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TREATMENT OF NON-MUSLIMS IN MODERATE SAUDI IN MUHAMMAD BIN SALMAN'S RELIGIOUS REFORM

Yuangga Kurnia Yahya*, Badrus Sholeh** and Mufti Rasyid***

Abstract: This study highlights the changes and breakthroughs that Crown Prince and Prime Minister of Saudi Arabia Muhammad bin Salman echoes in the Saudi Vision 2030, particularly regarding the treatment of non-Muslim groups who experienced discrimination and persecution during the previous administration. As promised by the Prince, the government that was previously conservative returned to a more moderate direction. However, it is necessary to further explore whether the application and practice of moderate Islam includes the relationship between the state and non-Muslims in this country. For this reason, this study compares several policies before Muhammad bin Salman's era and their changes after the reforms carried out by the Prince. This research shows that Muhammad bin Salman has initiated some changes in relations with non-Muslims at a global level. Some changes in formal school textbooks have also been made towards a more moderate ideology. However, changes in religious reforms brought by the Prince were limited to a symbolic level and more external in nature. Meanwhile, domestic commitments related to the management of diversity and fulfilment of rights to freedom of religion have yet to be seen in real policies that provide rights for non-Muslims.

Keywords: *MbS reform, moderate Islam, non-Muslims, Saudi Arabia, Saudi Vision 2030*

INTRODUCTION

Saudi Arabia is a country that is synonymous with Islam. This label comes because two holy cities of Muslims, Mecca and Medina, are situated in that country. Both cities have strong historical ties to Islam because they are where Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), was born, grew up and spread Islam for the first time. To this day, Muslims also have an obligation to perform pilgrimage to these two holy cities, at least once in their lifetime. This is what often

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makes Saudi Arabia a representation of Islamic teachings and role model for Muslim life around the world.¹

However, as a country that uses Islamic teachings as the foundation of its country, Saudi Arabia faces several problems, especially in managing the diversity of religious backgrounds. As is known, Sunni Islam is the official religion of Saudi Arabia and embraced by 85-90% of the population. In addition, 10-12% are Shi'ite, about 3.7% are Christians, 1.1% are Hindus and about 1% are adherents of other faiths.² As a majority group, the management of diversity shown in Saudi is intolerant and tends to discriminate other groups, such as the Shia group and non-Muslims. The 2009 Human Rights Report shows the Saudi government system does not recognise the concept of religious freedom.³ In 2008-2009, there were more than 10 cases of prosecution and persecution of non-Muslims on charges of apostasy from Islam, supporting Shia minority groups, and discussing beliefs other than Sunni Islam, with the Hanbali school of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence, which became the legal system in public spaces and cyberspace since 1992.⁴ In 2015, Saudi Arabia was ranked 7th in the category of countries that have a high level of government restrictions on religion. In a report by Pew Research, Saudi Arabia, together with China, Egypt, Uzbekistan and Iran, have consistently been on this list from 2007 to 2015.⁵

This persecution adds to the dark list of Saudi relations with non-Muslims in the country. Previously, Saudi Arabia had implemented state policies that discriminated against other religious communities. In lifeinsaudiArabia.net, 10 facts are mentioned about the Christian community living in Saudi. Among these facts is the lack of a church that is actively used for worship and religious activities. In addition, showing Christian identity in the form of religious symbols, including celebrating Christmas, is not allowed in public places. For Christmas celebrations, the Christian community is required to do it in their respective homes and not gather in one place.⁶ These restrictions show the management of religious differences and majority-minority relations in Saudi are coloured by oppressive actions and regulations from the majority party.

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia is entering a new era after the appointment of Prince Muhammad bin Salman (MbS) as the crown prince of the kingdom. On 25 April 2016, he

¹ Idil Akbar, "Khilafah Islamiyah: Antara Konsep Dan Realitas Kenegaraan (Republik Islam Iran Dan Kerajaan Islam Arab Saudi) [Islamic Caliphate: Between Concept and Reality of Statehood (Islamic Republic of Iran and Islamic Kingdom of Saudi Arabia)]," *Journal of Government and Civil Society* 1, no. 1 (2018): 95, <https://doi.org/10.31000/jgcs.v1i1.265>.

² Office of International Religious Freedom, *Saudi Arabia 2022 International Religious Freedom Report* (Washington: US Department of State, 2023).

³ Bureau of Democracy Human Rights and Labor, 2009 Human Rights Report: Saudi Arabia (Washington: US Department of State, 2010), <https://web.archive.org/web/20100315154836/http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2009/nea/136079.htm>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ "Rise in Countries with 'Very High' Government Restrictions on Religion in 2015," Pew Research Center, April 11, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/04/11/rise-in-countries-with-very-high-government-restrictions-on-religion-in-2015/>.

⁶ Steve, "10 Facts about the Christian Community Living in Saudi Arabia," [LifeinsaudiArabia.net](http://lifeinsaudiArabia.net), accessed June 6, 2022, <https://lifeinsaudiArabia.net/10-facts-about-christian-community/>.

launched “Saudi Vision 2030,” which contains reforms, even revolutions in economic, social, political, educational and religious fields.⁷ One of the slogans that MbS often echoes is “to return Saudi Arabia to a moderate Islam.” According to him, in the last three decades, various regulations and policies regarding Islamic teachings in Saudi are rigid and abnormal.⁸ In the religious aspect, MbS has shown some changes by limiting the role and influence of Wahhabism in royal policies and regulations. This is a revolution from the beginning of modern Saudi history, in which the al-Saud family and Wahhabism clerics established mutually supportive relationships.⁹ This is touted as a form of Saudi modernisation and shift of traditions that have been entrenched for centuries.

This research highlights the changes and breakthroughs that MbS echoes in Saudi Vision 2030, particularly in the aspects involving treatment of non-Muslim groups. As mentioned above, this group experienced a lot of discrimination and persecution during the previous administration. As promised by MbS, the government that was previously conservative will return to a more moderate direction. However, it is necessary to further explore whether the application and practice of moderate Islam includes the relationship between the state and non-Muslims in this country. For this reason, this study compares several policies before the MbS era and their changes after the reforms.

RELIGIOUS MANAGEMENT AND MINORITY RIGHTS

The developments of the era and globalisation have created encounters between people, in real-life and digital interactions. These encounters cannot avoid the diversity of religions in various parts of the world. Recently, the issue of religious diversity and management of diversity by the state has been regulated in articles 18, 19 and 20 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Briefly, the three articles stipulate that all countries must guarantee the freedom of their people to adhere, teach and convert to the religion they believe in and the freedom to express opinions and convey religious expressions as well as gather and carry out worship.

However, research conducted by Akbaba and Fox¹⁰ and Finke and Martin¹¹ show that many countries still persecute and discriminate against adherents of particular religions in their countries. This discrimination eventually escalated into violence based on religious

⁷ Jihan Chara, “Saudi Arabia: A Prince’s Revolution,” *European View* 17, no. 2 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1781685818803525>.

