

<論 文>

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's Islamic Extremism Deradicalization Strategies from 1979 to 2020

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In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, various interpretations of Islam, including those that have encouraged extremism, have grown in popularity. This study argues that the disengagement of radical ideas from the concepts of moderate Islam leads to deradicalization. The study illustrates how radical ideas have been merged with moderate ones by extremists to create extremist modes of Islam and describes their tendencies and tenets. In addition, this paper reviews a moderation strategy for deradicalization applied by the Saudi Arabian government to combat extremism and outlines the crucial role played by the Council of Senior Islamic Scholars in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Saudi Arabia's highest religious advisory body). This study attempts to shed light on this policy in the context of Saudi Arabian political studies, thus addressing the scarcity of scholarly attention on this matter. The paper covers the phenomenon of deradicalization studies taking place between 1979 and 2020.

Keywords : Moderate Islam, Islamic notions, The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, deradicalization, extremism

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INTRODUCTION

A core facet of radicalization is establishing extreme perceptions of Islam that encourage the emergence of extremist behavior (Al-Ghamdi, 2015), which highlights the importance of certain usages of 'Islamic notions'. A religious, intellectual, Islamic education, as well as the enforcement of a moderate conception of Islam, have been proposed as tools of deradicalization, and combating extremism by promoting the moderate tenets of Islam is a successful deradicalization method (Porges, 2010). This study argues that the disengagement of radical ideas from the concepts of moderate Islam—that is, removing the radical notions that extremists consider 'moderate'—leads to deradicalization. This paper will illustrate how extremists have engaged with radical ideas and merged them with the moderate. In this study, moderate Islam is defined as 'extracting extremist ideas by inculcating moderate thoughts' (IWC, 2020, p. 1).

This study examines the relationship between extremist interpretations of Islamic ideals, such as jihad and Qur'an verses, and deradicalization. In addition, the paper will explore how extremist modes of Islam emerge, discuss their tendencies and tenets, and evaluate how they can be confronted via a deradicalization strategy based on moderation and will discuss and question extremist interpretations of Islamic notions, including radical renderings of verses from the Qur'an, before reviewing the latest analyses of the KSA's strategy to combat extremism and, overall, contributing to a broader scholarly discussion of deradicalization.

Evaluating such questions is particularly pertinent today, in a time at which radical acts are increasing. Unlike the present study, previous scholars have not focused on deradicalization via new tools but rather on existing Saudi Arabian deradicalization programs and, in particular, on the efforts of the Muhammad bin Naif Counseling and Care Center. However, as yet, few studies have explored the concepts of moderate Islam and investigated their engagement with extremists' radical ideas.

The extremists' perception of Islam has flourished in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) since 1979 (Almiman, 2021). The Intellectual Warfare Center (IWC, 2020), affiliated with the Saudi Ministry of Defense, is presently investigating deradicalization strategies in the KSA. Although the study is still underway and, according to the IWC, will further develop alongside additional recommendations for deradicalization strategies, its focuses are limited to security issues regarding military intervention, imprisonment, or other forms of deterrence. In contrast, this study reviews the KSA's approach to deradicalization by

focusing on shifting extremists' perceptions of Islam. Hence, the problem requiring academic investigation is the extent to which the Saudi government disengages radical ideas from the concepts of moderate Islam, thus leading to deradicalization. In other words, the question to be answered is how one can dissect those ideas considered 'radical' and remove them from the theory of moderate Islam.

This study aims to fill a gap within the existing literature. Indeed, few studies have discussed the efforts made from 2015 to 2020 to shift Islamic notions, including extremists' perceptions of Islam and their interpretation of Qur'an verses, and their impact on reducing extremism in the KSA. A critical study in this field is Andreas Casptack's (2015) review of the deradicalization programs in the KSA. Casptack emphasizes that the Saudi government can reshape all aspects of the detainees' lives, offering them a complete break from their jihadist pasts, although, according to the author,

none of the techniques used by the Saudi government are, in themselves, revolutionary...the Saudi deradicalization program deserves great attention for being a rare case of real and tangible success. (Casptack, 2015, p. 6)

While the author refers to Saudi Arabian deradicalization programs, the study fails, unlike the present paper, to examine the Saudi Council of Senior Islamic Scholars' role in reducing extremism. The Council's significance lies in its promotion of the concept of intellectual, moral, and ethical security by, for example, participating in local and international events to enhance moderate Islam, raising awareness of Islamic science, and disengaging radical ideas from the concepts of moderate Islam.

The present study will first describe extremism and extremists' perceptions of Islam from different scholarly perspectives and Islamic schools of thought before emphasizing the importance and values of moderate Islam. Subsequently, the paper will outline how extremists have interpreted Islam, leading to the consolidation of radical acts with the concepts of moderate Islam. This study reviews formal and traditional Islamic education, the role of extremist movements in dividing Islam into mutually exclusive and contradictory doctrines, and the spread of extremist Islamic notions through a truncated Islamic context from the Qur'an, paying particular attention to the case of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB).¹⁾ Lastly, the study examines the factors and strategies playing a role in correcting extremists' perceptions of Islam in accordance with the Saudi Arabian government's vision and its deradicalization efforts from 2015 to 2020.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As noted previously, few scholars have paid adequate attention to the phenomenon of deradicalization in relation to Islam in the KSA. The present study aims to address this gap in the literature.

