

# **Doctoral Dissertation**

## **Deradicalization Policies of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Seeking Moderate Interpretations of Islam (1979-2020)**

September 2022

Doctoral Program in International Relations  
Graduate School of International Relations  
Ritsumeikan University

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University**

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Arabia: Seeking Moderate Interpretations of Islam  
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**サウジアラビア王国による脱急進化政策：穏健的  
イスラーム解釈の追求（1979-2020）**

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# ABSTRACT OF DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

## **Deradicalization Policies of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Seeking Moderate Interpretations of Islam (1979-2020)**

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Amidst the Cold War (1947-1991) between the religious movements in KSA, extremists have exploited the platforms to reshape the Islamic religious landscape since 1979. This exploitation has affected Saudi national security. In 2017 Saudi Crown Prince Muhammed bin Salman (1985-) presented coexistence, tolerance, and openness to the world. Various interpretations of Islam claiming to apply religious teachings have spread, some of which encouraged extremism. However, in recent decades, KSA has attempted to reduce extremism with new tools and fresh strategies, evaluated in this dissertation. We are aware of the sources gap in this topic which we attempt to fill in this dissertation.

This dissertation focuses on three dimensions. The first dimension is extremists' influence and exploitation of Islamic platforms. By overtaking these platforms and accessing millions of people, terrorists can spread their ideas globally, greatly impacting the national security of KSA. Thanks to a new research approach, understanding how this exploitation takes place is crucial to crafting a comprehensive policy challenging extremism. The second dimension narrows the focus of the study by analyzing Islamic intellectual security as the policy choice of the government of KSA. Given the religious source of conflict, the fight between extremists and the government takes place on an ideological level, requiring officials to combat extremist Islamic doctrines used to persuade the youth to join the *jihad*. The last dimension deals with the anti-extremist policies within the Islamic intellectual security idea by showcasing KSA's three-pronged deradicalization approach based on the tenets of moderate Islamic teachings.

Using an analytical-descriptive research method the dissertation analyzes the shortcomings of existing literature to understand how moderate Islam influences deradicalization policies from an Islamic perspective. KSA's national security requires an understanding of the religious nature of the conflict, soft power approach targeting minds, and extremists' belief systems to successfully eliminate terrorist threats.

# 博士論文要旨

## サウジアラビア王国による脱急進化政策：穏健的イスラーム解釈の追求（1979-2020）

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1979年以降、サウジアラビアで宗教運動間の静かな対立が続く中、一部の過激派が宗教的プラットフォームを利用して、イスラームの宗教的景観の再構築を企ててきた。過激派は、イスラーム・プラットフォームを搾取することで、サウジアラビアの国家安全保障に影響を及ぼすに至ってきた。そうした状況下で、2017年には、サウジアラビアのムハメド・ビン・サルマン皇太子が、イスラームに内包される共存と寛容を訴え、サウジアラビアの開放性を世界に提示した。サウジアラビアでは、宗教の教えに基づいていると主張する様々なイスラーム解釈が流通するようになっており、その中には過激派を助長する性格をもつものもあった。しかし、ここ数十年、サウジアラビアは新たな手段、新たな戦略による過激派の弱体化を試みており、本論文ではその成果を新たな視角から分析する。

具体的には、本論文では、3つの側面に焦点を当てている。第一に、イスラーム・プラットフォームがサウジアラビアの国家安全保障に与える影響である。その意義は、イスラーム・プラットフォームの在り方を深く観察し、その利用、影響、言説がサウジアラビアの国家安全保障にもたらす結果を論じることにある。ここでは、サウジアラビアにおいて過激派思想を広めるためにイスラーム・プラットフォームが利用されている現状を考察し、加えてイスラームの教えに基づく平和構築に貢献したサウジアラビアの反過激派政策について概説する。

第二に、記述分析的手法を通して、サウジアラビアにおけるイスラームの「知的安全保障」概念とその重要性を論及している。また、イスラームの知的安全保障の浸透という予防策がサウジアラビアにおける過激派の弱体化に果たす潜在的な効果・役割を説明し、イスラームの「知的安全保障」を用いた過激派思想の波及の予防と過激派の弱体化を結びつける様々な要因を明らかにする。

最後に、サウジアラビア政府のビジョンに従って、イスラームの穏健な教義を提示することによって過激派と戦うことが、脱民主化の方法として成功している現状を提示する。ここでは、イスラームの過激派様式がどのように出現し、その傾向や信条をどのように説明したのかという問題を扱っている。ここでは、サウジアラビア政府が過激派と戦うために適用している脱過激派戦略について検討し、サウジアラビアの上級イスラーム学者評議会（サウジアラビアの最高宗教顧問機関）が果たす重要な役割について詳説する。

## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation represents my work, which has been done after registration for the degree of Doctoral Degree at Ritsumeikan University and has not been previously included in a thesis or dissertation submitted to this or any other institution for a degree, diploma, or other qualifications.

**PARTS OF THIS DISSERTATION ARE CONSTRUCTED UPON MY ARTICLES THAT HAVE BEEN PUBLISHED AS PEER-REVIEW IN ACADEMIC JOURNALS AND REVISED, AS FOLLOWS:**

## LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

Chapter 2:

The Extremists' Exploitation of Islamic Platforms in Qassim, Saudi Arabia, 1979–2019  
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Chapter 3:

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Chapter 4:

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's Islamic Extremism Deradicalization Strategies from 1979 to 2020. *Ritsumeikan Journal of International Relations and Area Studies*, 2022. Vol. 54, pp. 19-40.

## **ABBREVIATIONS INDEX**

AHIF	Al-Haramain Islamic Foundation
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
MB	Muslims Brotherhood
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
KSA	The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
RSCT	Regional Security Complex Theory



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Figure 1. Map of Saudi Arabia, 1974

## Introduction

In an era of increased Islamophobia and a rise in terrorist acts, violence, and bombings, Islam is often used as a pretext to justify murder and violence (el-Aswad, 2021). Nevertheless, this ‘justification’ is utilized not only in Islam but also in Christianity, Judaism, and Buddhism. Therefore, while religion is prevalent and is often considered to save people’s souls and lives, it is also sometimes used to validate specific political objectives or even violence. Religion can be considered either extreme or moderate, and throughout the years 1979-2020, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia - hereafter the KSA - has been attempting a strong effort to keep extremism contained. Consequently, in this dissertation, extremism is defined as a ‘collection of ideological beliefs about an obligation to bring back the political system to a form suggested by religious norms through violence’ (Arena & Arrigo, 2005). Therefore, groups declared as extremists are often opponents of the mainstream political and religious beliefs held by the public. Governments fighting extremists often have policies in place that control major influential platforms out of caution for public safety (Alsaif & Starks, 2018). For example, the KSA embraces the two holy mosques, al-Masjid al-Harām in Mecca and al-Masjid an-Nabawī in Medina, reflecting the KSA’s essential and significant role in Islam (Chaplin, 2014).

This dissertation operates within the context of political science and security studies and adopts the concept of moderate Islam and extremist Islam in that sphere. Therefore, moderate Islam is used to separate those who denounce the use of violence and terrorism and those who employ these methods to secure political gains (Khan, 2007). In addition, the term also refers to the concept of *wasatyyah* or *wasat* meaning the center in Arabic, community balanced way as described in the Qur’an (Kamali, 2015). The community of moderate Muslims rejects violence and extremist tendencies and overall has a very negative view of those who engage in violence in the name of the religion (Majumdar, 2015). The present dissertation does

not aim or try to settle the debate on whether the differentiation between moderate and extremist Islam is necessary or not but prefers the term to describe the deradicalization approaches rooted in the Qur'an to reduce the number of extremists.

The KSA's official stance on religious extremism has come a long way since 1979 when Abdullah Yusuf Azzam (1941-1989), known as the Father of Global Jihad, and a founding member of Al-Qaeda, was in the KSA delivering extremist discourses in Jeddah and Riyadh. In addition, Osama bin Laden (1957-2011), the founder of the militant Islamist organization Al-Qaeda, the future leader of Al-Qaeda, and master of many terrorist attacks against the U.S. and Western countries, also preached extremist content in the country at the same time as Abdullah Yusuf Azzam. One of the most prominent tenets of their extremism was that the U.S. is an enemy of Islam and must be denounced. For instance, extremists forbid their followers to buy or use American cars because the US is a non-Muslim country (Maliach, 2010).

In 1985, the atonement started openly, and extremist discourses began to spread widely—even in mosques at Friday prayers. One of the most prominent branches of the extremists was led by Johaiman Al-Otaibi (1936-1980) who oversaw the Salafi *Muhtasib* group. The group was founded on the belief of an impending Judgment Day. The *Muhtasib* group operated in Medina and called for Jihad. Al-Otaibi profoundly believed that his son Muhammed would be the *Mahdi*, or the 'guided'; referring to the person who will appear in the last years before the day of judgment and lead the world. Al-Otaibi performed his extremist acts in Islam's holiest places, requiring Muslims to acknowledge his son as the Mahdi (Ascoura, 2013). His most significant action was the seizing of al-Masjid al-Harām in Mecca on 20 November 1979, which became the largest hostage-taking event with 400-500 men to happen in the KSA. The hostage-taking lasted for two weeks until French forces intervened with special tear gas to prevent aggressiveness to free the hostages (Lacey, 2009).

Within this framework, the focus on available literature addressing these questions can be broadly divided into two dimensions. The first category of Saudi political studies dealing with this topic discusses the issue purely from an Islamic perspective. The second dimension explores the issue from a social science perspective. Scholars have failed, however, to consider the new methods of deradicalization in the KSA from a Saudi Arabian political and Islamic studies perspective. Moreover, previous studies have not enough addressed the importance of moderate Islam and its essential role in combating extremism.

The prevailing scholarly debate is centered around whether counterterrorism should prioritize the military-security approach to disengage combatants or the non-physical dimension of deradicalization. Western think tanks and experts often view Islamic radicalism as a security problem and formulate counterterrorism strategies using the military-security approach. The Crisis Group (2016) suggested that foreign powers use military operations to contain extremism even if it carries grave risks. Even though the authors recognized the dangers of using military force, as it can potentially help extremists recruit additional members, it must be part of the counterterrorism tools. In addition, Western scholars often criticize soft power tools such as religious debates and re-education programs as unable to persuade hardcore extremists (Brzuszkiewicz, 2017; Ezzarqui, 2010; Hafez, 2008; Kutner, 2016; Porges, 2010; Williams & Lindsey, 2012). In response, Saudi officials and academics point out that the integrated three-pronged approach developed to deradicalize extremists are successful in both removing terrorists from their groups and preventing potential recruits from joining the organizations (Al-Shaer, 2019; Almiman, 2021; El-Said, 2013; Roberts, 2021; IWC, 2017). The debate is far from settled but this dissertation points to the merits of the integrated soft power approach to deradicalize extremists. Hence, this dissertation's significance and contribution lie in addressing this gap in available literature by analyzing how and by what means extremists

spread their ideologies since 1979 and objectively evaluating how the government of the KSA turned to policies in the non-psychical dimension to counter extremism in the past two decades.

The dissertation wishes to describe how the KSA failed to combat religious extremism for decades due to the reliance on policies that treated religious terrorism as a military-security problem. By focusing on the problem as a primarily physical threat to the national security of the Kingdom, the government was unable to prevent attacks, deter people from joining terrorist organizations, and maintain its national security. However, over the past two decades the KSA has experimented new policies to reduce extremism especially by targeting the non-psychical dimensions. These include combatting the exploitation of ambiguous religious texts, engaging in debates with people who have been radicalized, restricting the financial streams of extremist organizations, and identifying the issue as caused by different interpretations of Islam. Although the KSA maintains anti-terrorist forces, uses law enforcement to prevent attacks, and detain individuals associated with extremist organizations, the Kingdom primary focus rests on disengaging and changing the minds of extremists.

In 2020, the Saudi Crown Prince issued a fundamental statement claiming that since mid-2017 and after restructuring the Ministry of Interior and reforming the security sector, the number of terror incidents in the KSA has decreased to nearly zero. The next chapter presents the existing literature by examining the types of studies undertaken, their achievements, and their limitations. The chapter will then emphasize the significance of the present study as an innovative means of solving existing issues.



# **1. Research Background and Problem**

The present chapter presents the background of the study. It illustrates the achievements and deficits of the previous literature in the Saudi Arabian political sphere and reviews the methodologies applied through this dissertation to overcome these disadvantages. It will then review existing studies, starting with presenting both benefits and problems of Saudi Arabian political studies and verifying the extent to which efforts have been made toward deradicalization in the KSA before critiquing these efforts. It also illustrates the theoretical framework and establishes the substance of the dissertation. Then, it presents the research questions and justifies the most suitable methodology to be applied in this field; finally, it explains the structure of the dissertation.

## **1.1 Research Problem**

This dissertation's focus is on the policies employed by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to reduce extremism within the country. Accordingly, the definition of Islamic extremism consists of two parts: firstly, radical Islam states that it is the only religion that is successful and morally sound, and secondly the belief that secular states are wrong because of their negligence of Islam (Cook, 2015). The government of Saudi Arabia has a somewhat different definition of radical Islamists. The KSA views its struggle against extremists as a 'war of ideas' based on the notions of legitimacy, authority, and the boundaries of Islam (Boucek, 2008).

While most researchers analyze radical Islam from a military-security perspective, this dissertation analyzes how extremists exploit the Qur'an to establish their ideas. Extremists usually use multiple pretexts to justify their extremist acts, such as public interest or Islamic teachings. They often exploit the flexibility of Islamic texts and use teachings out of context to validate their extremist tenets. Islam has become the primary pretext for some extremists, who pursue their personal or political goals by distorting the religion's maxims and reflecting poorly



on the notion of Islamic tolerance (Al-Shihri, 2016). The radical interpretation of Islam serves as a justification for the use of violence against foreigners, particularly those associated with the U.S., and the Saudi establishment which harbors a good relationship with Washington (Johnston, 2009).

Indeed, despite the clarity of the Qur'an's verses about tolerance — and the fundamental constitution of Islam, which is based on coexistence, tolerance, moderation, and wisdom — extremist acts using Islamic texts have increased. A question, therefore, arises: how did these individuals use the doctrines of Islam and Islamic texts to justify their actions, and how do they convince themselves of this erroneous understanding of Islamic books?

## **1.2 Theoretical Framework**

This dissertation uses regional security complex theory (RSCT) to explain the key KSA deradicalization policies as a response to the rising extremist acts of terror since 2000. The father of RSCT is Barry Buzan who upgraded his theory to fit the post-Cold War world in which regional security gained significant importance. In essence, RSCT departs from the traditional, realist theory of security by expanding on it through the addition of multiple sectors such as the economy, society, and environment (Buzan, et al., 1998). The reason for using this theory is explained by Buzan, et al. (1998, p. 1) himself: “Identifying security issues is easy for traditionalists who, broadly speaking, equate security with military issues and the use of force. But it is more difficult when security is moved out of the military sector. There are intellectual and political dangers in simply tacking the word security onto an ever-wider range of issues”. RSCT incorporates the traditionalist approach but widens the concept to include non-military dimensions in which threats to national security can emerge. To deploy RSCT accurately a level of analysis must be decided before the analysis can take place. International relations often divide the level of analysis into five different categories: international systems, international subsystems, units, subunits, and individuals (Buzan, et al., 1998). Given that the

dissertation aims to explore what policies the KSA employs to counter extremism, the correct level of analysis is units, subunits, and individuals. The unit would be the government of the KSA; subunits would be organizations, groups, and government agencies; and individuals are self-explanatory.

As mentioned earlier RSCT introduced the concept of different sectors to security studies. The theory differentiates between sectors by defining the specific type of interaction within each: the political sector is about relationships of forceful coercion while the societal sector is about relationships of collective identity (Buzan, et al., 1998, p. 7). Although analyzing how extremism affects all sectors of a given unit would provide the most comprehensive review, due to the limitations we will only apply the theory in the political and societal sectors when discussing extremism. The reason for the disaggregation of sectors is to reduce complexity enough to investigate specific patterns and power relations within each concerning each other and the unit. However, these patterns and relations do not exist independently but always as part of the whole. Following Buzan's method, the analysis consists of disaggregation and reassembly. In the context of extremisms in the KSA, disaggregation of the societal sector means identifying the features of extremist messaging and interests within the KSA, and the disaggregation of the political sector means analyzing the policies deployed to counter extremism. Through the reassembly process, I will present how the two sectors interact with each other and what results in their interactions produced.

### **1.3 Literature Review**

Since 9/11, the field of security studies has played a significant role in explaining the rise of Islamic extremists globally, including in the KSA.

The review of studies will span the relevant studies on deradicalization more generally and argue that their findings are context-dependent and must be modified to be applicable in

the KSA. Before contextualizing deradicalization efforts in the KSA, a general overview of the topic is needed. Nonaka Yo (2012, p. 2) examined Islamist movements in Indonesia and asserted that “Muslims believe that Islam covers not only part of life but their entire way of life. Therefore, the ‘public religion’ concept is not entirely appropriate for analyzing Islamic activities. In the Islamic world, almost all social movements based on Islam are likely to be classified as Islamist movements”. Yo demonstrated that analyzing Islam solely as a religion dominating the societal sector is incorrect and its effects must be considered across all sectors of society.