⁸ Martin Chulov, “I Will Return Saudi Arabia to Moderate Islam, Says Crown Prince,” *The Guardian*, October 25, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/24/i-will-return-saudi-arabia-moderate-islam-crown-prince>.

⁹ Ecaterina Mațoi and Diana-monica Constantin, “Muhammad Bin Salman’s Reforms vs. Wahhabi Rules: A Challenge for the Status Quo of the Saudi State?,” in *International Scientific Conference Strategies XXI: The Complex and Dynamic Nature of the Security Environment*, ed. Florian Cîrciumaru and Cristina Bogzeanu (Romania: Carol I National Defence University Publishing House, 2016).

¹⁰ Yasemin Akbaba and Jonathan Fox, “The Religion and State-Minorities Dataset,” *Journal of Peace Research* 48, no. 6 (2011), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343311418997>.

¹¹ Roger Finke and Robert R. Martin, “Ensuring Liberties: Understanding State Restrictions on Religious Freedoms,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 53, no. 4 (2014).

motives. In Finke and Martin's research, they came to the conclusion that several Muslim-majority countries had high levels of restrictions on adherents of other religions.¹² This opinion is reinforced by a report written by Jenkins,¹³ which describes the management of diversity and some restrictions conducted by the Turkish government on non-Muslim communities.

Therefore, to minimise the side effects of globalisation and religious diversity, Turner requires legal pluralism as a consequence of cultural pluralism. In this context, the state plays a role in determining the positive legal policies that cover all people.¹⁴ These state policies must be supported by social changes in society that create new patterns of social solidarity that are strong and capable of embracing various groups in society, especially minority and marginal groups. The government needs to explain its position as protector of the whole society and to not favour one ethnic or religious group; therefore, the rights of minorities are clearly protected by law.

Aziz et al. tried to portray the implementation of religious management in several countries in Asia. They chose Iran, Thailand, Philippines, Malaysia and India as research samples. In this research, they found these five countries had similarities in the contents of constitutions that guarantee freedom of religion for their citizens with the uniqueness and peculiarities of each country.¹⁵ However, there are still differences in policy practices and implementation of policies in society. This phenomenon does not necessarily indicate the failure of religious management in those countries; rather, religious management is dynamic, unstable and vulnerable of negative impacts on minority groups caused by policies supporting the interests of the majority group. Similar conclusions also come in Scharffs' research, which summarises that, in Southeast Asia, institutional factors contributed to the emergence of discrimination, conflict and violence with religious nuances.¹⁶

From previous studies, this research also looks at how the concept of "non-Muslim protection" is applied in Saudi Arabia. The Declaration of the Saudi Vision 2030, which is known as an effort to restore Saudi to moderate Islam, is expected to guarantee the rights of minority groups. This is in line with a quote from Helen Keller, which states that democracy is not only measured by the grandeur of buildings, fast vehicles and ease of transportation, but also by the care given to the welfare of all people without exception.¹⁷ More specifically,

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Gareth Jenkins, "Non-Muslim Minorities in Turkey: Progress and Challenges on the Road to EU Accession," *Turkish Policy Quarterly* 3, no. 1 (2004).

¹⁴ Bryan S. Turner, "Managing Religions: State Responses to Religious Diversity," *Contemporary Islam* 1, no. 2 (2007), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-007-0011-1>.

¹⁵ Abdul Aziz et al., *Minoritas Agama Dan Otoritas Negara: Iran, Thailand, Filipina, Malaysia, Dan India* [Religious Minorities and State Authority: Iran, Thailand, Philippines, Malaysia, and India] (Jakarta: Kementerian Agama RI, 2017).

¹⁶ Brett G. Scharffs, "Trends in Regulating Religion in Southeast Asia: Differentiating Core, Important, and Desirable Factors Regarding Religion and the Rule of Law," *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 14, no. 4 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2016.1248530>.

¹⁷ Helen Keller, "Try Democracy," *The Home Magazine*, 11, no. 4 (1935), <https://www.afb.org/HelenKellerArchive?a=d&d=A-HK02-B225-F02-035&e=-----en-20—1—txt—try+democracy-----3-7-6-5-3-----0-1>.

al-Qardhawi explains the rights of non-Muslim minority groups that must be guaranteed by a Muslim-majority country, which include protection rights, especially for the old, sick and poor, the right to embrace religion as well as performing worships, the right to work and the right to fulfil all the rights mentioned above.¹⁸ These principles become the author's perspective in describing religious management and fulfilment of minority rights in Saudi.

TREATMENT OF NON-MUSLIMS IN SAUDI PRE-MBS REFORM

The state of Saudi Arabia was founded in 1727 CE with an agreement between Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab, the founder of the Wahhabism movement with Muhammad bin Saud, as a political ruler. Both agreed to help each other to establish a Saudi state, in which all aspects of life in it are regulated according to the pure teachings of Islam and in accordance with the teachings of Prophet Muhammad. This legacy was continued during the founding of the modern Saudi state on 23 September 1932, which was led by King Abdulaziz.¹⁹ Since then, the modern state of Saudi Arabia has been officially declared a state with an absolute monarchy (kingdom) with an Islamic style, with Arabic as the official language and the Qur'ān as its constitutional basis.²⁰ Apart from that, the establishment of the modern Saudi state was also based on the Hanbali school of Sunni jurisprudence, which became the basic doctrine of Wahhabism. One of important principle in that school is *ta'at wali al-amr* (full obedience of the orders of political rulers) because Ahmad ibn Hanbal, the founder of Hanbali school, believed that revolt against the ruler of the Muslims is prohibited in Islam and urged his followers not to rebel against the regime.²¹

In 1992, the Basic Law of Government was established to regulate the system of government, rights and obligations of the government and citizens. In this law, the Qur'ān and *sunna* are the sources of *fatwas* (orders made under Islamic law) issued by the mufti (religious leader) in coordination with the Council of Senior Scholars (هيئة كبار العلماء) and the administrative affairs section. Policies issued by the Kingdom were intended to protect and maintain Islamic teachings, implement Islamic law, *al-amru bi al-ma'ruf ma al-nahyu 'an al-munkar* (call for good and forbid evil), and support Islamic preaching (*da'wah*). Therefore, all residents and immigrants to Saudi Arabia must obey and comply with various regulations that have been set in accordance with Islamic teachings and the prevailing culture in Saudi Arabia.²² Scholars from the Hanbali tradition, as the foundation of Wahhaby Islamic law, stipulated that only the Kingdom has the right to promote virtue and prevent evil in the public

¹⁸ Yusuf al-Qardhawi, *Ghair Al-Muslimin Fi Al-Mujtama' Al-Islamy* [Non-Muslims in Muslim Society], 3rd ed. (Cairo: Maktabah Wahbah, 1992).

¹⁹ David Commins, *The Mission and The Kingdom*, 3rd ed. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016).

²⁰ "About Saudi Arabia," The Embassy of the KSA, accessed September 9, 2023, <https://www.saudiembassy.net/history>.

²¹ Faisal Mukhyat Abu Sulaib, "The Role of Religion in the Politics of Saudi Arabia: The Wahhabi Concept: Ta'at Wali Al-Amr," *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 13, no. 3 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1525/caa.2020.13.3.51>.