Although the Saudi Arabian government has contributed various policies to the deradicalization process, as Marisa L. Porges (2010) observes, such efforts tend to be overlooked by the academic community. Porges is an expert at the Council on Foreign Relations think tank and argues that the Saudi deradicalization and terrorism reduction programs can deliver critical solutions to the rest of the world. Porges (2010) has noted the success of these deradicalization programs, which aim to balance traditional security efforts with techniques addressing the ideological sources of violent extremism. The author describes the religious reeducation and psychological counseling of extremists and observes that:

U.S. officials have been most interested in the Saudi programs of deradicalization because it involves the Guantanamo detainees and potentially provides the best role model for other detention facilities, including those in Afghanistan. (Porges, 2010, p. 2)

Nevertheless, although the author reviews the Saudi government's efforts regarding deradicalization, the study fails to examine the extremist consequences of limiting religious teachings to one school or sect and thus restricting Islam to a single denomination.

Similarly, Kamel al-Khatti claims that 'Saudi Arabia has one of the most successful deradicalization programs' (al-Khatti, 2019, p. 4). One criterion used in al-Khatti's study is the recidivism rate. According to the author, 10%–20% of the programs' beneficiaries engaged in criminal activities. While the author suggests solutions for deradicalization, such as dissociating extremists from their terrorist groups without attempting to change their beliefs, the study overlooks the deradicalization endeavors undertaken by the General Presidency for the Affairs of the Grand Mosque and the Prophet Muhammad's Mosque, which this study will examine.

Leila Ezzarqui (2010) develops a similar argument. Her study also focuses on extremist rehabilitation programs and claims that KSA boasts one of the most advanced deradicalization programs in the world. Ezzarqui shows that Saudi's rehabilitation programs enjoy a significant degree of success.

Other studies discussing deradicalization programs in the KSA include that of Michael J.

Williams and Samuel C. Lindsey (2012), whose study—in contrast to those mentioned above—critiques the KSA’s establishment of and selection of detainees for these programs. Notably, Williams and Lindsey’s study critiques deradicalization from a psychological perspective, whereas this study examines the topic from a security perspective. Amanda Johnston’s (2009) study also assesses the effectiveness of deradicalization programs for Islamic extremists but fails to discuss recent Saudi programs due to a scarcity of up-to-date data.

Moreover, both Sara Brzuszkiewicz (2017) and Mohd Mizan Aslam (2020) pursue a similar argument in their reviews of the Saudi deradicalization programs. These two studies address the field from a relatively neutral position. They describe the prison-based programs, which address holistic self-awareness, self-reflection, social skills, criminal behavior, spirituality, Islamic considerations, security, and psychology, yet the authors do not suggest other solutions for deradicalization.

In another study that shares the present study’s focus, Samantha Kutner (2016) asks whether it is ‘possible to dissolve the violent religious ideology behind the majority of terrorist behavior and keep the “person” intact’ (Kutner, 2016, p. 1). The author recommends religious reeducation, as does the current study. However, Kutner’s data and examples are less recent than those in this study, which examines deradicalization efforts up to 2020. Her study also fails to utilize Arabic references.

As mentioned above, this study aims to highlight extreme perceptions of Islam, such as extremists’ interpretations of jihad and Qur’an verses, which have not, as yet, been discussed in the existing literature. It then reviews the KSA’s deradicalization efforts and claims that the emergence of moderate Islam leads to a reduction in extremism.

EXTREMISM AND MODERATE ISLAM FROM THE SAUDI ARABIAN GOVERNMENT’S POINT OF VIEW

This section reviews extremism in the KSA and discusses the role of moderate Islam in stabilizing the KSA. It also addresses the teachings of Islam and the notion of moderate Islam from the Saudi Arabian government’s point of view.

I. MODERATE ISLAM

There are myriad interpretations of Islam, some of which have led to extremism. As such, understanding these interpretations is essential in developing strategies to counter

extremism (Al-Ghamdi, 2015).

'The notions of Islamic moderation', the KSA's strategy, aims to guide extremists back to a more moderate version of Islam by teaching Islamic notions (IWC, 2020). Indeed, the Saudi government argues that in order to implement moderate Islam, the state should employ and promote the concept of Islamic moderation. Doing something 'in moderation' means not doing it excessively (Al-Asmar, 2017). For instance, someone who moderates their food consumption may try to have a diverse diet while limiting their intake of unhealthy food. Similarly, moderate Muslims adhere to the concept of contextual relativism as a way to deepen their understanding of messages from the Qur'an. According to Kosugi (2020, p. 1),

it is well known that Islam is based on the two main sacred texts, namely, the Qur'an and the Prophetic Sunna, or *Kitāb Allāh wa Sunna Rasūl Allāh* (Allah's Book and the Sunna of Messenger of Allah) in Arabic.

