

# Exporting Their Religious Doctrines? The Cases of Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Morocco

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Islam in Europe has undeniably become a central social, cultural, legal and political issue. However, it is approached from many different angles in the public sphere. One of the most burning questions may have to do with the role played by certain predominantly Muslim states through their possible strategies for Muslims in Europe, in particular, their supposed desire to export very specific doctrinal conceptions of Islam in the context of a presumed proselytism and quest for political and diplomatic levers.

This article looks at how three different countries (Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Morocco) have, for many years, been developing a genuine religious policy targeting Muslims in the West, especially in Europe, and the reasons why. In deciding that all or some Europeans of Muslim heritage should no longer fall beyond the normally national scope of Saudi, Turkish or Moroccan public policy in the sphere of religion, these countries have sought to expand their social and diplomatic influence by appearing, depending on the circumstances, to be able to meet the doctrinal and religious needs of Muslim communities in Europe, beginning with some of their own diasporas. In this regard, three highly distinct logics and strategies can be identified if we wish to analyse exactly how each of these countries has used the doctrinal resource to position itself as a key player in the global field of Islam. Through decades of exporting Salafist theses for the premeditated purpose of achieving hegemony over globalized Islam, Saudi Arabia has taken a global view, whereby the issue of Muslims living in Europe is a matter of preaching,

rather than a quest for objective diplomatic influence. In contrast, Turkey and Morocco stand out primarily for their actions vis-à-vis their diasporas in countries such as France, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy and Spain. Here, the aim is to find potential political intermediaries, usually at the local level (management of places of worship and communities of Moroccan or Turkish origin), but also to hold important positions at the national level within the bodies that are supposed to represent Islam in the upper echelons of each country of emigration. However, from a doctrinal and symbolic standpoint, Morocco and Turkey clearly differ in terms of the religious content that they produce. Whilst the former seeks to occupy the space of religious moderation, the latter, under the effect of those currently in power, pursues a more militant agenda of defence of the Muslim identity.

## **A Networked and Globalized Islam: The Case of Salafism with a Focus on Saudi Arabia**

If the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is today a nerve centre for the spread of Islam in the world, it is chiefly due to the nature of the country's prevailing social contract and its considerable financial resources since the second half of the 20th century. As a result of the alliance between the Al Saud and Al Sheikh families – the former presiding over the country's fate through the religious fervour provided by the latter – the monarchy has, since the 1960s, deployed a foreign policy based partly on promoting “orthodoxy” in the global Islamic arena in a context of “Arab Cold War” (hostility towards “progressive” regimes, including Nasserism), alliance with the US (since the Quincy Agreement of February 1945) and, later, rivalry with Iran (since the “Islamic Revolution” in 1979).

The predominance of Salafism in Europe since the 1990s is thus largely the result of the two-level Saudi preaching apparatus. The first level is organically and formally linked to the leadership. Made up of the Council of Senior Scholars and the Permanent Committee for Scholarly Research and Ifta, it deals with the main religious matters for the State and society. Given the title of "Minister," the Council's members are consulted on the major issues (as diverse as they may be) affecting not only the monarchy's policy, but also events involving Muslims around the world. At the same time, Saudi Arabia's importance as a country for education provides another network for spreading Salafism. The resources and prestige of the universities of Mecca and Medina explain why many religious leaders (imams) have studied there and, in so doing, participated in the globalization of this Islamic offer.

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European followers are thus members of a genuine "epistemic community,"<sup>1</sup> which is part of a networked, non-pyramidal logic. The basis for this is a feeling of initiation and of being part of a privileged group, one with a stock of purity related to the mastery of "orthodox" Islamic norms and reasoning. This group is today further backed by a rich and powerful state that many European Salafists dream of emigrating to (*al-Hijrah*) to protect themselves from the sources of moral "corruption" stemming from an "infidel" society. Therefore, the initial symbolic influence that Saudi Arabia has today amongst "puritan" religious communities is, first and foremost, the result of the audience that benefits from the preaching networks originating in the Gulf. Whilst it is difficult to speak of a classical diplomacy aimed at proselytism,

it is possible to identify a Saudi soft power linked to Salafism, whose prestige is real for some European Muslims. Salafism, which is mostly quietist, is made up of a blend of objective strategies of mental and social rupture with the predominantly non-Muslim and even Muslim environment, but also of more equivocal practices (cultural, economic, etc.) through which the Salafists embrace and reject certain codes of modernity (appetite for entrepreneurship, disdain for political affairs, moral discrediting of anything that is not Islamic, etc.).