²² "Basic Law of Governance," The Embassy of the KSA, accessed September 10, 2023, <https://www.saudiembassy.net/basic-law-governance#Chapter Six: The Authorities of the State>.

sphere. Since then, the Wahhabi scholars, who were an integral part of the Kingdom, declared their determination to carry out and at the same time monopolise this religious duty.²³

The law mentioned above and its derivatives do not directly limit the activities of non-Muslims in the country. However, because Saudi Arabia is a theocracy, there is no distinction between state and religious affairs. The legal regulations and policies comprehensively regulate the rights and obligations of Muslims in political, economic, legal, social and religious aspects. On the other hand, residents who do not adhere to the government's official religion, Sunni Islam with Hanbali school of jurisprudence, will face discrimination in these aspects, including limited opportunities for employment, education and religious practices.²⁴

As a form of safeguarding the law, the Saudi government established a Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, known as the "Sharia police." This committee has the authority to monitor social behaviour and enforce morality that is consistent with the government's interpretation of Islamic law. The Sharia police's duty is to monitor social violations, such as men and women gathering in one venue, practicing or displaying beliefs other than Islam, insulting Islam, spreading media that are not in accordance with Islamic teachings (including pornography), producing, distributing and consuming alcohol, celebrating activities that are not in accordance with Islamic law, practicing witchcraft or magic, homosexuality and gambling.

Due to their wide scope of work, the Sharia police have large resources. As of 2010, more than 5,000 Sharia police personnel are spread over 13 provinces across the Saudi state. In addition, 1,600 additional personnel provide support in administrative matters. Several community groups that are not affiliated with the Sharia police also participate in monitoring and taking action against things that violate Sharia and submit them to the authorities. Structurally, this committee has a strong position because it is directly responsible to the King through the *Majlis al-Wazara as-Su'udi*/The Council of Ministers of Saudi Arabia.²⁵

In addition to state policies and laws, the attitudes and views of Saudi Muslims are influenced by the *fatwas* issued by scholars, especially those who are members of the senior clerical council. The *fatwas* issued contain elements of hatred and hostility towards non-Muslims due to theological differences, especially against Christians and Jews. For example, in the *fatwa* issued by al-Lajnah al-Daimah (Permanent Committee), in the second edition, volume 1 that deals with Islamic belief (*aqidah*), talks a lot about things that must be done to unbelievers.²⁶ In the same edition, in volume 2, a special section discusses the *ahl al-kitab*,

²³ Nabil Mouline and Ethan S. Rundell, *Clerics of Islam: Religious Authority and Political Power in Saudi Arabia* (London: Yale University Press, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.12987/yale/9780300178906.001.0001>; Jonas Otterbeck, "Wahhabi Ideology of Social Control versus a New Publicness in Saudi Arabia," *Contemporary Islam* 6, no. 3 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-012-0223-x>.

²⁴ United States Department of State, *2010 International Religious Freedom Report - Saudi Arabia* (New York: US Department of State, 2011), <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4e734c6c.html>.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ "Fatwas of Permanent Committee," The General Presidency of Scholarly Research and Ifta, accessed June 6, 2022, <https://www.alifta.gov.sa/En/IftaContents/PermanentCommittee/Pages/default.aspx?cultStr=en&View=Tree&NodeID=8683&PageNo=1&BookID=7>.

including the law of viewing the Jewish and Christian scriptures as well as the arguments surrounding the error of the Christian faiths.²⁷

According to data released by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Saudi Arabia's population will reach 36.168 million in 2022.²⁸ Five million of them are concentrated in the city of Riyadh. The rest are scattered across other cities with an average of under three million inhabitants.²⁹ In addition, this number can increase along with the high number of foreigners coming and staying in Saudi Arabia. In 2021, the number of foreign nationals living in Saudi Arabia will reach 13.49 million. This shows the high number of foreign nationalities in Saudi Arabia. Even so, ethnically, the Saudi population is still dominated by the Arab ethnicity by 90% and the remaining 10% consists of Afro-Asian ethnicity.³⁰ In terms of religious pluralism, Saudi Arabia is dominated by a Muslim population. The number of Sunni Muslims in this country reaches 85-90% of the total population. Beside that, 10-12% of the population are Shia Muslims who are concentrated in certain areas in the east, such as Qatif, Sayhat, Safwu (near Dammam) and al-Hasa (near Hoffuf). The adherents of other religions consist of 3.7% Christians, 1.1% Hindus and 1% other religions and beliefs.³¹

One of the interesting facts about Christians in Saudi Arabia is that the total number shown in the census is immigrants from other countries. Officially, all residents who show Christian identity and claim to be Christians are non-Saudi residents. The native Saudis are not allowed to embrace a religion other than Islam. If they do this openly, they will be punished as apostates. For perpetrators of apostasy or religious conversion, the punishment that will be imposed is the death penalty.³²

In addition, non-Muslims are prohibited from showing their religious identity and spreading their religious teachings to groups outside their religion, especially to Muslims. Because religious identity and the use of religious symbols are prohibited, celebrations of holidays such as Christmas in Saudi Arabia are carried out in their respective homes and they do not gather with many other congregations. This is not limited to Christmas celebrations; routine worship also may not be carried out in open places or special places of worship. Apart from the absence of churches that are actively used for worship, the Saudi government does not allow public and open worship practices other than specifically for Sunni Muslims. Non-Muslims are also not allowed to enter the two holy cities of Islam, Mecca and Medina.³³

In 2012, Saudi police secured a house in al-Jouf province for holding a Christmas celebration attended by more than 41 people. All parties involved in the celebration were

²⁷ al-Lajnah al-Daimah, "Al-Adillah 'ala Buthlani Al-Aqidah Al-Nashraniyyah," The General Presidency of Scholarly Research and Ifta, accessed June 6, 2022, <https://www.alifta.gov.sa/Ar/IftaContents/Pages/FatawaChapters.aspx?cultStr=ar&View=Page&PageID=11117&PageNo=1&BookID=3>.

²⁸ International Monetary Fund, "Saudi Arabia," accessed September 9, 2023, <https://www.imf.org/en/Countries/SAU#countrydata>.

²⁹ GMI Blogger, "Saudi Arabia Population Statistics 2022," Global Media Insight, September 4, 2023, <https://www.globalmediainsight.com/blog/saudi-arabia-population-statistics/>.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Office of International Religious Freedom, *Saudi Arabia 2022 International Religious Freedom Report*.

³² US Department of State, *2010 International Religious Freedom Report - Saudi Arabia*.

³³ Steve, "10 Facts about the Christian Community Living in Saudi Arabia."

detained by the Sharia police for violating the applicable law regarding restrictions on religious activities other than Sunni Islam in public spaces and involving many participants. This was also confirmed by the *fatwa* of the then Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdul Aziz bin Abdullah, which forbade invitations and attending invitations to Christmas celebrations and non-Muslim weddings.³⁴ In addition, another cleric, Sheikh Muhammad ibn Saleh al-Othaimeen quoted a statement from Ibn Taymiyyah regarding the prohibition of Christmas and New Year celebrations for Muslims.³⁵ These regulations protect the convenience of Muslims in Saudi Arabia to worship and maintain their faith.