In the Qur'an, Allah states that he made Muslims into a justly balanced, whole Muslim world (*The Qur'an*, 2, 143). In this sense, therefore, ISIS would not be considered to have adopted the concept of genuine Islam because the group has killed hundreds of people and engaged in many kinds of extremist behaviors.²⁾ Moreover, murder and violence cannot be justified by any logic or religion (Al-Tai, 2017).

Similarly, one cannot claim that extremist groups that call for partisanship, such as the MB, embody genuine Islam. The Saudi government recognizes such organizations as terrorist groups because they call for the separation of Muslims into groups under various slogans, political or otherwise. At the same time, Allah Almighty forbade such separation in the Holy Qur'an. The Arab Spring and its consequences, which have tended toward extremism and violence (including devastation, destruction, and murder), provide another example of inauthentic Islam (AL-Sabty, 2019). Hence, according to the Saudi Arabian government's understanding, Islamic extremism tends to involve the killing of non-Muslims and restricts Islam to one denomination only, to the exclusion of all others (Fandi, 2017).

Furthermore, extremists invoke a radical interpretation of Qur'anic verses to justify committing murder, which is their essential tenet. Therefore, the moderation strategy suggested in this study is a crucial means of fighting extremism and bringing about deradicalization. There is no such thing as extremist Islam, only extremist behavior arising from extremist perceptions of Islam (Almiman, 2021). Another significant factor that leads to extremism is extremists' tendency to conflate Sharia texts with the Qur'an as a whole

(IWC, 2020).

According to the Saudi Arabian government, any group claiming to embody Islamic concepts should base itself on the Qur'an and the Sunnah and be pragmatic rather than dogmatic, which involves considering the practicalities rather than a literal interpretation of text without context. If the group is peaceful and calls for forgiveness and justice, they follow genuine Islam. If, however, the group incites murder, violence, and extremism, they are using Islamic notions to achieve political goals and personal interests (Al-Jassem, 2018).

In the Kharijite era, specifically during the reign of the fourth Caliph after the Prophet Muhammad, Ali bin Abi-Talib, the first war emerged between two Muslim groups. Both parties claimed to fight for genuine Islam and sought to establish justice. Each party's results should be examined based on the KSA's perspective concerning moderate Islam to determine which was correct. For instance, Abdullah bin Abi bin-Saloul permitted the killing of Muslims, while the Messenger, before his death, believed that there was someone who sowed sedition and hatred. However, he told his companions that they should not kill anyone to avoid accusations that Muhammad was killing his companions. Thus, Islam does not have a specific definition: instead, according to the Saudi Arabian government's understanding of moderate Islam, it is a set of concepts summarized by tolerance and fairness, far removed from extremist discourse (Almiman, 2021).

As stated above, Islam is a flexible religion that does not advocate violence but rather coexistence and tolerance. Nevertheless, Faqih argues that there is no such thing as moderate Islam, asserting that 'Islam is only one, and there is no moderate and non-moderate' (2017, p. 1). In contrast, Christianity is an illustration of a moderate religion: for example, drinking alcohol temperately is permissible, while drunkenness is forbidden.

Similarly, Al-Asmar (2017) suggests that Islam is sometimes used politically: politicians exploit Islamic notions to achieve political goals. Indeed, according to Al-Shaher (2019), Islam has been integrated with politics since the first Islamic era. The Muslim Caliph consulted the companions and other Muslims in the mosque, the principal place of worship for Muslims, after praying about governance and political issues in the Islamic caliphate. To summarize, Islam is not only a set of religious practices but also a complete system for a life of moderation. The following section outlines the values of moderate Islam according to the KSA's perception of Islam and how these tenets contribute to combating extremism.

II. MODERATE ISLAM: SIGNIFICANCE AND VALUES

The KSA promotes so-called 'moderate Islam' as a policy and strategy to counter extremism using nonphysical means. This section reviews the significance and values of moderate Islam.

According to the KSA and its perception of moderate Islam, the religion indirectly underpins the global economy and calls for economic and social openness (Ali, 2018). The Abbasid Caliphate is one example of this. During Caliph Harun al-Rashid's reign, Islamic countries were among the most powerful and prosperous in the world. A potential reason behind this power is that countries applied the pragmatic concepts of Islam—for instance, by enabling women to work and actively involving them in society. In fact, this idea of supporting women was prevalent in the early Islamic eras. The first Muslim woman was appointed as a market supervisor in Islamic history during the rule of the second Caliph, Umar ibn Al-Khattab (Fandi, 2017).

One of the KSA's core understandings of Islam that contributes to combating extremism is the assumption that Islam facilitates a healthy society, free from social or economic extremism, fraud, lying, or any other type of extremism. This notion contradicts those who regard Islam as solely a religious practice (Al-Ghamdi, 2015). Notwithstanding the conflict that emerged within the Umayyad family, the Umayyad Caliphate provides further support for this argument. The Umayyads assisted in spreading moderate concepts of Islam, such as by restricting the teaching of Islamic studies to specialists and Islamic scholars, which was reflected in the caliphate's cultural and religious stability and economic prosperity.