Ryan Shaffer (2015) offered an unusual approach to anti-extremist measures, discussing music’s influence on reducing extremism and promoting humanity. Nonetheless, it must be noted that Shaffer’s study — comprising research notes — was limited in its approach; this research style is much more applicable to medical research than to the present chapter’s field of international relations. Shaffer also investigated the transformation of counterterrorism efforts since 2001, a transformation the author considered undeniable. The author reviewed how counterterrorism evolved, looking at intelligence, training, and government policy. The study cautioned, however, that not all the developments were beneficial: indeed, “as the UK-U.S. intelligence services have increasingly moved ‘ever closer to one another, the ability in either the United Kingdom or the United States to call their activities effectively to account, both democratically and publicly, has hemorrhaged” (Shaffer, 2015, p. 3).

Jais Adam-Troian (2021) reviewed radicalization in a French context. The study examined the role of secularism in extremism in France. In short, the study argued that secularism, education, and socioeconomic disparities have contributed to the growth of radicalization. The space left by turning away from religion was prone to exploitation by radicals who could persuade members of the younger generation to believe in something bigger than themselves. Conversely, John Horgan (2014) discussed radicalization generally and its

underpinning theories and characteristics. He noted that the psychological and behavioral processes of radicalization have three distinct stages: becoming a terrorist, being a terrorist, and disengaging from terrorism (Horgan, 2014, p. 292). Counterterrorism efforts and deradicalization policies must consider the three steps in the lifecycle of a terrorist.

In this regard, Goerzig (2018) discussed the use of Argyris and Schon's *Double Loop Learning Model* which was used to deradicalize *Gamaa Islamiya* extremists operating in Egypt. The double loop model is defined as "the integration of both cognition and actions as parts of the learning process and is explicitly focused on forms of deeper or higher-level learning that underlie strategic adjustments and fundamental changes" (Goerzig, 2018, p. 1). In addition, the model also includes behavioral adjustment which "occurs when an error is detected and corrected in ways that involve the modification of an organization's underlying norms, policies, and objectives" (Goerzig, 2018, p. 2). Consequently, single loop learning only affects the individual and leaves the underlying structure unmodified. Given the relationship between extremists and their groups, Goerzig argued that double-loop learning is the most effective way to diminish extremism because it also deconstructs the terrorist organization itself.

General anti-extremist measures also include policies that target not the terrorists or their organizations but rather the environment in which they operate. One of the contributors in this field is Fouad Alasiri (2020), who argued that the fight against extremism should focus more on defensive measures rather than deradicalization efforts. Alasiri suggested that urban design can assist in combating terrorism, concerning the novel concept of 'new urbanism'. This concept predicates that "it is unreasonable to believe that security measures alone will be able to stop terrorist attacks from occurring in cities" (Alasiri, 2020, p. 3). The study pushed the idea that policymakers should incorporate more urban security procedures into their designs to create a new and more effective urban dynamic. An analysis of terrorist attacks showed that the most lucrative targets of extremists are places with high population density and

culturally/politically significant urban spaces. Policymakers and urban planners should employ new policies that can both deter and reduce the number of terrorist attacks by creating artificial barriers, limiting crowd sizes, and enhancing security measures.

Lirong Ma and Siyu He (2018, p. 1) argued that “Islam is a religion that advocates peace and abides by ‘the doctrine of balance’.” However, religious extremism is a ‘tumor’ for the development of Islam and leads to an alienation of Islam. Their study reviewed extremist religious thought and Sino–Arab cooperation regarding deradicalization. The authors focused on the uniqueness of China in coordinating the efforts of three major international deradicalization groups and encouraged advancing the interpretation of scriptures and improving religious dialogue mechanisms to combat extremism and effectively prevent its expansion. In a similar direction concerning promoting peace, Ingram (2021) focused on what role women can play in anti-extremist measures. Her policy paper argued that women should be trained using a four-pillar approach to possess the knowledge and strategic tools to combat extremism. These women can then be organized into women’s networks to disrupt the gendered aspects of extremist propaganda by developing locally nuanced strategies.

#### **1.4 Significance of the Dissertation**

This dissertation’s significance lies in its interaction with the available literature: as noted above, despite the prominence of this topic, few studies have focused directly on the issue addressed in this dissertation. Saudi Arabian political studies and Islamic studies have not been sufficiently evaluated due to linguistic barriers. In contrast, this dissertation utilizes Arabic sources and considers Islamic societies in the KSA.

The dissertation’s significance lies in its attempt to reshape the debate on disengagement and deradicalization by contextualizing the problem of Islamic terrorism within the framework of religious intellectual security. Several Western scholars emphasize that successful deradicalization programs must target the ‘hearts and minds’ of extremists but fail

to conclude that Islam is both the source of the problem and the solution (Bruszkiewicz, 2017; Capstack, 2015; El-Said & Barrettm, 2013; Goerzig, 2018). Islamic extremists interpret the Qur'an differently than that of the majority of Muslims and exploit the ambiguous teachings to gain power. This dissertation argues that these attempts can only be successfully stopped and prevented if a religious framework is used as an official government policy to reeducate extremists.

There is a gap in research that could provide a solid foundation for deradicalization policies especially in evaluating the methods employed. Additionally, available previous studies on deradicalization are mostly limited to case studies of the Mohammed bin Nayef Center for Counseling and Advice as an example of a deradicalization program. Conversely, this dissertation looks beyond the traditional approach to the implementation of deradicalization programs and focuses on the broader intellectual context that the KSA used to create these programs.

Previous scholars and political observers, including the authors of the above-mentioned studies, have made some substantial headway on this topic. However, their findings are impractical for future policy-making, given that they have focused on specific instances of violence and radical acts rather than the creation of deradicalization policies and strategies (Ambrozik, 2018; Iqbal & Mehmood, 2021; Lawale, 2020; Mullins, 2010; Nuys & Carter, 2021; Ragab, 2016; Romaniuk, 2019; Samaan & Jacobs, 2018; Schouten, 2010; Speckhard & Ellenberg, 2021; Speckhard & Shajkovci, 2019; Sun, 2018; Svensson, 2013). Indeed, they proved to be insufficient for a comprehensive assessment of the vision of deradicalization, and the efforts made by the KSA government. There is, as such, a need for new research that covers problems of deradicalization in KSA through the lens of moderate Islam. This dissertation aims to fill this gap in the existing literature by focusing on recent deradicalization efforts made in the KSA. In this context, it is possible to consolidate the previously vague understanding of the

motivations behind radicalization. As most studies on radicalization in the KSA have been conducted before the era of King Salman, it is crucial to investigate the recent endeavors made toward deradicalization. Thus, this study attempts to understand different types of deradicalization in KSA and elucidate how they are mutually linked.

## **1.5 Research Questions**

As noted previously, this dissertation investigates the recent policies implemented by the KSA government and then evaluates the efforts made. In so doing, the dissertation departs from the central question of how the KSA faces radicalization, what attempts have been made by the KSA government, and the extent to which radicalization has been ameliorated today. Despite the extensive literature available on extremism and deradicalization via new tools, previous studies have not yet examined the process and the reasoning behind the deradicalization approach of the KSA; thus, this dissertation intends to focus on the background of the policies namely, the exploitation of Islamic platforms, Islamic intellectual security, and Islamic moderation—in greater detail.

This dissertation wishes to fill the gap in the literature on deradicalization in the KSA by focusing predominately on three dimensions and three research questions. This dissertation aims to answer the following questions, which—as noted in the previous literature review—remain, yet, unanswered:

1. How have recent government endeavors played a role in combating extremism in the KSA?
2. How do some extremists use Islamic imagery and ideology as a pretext to justify extremism, and which tools to dismantle that pretext have the KSA government attempted to implement?

3. What measures has the KSA taken to prevent the exploitation of Islamic platforms and establish Islamic intellectual security?

## **1.6 Research Method**

This dissertation is a product of qualitative research and uses an analytical-descriptive instrument method. This method is an effective means of elucidating the answers to the research questions. This dissertation relies on the analysis of data recorded in previous studies. Data were collected through books, articles, and individual and governmental reports. Documents and publications from relevant institutions, as well as news reports and scholarly articles, were collated and analyzed to compare, confirm, control, enhance, and clarify the collected data.

One of the critical advantages of this dissertation is its collection of data from English, Arabic, and Japanese sources, such as the KSA's semi-governmental publications, as primary sources. As previously observed, some of the existing studies lack a systematic review of Arabic sources due to the scholars' inability to access sources written in Arabic. Therefore, this dissertation is significant in its review of multiple dimensions - inward-looking perspective included - and numerous international schools, focusing on scholars from different cultures and academic schools.

## **1.7 Structure of the Dissertation**

It is necessary to present the dissertation's structure and briefly explain the contents of each chapter to clarify the research context.

Chapter 1 provides a brief introduction to the topic, provides the theoretical framework used in the analysis, and discusses the relevant literature regarding deradicalization in general as well as in a Saudi Arabian context. This chapter has introduced the problem of extremism and its many facets. It has provided an overview of radicalization in the KSA through a



comprehensive literature review and presented the scope of this dissertation, which is limited to the Awakening movement (*Sahwa* movement) from 1979 to 2020. The chapter has also documented the dissertation map, explained each chapter's aims, and stated the dissertation questions and hypotheses.

Chapter 2 investigates the role of radicals' exploitation of Islamic platforms in extremism and argues that extremist platforms pose a threat to the national security of the KSA. It addresses an issue on which few existing studies have touched, despite its potential to overcome extremism: namely, the importance of Islamic platforms. More specifically, it focuses on Islamic platforms in the Saudi Arabian context and includes a detailed investigation of their exploitation using an analytical-descriptive instrument method. This chapter comprises four main sections. First, it reviews the concepts behind and significance of Islamic platforms. Second, it addresses the platforms' characteristics and underlying discourses, and third, it identifies the values of moderate Islam, which are allegedly disseminated through Islamic platforms. Finally, it examines the influence of the contemporary exploitation of Islamic platforms to convey extremist ideas and describes the consequences for Saudi Arabian national security. This chapter primarily discusses Islamic platforms in the Qassim region since most Saudi Arabian ISIS recruits (576) came from that area (Al-Kabeer, 2019). It also argues that there is an urgent need to reconsider moderate Islamic teachings, particularly among Saudi youths, and to return to the primary sources of Islamic teachings—the Qur'an and Hadith—to promote moderation rather than extremism. It advocates cohesion and stability rather than extremist motivational discourses and calls for the education of moderate Islamic values, such as tolerance and coexistence, which lie at the very foundations of Islamic law.

Chapter 3 discusses intellectual security immunization and its role in reducing extremism. Complex security theory and realists reduced terrorism strictly to the traditional military-security dimensions and fail to consider the implication such assumption has on

national security. However, traditional security measures such as military action, cover operations, sanctions, and other realist tools fail in effectively combatting Islamic terrorism because it does not consider Islam from a religious-identity dimension. Therefore, this dissertation uses regional complex security theory to explain how Islamic intellectual security represents a key concept in reducing extremism and employing successful deradicalization policies. This chapter not only emphasizes the importance of Islamic intellectual security but also examines Islamic intellectual deviation, attributing its consequences to misleading representations of Islamic texts that eventually lead to extremism and the propagation of Islamic deviants. It illustrates the intellectual security landscape in the KSA concerning Islam and addresses the role played by Islamic intellectual security immunization in reducing extremism. This dimension highlights the relevance of Islamic intellectual security in terms of historical realities by discussing the first Islamic era, including the Prophet Muhammed's contemporaries, and then connecting these realities to the beginning of Islamic intellectual deviation and, eventually, extremism. In this dimension, the Islamic intellectual security immunization reduces extremism in the KSA. The chapter is divided into three sections, the first of which reviews the concept and importance of Islamic intellectual security. Second, the chapter addresses how patriotism is a substantial element of Islamic intellectual security. Third, a correlation between the reduction of extremism and the immunization of Islamic intellectual security is proposed. This dimension's significance lies in its discussion of how Islamic intellectual security affects extremism by presenting an in-depth look at the relationship between increasing Islamic intellectual security immunization and reducing extremism in the KSA through an analytical-descriptive study. The chapter finds that the protection of Islamic intellectual security plays a crucial role in safeguarding people's minds and reducing extremism under the guise of Islam, especially in the KSA.

Based on the societal sector identified in Chapter 3, Chapter 4 builds on the previous section by identifying the significance and the process of deradicalization through re-education programs that seek to correct extremist concepts of Islam. This chapter suggests that the teaching of Islamic moderation via Islamic education is an essential strategy for reducing the persuasive power of extremist teachings among the youth population who are the most susceptible to propaganda. It also analyses the correlation between the misconceptions about Islam and the prevalence of extremism from 1979 to 2015. This dimension explores how the mode of extremism in Islam occurs, its tendencies and tenets, and how it can be confronted with a deradicalization strategy based on moderation. The chapter posits that moderation strategies should advocate Islam using genuine Islamic concepts. This section also positions the approaches employed in the KSA as some of the most successful and unique deradicalization efforts since they focus on correcting Islamic conceptions rather than on radicalism's physical dimensions. In addition, deradicalization by teaching moderate Islam is a proactive approach that seeks to stem the problem of extremism before individuals can join such organizations. The chapter's central argument is that the most effective deradicalization strategy is the promotion of moderate Islamic concepts in the context of Saudi Arabia. This dimension is divided into several sections. First, the chapter illustrates extremism and Islam's tenets according to different scholars and Islamic doctrines and then discusses the importance and values of moderation. It then outlines how Islamic concepts have been misinterpreted, leading to extremism under the Islamic image. It reviews formal and traditional Islamic education, the role of extremist movements in dividing Islam into mutual and contradictory doctrines, and the spread of fallacious Islamic concepts through truncated Islamic texts, with particular attention to the case of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). Lastly, this chapter discusses the role of correcting Islamic ideas in deradicalization in the KSA from 2015 to 2020.

Chapter 5 concludes the discussions. Based on the various empirical studies in the previous three chapters, whose findings are novel and previously unexamined by other scholars, this chapter elucidates the dissertation's unique contributions to Saudi Arabian political studies and policymaking. Finally, the most notable findings are highlighted to answer the research questions.

## **2. The Extremists' Exploitation of Islamic Platforms**

### **2.1 Introduction**

In recent decades, extremist groups have extended their reach worldwide and challenged the stability and security of states. In the Arab Islamic world, home to many infamous terrorist organizations, the threat to national security increased significantly as the number of terror attacks grew by 22% between 1990 and 2010 (Hegghammer, 2010). The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, being home to the two holiest Islamic sites in the world, has suffered numerous attacks and because of that faced deteriorating national security. This dissertation uses Makinda's (1998) definition of national security: the ability of a state to cater to the protection and defense of its citizenry. As terrorist attacks primarily target civilians a state's inability to protect its citizens from such attacks can have wide-ranging consequences and can undermine the legitimacy and authority of the government (Hough, 2018).

Extremists use 'Islamic platforms' as a primary tool to spread their thoughts and ideologies. An Islamic platform is defined as "a society, association or religious stage that offers a comprehensive environment for Muslim societies, which includes periodic meetings to convey the Islamic messages and various Islamic activities, which are supervised by Islamic figures" (BoSa'adah, 2013, p. 2). Islamic platforms include the two holy mosques in the KSA, al-Masjid al-Harām in Mecca and al-Masjid an-Nabawī in Medina delivering their discourses and prayers to millions of Muslims (Abdulqader, 2017). A particular advantage of Islamic platforms is that 98.43% of Saudi youth access these platforms, with 35.83% claiming that it influences their ideas (Saudi youth development survey, 2019). Thus, the importance of Islamic platforms is particularly remarkable in the KSA compared to other Islamic states with fewer Islamic platforms. The access Islamic platforms provide makes them a target for extremists

who can utilize these channels of information to increase their public outreach and recruit new followers.

The exploitation of these platforms is a serious problem because extremist figures present themselves as official representatives of Islam and use these platforms for political purposes. Such exploitation is based on the manipulation of Islamic textures and motivational discourses (Al-Abdulkareem, 2015). 'Exploitation' refers to the use of Islamic platforms to deliver emotionally charged and vague discourses that promote hidden political agenda that justifies the use of violence under the pretext of Islam. One such example is the KSA's most notable religious transformation, which has contributed to the spread of Islamic platforms exploitation, is the emergence of the 'Sahwa movement', also called the 'Islamic Awakening'. The movement originally began as a religious, political, voluntary, social, and intellectual movement in Egypt in 1970 (Rutherford, 2006). Then, it was established in the KSA in 1979. This movement fostered the reshaping of the Islamic landscape which can exploit Islamic platforms (Lynch, 2011).

Hence, this chapter focuses on the rapid proliferation of Islamic platforms and their exploitation due to the Sahwa movement and the concomitant decrease in Saudi national security. When the KSA supported Afghanistan's jihad in 1980 by collecting financial donations for Afghanistan's calamity, Islamic platforms were regarded as a key method for providing that support. Sahwa movement activists exploited this method and took advantage of the Saudi government's openness to supporting jihadists, representing themselves as Islamic figures to use Islamic platforms to incite jihad and spread extremist ideologies (Al-Turki, 2006). This was the main method by which they exploited Islamic platforms.

