

# Testing Prince Mohammed bin Salman's Pledge to Return Saudi Arabia to "Moderate Islam"

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*Saudi **Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman**'s vow to return his kingdom to a moderate interpretation of Islam could be put to the test by a [draft bill in the US Congress](#) that would require the secretary of State to submit yearly reports about whether Saudi Arabia is living up to its promise to remove intolerant content from its educational materials.*

The bill would also increase pressure on Saudi Arabia to introduce freedom of religion in a country that bans all worship except for those that adhere to its long-standing strand of ultra-conservative Sunni Muslim Islam.

The bi-partisan bill submitted by Republican House of Representatives member **Ted Poe** and Democrat **Bill Keating** reflects long-standing criticism of Saudi textbooks that use hateful and incendiary language; foster supremacism, intolerance, and anti-pluralism; and, according to many critics, incite violence.

The texts describe alternative strands of Islam such as Shiism and Sufism in derogatory terms and advise Muslims not to associate with Jews and Christians who are labelled kaffirs or unbelievers. They also justify the execution of 'sorcerers.' Saudi Arabia, moreover, has legally defined atheism as terrorism. The textbooks are used not only in Saudi schools but also in many educational and cultural institutions funded by the kingdom across the globe.

To be sure, Saudi Arabia has for more than a decade pledged to revise its educational materials and has made significant progress in doing so. The progress falls, however, short of a [2006 US-Saudi understanding](#) that the kingdom would "within one to two years... 'remove remaining intolerant references that disparage Muslims or non-Muslims or that promote hatred toward other religions or religious groups.'"

A [Human Rights Watch survey of religion textbooks](#) produced by the Saudi education ministry for the 2016-2017 school year, while acknowledging Saudi efforts, concluded that "as early as first grade, students in Saudi schools are being taught hatred toward all those perceived to be of a different faith or school of thought." The survey was part of a larger study of hate speech adopted by Saudi officials and Islamic scholars.

Saudi revision of textbooks has taken on added significance with [Prince Mohammed's pledge last October](#) to return Saudi Arabia to a vaguely defined form of "moderate" Islam. The pledge heightened expectations created by social reforms introduced by the crown prince that include lifting a ban on women's driving, a residual of Bedouin rather than Muslim tradition; granting women access to male sporting events; allowing various forms of entertainment, including cinema, theatre and music; and stripping the religious police of its right to carry out arrests.

In outlining his vision, Prince Mohammed said Saudi ultra-conservatism had been an uninformed response to the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran. Even though Saudi association with ultra-conservatism harks back more than two centuries to the teachings of 18<sup>th</sup> century Islamic scholar **Mohammed ibn Abdul Wahhabi**, Prince Mohammed asserted that

“we are simply reverting to what we followed – a moderate Islam open to the world and all religions.”

Among objectionable texts in schoolbooks, according to [Human Rights Watch researcher Adam Coogle](#), are markers by which one can recognize the approach of the Day of Resurrection, that include the assertion that “the Hour will not come until Muslims will fight the Jews, and Muslims will kill the Jews.”

The assertion is not dissimilar from [evangelist belief](#) that Christ’s second coming is linked to the conversion of Jews to Christianity prior to the Day of Judgement and the prediction of a Holocaust for all those who refuse. Evangelist support for Israel and US **President Donald J. Trump**’s pro-Israel policy is rooted in that belief. Moreover, influential Premillennial Dispensationalists argue that Israel’s creation signalled the nearing of the end of days and that thousands of Jews will die on the Day of Armageddon.

Mr. Coogle noted that Prince Mohammed has remained conspicuously silent about hate speech in textbooks as well as its use by officials and Islamic scholars connected to the government.

The bill introduced by Messrs. Poe and Keating, dubbed The Saudi Educational Transparency and Reform Act, would increase pressure on Prince Mohammed to act more forcefully in a bid to halt mounting criticism in Congress of Saudi Arabia that is driven by perceptions of linkages between Sunni Muslim ultra-conservatism and political violence and the kingdom’s ill-fated invasion of Yemen. The bill could also persuade the crown prince to act in an effort to prevent further tarnishing of the kingdom’s image.

The bill further puts Saudi Arabia’s continued violations of freedom of religion in the spotlight. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom has identified Saudi Arabia since 2004 as a “country of particular concern.” The designation constitutes the Commission’s harshest condemnation of violators of freedom of religion.

A 1998 law calls for the sanctioning of violators but allows the president to waive penalties if he decides that it would enhance the chances of achieving adherence or be in America’s interest. US presidents have issued a waiver for the past 12 years. Messrs. Poe and Keating’s bill would step up the pressure by requiring the secretary of State to regularly justify a waiver.

The bill, if passed, could push Prince Mohammed to clarify whether his call for a moderate form of Islam means a clean break with the teachings of **Ibn Abdul Wahhab** or whether he simply has a polishing of the rough edges of the scholar’s ultra-conservatism in mind.

Ironically, the model for an upgraded, more friendly form of Wahhabism, is Prince Mohammed’s nemesis, Qatar, the world’s only other Wahhabi state. Saudi Arabia leads an alliance that last June imposed a diplomatic and economic boycott on Qatar to force it adopt policies aligned with those of the kingdom.

The contrast between Qatar and Saudi Arabia could, however, not be starker. Prince Mohammed's reforms such as women's driving, entertainment, and freedom of religion have long been standard practice in Qatar.

That is not to say that Qatar does not have its share of supporters of ultra-conservatism and controversial clerics, including Sheikh Yusuf Qaradawi, one of the world's most prominent living Islamic scholars, who spew hate speech and issue religious edicts that have justified suicide bombings.

Said former Qatari justice minister and prominent lawyer [Najeeb al Nauimi](#), speaking some 16 years ago:

"Saudi Arabia has Mecca and Medina. We have Qaradawi — and all his daughters drive cars and work."

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