The values of genuine Islam are incredibly diverse, and Islamic values are sometimes taken from non-Muslims. This is also an element of the KSA's understanding of moderate Islam (Al-Ghamdi, 2015), whereby Islamic values are related to Islam rather than to Muslims. According to the Prophet Muhammad, Allah loves anyone who perfectly performs any job (Setiawan, 2020). Therefore, in this context, accuracy, quality, and honesty in one's work can be learned and committed by non-Muslims and still be regarded as Islamic values. The Prophet Muhammad also states that a wise word is the lost property of the believer, so wherever he finds a wise word, he has more right to it than others (Ebaugh, 2010). Regarding this point, Al-Hasan (2016) affirms that Islam's most critical value is not confined to one place but is characterized by universality. Islam, then, is an integrated system that helps people conduct their lives effortlessly and smoothly—it is not merely a religion.

Despite the significance of moderate Islam's values, however, their meanings have been reinterpreted for personal and political purposes, as elaborated upon in the following section.

EXTREMISTS' PERCEPTION OF ISLAM: THE SAUDI GOVERNMENT'S POINT OF VIEW

This section reviews the policies and strategies implemented by the KSA to promote moderate Islam. One of the negative elements discussed is the fallacy of interpreting Islamic notions and using religious texts out of context, altering their meaning. This section also analyzes some of the texts from the Qur'an and Hadith that have been used to discredit other Islamic notions (Ali, 2018). In addition, this section discusses the potential role of Islamic scholars in disseminating moderate Islamic concepts in the KSA. Finally, it explores the relationship between Islam's transition into sectarianism and extremist movements, focusing particularly on the MB.

Some scholars have posited the importance of reconceptualizing Islamic tenets as the key to overcoming extremism. This study, meanwhile, focuses on the necessity of embracing moderate Islamic values and examines their role in deradicalization in the KSA.

Extremists' ignorance toward the meanings of Islamic texts and their historical contexts has led to a history riddled with insults to Sharia and criminal and terrorist acts stemming from their distortion of Islamic values (IWC, 2020). Indeed, Islam has become associated with the term 'terrorism', especially since the 9/11 attacks. This begs an important question: is the understanding of Islam in the KSA related to extremism or violence in any way?

During the war between Muslims and the Quraysh,³⁾ at the time of the Prophet Muhammad's call, the Quraysh killed large numbers of Muslims in two battles, the Battle of Uhud and the Battle of Bader. Subsequently, after Muslims conquered Mecca in December 629, the Quraysh, who had participated in the killing in the two previous battles, came to the Prophet Muhammad. He told them, based on Islamic regulations, 'Go. You are free' (Al-Hasan, 2016). The Prophet Muhammed's action reflects Islam's tolerance and shows how it contributes to the stability of nations. According to the KSA's interpretation, Islam calls on both Muslims and non-Muslims worldwide to engage in moderation. Therefore, two crucial tenets of moderate Islam in the KSA are diversity and universality.

Extremists have attempted to restrict Islam into a narrow group called the 'survivor

squad' (Al-Ghamdi, 2015). This group was described by the Prophetic Hadith when the Messenger stated that 'the children of Israel split into 71 sects, and my nation will split into 72, all of which will be in Hell apart from one' (Sunan Ibn Majah, 68, 3993). Notably, the Messenger indicated the split of the Ummah rather than Muslims, who differed regarding jurisprudential issues or non-religious matters.

The texts of the Qur'an and Hadith were originally written in a loose and tolerant style, allowing readers to interpret the texts in myriad ways, particularly if the texts are removed from their proper contexts. One reason for this style is that Islam assumes and encourages Muslims and non-Muslims to be different and make life easier (Borda'a, 2014), evincing the principles of tolerance and coexistence that the Saudi Arabian government applies to their understanding of moderate Islam.

In this context of multifaceted interpretations, one could argue that ISIS misinterpreted the Qur'an verse explaining fighting and killing during war. However, after truncation, this verse appears to refer comprehensively to killing in any case. Thus, ISIS has come to invoke killing at all times and claim it is justified under the pretext of Islam by using a Qur'an verse (Al-Tai, 2017).

I. THE ROLE OF FORMAL AND TRADITIONAL ISLAMIC EDUCATION IN TEACHING ISLAMIC NOTIONS IN THE KSA

This sub-section reviews formal and traditional Islamic forms of education in the KSA and their methodological differences to define their role in spreading Islamic tenets. In this study, formal teaching refers to education in traditional Islamic schools, whereas traditional Islamic education relates to the teaching of Islamic sciences at mosques, as the Prophet Muhammed taught his companions and the first Muslims. In typical and traditional schools, Islamic science education is essential in establishing moderate Islamic principles. As will be discussed in this section, the education methods, teachers' natures, and customs and traditions all considerably influence the understanding of Islamic tenets.