### Morocco and the Export of "Maliki Moderation"

The Kingdom of Morocco is characterized by a conscious strategy of differentiation through moderation. Emphasizing its Maliki heritage (the historically predominant Sunni school in Northern Africa), by making consensus a cardinal value of Islamic ethics, as well as its Arab, Berber, Jewish and Andalusian heritage, Morocco, by sending imams and signing formal agreements with European countries, especially France, explicitly highlights its distance from "extremism." Seeking to position itself as the hub for the spreading of an Islam at once traditional and modern, one presented by the most senior officials (beginning with the King) as the surest factor to fight terrorism and the appeal of jihadism, Morocco is actually targeting two very specific groups.

The first is its own diaspora, over which it seeks to exert increasing religious control, whether in the historical countries of emigration (France, Belgium, Germany, etc.) or more recent ones (Spain, Italy, etc.). In keeping with its consular management of the Muslim faith in numerous European countries, allowing for both a security approach and a hoped-for consolidation of allegiances between the Makhzen and its overseas nationals, since the early 2000s, the kingdom has invested heavily in bodies representing Islam, as witnessed by the creation and support for structures linked to it (the Rally of Muslims in France or the National Federation of Muslims of France within the framework of the French Council of the Muslim Faith in France, officially set up in 2003).

<sup>1</sup> HAAS, Peter M. "Introduction: Epistemic Communities and International Policy Coordination," *International Organization*, Vol. 46, No. 1, Winter 1992.

The second group consists of the European states themselves, in which emigrants and their descendants are encouraged to take on positions of responsibility, in order to strengthen Morocco's channels of influence with European countries. Above all, insofar as it presents Moroccan Islam as rooted in tolerance and multiple traditions, this is a real emerging area of foreign policy: religious moderation (as opposed to the Gulf states, accused by some Western countries of promoting extremism). Amongst the many examples of this foreign policy, Morocco has provided training for imams for many years in order both to consolidate its control over its diaspora and to position itself as an ally of European countries against radical and violent movements. By way of example, on 20 September 2015, French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius and his Moroccan counterpart, Ahmed Toufik, signed an agreement to train 50 French imams at the Mohammed VI Institute, founded in March of the same year. The two officials claimed they sought "to encourage a middle-ground Islam," "entirely rooted in the values of the Republic and secularism."

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### **Turkey and the Synthesis of Islamism and Diasporic Diplomacy**

Turkey, another important Muslim country in the Mediterranean region, millions of whose citizens have settled in the European Union (Germany, France, the Netherlands, Sweden, etc.) in recent decades, has positioned itself differently, especially since the arrival to power of a movement born of political Islam. Whilst

the issues of dialogue between civilizations and the fight against extremism have been present and tackled since 2003, the issue of the defence of the Muslim identity (especially when it is depicted as being under attack) is central. This partly explains the increasingly active role of Turkish official religious institutions (Diyanet, etc.) in the management of Europe's Turkish communities. Here, too, in the name of a diasporic diplomacy, but also of a broader, often more radical discourse of defence of all Muslims, Turkey projects the image of a country able to speak to European states as an equal. These two dimensions (the assumption of community management and a self-interested pan-Islamism) are the basis for a Turkish policy on Islam synonymous with activism in the representative bodies of this religion in European countries (as can be seen, for instance, in Germany in the Central Council of Muslims in Germany) and religious pride. The funding of large mosques, the call not to be ashamed of one's religion, the fight against Islamophobia or even the need to have children because they are the future of Europe have thus all been recurring themes in President Erdogan's discourse for several years. The Turkish State hopes to receive the dividends of a more accepted Islamic consciousness in its diplomatic dialogue with European countries. Aiming to be the godfather of Muslim Europeans, the Turkish government promotes a more doctrinally militant and less complex Islam that can both attract religious profiles in search of religious heralds and cause more or less serious friction with its European neighbours.

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