The main argument of this chapter is that extremist platforms pose a direct threat to the national security of the KSA. This chapter addresses an issue that few of such literature touched

on, the importance of Islamic platforms, albeit it is a substantial key to overcoming extremist issues. Precisely, this chapter focuses on Islamic platforms in the Saudi Arabian context and includes a detailed investigation of their exploitation, using an analytical-descriptive instrument method. This chapter has four main sections. First, it reviews the concepts and importance of Islamic platforms. Secondly, it addresses the platforms' characteristics and discourses. Thirdly, it identifies the values of moderate Islam that are supposedly disseminated through Islamic platforms. Fourthly, it examines the current exploitation of Islamic platforms for the dissemination of extremist ideas and the influence of this exploitation, then illustrates the consequences for Saudi national security. This chapter focuses on Islamic platforms in the Qassim region since most Saudi Arabian ISIS recruits (576) came from that area (Al-Saud, 2019). This chapter also argues that there is an urgent need to reconsider moderate Islamic teachings, particularly among the Saudi youths, and to return to the main resources of Islamic teachings—the Qur'an and Hadith—to promote moderation rather than extremism. This chapter promotes cohesion and stability rather than extremist motivational discourses and calls for the teaching of moderate Islam values, such as tolerance and coexistence, which lie at the very foundations of Islamic law.

### ***2.1.1 The Nature and Influence of Islamic Platforms***

'Platform' is a flexible word that has various meanings. The following definition is used in this context: "platforms offer shared access to different sets of people... from various countries along with well-defined processes to govern interactions and transactions with them" (Nambisan, et al., 2019, p. 10). The definition reflects the fact that platforms offer comprehensive access to people regardless of physical boundaries by sharing ideas and increasing information access, targeting specific groups to enhance skills and advance long-term goals. Saudi youth development survey (2019) reviewed the number of individuals using various social media platforms around the world and found that the number of estimated

monthly users rose from less than 500 million in 2004 to two billion in 2019, demonstrating that platforms play a key role in spreading and sharing ideas. The closest concrete instance of ‘platform’ that leads to the intended meaning in this chapter is local social clubs but targeting Muslim society, where ensuring the platforms’ concept is not referring to social media platforms (Allothman, 2013). The core feature of platforms is that the organizing concept behind them is identity. Social identity refers to ways that people’s self-concepts are based on their membership in specific social groups. Consequently, if people feel that the group, they belong to is under threat it leads to societal insecurity (Buzan, et al., 1998). Buzan calls this concept identity security.

Islamic platforms deliver diverse and comprehensive Islamic ideologies to Muslims around the world. “Islamic platforms deliver Islamic teachings and provide opportunities for young Muslims to engage, use their creative energies, and invest their efforts within beneficial deeds, religiously” (Abdulqader, 2017, p. 2). Typically, these platforms target Muslim societies in Muslim countries and Islamic minorities in non-Muslim countries. Islamic platforms are regarded as the main gathering place for Muslim societies and minorities. For instance, Muslims gather for Friday prayers in mosques in Muslim countries, and mosques or Islamic centers in non-Muslim countries. Islamic platforms host various activities such as various meetings for acquaintance between Muslims and to have cooperation to spread the Islamic religion and teachings (Al-Turki, 2006). Therefore, Islamic platforms have become an important means by which Muslims communicate, share ideas, and influence each other. They offer a fruitful environment conducive to social innovation, knowledge creation, relationship building, and collective motivation (Nambisan, et al., 2019). Wolfsfeld, Gadi, Elad Segev, and Tamir Sheafer (2013) used the Arab Spring as a case study and collected data from twenty Arab countries, including the Palestinian National Authorities. The authors argued that Islamic platforms reshape Islamic ideologies and discuss the platforms’ role in ideological



transformation during the Arab Spring. Although the discussion included various countries with different data resources, the authors do not address Islamic platforms in the KSA, leaving a gap that the present chapter will fill.

Islamic platforms offer motivational and emotional discourses. As a result, they are widely accepted by all segments of Muslim societies, especially by the youth. Islamic platforms can be sponsored by official Islamic authorities such as ministries of Islamic affairs or non-profit Islamic associations such as the Al-Haramain Islamic Foundation (AHIF), which was shut down and charged with terrorism by the Saudi government in 2004. AHIF was a charity foundation based in the KSA and had expanded to Afghanistan, Albania, Bangladesh, Bosnia, Comoros, Ethiopia, India, Kenya, Malaysia, the Netherlands, Nigeria, Pakistan, Somalia, Tanzania, and the United States (Rosenberg, 2004). The Saudi Arabian government has started to reshape and reprocess Islamic sources and information by creating official regulatory authorities under government supervision which shall be highlighted in this chapter.

### ***2.1.2 Islamic Platforms' Importance in the KSA***

Islamic platforms have the power to influence the thoughts of Islamic societies in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Buzan (1998, p. 124) argued that “different societies have different vulnerabilities depending upon how their identity is constructed.” Given that the KSA is an Islamic country, it constructs its identity by tightly controlling what is and what isn't permissible under Islam. Therefore, the country is especially vulnerable to threats originating from the societal sector, namely religion. Absent a tight hierarchy, unlike in the Roman Catholic Church, Islam's unique feature is the competition between multiple religious denominations, all of which can make an appeal to Muslims and mobilize the population for their personal and political gains. Therefore, it is crucial to understand how ideologies are disseminated through the exploitation of Islamic platforms.

The KSA is among the countries with the highest usage of platforms as key resources for sharing and receiving ideas (Khidzir, et al., 2018). The importance of Islamic platforms can be explained by two aspects of Saudi society. First, the culture of interaction among Saudi people is strong and securely established. Second, the younger Saudi generation is highly sensitive to emotional influence due to their culture (Al-Habib, 2012). This second factor was exploited by Islamic platforms in the KSA during the Sahwa movement, which was based on emotional motivative discourses. Indeed, movement leaders believed that the KSA was a promising environment in which to initiate their activities, which were chosen because of their strong emotional influence and role in planting ideologies (Saudi youth development survey, 2019). Moreover, since 98% of the Saudi Arabian population is Muslim, Saudi Islamic platforms serve as reliable sources of Islamic teachings.

Al-Ghamdi and Waheed (2015) argued that Islamic platforms that are sponsored by non-profit Islamic associations in the KSA are one of the major funding sources for terrorist groups. He contended that Islamic figures use Islamic platforms in the KSA to deliver their political ideologies under the pretext of Islamic teachings. Al-Ghamdi (2015) made limited use of data resources because his study focuses on the story of religious transformations in the KSA rather than Islamic platforms specifically, which this chapter covers. He recommended intensifying efforts to root out Islamic activities on these platforms. The study did not specifically discuss Islamic platforms, which this chapter aims to cover. By contrast, Eisa, and Abdulrahman Ali (2001) argued that Islamic platforms in the KSA deliver the right Islamic foundations, cultivate human values, encourage various extracurricular activities, and enhance Islam's intellectual security. The author discussed the mosques in the KSA as a case study of Islamic platforms. He argues that Islamic platforms offer a moderate environment for Saudi youths and drive them away from extremism. He finds that Islamic platforms in the KSA help raise awareness of Islamic teachings. Nevertheless, his analysis presents a lack of data sources,

in which data was collected only using interviews with officials in charge of the Ministry of Islamic affairs in Sudan. Thus, this chapter aims to fill a gap by examining the Islamic platforms and their exploitation in the KSA, particularly in the Qassim region.

Al-Anazy, Hammad (2020) and Almutairi (2017) pursued a similar argument that states that focusing on intellectual security are key to combating extremism in the KSA. Nevertheless, they did not investigate the role that exploitation of Islamic platforms plays to spread extremism in the KSA, as this chapter fills this gap. Similarly, Abdulrazaq (1989) discussed Islamic platforms discourse and pursued a similar assumption that addresses the role of Islamic platforms to raise moderation. Nevertheless, the study failed to attribute the contribution of extremism in Saudi which caused severe damage to Saudi national security due to the influence of exploitation of Islamic platforms, as this chapter discusses.

As mentioned in the introduction, 576 Saudi ISIS recruits came from the Qassim region. Furthermore, after the September 11, 2001, attacks, several Islamic platforms emerged in Qassim. They were managed by young men aged between 20 and 24, 50% of whom were unmarried (Al-Saud, 2019). The Qassim area is far from poor, which makes it a special case study because, in religious history, it is found that whenever material, political and social conditions deteriorate, religious groups, resort to extremism as a defensive means of survival. Qassim is also a traditional region whose people are vehemently opposed to the arts, cultural activities, or any kind of civilization. Accordingly, this region, largely untouched by social media before globalization, offered a fruitful environment in which to exploit Islamic platforms (Budd, 2014). That is why this chapter focuses on Islamic platforms in the Qassim region.

As above highlighted, a few studies touched on the importance of Islamic platforms, albeit it is substantial in the fight to overcome extremist issues. Therefore, the contribution of this chapter not only aims to focus on the Islamic platforms but goes beyond this by discussing

the exploitation of Islamic platforms in the KSA, Qassim, in which it argues that focusing on exploitation is key to combating extremism in the KSA.

### ***2.1.3 Islamic Platforms' Influence and the Sahwa Movement in the KSA***

The era of the Sahwa movement was a significant period for the proliferation of Islamic platforms, which the movement regarded as essential tools to exploit for reshaping the Islamic landscape and incite jihad as well as the renewal of the Islamic structure of political Islam using speeches via Islamic platforms (Lacroix, 2011). In 1979, it was established in the KSA by four Saudi representatives of Islam—Salman Al-Odah, Naser Al-Omar, Safar Al-Hawaii, and Saad Al-Birik—among other activists (Al Ghamdi, 2015). These activists aimed to awaken the people to claim their rights and drive the Saudi government towards democracy, using Islamic platforms to communicate with Muslims.

One of the movement's goals was to divide Muslims into groups (Lacroix, 2011). However, the Qur'an addressed the disadvantages of the division of Muslims in various verses. Concerning those who have divided their religion and become sects, it says that you, the messenger, must not associate or cooperate with them in anything (Ali, 2013). In that context, Ibrahim Al-Turki (2006) discussed the Sahwa movement to assess the influence of Islamic platforms on Islamic intellectual events. He reviewed the Islamic Saudi community's openness to the Islamic world and the Islamic intellectual transformations that occurred. He mentioned 'Islamic forums,' which are among the most prevalent Islamic platforms that disseminate Islamic ideologies to the youth and discusses their social impact on the KSA. However, the study neglected to explore Islamic platforms' effects on national security, as this chapter aims to do.

During the Sahwa movement, Islamic platforms played an important role in the Arab Spring revolutions. The Arab Spring was first initiated by a broad range of movements shaped

primarily by a nonideological sense of civic identity (Stéphane, 2014). The Islamic platforms of the official mosques were exploited especially successfully by representatives of Islam, who gave emotional lectures after prayers (Wolfsfeld et al., 2013) Al-Ghamdi (2015) agreed with Khidzir, and Nik Zulkarnaen (2018) that Islamic platforms' exploitation during the Sahwa movement represented one of the most effective ways in which Islamic platforms were used in political movements. They examined "how Muslims across vast territories related to religious authorities in fulfilling spiritual, mystical, and legalistic agendas" (Khidzir, et al., 2018, p. 33). They observed that the essential elements of religious practices and authority are now represented on Islamic platforms, in the Sahwa movement particularly.

The KSA is one of several countries to have been affected by the Arab Spring. Besides, the country has a long history of experiences with the influence of Islamic platforms, particularly concerning jihad.<sup>1</sup> Hegghammer and Thomas (2010) discussed this phenomenon in their study aimed at identifying the main jihadist bases in the KSA between 1979 and 2009. The study aimed to analyze the rise of militant jihad and the appropriate platforms for spreading ideas in the KSA since militant jihad's intellectual beginnings in Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Chechnya and its expansion in the KSA via Islamic platforms (Amble & Meleagrou-Hitchens, 2014). He reviewed the political events and confrontations that took place, mentioning Al-Qaeda's expansion in the KSA since 1990 and the damage inflicted on the KSA's reputation as the birthplace of Osama bin Laden, the leader of Al-Qaeda. He addressed 99 terrorist acts that occurred between 1979 and 2009 in the KSA, but he discussed neither the effects of the exploitation of Islamic platforms on Saudi national security nor how Al-Qaeda's Saudi Arabian branch exploited Islamic platforms to disseminate their ideologies in Buraydah.<sup>2</sup> The study did

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<sup>1</sup> Jihad: Mawadudi (1997) and Streusand (1997) approach jihad systematically. They believe jihad to consist not only of war but also the creation of just regulations, including freedom of religion. Mawadudi (1997) describes jihad as follows: 'Islam wants to employ all the forces and means that can be employed for bringing about a universal, all-embracing revolution. It will spare no efforts for the achievement of this supreme objective. This far-reaching struggle that continuously exhausts all forces and this employment of all possible means are called jihad' (Mawadudi, 1997, p. 9-10).

<sup>2</sup> Buraydah is the capital city of the Qassim region (Budd, 2014).

not mention Islamic political movements during that period, such as the Muslim Brotherhood. Since Islamic platforms exert political and social influence in addition to their role as the main sources from which Saudi people receive Islamic teachings, it is important to examine the content of their discourse.

Islamic platforms are intended to disseminate moderate Islamic discourse. However, various types of dissemination may have different purposes (Islam & Khatun, 2015). For example, during the Sahwa movement and especially in 2000, various Islamic platforms in the KSA were founded to disperse new Islamic content for inseparable political and religious purposes (Lacroix, 2011).

This section has addressed the Islamic platform concept, its importance, and influence; reviewed Islamic platforms in the Saudi Arabian context; and presented an overview of the spread of Islamic platforms in the Sahwa movement. Due to the responsibility of Islamic platforms to promote moderate Islamic values, it is appropriate to examine the discourses that Islamic platforms promote in comparison with the moderate values of the KSA.

#### ***2.1.4 Islamic Platforms and Moderate Islam: A Saudi Arabian Case***

To assess the influence of Islamic platforms, it is necessary to review the contents and intended values of their discourse. This section addresses two dimensions of Islamic discourse: moderate Islamic discourse and the discourses propagated by Islamic platforms. Then, it evaluates the actual discourses of Islamic platforms to show how the exploitation of Islamic platforms began. Initially, platforms followed the principle that “this knowledge (Islam) is a religion, and we should exercise caution regarding from whom we receive it” (Altirmithi, 1985, p. 210). As an Islamic principle, the Qur’an and the Prophet’s Hadith are the main resources from which Muslims learn (Kosugi, 2020). Islam has brought forth magnanimity, through which scholarly diversity is met with acceptance, respect, fraternal dialogue, and tolerance

(IWC, 2019). Moreover, the God in the Qur'an clarifies the nature of moderate Islam, explaining that Islam is based on tolerance and coexistence and makes Muslims a righteous people that can be a guiding example for all humankind (Ali, 2013).

Regarding moderate Islamic discourse, it has been observed that “moderation takes on different shades of meaning when it applies to varying mechanisms like inclusion, participation, organizational interest, party autonomy, social learning, and socioeconomic factors” (Islam & Khatun, 2015, p. 75). Moderate discourses promoted through Islamic platforms represent “the commitment to adhere to the eloquent style, high morals, resilience, a sound understanding of religious textures, avoiding extremism and coercion, adhering to objectivity and honesty in religious preaching” (Al-nuaimy, 2018, p. 61), and moderate Islamic values are “expressed through the characters of tolerance, justice, mutual respect, togetherness, cooperation, responsibility, discipline, independence, honesty, seeing other perspectives, ability to differ tolerance and mixing the faith and accepting diversity” (Kartikawati, 2019, p. 1). Some extremist groups claim to behave according to moderate Islamic values due to their ignorance regarding the concept, theories, and discourses of moderation in Islam (Rizky & Umar, 2016). Al-Ghamdi (2015) and Al-Ghathami (2015) noted that extremist discourses are born from the interaction between political recruitment and the Islamic religion, and thus agree that political recruitment and political movements should be kept distinct and separate from Islam.

In the same context, Kartikawati, and Rohana Dwi (2019) conducted a study that clarified the concept of moderate Islamic teachings in a high school in Batu, Indonesia called SPI. The author defined the overarching concept of moderate Islamic teachings. In the 2019 study, Kartikawati applied analytical-qualitative methods to multiple case studies in which data were collected through observations, interviews, and documentation. He provided another definition of moderate Islam, claiming that “moderate Islam is another term of Islam ‘*rahmatan lil 'alamin*’ which is practically implemented in peacefulness and flexibility” (Kartikawati,

2019, p. 1). He concluded that students in SPI express moderate Islamic values through openness, diversity, eagerness to serve others, compassion, tolerance, coexistence, empathy, and avoiding selfishness. The study highlighted moderate Islamic discourses because of the unprecedented spread of extremism and recommends the creation of platforms for counter-extremism based on the concept of moderation in Islam.

