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For Saudis, A Hard Fight Over Faith

Reformers work to redefine religion in a kingdom built upon conservative Islam

By Faye Bowers, Staff Writer of *The Christian Science Monitor*

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Second of four parts

RIYADH, SAUDI ARABIA – They're not Felix and Oscar, although they are a somewhat odd couple. One is a bit impish. He looks like a young Omar Sharif, and sports a Vandyke beard - like Robert DeNiro, his favorite movie star.

The other looks more scholarly. He wears wire-rimmed glasses, and is extremely serious - his favorite philosopher is Nietzsche.

The two, however, have similar backgrounds and goals. Khalid al-Ghannami and Mansour al-Nogaidan were once subversive sheikhs, religious leaders espousing the same tenets as Osama bin Laden and his acolytes.

But they both embarked on spiritual journeys - separately - and now embrace a more moderate, inclusive view of Islam, and act as the most outspoken public boosters of religious reform in Saudi Arabia.

In fact, they made 180-degree turns from far right to left, and now say they want a broad reformation of Islam, something akin to what they say John Calvin or Martin Luther kicked off in Christianity. That's no small quest in any part of the Muslim world, much less Saudi Arabia. The birthplace of Islam, Saudi Arabia adheres to a branch of the religion known to many people as Wahhabism, as well as tribal cultural traditions. The struggle over how to interpret Islam

politically is not only important for Saudi Arabia, but for many foreign countries that receive billions of dollars in aid from Saudi Arabia - for building mosques, supplying Korans, and teaching their brand of Islam.

Wahhabism has led many Muslims to support and even join jihadist groups from Asia to Europe and the US, according to several government officials. And changing the ideology that supports and advocates the use of violence is crucial to eliminating terror attacks, like those perpetrated by Al Qaeda.

Change wrought with bombs

That these two sheikhs are now free - to a certain extent - to speak out, is testament to changes thanks in no small part to the May and November suicide bombings in Saudi Arabia.

Since those attacks, particularly the Nov. 8 attack that targeted the Muhaya compound where mostly Arabs lived - and died - the Saudi government has acknowledged that it has a problem with religious extremists.

It has created a public dialogue on these thorny issues within society, and has vowed to reform or remove those clerics who promote extremism or advocate the use of violence.

"A dialogue between scholars has been going on for a long time ... but now it has become an open thing," says Abdulrahman al-Matrodi, deputy minister for Islamic Affairs. "We have people who have been in the West, and they got more information, and maybe [have] more open minds than others who have not left. But you will not find them working against their country or their religion. They would like their religion [so] that they can follow the religion and still be modern."

This is no small task, of course, in a country that has at least 50,000 mosques and as many clerics. Not to mention the *muttawaeen*, feared religious police.

Moreover, the ruling family and conservative religious leaders have closely collaborated since the founding of this country.

At extremely opportune times, the *ulema* (religious leaders) issue *fatwas* (edicts) that enforce the princes' proclamations. For example, when religious zealots took over the Grand Mosque in Mecca at the end of the 1979 hajj (religious pilgrimage), the religious establishment issued a *fatwa* that allowed government troops to retake the mosque.

Now the government has to find a stable middle ground between the extremists, following in the footsteps of Osama bin Laden; the arch-conservative Muslims, who make up the religious establishment; and those who want to be far more open, like Mr. Ghannami and Mr. Nogaidan.

One European diplomat based in Riyadh says that the struggle is now between the government and the fundamentalist sheikhs. "The government has made some important gains," he says. But it has a long way to go, and it won't be easy.
Khalil al-Khalil, a professor of political science at Imam Muhammed bin Saud Islamic

University in Riyadh, concurs.

He even goes further - as do several other educators and intellectuals - and says it will be difficult for the government to make changes with some stalwart leaders of the religious community. In particular, he says, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs is not cooperative, and that the minister needs to be replaced.

"The minister of Islamic Affairs is very behind, and the man is not really cooperating," Khalil says. "He is probably there by mistake."

But, he goes on to say, the royal family has the power to enforce change - especially because it controls the purse strings.

