shift."

The rhythms of daily life in the kingdom have changed radically as a result.

Shops that used to be forced to close five times a day for prayer are now open around the clock. Far more women are visible in public, having joined the workforce in record numbers since Riyadh lifted the ban on female driving and eased dress code restrictions. Valentine's Day red roses and Christmas ornaments, once confiscated by the religious police, are sold openly in stores.



Saudis attend an electronic music festival on the outskirts of Riyadh in 2019 as MBS began to relax strict entertainment laws © Faye Nureldine/AFP/Getty Images

For the crown prince, he is simply reverting to the course he believes the kingdom had been on before 1979, when the Islamic revolution in Iran and the siege of Mecca's Grand Mosque by Sunni Islamists rattled Saudi Arabia's rulers into imposing a more puritanical version of Islam.

Authorities gave clerics such as Alsheikh and his predecessors free rein to impose their views on the public and spread their message abroad so that they wouldn't challenge the royal family politically.

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Saudi Arabia, and affiliate organisations such as the Muslim World League (MWL), which aims to promote Islam and its values, came under heavy scrutiny from the US and other western powers after 9/11, when 15 of the 19 hijackers turned out to be Saudi citizens.

Today MWL is at the forefront of projecting the new image of Saudi Islam. Instead of funding mosques abroad and sending Saudi-educated imams to lead them, the MWL now hosts conferences and councils that focus on outreach and interfaith dialogue.

While Alsheikh had receded in prominence, with his later public appearances rare and tightly controlled, MWL's secretary-general Sheikh Mohammad al-Issa has become one of the most important religious leaders in Saudi Arabia.

A former justice minister under the previous king, Issa is seen as a leading advocate for Prince Mohammed's rebrand of Islam and a top contender to succeed Alsheikh as grand mufti.



Sheikh Mohammed al-Issa is secretary-general of the Muslim World League and a contender to be the next grand mufti © MWL

Speaking to the Financial Times at the organisation's headquarters a few miles from

the Grand Mosque in Mecca, he said reforms were simply returning the religion to its true nature.

“Islam is one version that some have sought to hijack and distort, and the reforms came to address that and restore things to their correct state,” he said.

Issa said the Saudi population's embrace of the reforms, as seen in sold-out music concerts and other entertainment events, showed that most people were unhappy with restrictions that had been imposed in the name of religion.

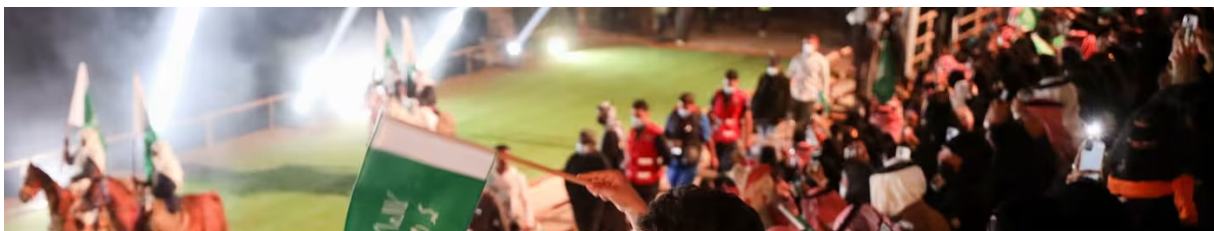
“These entertainment events are full of Saudi families and their children,” he said. “Aren't they the same Saudi families who also pray in the mosque, fast in Ramadan and go to Mecca for pilgrimages?”

One of the government's projects is an ambitious attempt to filter hundreds of thousands of sayings attributed to the Prophet Mohammed — used for centuries by scholars as the foundation for religious and legal rulings — to come up with a definitive collection that would form the basis of a modern system of legislation.

This exercise would limit the ability of clerics and judges to impose arbitrary rulings stemming from their own interpretation of Islam, and help to create a standardised, sharia-based legal system in which the laws are clearer and more predictable.

The crown prince said in a 2021 television [interview](#) that only sayings backed by a reliable chain of attribution — which he said were “very few” — could be used as the basis for legislation or punishment.

Even the opinions of Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulwahhab — the father of Wahabbism and the most prominent cleric in the kingdom's history — are not sacred, he said.





A celebratory holiday for Saudi Arabia's Founding Day was declared by royal order in 2022 © Ahmed Yosri/Reuters
Yet the liberalisation of Saudi Islam has been anything but organic. Alongside reforms, Prince Mohammed has cracked down on the already limited freedom of expression that existed before him, putting a stop to what used to be a vibrant debate between conservatives and liberals over the direction of the country.

Among the scores of people arrested since 2017 are prominent preachers such as Salman al-Oudah, who has millions of followers on social media. He faces a potential death penalty over charges of affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood and supporting popular Arab uprisings against autocratic regimes in 2011, according to advocacy groups.

“It was a shock,” one former activist said of the sudden changes. “But after things calmed down, you see it clearly. There are people who came to a decision: ‘This country is sinking. We need to move on, but if we take any risk in allowing defiance, our programme will fail.’”

With the shrinking of space for free speech, the level of discontent among conservatives remains unclear: many appear to prefer simmering in silence rather than to risk the consequences of publicly speaking up.

Nonetheless, Sultan Alamer, a senior resident fellow at the Washington-based New Lines Institute, said the crown prince's willingness to take on Islamists is now reflected in the daily lives of people in the kingdom.

“When young people discuss their problems today, they don’t ask whether something is *halal* or *haram*,” he said. “Instead, there is this new mix of laws, values, norms, traditions, including stuff they learned from TV and movies.”

“With the fall of clerics, they have been replaced by lawyers, social media influencers and life coaches.”

Additional reporting by Andrew England in London

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