### ***2.1.5 The Actual Discourses of Islamic Platforms***

In addition to discussing moderate Islam, it is also necessary to evaluate the actual content of the discourses of Islamic platforms. The ‘war of ideas’ stems from the claim over which interpretation of Islam is correct. Bar (2004, p. 5) argued that “much of the debate between radicals and nonradicals is not over the religious principles themselves, but over their implication for actual behavior based on the detailed legal interpretation of those principles.” To clarify this issue, Islamic discourses may be categorized into two types: motivational Islamic discourses<sup>3</sup> and logical Islamic discourses (Al-nuaimy, 2018).<sup>4</sup> Some representatives of Islam consider motivational Islamic discourses to be more influential than logical Islamic discourses, as Al-Rashed, and Mohammed Ahmad (2004) argued. He stated that “the emotional discourse is faster and better than logical discourse because the emotional discourse feeds the souls and drives the youths to jihad” (Al-Rashed, 2004, p. 228). He indicated that it is necessary to create an Islamic political movement not only through technological platforms but also through mosques and Islamic forums, observing that ‘The influences of mosques’ platforms and Islamic forums are multiplied for the younger generation because they attract a wide range of audiences and followers’ (Al-Rashed, 2004, p. 172). He found that Islamic religion and politics interact and Islamic platforms at all levels should be used for political purposes to incite Saudi Muslim youths to jihad. He addressed the importance of extracurricular activities that

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<sup>3</sup> Islamic motivational discourse: Islamic teachings through motivation and emotion, without roots in Islamic law (Al-Nuaimy, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Islamic logical discourses: Islamic teachings based on the Qur’an and Sunna’s prophet (Al-Eiad, 2012).



take place in Islamic forums, saying “these activities, such as sports, will interfere with pure Islamic activities, such as reading the Qur’an, and will lead to planting deep loyalty; therefore, the youth will lose their conscience and release control of youths to representatives of the Islamic religion to thinking instead of them” (Al-Rashed, 2004, p. 91). He conspicuously reviewed the ‘potential’ of Islamic platforms to disseminate ideology among the youth, and how to manipulate and control youths’ minds. Although his study was an academic study that advocated jihad, he failed to identify the influence of motivational discourses and provided no statistical data concerning young people who engaged in conflict after exposure to such discourses.

By contrast, Gillespie, and Tarleton (2018) found that the actual contents of Islamic platforms’ discourses are complex, and their activity is difficult to supervise. He argued that the responsibility for Islamic platforms’ influence should be assumed not only by the platforms’ representatives but also by the public itself. He cited John Dewey’s definition of ‘public’: “the public consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for” (Gillespie, 2018, p. 203). Overall, he focused on the interaction between Islamic platforms and the public and platforms’ responsibility for discourses and their consequences. However, the negative social and ideological effects of Islamic platforms are absent from the study. One is led to wonder whether Islamic platforms are exploited at various levels in the interest of personal goals, which is discussed in the next sub-section.

### ***2.1.6 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 Muslim Brotherhood (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.<sup>5</sup> 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 (born in Egypt in 1928 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 (Josefsson, et al., 2017).

### ***2.1.7 The Exploitation of Islamic Platforms***

The exploitation of platforms to spread extremist ideas occurs not only in Islam but also in Judaism, Christianity, and Hinduism (Al-Habib, 2012). The significant point is that

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<sup>5</sup> 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).

exploitation is not related to religions but to extremist behavior that arbitrarily links religious concepts to extremist thoughts. This chapter argues that there are, in fact, no ‘Islamist extremist platforms,’ but that extremist behavior has arisen because of the exploitation of Islamic platforms by extremists. In this chapter, platforms that are exploited in this way are referred to as ‘extremist platforms.’

In Islamic society in the KSA, there is some confusion between moderate and extremist Islamic discourses because both are delivered through Islamic platforms and extremists believe that their discourses are moderate (Hegghammer, 2010). In principle, Islam promotes the creation of a diverse religious society, while extremism advocates atonement and attempts to divide the Islamic nation. This principle is supported by a study conducted by Al-Hasani, and Ahmad Abdulreda Muhammad (2010) that aimed to define the concepts of extremism and atonement that have been manipulated by those aiming to distort Islam and represent it as a violent religion that “advocates evil and aggression and not accepting the other regardless of race and belonging” (Al-Hasani, 2019, p. 12). He emphasized the importance of moderate Islamic media and platforms that promote Islamic moderation and represent Islam’s principles of tolerance. Al-Habib and Tariq (2012) pursued a similar argument, claiming that atonement inevitably leads to violence. However, these studies failed to examine the determinants of and differences between Muslim societies and extremist societies, both of which claim to represent moderate Islamic discourses.

The confusion between moderate and extremist discourses has allowed extremists to exploit Islamic platforms. As mentioned in the introduction, the main exploitation method is that the activists have taken advantage of the Saudi openness to jihadists’ support. For example, when the KSA supported Afghanistan’s jihad in 1980 by collecting financial donations from people, Islamic platforms were regarded as a key aspect of that support. The jihadists

represented themselves as Islamic figures to use Islamic platforms to incite jihad and extremist acts by spreading extremist ideologies (Maliach, 2010).

### ***2.1.8 The ‘Sororiaya’ and the Exploitation of Islamic Platforms***

By the end of 2001, during the rise of the Sahwa Movement and particularly after September 11, 2001, attacks, Saudi Islamic society was divided into two segments based on their approaches to Islamic life and customs. The first group comprised Muslims who lived very traditionally, as the Islamic Arab Peninsula had in the past. The second group was more open to the world and modernization (Hegghammer, 2010). The focus of this chapter is the first group, commonly known as the ‘Sororiaya’ group. Islamic religious practices are divided into two concepts. The first is the intrinsic religious orientation, which is the religion’s essential nature and is truly moderate, rejecting enmity, contempt, and bigotry. The second is the extrinsic religious orientation, which focuses on the outsider’s appearances (Allport, 1966). The Sororiaya derive their customs partially from Salafism and follow the extrinsic religious orientation (Bonney, 2013). They practice beard lengthening, wear their tunics above the knee, and forbid music and smoking. They are particularly widespread in Najd, Saudi Arabia (Al-Ghamdi, 2015).<sup>6</sup> This group was the first to exploit Islamic platforms to disseminate extremist ideas, vehemently rejecting culture and the arts. Since 1979, the Sororiaya group has exploited several Islamic platforms in Qassim and gradually established others in different regions of the KSA (Al-Hasani, 2019). Al-Ghathami (2015) described the group as follows: “the Sororiaya in the Sahwa movement have social mobility rather than thoughts rooted in Islamic society; they were driven by intense and uncontrolled enthusiasm, not calculation. It was reactions rather than real actions, and they did not start from a clear and deep Islamic foundation” (Al-Ghathami, 2015, p. 119). Islamic camps and libraries, defined in the next

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<sup>6</sup> Najd: one of the biggest regions in Saudi Arabia that contains other regions such as Qassim (Budd, 2014).

section, are among the most prevalent Islamic platforms that the Sororiaya exploited to promote extremist ideas during the Sahwa movement.

In summary, this section compared the Islamic discourses disseminated by platforms to the Islamic values that those platforms should deliver, examined the beginning of the exploitation of Islamic platforms, and discussed the first group to have exploited the platforms, the ‘Sororiaya’. Next, I will address the categories of Islamic platforms that have been most extensively exploited to spread extremist ideas.

## **2.2 Categories of Extremist Platforms in the KSA**

To determine the sources of the exploitation of Islamic platforms, this section describes the three most prominent categories of Islamic platforms that have been exploited by extremists. Then, various aspects of these platforms and the characteristics of their representatives are examined to understand the platforms’ context.

### **2.2.1 *The Prominent Islamic Platforms***

While numerous types of Islamic platforms exist, three have been most exploited. The first platform comprises Islamic camps, which are non-profit associations established and organized by extremists, funded by Islamic donations, and held annually for periods of three months in the summer and winter by groups of representatives of Islam. The other name of these platforms is also ‘Islamic forums’ (Al-Rashed, 2004). This platform type is ubiquitous in the KSA. The practice of camping is considered the closest representation of the lifestyle of the Prophet Muhammed and his companions. The camps manipulate their participants emotionally with stories that include seductive terminologies and slogans, such as “we love death as you love life” (Al-Rashed, 2004, p. 199). Most importantly, they encourage Muslim youths to marry Al-hoor Al-iyyn in the Hereafter, thus encouraging them to die as soon as

possible to enjoy the afterlife.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, Al-Rashed, Muhammed Ahmad (1975) indirectly revealed his desire to incite Muslims to war through such platforms, saying “since blood is very expensive for Muslims, they will not achieve anything—the price of pride and freedom is blood” (Al-Rashed, 1975, p. 87).

The second platform consists of Islamic awareness associations, which are non-profit associations that conduct weekly meetings with Islamic religious representatives in which they deliver motivational lectures and lead extracurricular activities. These platforms’ funding depends on the Saudi Ministry of Education as well as donations to the religious authorities from the public. The associations partially follow the guidelines of the Saudi Ministry of Education, targeting students during their high school studies. Each high school in Qassim has one association, which is also called ‘Islamic libraries’ because the weekly meetings usually take place in high school libraries. These associations are more common in Qassim and Riyadh than in other regions in the KSA (Al-Nuaimy, 2018).

The final platform type is the exploitation of official mosque platforms through emotionally driven lectures given in mosques after prayers every day. This platform has a wide reach because it targets most Muslims who frequently come to pray. Once prayers are complete, an extremist will usually stand up, take the microphone, and deliver a speech including all manner of emotional content (Abdulqader, 2017). The combined effect of these extremist platforms is that they deliver motivational Islamic discourses to drive the youth toward death, such as participating in extremist activities and terrorism.

### ***2.2.2 Aspects of Extremist Platforms***

Having identified the categories of extremist platforms, it is appropriate to address how they are exploited. The exploitation of Islamic platforms consists of several activities. These

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<sup>7</sup> Al-hoor Al-iyun: The girls in paradise in the hereafter, whom God promised that honest, faithful Muslims would marry. God says in the description of Muslims in the Qur’an: ‘(there are) fair ones with wide, lively eyes and he said, reward for what they used to do’ (Ali, 2013).

activities are influenced by two main factors. First, the activities are flexible and vague, which allows the Islamic figures to use the activities in many ways for various purposes, as discussed below. Second, the extremist discourses that these platforms deliver to young people are extremely emotional and motivational rather than rational. The activities that are influenced by these factors fall into five main categories:

First, guilt associations involve activities that individuals join after giving up what are perceived to be horrible acts, such as listening to music or smoking. They are required to stand up in front of all the association members to renounce the acts publicly (Al-Ghamdi, 2015). These associations do not require participants to be of a particular age to join. Second, emotional lectures are delivered to the public using motivational discourses that attempt to encourage natural human feelings through erroneous Islamic beliefs. Third, youth training and preparation for jihad are conducted so that young people may be sent to conflict zones, such as Syria, Iraq, and other conflicts, such as the ‘Arab Spring.’ Fourth, deep loyalties are established for future political purposes, whereby followers imitate their leaders’ every thought and step (Al-Abdulkareem, 2015). Islamic platforms focus on fueling emotions to manipulate the youth’s feelings through motivational discourse. Additionally, they “make use of the international events and injustices that happen to Muslims and arbitrarily link them with some decisions that Arab and Islamic countries make while showing images of feeble acquiescence without regard for ... legitimate interests” (Al-Smadi, 2016, p. 635). Fifth, platforms are used to punish people for their thoughts, such as beliefs about the value of education. For example, in 1995, Islamic platforms in Buraydah incited young people to leave public schools and enroll in informal education to study with Sheiks in mosques, allowing extremists to plant their false

theologies because they believed formal education to go against their ideas (Al-Ghathami, 2015).<sup>8</sup>

Extremist platforms are also important to the younger generation because they exploit international events to promote their ideas. A key aspect of this is the spread of hatred of the United States. In the wake of September 11, extremist platforms intensified their activities by claiming that the United States hated Islam and was racist against Muslims (Hegghammer, 2009). Therefore, extremist events organized through these platforms multiplied. For instance, the facilities bombing that took place in 2001 in the Abqaiq oilfield (the biggest oilfield in the world, belonging to the Saudi Arabian national petroleum and natural gas company, the world's largest oil company) was framed as a response to the United States' hateful behavior, such as killing Muslims in Palestine, as some Americans worked at the company (Lacroix, 2011).

### ***2.2.3 The Characteristics of the Representatives of Extremist Platforms***

It is necessary to understand the characteristics of the representatives of extremist platforms to understand the shape that their exploitation takes. Representatives of extremist platforms have numerous characteristics, among which asceticism is a key factor that they use to manipulate and drive their targets' emotions. This is one of their tactics for manipulating public crowds, some of whom are uneducated or former prisoners (Hegghammer, 2010). Nevertheless, their discourses are delivered with extreme confidence and their audiences believe them without hesitation (Muhammed, 1981). Their activities continue throughout the year due to their sustained motivation to spread Islamic extremist ideas through platforms. According to the global Ideological Warfare Center (2017), representatives of extremist platforms share several characteristics:

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<sup>8</sup> Sheikhs: representatives of Islamic religion (Al-Ghamdi, 2015).



- Abandoning Islam's values of tolerance and compassion to focus on constraining individuals, causing them distress and embarrassment.
- Discrediting all opposition by accusing opponents of ill-will and denying their legitimate right to diligence.
- Meeting opposition with insolence instead of sympathy and kindness.
- Lacking knowledge of Sharia scriptures of the subjects at hand, which leads to quoting them out of context when making a point.
- Disregarding the wisdom of Islamic legislation and being especially ignorant of the rules governing the jurisprudence of priorities, 'the balance between advantages and disadvantages.
- Failing to consider the outcomes of things visible through the reckless and barbaric actions of extremism, all the while justifying these heinous crimes using Islam.
- Overlooking the aims of scriptural texts, which leads to a shallow understanding and application of these texts.
- Interpreting current events from one perspective causing serious pitfalls that have led them and others astray.
- Focusing on stimulating religious sentiments and exploiting the lack of awareness among the targeted youth.
- Relying on methods such as 'uniqueness' and 'isolation,' which cause divergence from the collective definition of Islam that Allah has declared to all Muslims, claiming that this definition is insufficient; a result of being isolated from the mainstream, describing it as ignorant and misguided. Some have even gone as far as calling other Muslims

apostates who have fallen into new ignorance, leading to the invention of alternative code names.

To summarize this section, it has been discussed the three prevalent categories of Islamic platforms that have been exploited by extremists and defined the exploitation as ‘extremist platforms’ for this chapter. Then, it has been addressed their various aspects and characteristics to understand the shape of their extremist activities. The next section touches the influence of the exploitation of Islamic platforms on Saudi Arabian national security.

## **2.3 Islamic Platform Exploitation and the Disruption of Saudi National Security**

This section provides an overview of Saudi national security, then reviews attacks perpetrated in the KSA between 1979 and 2015 to determine their potential relationship to extremist platforms. Then, I will evaluate the success of Saudi anti-extremism efforts.

### **2.3.1 *Saudi National Security***

Security is the most important thing that governments can provide to citizens (IWC, 2017). The “definition of national security goes far beyond traditional military notions. National security is viewed in comprehensive terms that also include economic and political dimensions” (Katzenstein & Okawara, 1993, p. 1). While there are various types of national security, societal security is one of the most important. The loss of social identity leads to the loss of societal security and thus the collapse of security in general. Saleh (2010) conducted a study of the impact of societal security on states’ national security. He argued that “the most pressing threat to state’s national security is within, and not from realist international pressures” (Alam, 2010, p. 1). He described the loss of social and civic identity as a ‘Cold War Within.’ Giving human value to people, in contrast, indirectly enhances internal national security.

King Abdelaziz (1876-1953), the founder of the KSA, issued policies to support the Saudi pursuit of national security based on justice and several other principles giving high value to human life as the main right in the KSA. Among the most important principles for enhancing Saudi national security is the fight against extremism, whether at the governmental or societal level (Al-Asaker, 2018). However, the greatest harm done by extremism was its distortion of the image of true Islamic religion and law. After Afghanistan's jihad in 1979, the younger Saudi generation, particularly in the Qassim region, witnessed a major Islamic transformation whereby the exploitation of Islamic platforms began to spread. Accordingly, local attacks and bombings increased. The most destructive attack was in 2003 at the US embassy in the KSA, when extremists entered the US embassy and randomly shot the people inside, more than 100 of whom were women and children. These extremist attackers were from the Qassim region and were members of at least one of the platform categories mentioned above. In 2011, the wanted terrorist lists reported in the official Saudi news by the General Investigation Department in the Ministry of Saudi Interior contained three major terrorists who were extremist platform representatives (Ministry of Interior in Saudi Arabia, 2011).

### **2.3.2 The Main Attacks in the KSA, 1979–2015**

The attacks that were most influential and had the most victims in the KSA between 1979 and 2015 can be characterized in Table 1 (Al-Ghannam, 2015).