"The clerics are employed by the government, and if the government decides something, the clerics have to listen," says al-Khalil, who is also a member of the government's commission on education reform. "They are cooperating so far."

The government has, for example, removed some 2,000 clerics for violating "prohibitions against the preaching of intolerance," and has sent back 1,500 for additional training in more moderate interpretations of Koranic verses and current events. It has begun a program to tamp down the zealousness of the *muttawaeen*. And it has arrested three clerics for issuing *fatwas* promoting terrorist activity. All have since gone on television to recant their views.

Ghannami and Nogaidan, however, are skeptical about such conversions. They doubt these clerics changed their views so completely in only a few months.

For them, the journey from extremism to tolerance was a long one - at least five years, they say. Ghannami, now a middle school English teacher, was introduced in the late 1990s to more moderate Egyptian and Moroccan clerics by a friend.

He used to sneak to the friend's house to watch them on television, and he read hundreds of their books, which preached love of life, human values, and tolerance.

Nogaidan spent a considerable period of time in jail for extremist activities, like burning down video stores in 1992 because he viewed them as heretical to Islam. While in jail, he was introduced to a moderate Palestinian cleric, several treatises on the history of the West, and the works of prominent Western philosophers.

Both gradually began to quietly - then openly - question the interpretation of Islam they and thousands like them, many of whom are now dedicated to Al Qaeda or other terrorist groups - received in Saudi Arabia's schools and mosques.

"[Religious leaders] say music is forbidden, photographs are forbidden, MTV is forbidden, sex lives are forbidden," says Ghannami. "These young men who blow themselves up in Saudi Arabia, it's because of the teaching in the mosques and the schools. [It] concentrates on the life after this life. This life to them is just a gas station, someplace to stop and refill and move on to

something better for eternity."

Ghannami, who also writes occasional newspaper columns, goes on to say that many of the extremists also practice *takfir*.

That means if one Muslim deems another Muslim a *takfiri* (an infidel), a *fatwa* can be issued targeting that infidel.

He goes on to say that the difference between him, Nogaidan, and others who were schooled in the same way and Osama bin Laden and other Al Qaeda members is that the latter went to Afghanistan and trained in a "military way."

Ghannami, Nogaidan - as well as many others in this country - point out that it was the US collaborating with Saudi Arabia in sending and funding the mujahideen operations in Afghanistan in the 1980s.

Both have also suffered because of their now public conversions. Nogaidan, who is a regular columnist for Al Riyadh newspaper in Riyadh, was targeted with a *fatwa* - by one of the sheikhs now jailed - because of his views.

He also was picked up by the religious police in November and sentenced to 75 lashes for his columns criticizing Wahhabism. The sentence was later suspended. But the two say they walk a fine line between criticism of the religious establishment and advocating reform.

Many of their former friends - still extremists - have "forsaken" them, and they say they receive hundreds of threatening letters and phone calls.

Others say the numbers of these extremist imams is small, and does not represent the mainstream.

"These imams are few, and don't have the support of big, well-known sheikhs and imams," says Nasser al-Rasheed, a conservative Saudi businessman who was educated in the US. "Their attitudes are not created because of the Wahhabi belief, but because they went to fight in Afghanistan and because of the US position regarding Israel."

A force to be feared?

Sheikh Mussa al-Hanagid concurs. He is a member of the *muttawaeen*. The *muttawaeen* have long been caricatured - and feared. They are depicted as elderly men with long white beards, robes, and sticks - mainly screaming at women to cover more fully.

But Sheikh Mussa, says the government is recalibrating the roles of religious police, too. Mussa, himself a trainer, says there are a number of supervisors monitoring the *muttawaeen*. They are being trained to be more tolerant, kind, and professional. For example, they've now all been ordered to wear a badge with a picture that clearly identifies them.

Ghannami and Nogaidan are skeptical of the changes and think the government needs to go

further. "We must find a new reading of our religion that is more tolerant, something that will fit better with globalization and communicating with our fellow man," Ghannami says. "[Saudi Arabia] is not an isolated desert island anymore."

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