In social relations, a *fatwa* was issued regarding the law of greeting non-Muslims. Based on the decision of *fatwa* assembly number 12087, it is forbidden for a Muslim to start greeting non-Muslims even if the non-Muslim has a higher position or position. This is in accordance with the *hadīth* of the Prophet narrated by Imam Muslim not to start greeting Jews and Christians.³⁶ As for when they start greeting, a Muslim should answer with *wa 'alaykum* (the same to you). In another *fatwa*, the question continues with the law on attending the funeral of a non-Muslim. *Fatwa* assembly number 16426 states it is forbidden for a Muslim to attend the funeral of a non-Muslim because this is considered a form of loyalty to them.³⁷

In addition, social relations with non-Muslims are limited. In *fatwa* number 11967, it is not permissible for a Muslim to make friends with and be kind to non-Muslims,³⁸ because they are not their brothers referred to in the Qur'ān and *sunna* (prophetic tradition).³⁹ In their perspective, congratulating them on their religious celebrations and greeting them at their religious celebration shows closeness and support for their religious rituals. Hence, as commanded by Allah, every Muslim is forbidden to have close relations with non-Muslims and help with them in sin and aggression.⁴⁰ The same applies to helping with their wedding

³⁴ Editorial Staff, "Saudi Detains Dozens for 'Plotting to Celebrate Christmas,'" *Washington Examiner*, December 28, 2012, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/red-alert-politics/saudi-detains-dozens-for-plotting-to-celebrate-christmas>.

³⁵ Muhammad ibn Saleh al-Othaimeen, "The Ruling on Christmas & New Year," December 20, 2004, accessed September 9, 2023, https://d1.islamhouse.com/data/en/ih_articles/single/en_The_Ruling_on_Christmas_New_Year.pdf.

³⁶ al-Lajnah al-Daimah, "Initiating Salam with Non-Muslims," The General Presidency of Scholarly Research and Ifta, accessed June 6, 2022, <https://www.alifta.gov.sa/En/IftaContents/PermanentCommittee/Pages/default.aspx?cultStr=en&View=Page&PageID=10747&PageNo=1&BookID=7>.

³⁷ al-Lajnah al-Daimah, "Attending Mushriks' Weddings," The General Presidency of Scholarly Research and Ifta, accessed June 6, 2022, <https://www.alifta.gov.sa/En/IftaContents/PermanentCommittee/Pages/default.aspx?cultStr=en&View=Page&PageID=10772&PageNo=1&BookID=7>.

³⁸ al-Lajnah al-Daimah, "Befriending the Christians," The General Presidency of Scholarly Research and Ifta, accessed June 6, 2022, <https://www.alifta.gov.sa/En/IftaContents/PermanentCommittee/Pages/default.aspx?cultStr=en&View=Page&PageID=10744&PageNo=1&BookID=7>.

³⁹ al-Imam Bin Baz, "Al-Kafir Laysa Akhon Li Al-Muslim," *Majmu al-Fatawa*, accessed June 6, 2022, <https://binbaz.org.sa/fatwas/1863/الكافر ليس ااخا للمسلم>.

⁴⁰ al-Lajnah al-Daimah, "Attending Mushriks' Weddings."

celebrations, religious celebrations and funerals because these are all forms of commercial, dealings and civil acts (*mu'amalah*) affairs.⁴¹

In addition to the *fatwa* on social relations, there is also a *fatwa* regarding the establishment of houses of worship for non-Muslims. In response to a question about the law on the construction of houses of worship for non-Muslims, the Saudi *fatwa* assembly issued *fatwa* number 21413 on the construction of places of worship in the Arabian Peninsula. In that *fatwa*, the council explains that all beliefs outside Islam are wrong. The Arabian Peninsula is a holy place for Muslims and it is forbidden for non-Muslims to damage and disrespect it. The construction of these places of worship is considered a form of disrespect for the sacred area and granting permission to build houses of worship for non-Muslims is a form of support for their false beliefs and validation of their faith.⁴²

In fact, based on the sanctity of the Arabian Peninsula for Muslims, Sheikh Imam Bin Baz stated it is not permissible for non-Muslims to live and settle in the area. This is based on their claim of a *hadīth* that once the Prophet (pbuh) expelled all polytheists from the Arabian Peninsula. Therefore, for every Muslim, it should not be easy to employ non-Muslims in this area, including renting houses to non-Muslims. As for areas outside the Arabian Peninsula, such as in Egypt, Syria and Iraq, this is permissible as long as it is not in the work that is forbidden.⁴³ In another case, Sheikh Imam bin Baz also mentioned the *fatwa* that it is forbidden to seek servants or household assistants from non-Muslims because the life guidelines they use are not from Islam. This *fatwa* emphasises once again the sanctity of the Arabian Peninsula so it must be free from non-Muslims. However, in the end, Sheikh Imam bin Baz gave an exception for jobs or professions that are needed in an emergency and no one else can afford it except non-Muslims.⁴⁴

Based on the *fatwa*, the government forbids non-Muslims from entering the cities of Mecca and Medina. This is because the two holy cities are referred to as “haram land” or land that is forbidden to non-Muslims. In addition, non-Muslims who are residents of other countries can work and visit Saudi Arabia. However, they cannot apply to become Saudi citizens. This provision is the implementation of the *fatwa* above, which is based on the Qur’ān and *sunna*. Therefore, in Saudi Arabia there are no Saudi citizens who are non-Muslims or non-Muslim foreign nationals who are Saudi citizens.⁴⁵

However, the *fatwas* above do not necessarily justify bad deeds to non-Muslims. Sheikh Imam ibn Baz mentions at least four things that need to be done in social relations between

⁴¹ al-Lajnah al-Daimah, “Participating in Disbelievers’ Festivals,” The General Presidency of Scholarly Research and Ifta, accessed June 6, 2022, <https://www.alifta.gov.sa/En/IftaContents/PermanentCommittee/Pages/default.aspx?cultStr=en&View=Page&PageID=10748&PageNo=1&BookID=7>.

⁴² al-Lajnah al-Daimah, “Ruling on Building Temples in the Arabian Peninsula,” The General Presidency of Scholarly Research and Ifta, accessed June 6, 2022, <https://www.alifta.gov.sa/En/IftaContents/PermanentCommittee/Pages/default.aspx?cultStr=en&View=Page&PageID=10783&PageNo=1&BookID=7>.

⁴³ al-Imam Bin Baz, “Hukmu Wa Kayfiyatu Al-Mu’amalah Ma’a Ghayr Al-Muslimin,” Majmu al-Fatawa, accessed June 6, 2022, <https://binbaz.org.sa/fatwas/4629/حکم-وكيفية-المعاملات-مع-غير-المسلمين>.

⁴⁴ al-Imam Bin Baz, “Hukm Istidamah Al-Khadimah Ghayr Al-Muslimah Wa Al-Ikhtilath Biha,” Majmu al-Fatawa, n.d.