The family is considered a fundamental pillar informing 'the identity of moderation' in individual thought and behavior (Al-Habib, 2012). Educational institutions in the KSA reinforce this pillar through their pivotal role in education, subject to specialized periodic scientific assessment (IWC, 2020).

The teaching of Islamic sciences began when the Prophet Muhammad first taught them to Muslims in mosques through revelation (Setiawan, 2020). The educational program developed for the Islamic sciences was implemented in regular schools during the early

Islamic era. In the third century, Greek philosophy also began to be taught in traditional Islamic schools. However, some Muslims were not convinced of the civilization's value and development during that period; thus, they continued to study Islamic sciences in mosques and attempted to imitate the Messenger in form and substance. Even today, for example, some Islamic scholars and imams avoid using electricity and air-conditioning in mosques on the pretext that the Prophet Muhammad did not use them. Instead, they use traditional oil lamps, imitating the Messenger.

Moreover, some Islamic science teachers require students to bring traditional boards rather than pens and paper, just as the Messenger used for writing (see Figures 1 and 2). It must nonetheless be noted that Allah's Messenger did not advocate against civilization or development.



Figures 1 and 2: Traditional boards used in the Islamic Center in Nairobi, Kenya

(Source: Author)

Extremist interpretations consider Islamic legal texts as concrete rules with specific results that should never be discussed but only imitated verbatim, which, in some Islamic countries, prevents social and economic development. According to the Saudi government's interpretation, meanwhile, moderate Islam is a way of life rather than a set of laws and religious practices (Al-Ghamdi, 2015).

One of the factors contributing to the dissemination of moderate Islam in the KSA is the teachers, who play a crucial role in facilitating an understanding of texts and Islamic tenets. For instance, education in the Najd region in the KSA is based on somewhat rigid and strict teachings and is characterized by firm decision-making, decisiveness, and rigor in all matters of life (Awes, 2019). By contrast, in the KSA's Eastern Province, teachings are distinguished by flexibility, coexistence, looseness, and fluidity rather than inflexible dogmatism. Therefore, this latter type of teaching better reflects moderate Islam (Al-Habib,

2012).

Hadari (2020) argues that regular Islamic education in the KSA promotes moderate Islam. He notes that the educational process in regular schools, particularly regarding Islamic sciences, is subject to a well-studied methodology and audited by specialized Islamic scholars. Conversely, education in the traditional schools in Saudi Arabian mosques is subject to the teachers' personal interpretations rather than based on an analysis of the meaning and intent of the religious texts.

One instance of Saudi efforts toward promoting moderate Islam is the education in the Two Holy Mosques, where lessons are given in the Grand Mosque and the Prophet Muhammad's Mosque with an unparalleled level of erudition. The Islamic lessons are broadcast directly via online platforms, and more than 120 nationalities study them remotely (Al-Thaqafi, 2018).

The following sub-section discusses how the MB has contributed to the extremism in the KSA.

II. EXTREMIST MOVEMENTS' CAUSES IN THE KSA: ISLAMIC DIVISIONS

This sub-section discusses the causes behind Islamic sectarianism and attributes these divisions to extremist movements. It focuses on the MB as one of the causes of Islamic divisions in the 1980s and 1990s in the KSA (AL-Sabty, 2019). Furthermore, the sub-section demonstrates how the MB has contributed to Islam's split into various hostile doctrines by establishing Salafism and a fusion of Salafism's roles and *Sororiaya*.⁴⁾ It argues that the MB has attempted to foment extremism by espousing the concept of the caliphate to overthrow the KSA government and spread hatred of the monarchy among the youth, who will one day lead the country. In each of these cases, extremist interpretations of Islam have been used as a tool to achieve personal and political goals (Leiken & Brooke, 2007).

Spreading sectarianism leads to isolation, intolerance, and extremism. Islam began to divide into various sects after the Prophet Muhammed's death. However, in recent decades, following the growth of the MB (initially in Egypt before it spread to the KSA), Islamic divisions have increased, and the MB quickly began to condemn anyone who did not belong to their movement (AL-Sabty, 2019).

Before the MB spread to the KSA, the teaching of Islamic sciences was controlled by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, yet with the MB's increased influence over Saudi authorities, the group was granted various Islamic teaching positions in mosques and schools.

A significant result of the MB's control was the reinterpretation of Islamic notions that led to the forbidden becoming permissible or Halal. This is the opposite of the concept of moderate Islam applied in the KSA (Al-nuaimy, 2018). While the jurisprudential rule in Islamic science states that the fundamental Islamic principle is that something is permitted unless there is a text expressly prohibiting it, these principles have become forbidden under the MB's interpretation (Al-Ghamdi, 2015).

As the following section describes, the MB took control of Islamic education in the KSA in 1979, spreading sectarianism and reinterpreting Islamic concepts until the Islamic reforms began in 2015 after King Salman assumed power.