Table 1. Number of attack victims in the KSA, 1979–2015

	1979	1988	1990	1996	2001	2003	2004	2010	2015
Attacks	2	3	5	5	6	4	4	1	2
Victims	234	3	12	392	4	139	151	2	1

As can be seen in Table 1, 1996 saw the highest number of victims. The high toll in 1996 was due to the Al-Khobar Towers bombing, which targeted American citizens in the KSA. This attack was perpetrated to express hatred for the United States as part of extremists' claims, made after the September 11 attacks, that the United States hated Muslims. One of the most significant attacks that can be linked to extremist platforms took place in 1990. In this arson attack, fires were ignited and public and private properties in Qassim were damaged. The attackers targeted music and video stores. They claimed that such stores are forbidden by God and spread these claims using the platforms discussed above (Al-Ghamdi, 2015). In 1979, a group of Sororiaya committed shootings and took hostages in al-Masjid al-Harām in Mecca, which was targeted because it is the world's main Islamic platform. In 2004, there was a bombing of the traffic department building in Riyadh. This attack was perpetrated because the extremists believed that the Arabian Peninsula should not be ruled by the Saudi government or constitutional monarchy but should be a traditional Islamic Caliphate as described by the Prophet Muhammed. Therefore, they claimed that police officers should be killed because they recognized the government as an official authority. The extremists exploited the Prophet's Hadith, which states that polytheists should be taken out of the Arabian Peninsula (AL-Sabty, 2019). However, the correct meaning of that Hadith is that polytheists who recognize Muslims as enemies should be removed from the Arabian Peninsula (Al-Eiad, 2012). As part of this trend, a compilation of 2,685 Islamic religious texts was cited and exploited by extremist groups over 3 years (Kaggle, 2017). The extremists' lack of knowledge of all Sharia scriptures leads them to cite the scriptures outside the context of Islamic foundational concepts. In 2001, an attack was made on the Abqaiq oilfield. This famous attack was perpetrated by extremists and targeted the Saudi economy, as the Abqaiq oilfield represents 70% of Saudi's gross domestic product. Fortunately, the attackers failed (Al-Abdulkareem, 2015). This attack occurred because extremists wished to express their anger toward American citizens living on

the Arabian Peninsula, claiming that the Prophet Muhammed states that the peninsula cannot accommodate two religions (Al-Ghamdi, 2015).

Overall, major attacks had two dimensions. First, they expressed anger about the Saudi government's decision to allow non-Muslims to enter and live inside the KSA for work. Since most Saudi extremists are an extremist segment of Sunni Muslims, they targeted two segments of society: American citizens in the KSA and any Muslims following other doctrines, such as Shiite Muslims, whom the extremists claimed were non-Muslims and therefore could be killed. It is important to note that most representatives of the extremist platforms were from Sororiaya groups in Qassim. Second, the extremists claimed that the Arabian Peninsula should not be a government but rather an Islamic Caliphate, as the Prophet Muhammed states, as will discuss below. Therefore, they argued that people who work for the government should be killed (Almiman, 2021).

### ***2.3.3 Potential Effects on Saudi National Security***

This chapter found that there is no relationship between moderate Islamic discourses and extremism. The two main Islamic platforms—al-Masjid al-Harām in Mecca and Al-Masjid an-Nabawī in Medina—that are used for delivering moderate Islamic discourses have never been exploited and have never spread extremist ideologies; in fact, extremists have regarded the representatives of these two Islamic platforms as government agents who do not represent Islam (Almiman, 2021). This is because the extremists could not have access to these two official Islamic platforms as other Islamic platforms. Moreover, this chapter found a potential relationship between the exploitation of Islamic platforms by extremists in the Qassim region and Saudi national security, especially in the destabilization of Saudi national security from 1979–to 2015. Some representatives of Islam in the Sahwa movement exploited the spread of Islamic platforms to reshape the religious landscape to achieve their political goals. Lacroix (2011, p. 3) found that “the Sahwa movement played a crucial role in shaping politically

oriented religious discourse in the KSA and beyond. Yet the movement is little understood and its ideas much misinterpreted”. The significance of the Sahwa movement’s use of Islamic platforms has less to do with its ideas than with the youth’s emotional way of thinking and absorbing ideas. This is one of the explanations for why extremism has spread throughout the KSA: intellectual transformation has been achieved through motivational and emotional discourses. The KSA’s intellectual transformation since 1979 by religious discourses delivered through Islamic platforms has reshaped Islamic religious movements. The Saudi Crown Prince, Muhammed bin Salman, stated that the Sahwa movement spread throughout the KSA and the Middle East after 1979, however, the KSA had never had any extremism before that (IWC, 2017). Six factors illustrate the relationship between the attacks and the exploitation of extremist platforms between 1979 and 2017.

The first important factor is the relationship between the increase of extremist platforms and attacks, as can be seen in Figure 2 (Al-Saud, 2019).

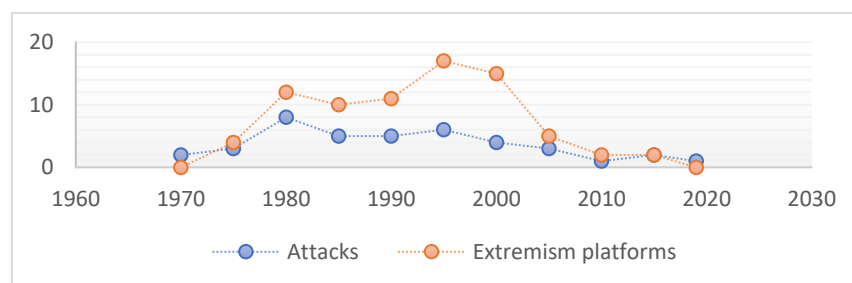


Figure 2. Number of attacks and extremism platforms in the KSA, 1979–2019

Figure 2 indicates two trends. The first is that the spread of extremist platforms correlates with extremist acts, perhaps because the platforms offered a fruitful environment for spreading extremism. As a result, this chapter argues that extremist platforms have directly influenced national security in the KSA. The evidence for the correlation is related to two factors. The first factor is that most attacks occurred under the pretext of Islam and were announced to youths in Islamic camps in Buraydah as jihadist news (Al-Rashed, 2004). The

second factor is that the attackers used arbitrary interpretations of Islamic texts to justify the attacks, which took place under Islamic symbols. Therefore, extremist platforms provided the most fruitful environment for these attacks because the Islamic platforms, including Islamic camps, are responsible for spreading information about Islamic issues. Concerning the second dimension, it is important to note that before 1979, the KSA had no extremist platforms, and no attacks took place. This suggests a link between the spread of extremism and the exploitation of Islamic platforms. Importantly, it also indicates a relationship between that exploitation and the Sahwa movement, as one of the most important objectives of the Sahwa movement was the spread of the Islamic platforms, as well as to spread the extremists' ideas using the Islamic platforms, both politically and religiously (Lacroix, 2011). The extremist acts are related to extremist platforms that correlated with the huge spread of the Sahwa movement.

In 2001, the Saudi Ministry of the Interior was shown footage of the Al-Qaeda leader, Abdelaziz Al-Muqrin, training youths in jihad skills at Islamic camps, one of the most significant extremist platforms discussed in this chapter (Al-Abdulkareem, 2015). Some extremists, such as Al-Muqrin, were active pioneers of Islamic camps in the Qassim region. Salman Al-Odah, who lives in Buraydah, is a famous religious figure in the KSA who was a pioneer as well (Al-Ghathami, 2015). In 1993, Al-Odah was banned by the Saudi Ministry of the Interior for delivering discourses through extremist platforms and was arrested in 1994 and detained until 1999 (Ministry of Interior in Saudi Arabia, 2011). Two aspects of this case demonstrate the relationship between the discourses of extremist platforms and their effects on Saudi national security. First, the Ministry of the Interior's actions reflect the seriousness of Al-Odah's acts and demonstrate that they affected national security rather than only Islamic issues. Islamic issues in the KSA are the responsibility of Islamic affairs or non-profit Islamic associations, as mentioned in the introduction. However, once the Ministry of the Interior in the KSA intervenes in a case that is not within its direct jurisdiction, it means that this matter

affects national security. Second, Al-Odah was the leader and organizer of the first revolution that occurred in Buraydah in 1994 under the pretext of Islam to demand reforms from the Saudi government. This movement was coordinated in advance at Islamic camps in Qassim. It was not a peaceful revolution but rather a kind of riot (Al-Abdulkareem, 2015). These riots were characterized by their emotional discourses, which played an important role in inspiring confidence and loyalty by using the official names of representatives of Islam. This use of official names represents a kind of exploitation of Islamic platforms. For example, the extremists delivered lectures using Islamic platforms and named trustworthy Islamic figures, such as Ibn-Othaimin and Ibn-Baz, as their teachers, attempting to exploit the youths' confidence in the official representatives and implying that they were such representatives (Al-Ghamdi, 2015).<sup>9</sup> However, in 2016, the Saudi Ministry of the Interior decided to bring the Islamic camps and Islamic forums under the Ministry's full supervision, expressing concerns regarding their activities (Almiman, 2021). This was the second intervention of the Ministry of the Interior, which reflects this issue's importance to national security, as mentioned above, and suggests a correlation between effects on national security and the platforms' programs.

The second factor that illustrates the relationship between the attacks and the exploitation of extremist platforms, is that Islamic political movements, such as ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and MB, began to establish their branches in the KSA after 1990, particularly after the Gulf War (Hegghammer, 2010). The establishment of branches of these movements in the KSA led to an increase in extremist platforms in Qassim and terrorist acts. According to an Al-Qaeda documentary released in 2003, Muhammed Al-Shihri blew himself up in a suicide attack in the KSA that same year (Ministry of Interior in Saudi Arabia, 2011). Al-Shihri had delivered a speech to his leader, Osama bin Laden, the leader of Al-Qaeda, advising him to be patient in pursuit of his goals. The KSA listed Al-Shihri at the top of the wanted list, and he was one of

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<sup>9</sup> Ibn-Othaimin and Ibn-Baz are famous religious figures who represented and delivered the right Islamic foundations (Al-Eiad, 2012).



the most famous representatives at Islamic camps (Al-Abdulkareem, 2015). This demonstrates the close relationship between extremism platforms and national security in the KSA.

The third factor is that the increase in extremist platforms is due to the fight against modernization, including reshaping the reform of religious discourse.<sup>10</sup> The Qassim region, and especially Buraydah and Unaizah, contains historical villages such as Al-Khabob in Buraydah.<sup>11</sup> Their citizens live traditionally and fight any reform or civilization, particularly at the religious level. Thus, this presents the puzzle of the existence of extremist platforms in Qassim and why they were initiated there, as extremists target to convert the KSA from a constitutional monarchy to a traditional Islamic Caliphate, starting from the Qassim region. The fourth factor is that most ISIS members who come from the KSA are from the Qassim region, as discussed above. The fifth factor is that Qassim's citizens enjoy significant privileges due to their wide relationships with various Saudi authorities including the Ministry of Islamic affairs and historically important relationships with the kings of the KSA. This is an important factor that leads them to the regional embrace of Islamic issues (Budd, 2014).

The last factor is that, in these platforms, a kind of Islamic guardianship is present whereby the followers imitate their leaders in every thought and step and this imitation hinders self-realization and leads to complacency.<sup>12</sup> These Islamic teaching methods play an important role in planting the seeds of Islamic dependency (Al-Ghamdi, 2015).<sup>13</sup> Thus, Saudi Islamic teachings, which are generally based on tradition, emotion, and imitation, have been exploited by extremist discourses on Islamic platforms to plant their ideologies and extremist ideas.

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<sup>10</sup> The reform of religious discourse: improving the Islamic religion towards the development of civilization (Al-nuaimy, 2018).

<sup>11</sup> Al-khabob: according to the Arabic Dictionary (n.d) 'Almohid'; Al-Khabob is the name of the land that lies between two mountains. This was the agricultural land in Buraydah, which has been turned into small villages in which traditional people live.

<sup>12</sup> Islamic guardianship: they require Muslims to follow the 'text' of the Prophet's companionships without scrutiny, and they cite Athar of Sofian Bin Oiainah, who said, 'If you can scratch your head by Athar, it is better for you'; Athar denotes the speeches delivered by the Prophet's companionships (Al-tirmithi, 1985, p. 221).

<sup>13</sup> Islamic dependency is a kind of imitation in which Sheikhs' opinions are taken and followed without consideration or analysis. It could be also taken as one of the Islamic styles (Al-Habib, 2012).

### ***2.3.4 Saudi Anti-Extremism Efforts to Improve Security***

Although the KSA has invested a significant number of resources in deradicalization strategies since the September 11 attacks, which marked the beginning of the transformation of anti-extremism efforts, the responsibility for reform does not lie only with the government but with every society and institution offering Islamic religious teachings (Al-Habib, 2012). Whether the KSA's reforms and anti-extremism policies have contributed to Islamic peacebuilding and raising the youth's awareness is a significant question. The KSA has closely monitored the exploitation of Islamic platforms and addressed the issue in a patient and artful way. In a moderate political sense, the government has seemed to apply the wisdom of Muawiya, one of the companions of the Prophet, who stated 'when you pull the rope, I will loosen it, and when you loosen it, I will pull it,' by approaching the situation neither strictly nor with tolerance (Altirmithi, 1985, p. 137).

Since 2006, after the file on the Al-Qaeda branch was closed by the Ministry of the Interior in the KSA, attention turned to Islamic platforms. After the death of the Saudi Arabian Al-Qaeda leader, Al-Muqrin, in 2004, acts of terrorism in the KSA gradually decreased (Al-Abdulkareem, 2015). As discussed above, Al-Odah was a famous religious figure in the KSA who delivered emotional discourses at Islamic camps in Qassim. In 2013, Al-Odah delivered 'an open speech' to the Saudi government requesting urgent political, economic, and religious reforms (Ministry of Interior in Saudi Arabia, 2019).<sup>14</sup> In 2017, he was arrested on 37 charges, the most significant of which was that he delivered emotional discourses through extremist platforms to incite youths and send them to conflict zones. Safar Al-Hawali and Naser Al-Omar, who organized the extremism platform mentioned above, were also arrested. Eventually, after extremist platforms were suppressed, extremist acts decreased dramatically in the KSA,

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<sup>14</sup> Open speech: a letter delivered to the Saudi government to request political and religious reforms. This letter was signed by Salman Al-Odah in 2013 (Al-Ghamdi, 2015).

including bombings and terrorist acts, as seen in Figure 3 (Presidency of state security in Saudi Arabia, 2019).

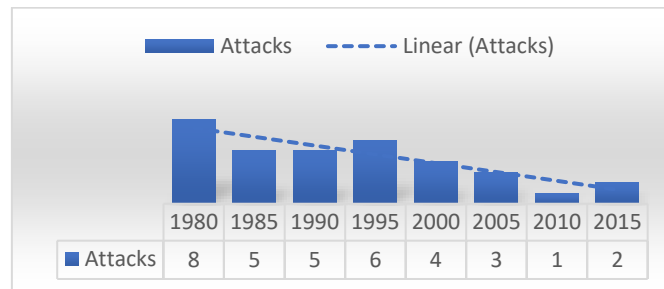


Figure 3. Number of extremist attacks in the KSA, 1979–2015

### 2.3.5 *The KSA Security Governance 2017–2019: the Stabilization Period*

King Salman bin Abdelaziz (1935-), the current king of the KSA, has reorganized the Saudi Islamic platforms, especially in Qassim, preventing most platforms’ exploitation. Between 2017 and 2019, Crown Prince Muhammed bin Salman announced his intention to eliminate the remaining extremist assets inside Saudi internal affairs and prevent the exploitation of Islamic platforms.

The KSA’s anti-extremist policies in the Qassim region targeted Islamic platforms to stop the spread of extremist messages. The Minister of Interior was tasked with removing extremist leaders from the region and disrupt the terrorist organizations. In addition, the Ministry also took control over Islamic camps and Islamic Forums establishing authority over their communication and financial resources. These two policy decisions were crucial in addressing the extremist problem in the Qassim region. Terrorist organizations cannot long operate without new members and money adequate supplies; therefore the government successfully shut down the extremist activity in Qassim.

Thirty years ago, the KSA was open to the world and adhered to a moderate Islamic theology. The country is now trying to return to the moderation of the past (Al-Asaker, 2018).

There are five factors to reducing extremism and terrorism, the most important of which is raising loyalty and national awareness (Allport, 1966), which the Saudi Crown Prince has undertaken. He aims to transform the extremist religious perspective from closed to open and fight terrorism by eliminating organizations that aim to foment social and political revolution. The Crown Prince established official centers to fight extremism, such as the Centre for Moderation under the general Department for Counter-extremism, the Global Moderation Centre for Counter-extremism, and moderation institutions at King Abdelaziz University. Furthermore, the Saudi Ministry of Defense launched the Ideological Warfare Centre to Counter Extremist Ideologies that cause terrorism (IWC, 2017). These official platforms were established to eliminate the remaining extremist resources and to contribute to the dissemination of Islamic ideals of tolerance and coexistence, which represent the correct way to understand the concept of Islam.

To summarize this section, it briefly described Saudi Arabian national security, reviewed the attacks that took place in the KSA between 1979 and 2015, examined the relationship between these attacks and extremist platforms, and related them to the disruption of the KSA's national security. Finally, it addressed Saudi anti-extremism efforts.

## **2.4 Conclusion**

This chapter discussed the exploitation of Islamic platforms and argued that focusing on the exploitation of Islamic platforms is key to combating extremism in the KSA. This discussion focused on the KSA because 98.43% of Saudi youth use Islamic platforms and the country is home to the world's biggest Islamic platforms. It highlighted Islamic platforms in the KSA, including their definition, importance, and concepts before addressing extremist platforms and their respective characteristics, discourses, influences, and exploitation, using an analytical-descriptive instrument method. A few of such literature touched on the importance of Islamic platforms, albeit it is a substantial key to overcoming extremist issues, therefore, the

contribution of this chapter lies in its attempt to find a correlation between extremists' exploitation of Islamic platforms and their influence on the KSA's national security, which has not been thoroughly or sufficiently discussed in the literature. Other studies have generally focused on the influences of online platforms, the Sahwa movement's dimensions, extremists' characteristics, or general threats to the KSA's national security. This chapter highlighted the paucity of studies that have directly explored the effects of the exploitation of Islamic platforms on national security with a particular focus on the Qassim region, which was the origin of the vast majority of the KSA's ISIS members. Overall, this chapter has focused on three dimensions.