⁴⁵ Ghassan Salamé, “Islam and Politics in Saudi Arabia,” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (1987).

Muslims and non-Muslims. First, explain to them the nature of Islam in the context of preaching Allah's religion. Second, it is forbidden for a Muslim to oppress the self, property and honour of a non-Muslim. Third, it is permissible to have *mu'amalah* relationships, such as buying and selling and so on. Fourth, do not start with greetings while maintaining their rights as neighbours if they live side by side.⁴⁶ These are examples of *fatwas* that have emerged regarding the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims in Saudi Arabia.

In addition to these *fatwas*, the government's policy on non-Muslims is supported by the curriculum studied by Saudi students at various levels. As a country based on Islamic teachings, the core subjects in the Saudi education curriculum are also dominated by Islamic religious sciences such as *tajwid*, *tafsir*, *ḥadīth*, *fiqh* and *tawhid*. Other subjects in the social sciences and natural sciences also contain Islamic religious ideas and values. In the applicable curriculum, it is shown that Saudi Arabia is represented as a country that carries out Islamic teachings holistically in state affairs, public affairs and daily life. Islam is introduced as the only true religion; therefore, it has a superior position compared to other religions, including Christians and Jews. Christians and Jews are described as enemies of Islam and all Muslims in the world. This prevents befriending or imitating them in any way. This shows closeness and friendship, which is forbidden by Islam.⁴⁷

The narratives that appear in the textbooks at these formal schools also shape the way Saudi youth view non-Muslims, especially those who live around them. These ideas are presented in class and taught in a textual manner, by adopting the ideas written in the Qur'ān and *sunna* as well as the *fatwas* of the *ulama* regarding relations with non-Muslims. This is in line with the applicable law not to adopt modern perspectives in understanding Islam and to contradict the interpretations recognised by the state. Therefore, the ideas taught in formal schools function as extensions of the teachings written in the Qur'ān, *sunna* and *fatwas* of the scholars above.

As a result, these bases present an unhealthy and unbalanced majority-minority relationship in Saudi Arabia. In relation to non-Muslims, there are many cases involving non-Muslims who are accused of their beliefs and religion. On 13 January 2009, a blogger named Hamoud bin Saleh al-Amri was arrested after giving his views on his religion and announcing that he had converted from Islam to Christianity. As a result, he was arrested and his blog was blocked by the government.⁴⁸ This incident attracted the attention of the international community and human rights groups. One of them was the Arab Network for Human Rights Information, which demanded his release. In March 2009, he was finally released from prison.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ al-Imam Bin Baz, "Mu'amalatu Al-Muslim Lighayr Al-Muslim," Majmu al-Fatawa, accessed June 6, 2022, <https://binbaz.org.sa/fatwas/1691/معاملة-المسلم-لغير-المسلم>.

⁴⁷ Arnon Groiss, *The West, Christians and Jews in Saudi Arabian Schoolbooks* (New York: Center for Monitoring the Impact of Peace, American Jewish Committee, 2003).

⁴⁸ Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, "Blogger Arrested after Posting Opinions, Announcing His Conversion to Christianity," IFEX, January 15, 2009, <https://ifex.org/blogger-arrested-after-posting-opinions-announcing-his-conversion-to-christianity/>.

⁴⁹ US Department of State, *2010 International Religious Freedom Report - Saudi Arabia*.

In January 2009, Yemane Gebriel, a priest from Eritrea, fled Saudi Arabia to an undisclosed area. The escape was following threats from the Sharia police for carrying out a mission in Saudi. He was also arrested by the Sharia police in 2005. On 19 March 2010, four Sharia police and police officers stormed a house where a Christian service was being held. The house was inhabited by Christians from India. During the raid, the police arrested a priest and two members of the congregation plus confiscated pictures and videos containing recordings of the Bible and Christian teachings. They were later released on 23 March of the same year.⁵⁰ Then, on 2 August 2010, members of the Sharia police arrested 13 foreign nationals who were carrying out Catholic services. They were arrested while going to hold a service at their residence then released one day after.⁵¹

The discriminations and persecutions faced by non-Muslims show that, before MbS ascended the throne, the rights of non-Muslims in Saudi were not properly fulfilled or protected. In addition, narratives distributed in the form of *fatwas* and textbooks in schools gave bad stereotypes of non-Muslims to the youth, especially Christians and Jews. In fact, as mentioned above, there are around 3% of immigrants who are Christians and 1.1% who are Hindus in Saudi. Of course, the persecution faced by Christians and Hindus in social relations adds to their suffering for policy discrimination and its application in the public sphere. However, there is another fact about the relationship between Saudis and minorities. Apart from non-Muslims, another group that received heavy persecution was the Shias. The *Wahhabi* (teaching derived from Syeikh Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahab) doctrine, which has great influence in determining policy, places the Shia group as a regional and state threat. This is exacerbated by the *fatwa* that killing a Shia adherent will be rewarded in the form of *ajr* (reward) or a greater reward in heaven than killing a Jew or Christian.⁵² Moreover, in another report, the persecution of Shi’ites by the Sharia police is greater than the persecution of non-Muslims.

RELIGIOUS POLICY IN MBS’ RELIGIOUS REFORM

In 2016, MbS declared his reform program called Saudi Vision 2030. One of the core points of the proclaimed vision is to make Saudi Arabia the centre of the Arab country and the Islamic world, an investment centre and a centre of activity that connects three continents.⁵³ Furthermore, on 21 June 2017, King Salman announced that his son, MbS, became the crown prince of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and King Salman’s successor. This decision is an anomaly of the customary law that has been running in the government since the establishment of the modern Saudi Kingdom.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Mai Yamani, “The Two Faces of Saudi Arabia,” *Survival* 50, no. 1 (2008), <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396330801899488>.

⁵³ “Vision 2030 Kingdom of Saudi Arabia,” Government of Saudi Arabia, accessed September 9, 2023, <https://vision2030.gov.sa/download/file/fid/417>.

⁵⁴ Chara, “Saudi Arabia.”