THE KSA'S DERADICALIZATION STRATEGIES AND POLICIES

This section illustrates the Saudi Arabian government's past deradicalization attempts, reviews its policies for promoting moderate Islam, and evaluates their role in deradicalization in the country from 2015 to 2020.

The discussion covers four aspects of these efforts. First, since the KSA focuses on moderate Islam and public awareness of Islam, the section will examine the Council of Senior Islamic Scholars' efforts regarding extremism. Second, it will assess the efforts made in the KSA linked to women's employment, highlighting women's position in moderate Islam and discussing the impact of this on deradicalization. Third, it reviews the extremist consequences of limiting religious teachings to one sect or school of thought in an attempt to restrict Islam to a single denomination, as has previously been attempted, along with a discussion of the KSA's efforts related to this issue. Fourth, it addresses the endeavors pertaining to deradicalization and the promotion of moderate Islam made by the General Presidency for the Affairs of the Grand Mosque and the Prophet Muhammad's Mosque.

Before beginning this discussion, to illustrate the Saudi Arabian government's anti-extremism endeavors and achievements, it is necessary to detail the use of moderate Islamic concepts. The KSA focuses on four areas of moderate Islam.

First, according to the KSA, restricting Islam to worship and religious practice only isolates religious feelings and extremism. Instead, Islam should form a complete and integrated religious system that even encompasses sports and entertainment. From 1979 onward, Islam in the KSA was limited to religious practice, asceticism, and waiting for death and the afterlife. Furthermore, Muslim clerics in Friday speeches focused on

describing hell to intimidate people rather than espousing heaven's bliss. This discourse resulted in an imbalance in the understanding of Islam. One of the solutions is adherence to the approach found in the Qur'an, which never mentions hell except when also mentioning heaven and vice versa. This is the moderate approach. Meanwhile, some religious figures are responsible for paradoxically promoting atheism because they discourage people from religion due to their strictness, intensity, and the severity of their teachings (Al-Ghazali, 2005). Therefore, one of the Saudi Arabian government's strategies has been to reform and reorganize the interior Islamic authorities and relevant Islamic organizations. From 1979 to 2015, anyone—whether Islamic specialists or not—was allowed to deliver Islamic lectures. However, since 2015, only Islamic scholars with permission from the Islamic authorities have been permitted to deliver Islamic speeches.

The Saudi Arabian government has limited Islamic speeches to the Council of Senior Islamic Scholars. These Muslim scholars specialize in Islam, politics, and history; they can consider Islamic issues from numerous perspectives that are not purely Islamic, and they deliver their statements and speeches via different media platforms. The Council has various programs and goals, including promoting moderate Islam, reinforcing moderate Islam through thoughts and behaviors, creating a scientific environment that encourages moderate Islam among intellectual elites, and reducing the spread of extremist ideology. One of the Council's most important goals is to promote the concept of intellectual, moral, and ethical security. For instance, the Council has participated in local and international events to represent moderate Islam, which is considered a new element in the Council's history, as previously, its posts were only local. Thus, this strategy raises awareness of moderate Islam and fosters deradicalization.

Since 1979, Islamic forums, such as mosques, have explicitly called for jihad to encourage the youth under the banner of Islam.⁵⁾ Unfortunately, however, this practice has encouraged the emergence of extremist groups in Iraq, such as ISIS, and led to wars, resulting in the conflation of radical ideas with the concepts of moderate Islam.

Nevertheless, since 2015, the reforms to promote moderate Islam have prevented extremists from attempting to justify and explain the concept of jihad based on personal opinion. In the KSA, as mentioned above, only the Council of Senior Islamic Scholars, an official Islamic authority, can deliver legal views on Islamic law. Consequently, awareness of moderate Islam has increased, and radical ideas have become disengaged from the perceptions of moderate Islam. Extremism has likely waned due to the Council's Islamic activities: indeed, no major terrorist bombings were recorded in the KSA in 2020. In this

context, extremism has become disentangled from the main concepts of Islam, ensuring that Islam and extremism are not related in any way (Al-Mousa, 2018).

The interpretation of Islam implemented in the Awakening Era consisted of the prohibition of entertainment, exhortations to asceticism, and exclusive devotion to worship.⁶⁾ There were various incitements and motivations for people to engage in jihad during that period (Al-Jassem, 2018). According to Al-Jassem, 'In Islam, *Jihad* is known for raising the banner of Islam to uphold the true word, while the extremist calls people to die' (2018, p. 2). Nonetheless, many people were unhappy during this period because they longed for the afterlife, a notion planted by extremist interpretations and discourses (Almiman, 2021).

The second dimension of moderate Islam pertains to women. Women's productivity in the KSA increased dramatically after 2015 following a decline in the restrictions they faced—conditions that had previously been implemented based on the assumption that Islamic rules forbid interactions with women.

Women have started to work in the industrial, retail, and manufacturing sectors since 2015. The Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development in the KSA indicates that productivity increased between 2015 and 2020, most likely because women entered the workforce. Moreover, the Ministry of Human Resources reported that women comprised 27.5% of the Saudi workforce during this period, exceeding the Ministry's target of 24% by the end of 2020 (HRSD, 2020).