First, it explained how extremists exploit Islamic platforms to spread Islamist extremist ideas. King Abdelaziz founded the KSA based on two institutions: Islamic law and the judiciary. Since the country was partially founded on Islamic law, Islamic teachings increased sharply in the KSA between 1979 and 2015. As part of this trend, the Sahwa movement was initiated in 1979 and grew gradually. The movement's principles are based on the manipulation of Islamic textures and the delivery of motivational discourses through Islamic platforms, and thus, the exploitation of Islamic platforms is referred to in this chapter as 'extremist platforms.' The characteristics of the platforms' representatives were discussed, including asceticism, manipulation through motivational emotional discourse, and the use of Islamic teachings.

Second, this chapter observed a relationship between the exploitation of Islamic platforms and an increase in extremist acts including bombings and terrorist activities. It emphasized the exploitation of Islamic platforms through essential branches of Islamic political movements that existed in the KSA, such as MB, ISIS, and Al-Qaeda. It also observed that the Ministry of the Interior in the KSA intervened in various Islamic cases that are not within its direct jurisdiction, which means that this matter affects national security.

Third, even though the KSA's reforms are often interpreted as mysterious and obscure by political opponents, there can be no doubt that they have enhanced national security, raised youth awareness, and reduced extremist acts. This chapter briefly outlined the KSA's anti-extremism reforms. For instance, the activities and programs of the global Ideological Warfare Centre were adopted by the Saudi Ministry of Defense, which specializes in confronting extremism, not only in the KSA but also in the Middle East and thus promotes peace in the region. Nevertheless, the KSA's anti-extremism reforms should be considered further to encourage the official Islamic authorities to raise the youth's awareness of Islamic resources that promote the discourses of moderate Islam.

### **3. The Role of Islamic Intellectual Security Immunization in Reducing Extremism**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

In recent decades, combatting extremism by various means has become a significant and urgent challenge. Physical war on terror is one approach, but it is broadly destructive and may reproduce extremism, such as revenge, extra-legal ways, and injustice, as the United States did in the past (Holliday, 2019). Therefore, today's efforts to combat extremism should focus on non-physical dimensions. Non-physical dimensions refer to nonmaterial factors such as identity, religion, belief system, conviction, and spirituality. Much of the traditional Western research has focused on the material aspects of extremism such as physical strength, firepower, supplies, and territorial domination (Tossell, et al., 2022). The limited research investigating the non-physical aspects of extremism found that personal spiritual formidability, or the will to fight, is the primary determinant of convictions that lead people to choose war. Therefore, traditional security complex theory cannot provide a solution to extremism as it is preoccupied with hard power and material aspects of terrorism. Islamic scholars have recognized that Islam is both the source and solution to terrorism and put forward the idea of Islamic intellectual security. Islamic intellectual security is defined as the deployment of a comprehensive set of policies that seek to protect society, particularly the youth, from deviant and extremist thoughts (Al-Osaimi & Al-Sufyani, 2018; Wakeel, 2021). The government of Saudi Arabia defines the concept the following way: Islamic intellectual security immunization is defined as an effort to develop a comprehensive and authentic understanding of the concept of Islamic texture and texts, and immunize that with logical evidence from the Qur'an and Sunnah (IWC, 2020).

Among these countries, the KSA is one of the most successful and unique because it focuses on immunizing Islamic intellectual security to combat extremism Fighting extremism

by Islamic intellectual security immunization has a crucial effect on social stability because Islamic intellectual deviation is an inherent extremist tendency present in many people (Al-Shihri, 2016).

Also, Islamic intellectual security immunization plays a crucial role in solving Islamic sectarian conflicts and hindering extremists' movements in the KSA. This is because Islamic intellectual deviation encourages atonement by misunderstanding the Islamic texts. 'Atonement' refers to moving Muslims out of Islam. Thus, it leads to Islamic sectarian conflicts that, in turn, lead to wars under Islamic pretexts, such as the Sunni–Shiite war in Iraq. In one instance, a total of 2,685 religious texts were erroneously cited by ISIS over three years. This misunderstanding led to conflicts, extremism, and extensive wars, all under the 'Islamic logo' (Kaggle, 2017).

Despite its importance, few studies have discussed Islamic intellectual security. Rather, previous studies have discussed the economic influence on intellectual security, intellectual security in a societal context, and the educational roles of intellectual security immunization. Prior research has also focused on hard security such as military and policing measures against extremism and has failed to discuss this issue from an Islamic perspective. Therefore, this chapter attempts to stand apart from these studies; instead, it focuses on Islamic intellectual security, which is a relatively fresh concept in the field. This chapter not only discusses the importance of Islamic intellectual security but goes beyond this by discussing Islamic intellectual deviation, attributing its consequences to misleading representations of Islamic texts that eventually lead to extremism and breed Islamic deviates.

This chapter illustrates the intellectual security in the KSA concerning Islam, which calls 'Islamic intellectual security.' It addresses the contribution of Islamic intellectual security immunization in reducing extremism. It highlights the relevance of Islamic intellectual security



in terms of historical realities by discussing the first Islamic era, including the companions of Prophet Muhammed, then connecting these realities to the beginning of Islamic intellectual deviation and, eventually, extremism.

The chapter aims to demonstrate the importance of Islamic intellectual security in the KSA. The main argument is that Islamic intellectual security immunization reduces extremism. It focuses on three dimensions. First, the concept and importance of Islamic intellectual security are reviewed. Second, the chapter addresses how patriotism is a significant element of Islamic intellectual security. Third, anti-extremist measures are attributed to the immunization of Islamic intellectual security by finding a potential correlation. The significance of this chapter lies in its discussion of how Islamic intellectual security affects extremism; by taking a deep look at the correlation between increasing Islamic intellectual security immunization and reducing extremism in the KSA through a descriptive-analytical study. It finds that Islamic intellectual security immunization plays a crucial role in protecting minds and contributing to reducing extremism that exploits the banner of ‘Islam’, especially in the KSA.

## **3.2 Islamic Intellectual Security**

### ***3.2.1 Islamic Intellectual Security: Its Concept and Significance***

Islamic intellectual security is a significant element of intellectual security in Islamic societies, especially those such as the KSA that follow Sharia and exercise Islamic governance. Therefore, Islamic intellectual security is a powerful tool to control policies and ideologies in which the Islamic intellectual security rules come from the main sources of Islam: the Qur’an and Sunnah. Islamic intellectual security is an important religious part of broader intellectual security (Lafi, 2019).

The integrity of the human mind and methodologies to avoid deviating from coexistence and moderation are some of the most significant tenets of Islamic teachings. This

is clearly illustrated in the Qur'an by its saying to Prophet Muhammed that he should call people to the way of his Lord with wisdom, moderation, and good teachings as well as speak kindly to people (Ali, 2013). 'People' refers to the whole of humanity, regardless of their religion and race. This is divine guidance for all believers, showing that the values of Islam regarding the kind treatment of others include everyone. This exemplifies Islamic intellectual security immunization through respecting all the various religions (Oak, 2010).

The formation of Islamic ideologies begins in childhood and gradually develops into the early years of youth. One significant factor that may explain Islamic intellectual deviation is 'societal behavior' (IWC, 2019). This is due to the Saudi Islamic societies' division, which in turn comes from different societal norms regarding how to understand Islamic teachings. These differences arise because understanding Islamic intellectual teachings requires understanding their context, Islamic jurisprudential principles, grammar, their underlying justification, and importantly, their application under various conditions. Related texts must also be collected, and their purpose investigated. Only specialist scholars can take on this task (Bieber, 2021). As a result, some extremists exploit the flexibility of Islamic teachings to plant extremist ideologies in young minds.

Emotional ideologies are more resilient than Intellectual ideologies in terms of strength and stability. Intellectual thoughts take a long time to plant, while emotions can be changed after a shorter period by, for example, motivation (Asem, 2017). This is one of the most significant features of intellectual security: intellectual security attempts to control the mind for a long period, and intellectual thoughts might not be changed except by stronger intellectual thoughts. For instance, the extremist thought 'If you do not agree with me, you are against the Lord' is a deep ideological extremist thought that requires a different logical thought to persuade the extremist that this is a type of Islamic intellectual deviation. This is because the intellectual thoughts come from an internal conviction rooted in the mind, and herein lies its

seriousness and difficulty (Awadh, 2017). Although the intellectual security concepts are still paradoxical and mysterious due to societies' different teachings, in Islamic societies particularly, these differences have the potential to provide humanity full integration across differences. The Qur'an illustrates this by saying if the Lord had so willed, He could have made humankind as one people: but they will not cease to disagree, and for that did he create them. This means that people will always differ in religions, creeds, beliefs, opinions, and sects. The lack of awareness of this has created conflicts throughout history, negatively affecting all (Al-Shihri, 2016).

### ***3.2.2 Islamic Intellectual Security: A Literature Review***

First, Islamic sciences are divided into two parts: practical sciences and pure sciences. The first sciences only serve to understand the pure sciences. One cannot understand the Qur'an, which is pure Islamic science until one understands the Arabic language, which is a practical science. Moreover, Islamic intellectual security is not confined to these two sciences but also should include all knowledge relating to Islamic sciences, such as Islamic history (Al-Sudais, 2017). The assumption is that more knowledge of Islamic sciences creates greater intellectual immunity against extremism.

Whoever controls the two official holy sites of Islam will have the chance to lead Islamic movements and policies. Moreover, these mosques can define the intellectual Islamic policies of the Islamic world because they deliver their discourses every Friday to millions of Muslims across the world (Bieber, 2021). Therefore, the KSA is the capital of Islam and the focus of attention of the Islamic world in the 21st century. It faces challenges regarding egalitarianism, as it must provide all the Islamic sectarians a free environment to express their beliefs moderately in a manner that is not inconsistent with other Islamic sectarians to protect the concept of worldly Islam from Islamic intellectual deviation and extremism (Rahman, 1982). Therefore, the KSA faces challenges regarding Islamic intellectual deviation. In recent

years, the KSA has become negatively influenced by various extremist movements, especially since intellectual extremism started in 1979. The KSA has faced numerous challenges from Islamic intellectual deviations from extremist and political movements such as *Jamā'a al-Ikhwān al-Muslimīn* (MB). It also faced Islamic intellectual clusters, followed by extremist acts and violence locally and internationally (Al-Saud, 2019).

Kalyugina and Pyanov (2019), as well as Kalyugina and Strielkowski (2020), pursued a similar argument that states the importance of global intellectual security. The studies addressed the issue from economic and social perspectives. They mentioned the consequences of the 'brain drain' on state intellectual security to reflect the seriousness of Islamic intellectual deviation as an important issue. Nevertheless, they failed to discuss the issue from the Islamic perspective, as this chapter is intended to. Similarly, Vinogradova, Sizikova, and Rybakova (2019) conducted an economic study that aims to prove that intellectual security is the leading factor in economic development. The study discussed intellectual security from an economic perspective rather than an Islamic perspective.

Al-Shihri (2016) conducted an important study that discusses the concepts of intellectual security. He argued that there is a contrast in intellectual security concepts between Muslims in the Middle East and non-Muslims in the West. He argued that there is no specific concept of intellectual security but that it is created based on various factors such as intellectual background, education, Islamic teachings, and society. He believed that education is one of the significant factors that enhance intellectual security concepts, and he partially attributes responsibility for intellectual security to social settings such as family teachings. One of the important results that he found is that Islamic societies, especially in the KSA, consider intellectual security to be unimportant. He recommended that the official authorities focus on intellectual security to raise Islamic societies' awareness to face the recent Islamic challenges.

The study focused on intellectual security from an education perspective and does not discuss the Islamic intellectual deviation that leads to extremist acts, as this chapter illustrates.

The literature shows consensus on the importance of intellectual security and its influence at various levels. However, as highlighted, few studies have discussed Islamic intellectual security. Therefore, the contribution of this chapter is not only to discuss the importance of Islamic intellectual security but also to discuss Islamic intellectual deviation, attributing its consequences to misrepresentations and misunderstandings of Islamic texts that eventually lead to extremism.

### **3.3 Islamic Intellectual Security: The Case of the KSA**

The KSA has passed various transformations regarding Islamic intellectual security (Al-Zarah, 2018). By the end of 1979, the largest hostage-taking event in the world was due to Islamic intellectual deviation. Therefore, the intellectual thoughts might not be changed except by stronger intellectual thoughts than them. This extremist act is the nucleus of the beginning of extremist movements in the KSA and especially intellectual extremism.

Al-Ghamdi (2015) conducted a significant study that discusses Al-Otaibi's act directly. He believed that Al-Otaibi was a part of the Salafism sect. He argued that this sectary has religious intolerance, as they believe that no one who truly worships the Lord except them. Al-Sudairi (2016) pursued a similar direction, stating that Salafism is one of the significant causes of Islamic intellectual deviation in the KSA. His study was conducted in China where both the Salafist and Wahhabis groups were identified as extremist groups posing a threat to the national security of the country. These groups proliferate and assist Chinese radicals establish connections with the Islamic State.

These studies fail to address the reasons for the correlation between Salafism and extremism. However, it is possible that religious intolerance does not necessarily lead to

extremism but could be the first stage. The roles religious figures play to enhance intellectual security in the KSA are still unknown. Awadh (2017) conducted a study by collecting data from the Ministry of Islamic Affairs in the KSA from 60 religious figures working at the Ministry. He used a survey-descriptive method as an instrument to collect the data. He argued that one reason for the lack of leadership by religious figures is the difference in opinion between the figures and the lack of space to express them. He added that religious figures are also disappearing from social media, which is the best platform to raise Saudi youths' intellectual awareness of Islamic teachings. He recommended that religious figures increase their efforts to contribute to enhancing Islamic intellectual security and respond to any kind of intellectual deviation that spreads extremist thoughts. Overall, there has been a lack of studies on extremism resulting from intellectual deviation and on extremist platforms and their role in intellectual deviation in the KSA.

### ***3.3.1 The Jeopardy of Islamic Intellectual Deviation***

Islamic intellectual deviation started in the KSA in 1979 and has increased gradually since then (Al-Saud, 2019). The significance of Islamic intellectual deviation lies in its ability to pass on ideologies, especially to young minds indirectly. This is because the strength of minds' abilities exceeds the power of emotions, as illustrated above. Islam in the KSA has undergone numerous transformations regarding Islamic ideology. These transformations have made it easy to transmit ideologies, particularly to those who have not received enough Islamic knowledge to be intellectually immunized.

Al-Arabia (2020) conducted an official report discussing an Islamic intellectual deviation. It addresses Tareq Al-Suwaidan, who is one of the significant members of the Muslims Brotherhood (MB), which is a prominent political movement that regards itself as the leader of Islam. Al-Suwaidan introduced himself as a management coach. More than 70,000 trainers have been trained by him. Recently, MB and Al-Suwaidan designated Turkey as an

official headquarters for training. This is because MB, represented by Al-Suwaidan, believed that there is the Great Caliphate project within short order, coordinated by MB and led by Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the Turkish president. One of the important courses in which Al-Suwaidan trained youths are ‘Skills of cultural and social change.’ Al-Suwaidan sought to plant extremist ideas in Saudi youths’ minds for a long period with deep conviction. He claims that Gulf countries, the KSA especially, have no economic pain and are secure; the change will not exist unless the royal family has internal conflicts. He recommended focusing on Saudi youths who study abroad, of which there are nearly 350,000. Since they enjoy full freedom, he claimed that they were the only chance to liberate the KSA because they would not return to the KSA with the same thoughts. When they return, it is easy to feed them extremist ideologies, politically and intellectually, under Islamic pretexts, including that of the caliphate. This is a concrete instance of deep ideologies and Islamic intellectual deviation that Al-Suwaidan sought to plant in Gulf countries through the KSA using Saudi youths’ minds. This indirectly promoted war in Gulf countries due to the striving toward the alleged Great Caliphate, mentioned above. It also reflects how Islamic intellectual deviation is planned regularly and gradually and combines political and intellectual elements under the Islamic pretext. In a similar context, the Ministry of the Interior in the KSA obtained a documentary were produced by Al-Arabia (2020) about Abdullah Al-Twijri and Muhammed Al-Khaith, who attempted to break the Saudi Arabian national petroleum and natural gas company in 2006 through a suicide operation. They were singing minutes before the operation, saying: ‘we are going to paradise and marry Al-hoor Al-iyin,’ while they were going to die in a suicide operation.<sup>15</sup> One of the indirect participants in this suicide operation felt regret for having participated in this ‘honor operation,’

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<sup>15</sup> Al-hoor Al-iyin: The girls in paradise in the hereafter, whom God promised honest, faithful Muslims would marry. God says in the description of Muslims in the Qur’an: (there are) fair ones with wide, lively eyes and he said, the reward for what they used to do (Ali, 2013).

as he called it. This reflects the seriousness of Islamic intellectual deviation, in which the extremists' thoughts accumulate for a long period and then end with events such as this case.