The program launched by MbS gave birth to many changes in various aspects of Saudi society's life. In the economic field, MbS has privatised a Saudi oil company, ARAMCO. This privatisation aims to increase job opportunities for Saudi youth, or what is known as the "Saudi-sation" of the work, to reduce the number of young Saudis working in the public administration sector.⁵⁵ Another goal that he proclaimed was to make Saudi Arabia a picture of future human civilisation. In addition, Saudi Arabia is also proclaimed to be among the 15 countries with the largest economic power in the world, an increase in gross domestic product from 40% to 65%, production of 50% of military equipment in the country, and a fivefold increase in income from the non-oil and gas sector.⁵⁶

In the social sector, MbS made a breakthrough by changing several policies. He allowed again that women could drive alone and visit tourist attractions. He also reopened cinemas after being closed for more than 30 years.⁵⁷ In terms of tourism, MbS opened the door wide for foreign tourists. To support this, MbS launched new visas for visitors from 49 countries and revised the completely closed and black dress policy for foreign tourists visiting Saudi.⁵⁸

In addition, MbS also pays attention to the implementation of Sharia in the community. The Sharia police, which previously had great authority in regulating the social behaviour of the community in accordance with Islamic law, were minimised and limited by the Prince. MbS also appointed Sheikh Muhammad al-Issa as chairman of the Muslim World League (MWL). The appointment of Sheikh Muhammad al-Issa is a symbol of openness and acceptance of new interpretations in the religious teachings.⁵⁹ This shows the Prince's commitment to promote "returning moderate Islam to Saudi Arabia."⁶⁰

The promotion indirectly shows the position taken by the Prince in the relationship between state and religion. So far, as mentioned above, the Saudi Kingdom has been under the influence of Wahhabi clerics. The declaration of "moderate Islam" shows that MbS, for the first time, broke the Kingdom's ties to the Wahhabi group. The policies of the Kingdom and state, since then, are no longer under the influence and shadow of the Wahhabi group.⁶¹ This is also seen in the appointment of Muhammad al-Issa as chairman of the MWL.

⁵⁵ Ben Hubbard, "Young Saudis See Cushy Jobs Vanish along with Nation's Oil Wealth," *New York Times*, February 16, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/17/world/middleeast/young-saudis%0A-see-cushy-jobs-vanish-along-with-nations-oil-wealth.html>; Hilal Khashan, "Saudi Arabia's Flawed 'Vision 2030,'" *Middle East Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (2017); Stig Stenslie, "The End of Elite Unity and the Stability of Saudi Arabia," *The Washington Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (2018).

⁵⁶ Mațoi and Constantin, "Muhammad Bin Salman's Reforms."

⁵⁷ Matt McGarry, "The Journey to Nowhere: Little Hope for Saudi Women since Driving Ban Was Lifted," *ABCNews*, June 25, 2019, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/journey-hope-saudi-women-driving-ban-lifted/story?id=63667888>.

⁵⁸ Aahil Shaik, "List of 49 Countries Whose Citizens Can Apply for Saudi Tourist E-Visa," Saudi Expatriates, August 7, 2021, <https://www.saudi-expatriates.com/2021/08/49-countries-whose-citizens-can-apply-for-saudi-tourist-e-visa.html>.

⁵⁹ Mațoi and Constantin, "Muhammad Bin Salman's Reforms."

⁶⁰ Annelle R. Sheline, "Mohammed Bin Salma's Plan to Moderate Islam in Saudi Arabia," Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, November 9, 2017, <https://agsiw.org/mohammed-bin-salmans-plan-moderate-islam-saudi-arabia/>.

⁶¹ Chara, "Saudi Arabia."

In this context, the role of religion, especially the Wahhabi group, in government is reduced.⁶² This conclusion can be seen in state policies aimed at combating extremism. The attitudes and behaviours that are fought by the Saudi government are social norms and concepts practiced by Salafi groups, especially from the Wahhabi group. In fact, two popular websites containing religious *fatwas* are managed by the Sheikh from Saudi – <https://ar.islamway.net/> and <https://islamqa.info/en/> – and monitored by the government. Thus, it is stated the sheikh who runs the second site was arrested by the government for spreading extreme Islamic teachings.⁶³

All actions and policies above considered important by MbS as response to the accusation that Saudi Arabia is having a coalition with extremist and radical groups. This has been addressed to the Saudi Kingdom, which is close to the Wahhabis.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, MbS still appointed the chairman of the Senior Ulema Council from the Wahhabi group, namely Sheikh Abdul Aziz ibn Abdullah, who is a descendant of Abdullah ibn Abd al-Wahhab.⁶⁵

In addition to policies on Islam and women, these reforms had an impact on the Kingdom's relations with minority and non-Muslim religious groups.⁶⁶ This is, as stated in the Saudi Vision 2030, that Saudi has a vision of being a tolerant country with Islam as the foundation of its constitution and moderate methods. They are committed to welcoming people from all over the world and respecting them in order to achieve success.⁶⁷ The next paragraphs, will describe some changes made by the Prince in the Kingdom's relations with non-Muslims.

After the reform, Saudi Arabia initiated inter-religious meetings and dialogues. In 2017, Sheikh al-Issa, secretary general of the MWL, met with Pope Francis to draft the first agreement between the MWL and Vatican, specifically on counterterrorism and counter-extremism.⁶⁸ In November 2018, Saudi Arabia received a visit from the leader of the Evangelical Church from the United States. The group was received directly by MbS and the Secretary General of the MWL, Muhammad al-Issa. A similar visit was held again in

⁶² Besnik Sinani, "Post-Salafism: Religious Revisionism in Contemporary Saudi Arabia," *Religions* 13, no. 340 (2022).

⁶³ Sheline, "Mohammed Bin Salma's Plan."

⁶⁴ Simon Mabon, "It's a Family Affair: Religion, Geopolitics and the Rise of Mohammed Bin Salman," *Insight Turkey* 20, no. 2 (2017); Chara, "Saudi Arabia."

⁶⁵ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen and Anelle Sheline, *Mohammed Bin Salman and Religious Authority and Reform in Saudi Arabia*, issue brief no. 09.19.19 (Houston, Texas: Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy, 2019).

⁶⁶ Jens Heibach, "Public Diplomacy and Regional Leadership Struggles: The Case of Saudi Arabia," *International Politics* (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-021-00310-7>.

⁶⁷ Government of Saudi Arabia, "Vision 2030 Kingdom of Saudi Arabia."

⁶⁸ "Dr. Mohammad Bin Abdulkarim Al-Issa Biography," The Muslim World League, accessed September 9, 2023, <https://www.themwl.org/id/SG2019>.

September 2019.⁶⁹ In the same year, Sheikh Muhammad al-Issa also met Coptic Bishop Morcos in Riyadh.⁷⁰

In January 2020, Muhamad al-Issa led a group of Saudi clerics on a visit to the site of the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland. During their visit, the group was accompanied by representatives of the American Jewish committee. The Auschwitz Museum declared the group's leader, Sheikh al-Issa, was the most senior Islamic delegation to have visited the site. The visit was in order to fight the anti-Semitic movement and Islamophobia.⁷¹ In addition, the Prince's commitment in fighting terrorism and extremism is to establish a global centre to encounter extremist ideology called *Etidal*, which was established on 21 May 2017 and inaugurated by the President of the United States Donald Trump. The tagline promoted by *Etidal* is "seeking a moderate world."⁷²

To minimise the *fatwas* that are misused as the basis for extremist ideology, King Salman ordered the establishment of "The King Salman Complex." In this complex, *ḥadīth* experts will collect, study, criticise and eliminate false *ḥadīths* and *ḥadīths* that contain extremist ideology. In fact, in his announcement, *ḥadīth* texts that contradict Islamic teachings and legalise violence, murder and terror must be removed from the teachings of Islam, which is a religion of peace.⁷³ King Salman appointed Sheikh Muhammad bin Hassan al-Sheikh as chairman of the scientific board of the complex in Medina.⁷⁴ However, no recent information from this project can be found following the news in 2017.⁷⁵

Other changes can also be seen in the textbooks used in formal schools. In research conducted by the Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education (IMPACT-se) based in Ramat Gan, Israel, several changes were found in the curriculum and textbooks taught in Saudi. In 2016-2019, the curriculum has undergone changes and more moderate ideas are found than those that lean towards extremism. In the curriculum, non-Muslims are still referred to as *kafir* (infidel), but many things show openness and change towards a more tolerant direction.⁷⁶ Judaism and Christianity are recognised as the two

⁶⁹ Jon Hoffman, "The Evolving Relationship Between Religion and Politics in Saudi Arabia," Arab Center Washington DC, April 20, 2022, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-evolving-relationship-between-religion-and-politics-in-saudi-arabia/>.