Almiman (2020) conducted a study on the organization of Islamic cooperation, focusing specifically on the KSA. The author investigated the factors determining women's participation by measuring governance data and education, using robust panel data methods to calculate the interdependencies of these variables. He found that 'the participation of women is both a driving force and a sign of the ongoing outcome of economic development' (Almiman, 2020, p. 45). It should be noted that before 1979, women used to work in the Saudi Arabian markets. However, after the Awakening Era began in 1979, women were forbidden to work either in the markets or any other settings under the pretext of so-called Islamic rules (Samargandi et al., 2019).

One fruitful consequence of the reinterpretation of Islamic notions is the positive relationship between women's employment and deradicalization in the KSA. Revising ideas relating to women's status in line with moderate Islamic tenets is one strategy for reducing extremism. For instance, in Saudi Crown Prince Muhammed bin Salman's era, a woman was appointed to the role of Deputy Minister of Labor for the first time in the

country's history. Moreover, the first female Saudi ambassador to the United States was appointed in 2019 (HRSD, 2020). Given women's presence in several labor sectors, it is clear that the harsh treatment of women has decreased due to the shift in Islamic notions concerning women's issues. In turn, extremism in the KSA decreased between 2015 and 2020.

The third dimension, the derivation of religious teachings from only one sect or school of thought, is one of the most significant factors leading to extremism. Islamic education limited to one group under one denomination leads to ownership of Islamic tenets. Consequently, it is assumed that anyone exclusive to the group and/or who is non-Muslim is an outsider and, therefore, permissible to kill, as ISIS advocates (Al-Tai, 2017).

The KSA no longer limits religious teachings to one sect or school of thought. In 1979, however, people saw religion monastically: they could only belong to one school of thought and denomination and only learn from scholars in Najd in the KSA. This is likely due to Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahab's legacy. He was a religious leader, Islamic scholar, and theologian from Najd and the founder of the Islamic movement known as Wahhabism (Saleh, 2017).⁷⁾ While religious books teach that Islam is characterized by universality, in reality, this is often not the case (Al-Shugair, 2020).

In extreme cases, some religious figures have forbidden teaching foreign languages or speaking them unnecessarily and encouraged speaking solely in Arabic. These figures argue that Arabic is the language of the Qur'an, and thus, the text should not be communicated in other languages. Nonetheless, speaking in foreign languages opens doors to different cultures. One of the KSA's efforts in reinterpreting Islamic notions is to be more accepting of foreign languages, including English and Chinese (Al-Ghamdi, 2015), and in 2020, Saudi schools and universities began to teach foreign languages.

Furthermore, the teaching of arts and crafts has also begun. Arts education provides people with a source of spirituality, which Islam encourages as long as it does not explicitly violate Islamic prohibitions (Terhaag, 2020). As these religious reforms call for people to embrace life, they represent the opposite of extremists' understanding of Islam. Indeed, whereas extremists view Islam as a religion that entices people toward death in the belief of an afterlife, these reforms advocate diversifying the sources of Islamic teachings as a promising deradicalization strategy.

Based on the above, therefore, extremism is reduced once Islamic notions are moderated to be more aligned with believers' lives. In addition, Islamic partisanship reduces, affiliation and *takfir* decrease, and everyone becomes a believer under a single banner of

Islam.⁸⁾

The fourth and final dimension comprises the deradicalization efforts made by the General Presidency for the Affairs of the Grand Mosque and the Prophet Muhammad's Mosque. The two Holy Mosques are the most important mosques for Muslims, and the General Presidency has focused on broadcasting lectures and speeches on spreading moderation and peace, which the Qur'an also calls for (Al-Thaqafi, 2018). The goal is to disseminate moderate Islam throughout the KSA and the broader Islamic world. The lectures are divided into general lectures, intensive monthly and weekly sessions, and Friday lectures. More than 10,000 lectures were given between 2015 and 2019.

The Presidency has also established the Center for Moderation. This center publishes articles, raises awareness, and supervises and reviews the results of the Presidency's efforts to spread moderate Islam (Al Harthi, 2019). Consequently, the center encourages the promotion of moderate Islam and thus refutes extremism. Additionally, since 2015, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs has controlled the Friday lecture topics. Prior to this time, from 1979 to 2015, the lecture topics were subject to the Sheikhs' personal choices without revision by the Council of Senior Islamic Scholars.

As such, extremism has lessened between 2015 to 2020 due to the suitable selection of topics for the Friday lectures. The role of the Sheikh is now moderated by selecting those who have studied moderate Islam and learned the principles of Islamic sciences (Sharia). This practice, alongside controlling the topics of the Friday lectures, likely contributed to the shift in Islamic tenets. It should also be noted that the above four aspects were reformed by institutions on their own initiative, supported by the King's and Crown Prince's initiatives (Ministry of Islamic Affairs, 2020).