Somewhat similarly, according to the Saudi Ministry of the Interior (2020), Hakim Al-Mutairy is a political activist. The Ministry released an audio recording between Al-Mutairy and Muammar Al-Gaddafi, the former Prime Minister of Libya. Al-Gaddafi said to Al-Mutairy that they should exploit the current situation of MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region countries and spread the violence in Iraq, Bahrain, Kuwait, and the KSA by using Islam concepts politically. This would have been successful if you had created the youth's revaluation groups who had not to have enough Islamic knowledge and create Islamic chaos by sectarianism ignited among Shiite and Sunnah as well as tried to attribute the Wahabism to atonement (Mirali & Amanollah, 2020).

Similarly, the Muslim Brotherhood's spiritual leader Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who is based in Qatar, went so far as to issue a Fatwa, which is a legal opinion on the point of Islamic law (Sharia) given by a jurist in 2019 banning the Hajj on human rights grounds, citing Saudi human rights abuses in Yemen. However, in his paradoxical statement, he incited the killing of any Muslims supporting the official government in Libya and Egypt. Moreover, he issued a fatwa called 'Islamic permission' to allow suicidal operations. The result was that a thousand Muslims in Iraq and Egypt have passed away in conflict zones and clandestine wars (Ministry of Interior in Saudi Arabia, 2019).

What all the above instances have in common is one significant factor of the seriousness of Islamic intellectual deviation: making use of international events and injustices and arbitrarily linking them with some Islamic texts (Al-Smadi, 2016). In a recent example, ISIS claimed that the COVID-19 pandemic was a torment sent by God to non-Muslims around the world (Al-Kabeer, 2020). They refer to a verse from the Qur'an that tells Muslims that they



should kill ‘non-Muslims’ where they found them (Ali, 2013). However, using the verse as evidence to justify killing is a kind of Islamic intellectual deviation that is not based on knowledge and a proper understanding of religion (IWC, 2019). This is an example of the seriousness of Islamic intellectual deviation that leads to violence and the spread of hate and, eventually, extremism, as the next sub-section illustrates.

### ***3.3.2 Determinants of Islamic Intellectual Deviation***

Islamic intellectual deviation extremists are considered at high risk for social disintegration in Islamic societies. Most of the extremists’ religious controversies focus on mistakes in textual interpretation, terminological comprehension, and contextual understanding. It is important to define the factors of intellectual deviation to understand the concept and propose efficient policies to counter them.

Firstly, Islamic intellectual deviation is the adherence to direct commands and prohibitions. This is evident, for instance, in the selection of books for reading. Extremists deny their follower’s free thought and seek to establish firm control over the interpretation of the Qur’an. Moreover, figures of Islamic intellectual deviation usually disappear during violent conflict and are not represented among those killed or captured. The following are the characteristics of Islamic intellectual deviation, according to Ideological Warfare Center IWC (2018).

Islamic intellectual deviation shows no hesitation in accusing others of being infidels and deviants. They perform numerous false actions such as preferencing their illusionary stories of miracles and visions seen in dreams over Sharia, spreading ignorance and confusion regarding the concepts of enduring hardship (and seeking reward from Allah for being patient), and complete independence from Allah coupled with overzealous religious sentiment. Furthermore, given the influential role Saudi culture plays in embedding individuals in the

fabric of society, extremists rely on isolating and alienating their followers. An individual torn from their families and society is more prone to extremism and vulnerable to persuasion. Also, another tactic used by these groups is accusing government institutions of leniency and negligence in protecting the religion and rejecting the concept of coexistence with non-Muslims, deeming such acts as softening up the enemies and contradiction to the doctrine of loyalty and disavowal 'according to their devoted interpretation.' These extremists consider such barbaric crimes a victory for God and His Messenger and an honor for Islam and Muslims. Moreover, raising funds through illegal means justifies it using their corrupt logic, as for them, the end justifies the means. Quitting mosques under the pretext that their Imams are appointed by the government and are loyal to it, renders them infidels in their eyes. Additionally, criticize scholars and question their piety and honesty, accusing them of ignorance, giving preference to extremist leaders 'belonging to a herd of ignorant and deviants' over the prominent scholars of the Ummah. Finally, they hastily accuse governments and security forces of being infidels and justify killing and robbing them.

In summary, this section has addressed the definition of Islamic intellectual security and its importance in the KSA, then discussed its role in reducing extremism. Then, it addressed the seriousness of Islamic intellectual deviation in the KSA and addressed various concrete instances. To conclude, it determined the factors of Islamic intellectual deviation. In the next section, the chapter explores the potential role of Islamic intellectual security immunization in reducing extremism.

### **3.4 The Role of Islamic Intellectual Security in Reducing Extremism**

This chapter identifies a potential relationship between Islamic intellectual security immunization and reducing extremism in the KSA. The following four factors illustrate the correlation between these two phenomena from 1979 to 2019.

The first factor is the prevention of illegal Islamic donation associations. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs announced that various donation associations are using Islamic logos and fundraising from the public under the pretext of Islam. These suspicious associations were operating in non-official places like petrol stations. This form of donation-supported extremism in the KSA from 1998 to 2006 assisted jihadists in conflict zones in the KSA, such as Al-Qaeda and MB. The Saudi government has reorganized the donation methodologies. They allow donations only to officially registered associations that follow the Ministry of Islamic Affairs. As well, the Ministry intensified its effort to spread publications raising Islamic intellectual security and Islamic awareness. As a result, the amount of money donated substantially decreased from 2010 to 2017. This is one of the policies that the Saudi government has implemented to raise Islamic intellectual security (Oak, 2010).

The second factor is that the KSA started to provide students with scholarships to study abroad, especially from 2006 to 2016. These scholarships are thought to immunize Saudi students intellectually. The Saudi government has provided more than 100,000 scholarships annually to study abroad. It has also provided Islamic courses, while these students are studying abroad, in which youths can understand Islamic concepts from various perspectives, helping them to understand Islamic concepts intellectually (Malibari, 2020). This is because, in traditional Islamic educational systems, there was only the perspective of one Sheikh from a single association, and sometimes one city such as Qassim, that youths received their complete Islamic teachings and concepts. As a result, they did not receive a broad-ranging vision. Thus, those who studied abroad were less likely to deviate (Al-Asaker, 2018). Therefore, the Saudi government scholarships help to raise Islamic intellectual security, indirectly, and thus, reduce extremism in the KSA.

The third factor is that since 2017, the KSA distinguishes between moderate Islam, patriotism, and security, to define these factors and relate them to one another. Previously, in

the KSA, the Islamic concept was separated from security. For instance, the Islamic government institutions in the KSA did not coordinate or choose the subjects of the Friday Khutbah in the mosques, which serves as the primary formal occasion for public preaching in the Islamic tradition. This is because Islamic institutions in the KSA thought that the mosques were an independent Islamic issue, and thus outside the government's purview. This is because it is related to the hereafter, thus, it should not be guided by positive law but only by purely Islamic laws. The Sheikhs had the freedom to choose the Khutbah subjects, some of which contributed to raising extremism and Islamic intellectual deviation. However, since 2017, the Saudi government has restricted Khutbah subjects to raising Islamic intellectual security. One of the policies they used to be regarding patriotism as a part of security, where this merger leads to moderate Islam (Al-Sudais, 2017).

The last factor is the MISK Foundation report (2019) showing that the KSA contributes to raising Islamic intellectual security. Consequently, Islamic intellectual deviation has been reduced. MISK is a non-profit foundation established by Saudi crown prince Mohammad bin Salman in 2011 to develop and empower Saudi youth to become active participants in the future of the region. MISK has played a crucial role in reshaping the Islamic landscape through its social events (MISK, 2019). For instance, forums and conferences have been held to target Saudi youths to immunize Islamic intellectual security. These forums and conferences represented alternatives to some suspicious events such as the 'Annual Renaissance Conference.' This conference is banned by the Ministries of the Interior of the KSA and Kuwait. It was held annually in Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait, and it incited Saudi men to fight against the Saudi royal family. Azmi Bashara was one of the main speakers at the conference. He planted extremist ideas intellectually to target interior national security as well as to plant extremist political activists inside the KSA. The actual goal of this conference is to gain secure information through hidden sources who are Saudi activists. The prevention of the conference

in 2014 contributed to reducing Islamic intellectual deviation, and consequently, reducing extremism in the KSA (Al-Arabia Report, 2020). The MISK Foundation forums and conferences have raised Islamic awareness as well as Islamic intellectual security and have reduced Islamic intellectual deviation, reducing extremism as a result.

MISK also aims to inspire patriotism in the people of the KSA. MISK assumes that the increase in patriotism will encourage people to become important members of society; therefore, it also aims to reduce extremism. Al-Sudais (2017) assumes that patriotism is an integral part of Islam. One piece of evidence is that Islam urged society towards stability, which is a significant segment of patriotism. He adds that the Prophet Muhammed founded an Islamic country, then the first Caliph, Abu-Baker, established the ministries, and the third Caliph, Omar Ibn-AL Khattab, has founded the courts, with fairness and coexistence as the bases of all these institutions. There were no Muslim Caliphs after Ali bin Abi Talib, who is the fourth and last Muslim Caliph. In fact, in Islamic religious regulations, there is no specific way of ruling or choosing a country's rulers, even about government matters, whether they are royal, constitutional, or imperial. All such matters were left to people to define their affairs, and patriotism is a significant aspect of all such political arrangements (Al-Sudais, 2017). Therefore, MISK intends its events to enhance patriotism and indirectly reduce extremism. Although the patriotic feeling is perhaps universal to all humankind, people's perception of their homeland is not always the same. Some see it in national terms, while others see it as tribal and so on (Skitka, 2006).

However, in authentic and moderate Islamic teachings, patriotism is compatible with Islam, and Islam encourages people to love their homeland, so they have social and security stability and to integrate the people and the government. One piece of evidence is that the Qur'an addresses the word 'homeland' in 18 verses in contexts of defense and belonging that are related to patriotism. For instance, the Prophet Muhammed said that while he was on his

way after being expelled to Medina, he turned his back to Mecca, his birthplace, and said I swear that you are the nearest city to my heart; but I was expelled by your citizens (Tristram, 2019). In this case, the Prophet's patriotism was integrated with Islamic intellectual security. Al-Sudais (2017) illustrated how the immunization of patriotism reflects Islamic intellectual security. He argued that patriotism should be considered an important rule for Islamic intellectual security immunization that contributes to societies' stability and keeps them far away from extremism. This significant argument has two dimensions.

First, patriotism is an integral part of Islam and Islam is an ethic before it becomes a set of regulations (Bieber, 2021). One piece of evidence is that the Prophet Muhammed stated that he was sent to the people to fulfill their morals and increase social stability and avoid wars. Importantly, he stated that he would fulfill, not create, morals. This means he believed the people already had morals that he was sent to fulfill, thus representing Islam. In the same context, the fourth Caliph, who is the last Muslim Caliph, Ali bin Abi Talib, stated that "religion is all ethics, and whoever surpasses you in morals surpasses you in religion" (Al-Ghamdi, 2015, p. 112). This suggests that social stability, morals, and coexistence are the main rules of patriotism in Islam.

The second dimension is that when the Saudi youths' patriotism increased, the sense of their values will be increased respectively. They will then become an important segment of society, which is an integral and collective responsibility in both Islamic and non-Islamic societies, especially in the KSA. Therefore, their sense of society's responsibility towards Muslim and non-Muslim societies increases. One piece of evidence is that, during the day of the conquest of Mecca in 629 CE when Abu Sufyan ibn Harb entered Islam, the Prophet Muhammed provided him with a guarantee, by saying to others, 'who enters the home of Abu Sufyan, they will be safe.' The Prophet Muhammed said that due to Abu Sufyan's pride and love, he would provide with his feelings of belonging. It cannot be stated that the Prophet

Muhammed exploited Islam for personal purposes, but to seek stability for the country by planting patriotism. He also encourages Abu Sufyan to raise his faith as well as to preserve the common good. This dimension plays a crucial role in immunizing Islamic intellectual security under the Islamic pretext, and a significant element of it is increased loyalty. Therefore, once loyalty increases, Islamic loyalty will also increase, creating deep intellectual immunity (IWC, 2019). Hence, it will be difficult to remove due to its Islamic, logical, intellectual, and innate immunization.

As a result, extremism in the KSA has reduced, coinciding with all the above factors from 1979 to 2019. This reflects the success of the efforts for raising Islamic intellectual security immunization. Moreover, there are five factors to reducing extremism and terrorism, the most important of which is raising loyalty and patriotism (Allport, 1966), which the Saudi crown prince has undertaken from 2017 to 2019.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

To conclude, this chapter discussed Islamic intellectual security in the KSA. The significance of this chapter lies in its discussion of how Islamic intellectual security affects extremism, by examining in detail the correlation between increasing Islamic intellectual security immunization and reducing extremism in the KSA through a descriptive-analytical study. The main argument of this chapter focused on the influence of raising Islamic intellectual security on reducing extremism in the KSA. Other studies have discussed the economic and social influence of intellectual security and the roles of the Saudi family and education in increasing intellectual security. However, this chapter emphasized the role and the significance of intellectual security relative to hard security in combatting terrorism. It reviewed the original Islamic intellectual deviation in the earliest era of Islam after the Prophet Muhammed's death and attributed the first war in Islam to the vulnerability of Islamic intellectual security. It noted

that due to the seriousness of Islamic intellectual deviation, a thousand Muslims in Iraq and Egypt have died in conflict zones and clandestine wars.

This chapter found that four factors illustrate the correlation between Islamic intellectual security and reducing extremism from 1979 to 2019. The first factor is the prevention of random Islamic donation associations. These associations indirectly fed Islamic intellectual deviation. Second, the annual scholarships provided by the KSA for students to study abroad while benefitting from various Islamic courses to study the religion from new and moderate perspectives. Those who studied abroad were less likely to deviate. Third, the government attempts to increase Islamic intellectual security by limiting the topics of the Friday Khutbah and emphasizing the distinctions between moderate Islam, patriotism, and security to define these factors and relate them to one another. One specific policy that they used regards patriotism as a part of security where this merger leads to moderate Islam (Al-Sudais, 2017). Fourth, MISK Foundation reports (2019) have shown that in the KSA, raising Islamic intellectual security has reduced Islamic intellectual deviation from 1979 to 2019.



## **4. The KSA's Islamic Deradicalization Strategies**

### **4.1 Introduction**

The dissertation has so far discussed how extremists spread their ideologies through the exploitation of Islamic platforms and how the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia responded with the comprehensive security policy called Islamic intellectual security. In this chapter, I dive deeper into deradicalization strategies in the KSA that stem from the mentioned above security policy. Previous chapters have established that the core facet of radicalization is establishing extreme perceptions of Islam that encourage the emergence of extremist behavior (Josefsson, et al., 2017). A religious, intellectual, and Islamic education, as well as the re-education of a moderate conception of Islam via soft power methods, have been used as tools of deradicalization (Porges, 2010). This chapter argues that it is important to differentiate between disengagement and deradicalization and use the proper tools to dismantle extremist networks. The underlying notion of the KSA's Islamic intellectual security policy is that to successfully counter terrorism disengagement is not sufficient and deradicalization must be employed. Consequently, the state must challenge and deconstruct radical notions of Islam and replace them with the moderate and non-violent tenets of moderate Islam (Jessa, 2006). This chapter illustrates how extremists have modified moderate ideas and turned them into highly persuasive extremist ideologies. In this chapter, moderate Islam is defined as extracting extremist ideas by inculcating moderate thoughts (IWC, 2020).

This chapter examines the relationship between extremist interpretations of Islamic ideals, such as jihad and Qur'an verses, and deradicalization. In addition, the paper explores how extremist modes of Islam emerge, discusses their tendencies and tenets, evaluates 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 chapter, previous scholars have not focused on deradicalization via new tools but rather on existing Saudi Arabian deradicalization programs and on the efforts of the Muhammad bin Naif Counseling and Care Center. However, 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 KSA since 1979 (Almiman, 2021). The Intellectual Warfare Center (Oak, 2010), 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 chapter 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.

#### ***4.1.1 Literature Review***

First, discussing the deradicalization programs in the KSA is a valuable way to situate the topic and understand the landscape of radicalization. The author defined deradicalization as “efforts that attempt to transform attitudes and behaviors of former terrorists, so they reject

violence as a tool to achieve ideological, religious or political goals that threaten national security and life or cause political and economic instability” (Aslam, 2020, p. 1).

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia experienced a rapid growth in extremist violence targeting mostly western-affiliated targets between 2003 and 2007 (Angel, et al., 2010). Saudi officials launched a comprehensive counterterrorism and deradicalization program aiming to separate extremists from mainstream society. The core of the program is known as the Prevention, Rehabilitation, and After-Care approach (Boucek, 2008). This soft power approach targets the intellectual and ideological reasons behind extremists’ motivations and actions. The government recognizes the complex nature of radical Islam as they claim it to be a perversion of true Islamic doctrines that seek to overthrow the ruling authority. This recognition means that the KSA moved beyond the traditional military-security approach and seeks to defeat extremists by preventing exposure to extremist ideas, refuting and countering their religious claims, and promoting policies that prevent relapses. The program has generated positive results with recidivist and rearrest rates at the 1-2% range.