⁷⁰ "Muslim World League Chief Receives Egyptian Coptic Bishop," *Arab News*, November 28, 2018, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1412701/saudi-arabia>.

⁷¹ "Dr. Mohammad Bin Abdulkarim Al-Issa Biography."

⁷² "About Etidal," Global Center for Combating Extremist Ideology, accessed September 9, 2023, <https://etidal.org/en/about-etidal/>.

⁷³ Harriet Sherwood, "Saudi Scholars to Vet Teaching of Prophet Muhammad to Curb Extremism," *The Guardian*, October 19, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/18/saudi-scholars-to-vet-teaching-of-prophet-muhammad-to-curb-extremism>.

⁷⁴ "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Salman Bin Abdulaziz Al Saud Complex for the Prophet's *Hadīth*," Saudi United National Platform, last modified March 28, 2023, https://www.my.gov.sa/wps/portal/snp/agencies/agencyDetails/AC408!/ut/p/z0/04_Sj9CPykssy0xPLMnMz0vMAfIjo8zivQIsTAwdDQz9LQwNzQwCnS0tXPwMvYwNDAz0g1Pz9L30o_ArAppiVOTr7JuuH1WQWJJKhm5mXlq8f4ehsYmChX5DtHg4AW32YQw!!/.

⁷⁵ Stéphane Lacroix, "Saudi Arabia and the Limits of Religious Reform," *The Review of Faith and International Affairs* 17, no. 2 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2019.1608650>.

⁷⁶ Eldad J. Pardo and Uzi Rabi, *The Winding Road to a New Identity: Saudi Arabian Curriculum 2016-19* (Ramat Gan: IMPACT-se, 2020).

religions that were practiced on the Arabian Peninsula before the birth of Islam.⁷⁷ In social relationships and daily life, Muslims are encouraged to be kind to their Christian and Jewish neighbours and friends.⁷⁸ Another new thing is the basis of Islamic law, which teaches the principle that cooperation with non-Muslims is permissible and has the principles taught by Islam.⁷⁹ Various accusations and poor definitions of Christianity as a colonial religion, genuine infidel and heretical religion have been removed from the 2019 curriculum.

In the 2017 curriculum, narratives about Jews and Israel are characterised by theological views and incitement to hatred. However, the 2019 curriculum is more dominated by theological views. In addition, the theological view that is promoted, the *wasatiyyah* (moderate) view, is also presented in the study of radical attitudes and extremism. The narrative of the relationship between the three Semitic religions (Islam, Judaism and Christianity) appears in their respective contributions to world civilisation and is not limited to the relationship between war and bloodshed, although no images of churches and synagogues have been found as symbols of Christian and Jewish houses of worship.⁸⁰

In the latest 2020 and 2021 curriculum, more problematic examples and narratives are removed. However, not all these sections were deleted and can still be found in the textbook. Some examples of material being omitted are *ḥadīths* that teach students that war between Muslims and Jews is inevitable and Muslims must fight Jews. The *ḥadīth* was deleted because it contains an anti-Semitic narrative. Likewise, other anti-Jewish and anti-Israel ideas, such as killing Jews in the last days and that Jews have no historical religious rights because they rejected the prophecy of Prophet Muhammad, were also abolished. In addition to the Jews, another idea that was abolished was the story of the homosexual crimes performed by the Sodomites.⁸¹ In the interpretation of several verses in the Qur’ān, the term “Jews and Christians” is replaced by a more general term, namely “enemy of Islam.”⁸²

However, some narratives are still found in the latest curriculum. Such as the narrative that all unbelievers will be tortured in Hell, but a Jew who embraces Islam will be saved, and the Jew is depicted as a representation of evil and the devil in the story of the generosity of Prophet Muhammad.⁸³ In the context of *Ahl al-Kitab* (People of the Book), the narrative presented is that the Torah and Bible are books revealed by God, but there are deviations and forgeries in them conducted by Christians and Jews.⁸⁴ Another narrative that is still being found is the death penalty for murderers, adulterers and apostates, according to Allah’s command in *surah al-Isra*.⁸⁵

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Eldad J. Pardo, *Review of Selected Saudi Textbooks 2020–21* (Ramat Gan: IMPACT-se, 2020).

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Eldad J. Pardo, *A Further Step Forward: Review of Changes and Remaining Problematic Content in Saudi Textbooks 2021-22* (Ramat Gan: IMPACT-se, 2021).

⁸⁵ Ibid.

However, some negative opinions emerged in response to the movements carried out by MbS and MWL. According to one Saudi intellectual, Sheikh al-Issa's actions above were not effective in changing the way people view non-Muslims. This is because the statements issued by Sheikh al-Issa and MWL about moderate Islam and eradicating extremism are not supported by the reading materials and widely spread media. According to him, the books in religious bookstores in Riyadh still teach many things that are contrary to the statements and actions of Sheikh al-Issa.⁸⁶

According to Lacroix, the religious reform policies launched by the Prince are seen as an act of public relations rather than a religious transformation.⁸⁷ Therefore, Ulrichsen and Sheline said MbS was still a political practitioner rather than a religious reformer.⁸⁸ In a report published by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), some policies and practices still discredit and intimidate non-Muslim groups. In the 2018 report, which is the year after the declaration of Saudi Vision 2030 and the appointment of the crown prince, religious freedom has not shown a significant increase. The government still imposes restrictions on religious practice for non-Muslims and persecutes individuals accused of blasphemy and conversion from Islam. In that year, the government seems not to have shown any concern about lifting the ban on worshipping for non-Muslims. Although they repeatedly stated they would guarantee non-Muslims from outside Saudi Arabia to practice private worship, but in practice it still cannot be implemented. This makes non-Muslims who are foreign nationals limit worship activities even at their homes so as not to attract attention from their neighbours.⁸⁹

As for the 2019 report, several positive developments emerged in religious life in Saudi Arabia. This is shown by the MWL's activities and meetings with religious leaders in the world. Narratives about inter-religious dialogue and the fight against terrorism seem to show a bright spot in managing diversity. However, at the level of policies and regulations regarding non-Muslims, there are no significant changes, including regarding the freedom to practice religious practices. Several Christian religious leaders in Saudi said the government did not appear to be serious about reviewing the policy. Instead, the government still monitors non-Muslim religious leaders, who often find it difficult to deposit money in banks. In September 2018, the government arrested a Catholic priest and some of his parishioners who attended a farewell party before he returned to his country.⁹⁰

In the following year, religious freedom in Saudi is still poor and has shown little improvement. The increase was in the form of holding the 14th Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) conference and giving birth to the Mecca Declaration. In addition, non-

⁸⁶ Lacroix, "Saudi Arabia and the Limits of Religious Reform."