Through the above dimensions and due to the deradicalization efforts made between 2015 and 2020, extremism has successfully been moderated in the KSA.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study analyzed the Saudi Arabian government's role in reducing extremism from 1979 to 2020. The case of the KSA was examined using an analytical-descriptive instrument method. The paper has explored how extremist modes of Islam emerged, reviewed extremists' perceptions of Islam and their interpretation of Qur'an verses, and then illustrated the Saudi Arabian government's efforts at deradicalization. This study's unique contribution to the academic literature lies in its aim to address deradicalization in the

KSA via a new method—the promotion of moderate Islam.

This study's primary argument is that the Saudi Arabian government's endeavors to reinterpret extremist Islamic notions by targeting extremists' shifting perceptions of Islam could potentially lead to deradicalization. That is, isolating, understanding, and removing the radical ideas that extremists consider moderate contributes to deradicalization. Despite the significance of revising Islamic tenets in the process of deradicalization and overcoming extremism, this topic has received scant scholarly attention. Existing studies have focused on new security systems to combat radicalization and examine deradicalization via nonphysical dimensions, such as the Internet of Things. Of course, some scholars have discussed the KSA's deradicalization programs; however, they have failed to address combating extremism via novel methods, such as reframing Islamic notions as being far removed from radical ideas and disengaging these radical ideas from the concepts of moderate Islam.

This study examined the issue of reinterpreting Islamic notions from three different approaches. First, it illustrated how the extremist mode of Islam has emerged and addressed the characteristics and tenets of this form. Second, it suggested that a moderation strategy could contribute to deradicalization by advocating moderate Islam, and lastly, it reviewed the KSA's moderation strategies and the role of efforts to shift Islamic notions in deradicalization in the country.

The paper has examined extremism in relation to the values and significance of moderate Islam. It then discussed the different extremist interpretations that play a crucial role in the rise of radicalization and violence. It presented the sources of Islamic teachings and formal and traditional Islamic educational methodologies. This study also discussed the Council of Senior Islamic Scholars, which attempts to promote moderate Islam to avoid interpretations that lead to extremism, and reviewed its strategies for deradicalization and their implementation. Finally, this study identified various factors that demonstrate the KSA's success in encouraging moderate Islam and reducing extremism, the most critical of which is the acknowledgment that Islam is not limited to religious worship and practice but rather encompasses an integrated socioeconomic and religious system for everyday life that even incorporates sports and entertainment. Furthermore, the paper has shown that the efforts made in the General Presidency for the Affairs of the Grand Mosque and the Prophet Muhammad's Mosque between 2015 and 2019 have helped encourage moderate Islam and deradicalization.

This study focused on the case of the KSA. However, it provides significant insight into

the practices of other countries. For instance, since 2015, one of the KSA's strategies to reframe Islamic notions has been to support women's employment and disseminate moderate Islam. Since the Islamic culture in the Gulf countries is similar, further research into the broader applicability of the lessons learned in the KSA is recommended.

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Notes

- 1) The Muslim Brotherhood is a transnational, political Islamist organization founded in Egypt by Hassan al-Banna in 1928, and one of its goals is to control the trends of the Islamic world (Al-Ghamdi, 2015).
- 2) The extremist group under the name of the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham (Levant), ISIS (Almiman, 2021) 'Aims firstly to re-establish a system of governance known as the Caliphate--an Islamic form of government that first came into being after Muhammad's death under Abu Bakr and saw its last manifestation in the Ottoman Empire--across the entire Muslim world. From there, the intention is to spread the Caliphate across the entire world' (Al-Tamimi, 2013, p. 1).
- 3) 'The Quraysh was a powerful merchant tribe of the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century. It controlled Mecca, where it was the custodian of the Kaaba, the sacred Pagan shrine and destination for pilgrims that became Islam's most sacred shrine' (Tristam, 2019, p. 1).
- 4) 'The Sororiaya derive their customs partially from Salafism and follow the extrinsic religious orientation. They practice beard lengthening, wear their tunics above the knee, and forbid music and smoking. They are particularly widespread in Najd, Saudi Arabia' (Almiman, 2021, p. 10).
- 5) Jihad: 'Muslims use the word Jihad to describe three different kinds of labor. For instance, a believer's internal struggle to live out the Muslim faith as well as possible. As well, the effort to build a good Muslim society. Also, the main meaning of Jihad is the internal spiritual struggle, and this is accepted by many Muslims' (BBC, 2009, p. 1).
- 6) The 'Awakening Era' is a movement that 'originally began as a religious, political, voluntary, social and intellectual movement in Egypt in 1970. Then, it was established in Saudi Arabia in 1979. This movement fostered reshaping the Islamic landscape which is capable of exploiting Islamic platforms' (Almiman, 2021, p. 2).
- 7) Wahhabism refers to the Islamic revivalist and fundamentalist movement within Sunni Islam. The term is derived from the Arab scholar Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (Al-Ghamdi, 2015).
- 8) Takfir: accusing another Muslim to be an apostate (Al-Tamimi, 2013).

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