Andreas Casptack (2015) focused on the rehabilitation section of deradicalization programs in the KSA. The rehabilitation program is the centerpiece of the counseling program during which intensive religious and ideological debate takes place between the extremist and a religious clerk (Boucek, 2008). The study stated that “During the counseling program, the clerics debate with the prisoners in an attempt to persuade them that they were tricked into their jihadist beliefs and to demonstrate how true Islam is a religion of peace and tolerance” (Casptack, 2015, p. 3). The government of the KSA strongly believes that proving to extremists that they were lied to and deceived about the true nature of Islam helps them renounce their extremist views. The counseling program is often hailed as a successful deradicalization strategy as the KSA claims that out of the 3,000 people who participated 1,400 have renounced their views (Boucek, 2008, p. 21). The deradicalization programs in the KSA succeed; however,

they may be difficult to replicate in other countries as the program requires a government that is capable of projecting religious authority effectively.

In pursuit of a similar direction and focusing explicitly on the Mohammed bin Nayef Center for Counseling and Advice, Kamel al-Khatti (2019) emphasized the efforts made by that Center. The study raises the question of why the KSA's deradicalization program successfully reduces extremism. A specific program for prisoners from the Qatif and Al-Ahsa regions in the KSA was established under the umbrella of the Mohammed bin Nayef Center for Counseling and Advice and named the 'Rehabilitation and Building Program'. The study noted that "the program has recorded a 100% success rate" and that the KSA has one of the most successful deradicalization programs due to its extensive scope and intention to reintegrate the released prisoners into society (al-Khatti, 2019, p. 3). In addition, the Saudi approach draws from cultural norms, historical precedents, and experiences from other countries to create a complex approach (Angel, et al., 2010). It is important to note that the 100% success rate refers to the fact that no participants have been arrested for terrorism. The study reviewed the rehabilitation programs, considering them a sample that could apply to other countries, and argued that "the Saudi deradicalization programs adopted trial and error methodology to counter its shortcomings. The process was a lengthy and complicated one, which suffered its share of disappointments, but was ultimately able to achieve great successes" (al-Khatti, 2019, p. 2). According to Kamel al-Khatti, the successes of the programs can be attributed to the government taking a measured and complex approach.

In another study, Leila Ezzarqui (2010) analyzed the relationship between deradicalization and rehabilitation in the KSA programs and proposes that the KSA is hailed as one of the most successful countries in terms of deradicalization; nonetheless, "methods to evaluate recidivism or to assess the effectiveness of those programs have yet to be established and are subject to further research" (Ezzarqui, 2010, p. 1). Ezzarqui questioned Saudi claims

that the three-pronged deradicalization strategy resulted in a 100% success rate. The study suggested that the concern with the “rehabilitation programs is that while they have succeeded to deprogram scores of former jihadis, the programs have mostly focused on minor offenders failing to address hardcore terrorists” (Ezzarqui, 2010, p. 2). Angel, et al. (2010) also pointed out that most of the participants involved in the deradicalization programs were troubled youth who were prone to falling for extremist exploitation. Besides some minor criminal offenses, these people had never engaged in violent crimes or were part of a terrorist organization. Therefore, it is necessary to differentiate between deradicalization programs designed for youth and hardcore terrorists. Unfortunately, there is barely any data available on the latter complicating efforts to evaluate these programs (Ezzarqui, 2010).

Scant research appears to focus on radicalization in the KSA in terms of understanding the KSA’s history, despite the nation’s implementation of new tools and strategies to reduce extremism. In another study, Hamed El-Said and Richard Barrett (2013) investigated the KSA’s vision of extremism. The study argued that the deradicalization programs’ design was affected by a rise in radical Islamic rights in the 1990s. The authors discussed the success of the KSA in reducing extremism resulting from a significant spike in oil prices, the consequences of which brought unprecedented wealth to the KSA in the early 1970s. It noted that the deradicalization efforts made by the KSA began in the 1990s; nevertheless, since the study was conducted in 2013, it did not discuss the efforts made by the KSA in the era of King Salman.

In the existing literature, most of the studies that discuss the KSA’s deradicalization refer to specific programs and aim to assess their overall viability, such as that of the Mohammed bin Nayef Center for Counseling and Advice but fail to place them in the larger context of Islamic extremism. For example, Sara Brzuszkiewicz (2017) followed this scholarly direction with a study that presents the KSA’s deradicalization program. The researcher found

previous claims of ‘terrorists living in luxury hotels’ to be false although a significant number of resources are used in the program. Similarly, to other academics, the author focused on the two pillars of deradicalization: one being a deep reinterpretation of Islamic messages that led individuals to believe violence is an acceptable means to instill change, the other being the development of national belonging (*intimā’ waṭany*) fostered to enhance trust in the Kingdom. Brzuskiewicz also highlighted the problems with the program namely the fear of gradually normalizing jihadist violence by viewing terrorism as simply something that happens, and terrorists can be rehabilitated. This poses the danger of creating the idea that terrorism can only be solved posterior rather than prevented.

A recent study focusing on the Al-Ha’ir, Al-Hitar, and Pemulihan deradicalization programs in the KSA, Yamen, and Malaysia was conducted by Mohd Mizan Aslam (2020). The study considered re-education and rehabilitation in each country. It also focuses on correcting political and religious misconceptions, but, unlike the present, more extensive study, does not address or refer to any Arabic sources.

Samantha Kutner (2016) pursued a similar direction regarding the focus on re-education as playing a significant role in deradicalization. At the beginning of the study, the author questioned, “Is it possible to dissolve the violent religious ideology behind the majority of terrorist behavior and keep the ‘person’ intact?” (Kutner, 2016, p. 1). Kutner’s study addressed the problems and limits surrounding deradicalization in the KSA The author pressed for a more integrative and evidence-based approach compared to using imams to conduct religious re-education programs. However, to do that a higher degree of transparency is required which is unlikely to be provided by the KSA.

Similarly, Amanda Johnston (2009) focused on radicalization in Yemen, the KSA, Indonesia, and Singapore. Johnston further investigated the three-pronged approach used by the KSA within its prison system and found that the primary objective of rehabilitation

programs is to change prisoners' interpretation of the concept of jihad and *takfir* (the concept of declaring a person an infidel). This rests on the notion that extremists are led astray by those seeking to secure personal and political gains through the corruption of Islamic texts. Therefore, physical punishment is an ineffective method to combat radicalism as the notions are deeply held religious beliefs. The re-education programs not only offer debates with religious personnel but also uses Saudi culture and traditions to 'rescue' extremists. However, Johnston noted that the major problem with the program is that it is not available to all prisoners. Hardcore prisoners, consisting of about 10% of the prison population, simply refuse to participate in the program. It is currently unclear what the KSA plans to employ to deradicalize the hardcore extremists who have taken part in violence.

In contrast, Marisa L. Porges (2010) criticized the KSA's deradicalization efforts. The author argued that "Saudi Arabia's programs to deradicalize suspected terrorists have experienced some high-profile failures but could still provide important lessons for other states" (Porges, 2010, p. 1). Porges discussed the initiatives taken by the Mohammed bin Nayef Center for Counseling and Advice, which was established in 2007. As such, the study was limited in its lack of consideration of recent government-mandated deradicalization endeavors. The study was conducted in 2010, whereas this dissertation aims to highlight the current efforts made by KSA, especially given that the KSA's deradicalization undertakings are still being refined.

Meanwhile, Michael J. Williams and Samuel C. Lindsey (2012) also criticized current efforts made by the KSA government based on the perspective of identity theory. The study defined identity theory as "one of the motivations most likely to render detainees susceptible to new belief systems" (Williams & Lindsey, 2012, p. 1) and asked, "if it does not deal with terrorists who commit violent offenses, how much good can it do?" (Williams & Lindsey, 2012, p. 3). The authors went on to observe that "the Saudi program's objectives did not preclude detainees' deradicalization"; rather, "its primary objective is individual detainees'

disengagement from terrorism” (Williams & Lindsey, 2012, p. 6). The study attempted to highlight the difference between disengagement and deradicalization. The authors questioned whether it is appropriate to categorize the current KSA policies as deradicalization. They found that disengagement, meaning a behavior change but not a change in beliefs, described these programs more accurately.

In a critical study of radicalization in the KSA, Mohammed M. Hafez (2008) referenced the militancy in Islam in both the KSA and Yemen. The study examined the fighting groups in these countries and their motivations for violence. According to the author, “Saudi Arabia and Yemen are pivotal states that deserve an in-depth look because of their ongoing troubles with radical Islamism” (Hafez, 2008, p. 2). Nonetheless, Hafez did not provide solutions for deradicalization in the KSA and given the study’s publication date, did not address the KSA’s recent efforts concerning extremism.

The literature review has suggested that the KSA possesses a somewhat successful deradicalization program, but it fails to account for hardcore terrorists. In addition, few studies have used a comprehensive vision of the KSA or provided a systematic analysis to understand the roots and motivation behind extremism in the KSA, and effective or practical solutions and recommendations have not been presented. Additionally, it is worth noting that while some researchers have tried to explain the KSA’s deradicalization, these studies enable readers to comprehend the efforts made by specific programs rather than the KSA’s strategies more widely, as this dissertation aims to do.

The achievement of the second group of studies is its discussion of the context-specific to the KSA; nevertheless, these studies have mostly focused on highlighting the need for better evaluative processes but did not identify new tools to disengage and deradicalize hardcore extremists. A potential reason for these deficits is the difficulty in accessing data in the Arabic



language, particularly given that the existing body of literature neglects Arabic sources and relies on old data.

There are various reasons why the existing literature has failed to address effective strategies in the KSA's deradicalization. For instance, KSA data are relatively inaccessible as they are typically documented in Arabic. Another reason may be the complexity of understanding the nature of the Saudi mindset, including that of political decision-makers and citizens. Moreover, the recent KSA reforms and political revolutions in the era of King Salman have affected both the KSA's political landscape and relationship with Islam, including radicalization and how to deal with it, in a manner unprecedented in the country's history. Thus, to compensate for the considerable gap in the existing literature, this dissertation attempts to provide a comprehensive vision for understanding the KSA's deradicalization and underlying motivations. It will also evaluate the KSA's strategies implemented in the era of King Salman by assessing the new tools applied by the KSA government.

## **4.2 Extremism and Moderate Islamic 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.

### **4.2.1 *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 (Josefsson, et al., 2017).

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 (Oak, 2010). Indeed, the Saudi

government argues that to implement moderate Islam, the state should employ and promote the concept of Islamic moderation. Similarly, moderate Muslims adhere to the concept of contextual relativism 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 was 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 (Qur'an, 2013). 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.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, murder and violence cannot be justified by any logic or religion (Maliach, 2010). Similarly, one cannot claim that extremist groups that call for partisanship, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, embody moderate Islam. The Saudi government recognizes such organizations as terrorist groups because they call for the separation of Muslims into groups under various political slogans forbidden by Allah Almighty in the Holy Qur'an. 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 chapter 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

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<sup>16</sup> 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).

extremists' tendency to conflate Sharia texts with the Qur'an as a whole (Oak, 2010). 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 (Verkuyten, 2007). Nevertheless, Faqih (2017, p. 1) argued that there is no such thing as moderate Islam, asserting that 'Islam is only one, and there is no moderate and non-moderate'.

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.

#### ***4.2.2 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. 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. 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. 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 (Josefsson, et al., 2017). 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 (Sheline, 2017), 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) affirmed 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.

### **4.3 Extremists' Perception of Islam: The Government's Point of View**

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 chapter, meanwhile, focuses on the necessity of embracing moderate Islamic values and examines their role in deradicalization in the KSA.

Extremists' ignorance of 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 (Oak, 2010). 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?

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 always killing and claim it is justified under the pretext of Islam by using a Qur'an verse (Al-Ragab, 2016).

#### ***4.3.1 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 chapter, 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 (Oak, 2010). 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 (Rahamneh, 2016). According to the Saudi government's interpretation, meanwhile, moderate Islam is a way of life rather than a set of laws and religious practices (Josefsson, et al., 2017).

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 (AbdulHalim, 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 (2019) argued that regular Islamic education in the KSA promotes moderate Islam. He noted 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' 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).

#### **4.4 The KSA Deradicalization Strategies and Policies**

This section illustrates the Saudi Arabian government's past deradicalization attempts, reviews its policies for promoting moderate Islam, and evaluates its 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 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 of 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 the strictness, intensity, and 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.<sup>17</sup> 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.

The interpretation of Islam implemented in the Awakening Era consisted of the prohibition of entertainment, exhortations to asceticism, and exclusive devotion to worship.<sup>18</sup> 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 were allowed to join 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 (Ministry of human resources and social development in Saudi Arabia, 2020).

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<sup>17</sup> 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).

<sup>20</sup> 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 can exploit Islamic platforms’ (Almiman, 2021: 2).

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 (Ministry of human resources and social development in Saudi Arabia, 2020). Given women's presence in several labor sectors, 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 (Ragab, 2016). 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).<sup>19</sup> While religious books teach that Islam is characterized by universality this is often not the case (Al-Shugair, 2020). In extreme cases, some religious figures have forbidden teaching foreign languages or speaking to 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 (Josefsson, et al., 2017), 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 if 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.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> 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 (Josefsson, et al., 2017).

<sup>20</sup> Takfir: accusing another Muslim to be an apostate (Al-Tamimi, 2013).

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 (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. Before 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 initiative, supported by the King's and Crown Prince's initiatives (Almiman, 2021).

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

## 4.5 Conclusion

This chapter 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 chapter'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 chapter'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 chapter 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 present study has examined extremism about 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 chapter 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 chapter 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 socio-economic 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 chapter 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.

## **5. Conclusion**

### **5.1 Summary of Key Findings**

The dissertation reviewed and analyzed Islamic extremism and deradicalization methods employed by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia between 1979 and 2020. Using a descriptive-analytical approach and regional complex security theory (RCST), the study dived into a comprehensive review of how Islamic extremism spreads and how the KSA responded to this spreading. The following analysis result deserves attention: the pervasive existence of Islamic platforms which serve as social and religious gathering places (both in the real world and in the digital space), is both the source and the solution to the problem of extremism. Extremists can exploit Islamic platforms and disseminate their version of the Qur'an to millions of people regardless of physical location and time. The target of these messages are mostly teenagers and young male adults who grew frustrated and disillusioned with their life and can be easily manipulated. The exploitation of these platforms is possible through various non-profits that serve as illicit donors, raising money from the public. As explained in the present study, extremists have a significantly different interpretation of the Qur'an, one that justifies the use of violence for political aims. Unlike moderate Islam which promotes and preaches tolerance of all humankind and living in peace, extremists bend Islamic texts according to their will and use those interpretations as the sole truth.

As stressed above, what is most significant in this study is that Islamic platforms are also the solution to the problem because the state can effectively utilize and control them to prevent the spread of extremist influences and actions. Consequently, the government of KSA oversees the most influential and relevant Islamic platforms and exercises oversight over the two holiest places of Islam inside the Kingdom political borders. Using a three-pronged deradicalization strategy (Prevention, Rehabilitation, and Aftercare) the state targets the most



vulnerable population to limit the spread of dangerous ideas. The program is designed for people who have not yet committed a terrorist act and wish to return to society. During the process, the prisoners have one-on-one conversations with clerks who challenge their radical ideas and reroute them to moderate Islam. In rehabilitation, the prisoners are reintegrated into Saudi life with the help of their families and peaceful traditions. The last part of the program ensures that they will never again leave moderate Islam and return to extremism. Although the Saudi government claims a high success rate, evaluations of the program still do not exist and it does not work on hardcore extremists.

Regional complex security theory helped explain the integrated problem of extremism originating from religion. Given that religion is both the source of identity and legitimacy for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, traditional complex security theory dealing with military-security issues is not enough. RCST allowed the expansion of national security to multiple sectors of society, in this case to the societal sector. It also proposed that religious extremism can only be controlled in non-physical dimensions where armies and firepower are useless. Correctly calling the struggle between terrorists and the KSA a ‘war of ideas’ requires a comprehensive, multidisciplinary, and integrated approach that targets the belief system itself rather than the symptom. The present dissertation reviewed the most notable deradicalization strategies that build on the idea of societal security by securing Islamic intellectual security. Despite evaluating the success of these policies is notoriously hard given the lack of transparency and public information, the findings of this study indicate that the KSA is on the right track to limiting extremism.

## **5.2 Future Work**

This dissertation has provided fruitful suggestions for further research concerning deradicalization in Gulf and OIC countries, which could offer significant insight into other countries. For instance, since 2015, one of the strategies employed by the KSA to correct the

interpretation of Islamic concepts is the power of decision-making regarding women's employment and, as noted above, promoting the genuine and moderate concept of Islam. Since 2017, one of the ways that the KSA has dealt with Islamic intellectual deviation has been by harnessing the intense power of Islamic decisions. Since the Gulf countries' Islamic culture is similar, future research may wish to consider the applicability and relevance of the lessons learned in the KSA to the Gulf and other nearby countries.

Although this research provides a significant contribution in terms of new strategies and anti-extremism methodologies and presents a novel evaluation of the KSA government's efforts and endeavors, the limited nature of the available data has posed a challenge. Therefore, future researchers should utilize more detailed data and analysis focused on Islamic platforms. Other research on Islamic perspectives and policies, especially the determinants of moderation, would also be worthwhile.

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