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ulrichsen and Sheline, "Mohammed Bin Salman."

⁸⁹ USCIRF, "Saudi Arabia," in *USCIRF 2018 Annual Report* (Washington DC: US Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2018), <https://www.uscirtf.gov/sites/default/files/2018USCIRFAR.pdf>.

⁹⁰ USCIRF, "Saudi Arabia," in *USCIRF 2019 Annual Report* (Washington DC: US Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2019), <https://www.uscirtf.gov/sites/default/files/2019USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf>.

Muslims are still prohibited from practicing religious practices in public spaces and establishing houses of worship. Those who gather in one of the houses are monitored by the authorities, and if deemed necessary, worship activities in it can be stopped.⁹¹

In 2020, a positive development is the cooperative relationship between the government and MWL with the global Jewish community. In addition, as explained above, this year there have been many revisions to teaching materials in schools that are more tolerant and moderate. However, the policies related to worship practices, the establishment of houses of worship and gatherings for worship for non-Muslims are no different from previous years.⁹² In 2021, the government continued revising textbooks containing extremist ideology. However, in religious life, there is no change. On the other hand, the government has several times used accusations of espionage against religious dissidents, non-Muslims and religious converts, and became the target of punishment by the Sharia police.⁹³

In the discussions above, there are no significant changes in realising a Saudi state that is more moderate and tolerant of the rights of non-Muslims. The activities carried out by MbS and MWL to promote moderate Islam to religious leaders around the world only stop at political and economic interests, as one of the goals in Vision 2030. Meanwhile, the management of religion in the country is still oppressive and coloured by suspicion towards non-Muslims. Therefore, in 2022, “Open Doors,” a Christian mission that focuses on oppressed Christians, puts Saudi Arabia in 11th place in the list of countries in the world that give bad treatment to Christians with a high level of persecution.⁹⁴

One thing that should be appreciated is the change in the curriculum and replacement of materials containing extremist ideology. This is one of the major breakthroughs in presenting a more moderate and open perspective to followers of other religions. As the motto of IMPACT-se, education is the most powerful tool in mitigating the influence of extremists and prejudice, to create a more tolerant and open-minded society in the future.⁹⁵

The moderate Islam promoted by MbS needs to be applied in domestic affairs, in the form of managing diversity in the country. The examples of activities above show the dominance of the direction of development and communication of Islam, which is moderate and open in international relations. However, this spirit has not yet been transformed into policies and regulations that show justice to the non-Muslim population. Therefore, it is not an exaggeration to mention that the changes in the religious aspect carried out by MbS focused

⁹¹ USCIRF, “Saudi Arabia,” in *USCIRF Annual Report 2020* (Washington DC: US Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2020), https://www.uscirtf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report_Final_42920.pdf.

⁹² USCIRF, “Saudi Arabia,” in *USCIRF Annual Report 2021* (Washington DC: US Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2021), https://www.uscirtf.gov/sites/default/files/2021-04/2021%20Annual%20Report_0.pdf.

⁹³ USCIRF, “Saudi Arabia,” in *USCIRF 2022 Annual Report* (Washington DC: US Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2022), <https://www.uscirtf.gov/sites/default/files/2022%20Annual%20Report.pdf>.

⁹⁴ David Curry, “The 2022 World Watch List,” Open Doors, accessed September 9, 2023, <https://www.opendoors.org.au/world-watch-list/>.

⁹⁵ “About Us,” IMPACT-se, accessed September 9, 2023, <https://www.impact-se.org/about-us/>.

on the symbolic level rather than the substantive changes.⁹⁶ According to him, one of the things that hinders its implementation at the domestic society level is the still strong and influential position of Wahhabis in society.⁹⁷ Although it is not in accordance with the spirit of renewal and reform brought by MbS and Saudi Vision 2030, it must be acknowledged that so far, the Wahhabi group has been still at the forefront of preventing the democratisation of Western-style government and maintaining political stability in the Saudi Kingdom.⁹⁸

However, after five years of MbS' declaration of moderate Islam, real evidence is needed in its implementation, especially in the fulfilment of minority rights. This step can certainly be a legitimacy and strengthening of soft power that Saudi is truly "sovereign inside and outside" in spreading moderate Islamic teachings. Moreover, in the Mecca Declaration by OIC member countries in 2019, one of the points brought up was to condemn all acts of intolerance and discrimination based on religion, skin colour or belief and the need to spread the spirit of tolerance, respect, dialogue and cooperation among society to combat discrimination and hatred.⁹⁹ If Saudi Arabia, which is often considered a representation of an Islamic state, in which there is a holy city of Muslims, succeeds in implementing this commitment, the influence and authority that will emerge will be greater and influential in the Islamic world and internationally.

CONCLUSION

After the reforms carried out by MbS in 2016, many reforms have occurred in aspects of Saudi society's life, in economic, social and religious aspects. Several breakthroughs were made by MbS to show his commitment in returning Saudi Arabia to a more moderate direction. Foreign collaborations and visits from non-Islamic religious leaders were carried out after the declaration of the Saudi Vision 2030. In addition, the teaching materials used in formal schools have received several improvements and revisions, especially in narratives and ideas that contain the ideologies of extremism and conservatism. In the textbook, relations with non-Muslims are not described with hatred and sedition, but in a more tolerant and humanistic form. On the other hand, no significant policies were found in managing diversity, including the implementation of religious practices for non-Muslims and the establishment of houses of worship. In fact, several cases show the use of private houses for worship activities is also under the strict supervision of the Sharia police.

This study shows there has been a change in the religious reforms brought by MbS, although it is at a symbolic level and is more external in nature. The commitments in the country related to the management of diversity and fulfilment of the rights to freedom of religion are still not visible. As promoted in Saudi Vision 2030, which is to make Saudi

⁹⁶ Lacroix, "Saudi Arabia and the Limits of Religious Reform."

⁹⁷ Ibid.; Otterbeck, "Wahhabi Ideology of Social Control."

⁹⁸ Mahmud Hibatul Wafi, "Diskursus Reformasi Arab Saudi: Kontestasi Kerajaan Saudi Dan Wahabi" [Saudi Arabian Reform Discourse: Contestation of the Saudi Kingdom and Wahhabism], *Journal of Islamic World and Politics* 2, no. 1 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.18196/jiwp.2113>.

⁹⁹ Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, *Makkah Al-Mukarramah Declaration* (Makkah: OIC, 2019).

Arabia a tolerant country and open to all parties and strengthened by the Mecca Declaration, the Prince needs to implement openness and respect for non-Muslims in a real policy, which is monitored from the implementation from high to grassroots levels and involve all elements of society to be more moderate and open in respecting religious differences.

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