



The King's Quiet Revolution

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In 2008, Saudi King *Abdullah* sponsored several initiatives in an effort to promote a more moderate Islam and achieve rapprochement between Islam and the West. At the time, it was obvious to most observers that Saudi Arabia's ultra-conservative *Salafi* clerics and their religious institutions continued to believe they possess ultimate power in the Kingdom and were in no hurry to lend their monarch a hand in developing his gentler view of Islam. [See [PI Online 559 - A country Failing its King](#)] The King also recognized that his people, particularly the youth whom he had incited to reform and abandon violence and Islamic rigidity, were unprepared or unable to initiate an ideological revolution against the religious establishment. If there is to be a revolution the King had to lead it.

The King realized that addressing the religious leaders in the West through interfaith dialogues would not lead to rapprochement. The rigidity of religious dogma made it almost impossible to reconcile fundamental differences. [See [PI Online 556 - Religious versus Cultural Dialogue](#)] While Western religious institutions were paid lip service the King knew he had to take his case directly to the people of the West and their political representatives. For such a major endeavor to be successful, however, the King first had to revolutionize his people's way of thinking. To that end, Saudi Arabia needed religious, educational and cultural reform. – it needed to shed its *Wahabi* doctrinal rigidity.

Writing in *Al-hayat* Newspaper last week, *Muhammad Jaber Al-Ansari*¹ states that, although some changes undertaken by the King this past month are normal political re-arrangements, those familiar with the intricacies of the Saudi culture will see that other changes are nothing short of historical in nature and scope.

Al-Ansari cites three initiatives as revolutionary in the conservative climate of the Kingdom:

- The appointment of a liberal minister of education and the appointment of a woman as one of his deputies – the first woman ever to reach such a high level in the Saudi government a first;
- The appointment of younger judges a few of whom are not of the dominant *Wahabi* denomination and thereby ending the *Wahabi* monopoly of the judiciary;
- Discarding the old guard from the most feared “General Organization for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice” and appointing a more enlightened president at its helm.

King Abdallah has apparently realized that rather than heeding his advice for progress and change the clerics at the helm of these institutions, aware that the monarch is approaching his eighty-fifth birthday, were simply biding their time in anticipation of a not too distant comeback. By enacting these reforms now and ushering in a younger more liberal leadership, the King seems intent on ensuring that any progress he achieves will survive him. During his publicized reception of the Saudi Grand Mufti at the

¹ February 26, 2009 - <http://www.alhavad.com/opinion/02-2009/Item-20090225-ae94a60f-c0a8-10ed-003f-4a21133f724a/story.html>

palace this week², the monarch issued a subtle warning, admonishing the clerics to portray the benevolent side of Islam and distance themselves from all those who have tarnished the religion.

The King's influence was also being felt overseas – most importantly, thousands of miles away in Pakistan. Until last year, former Prime Minister *Nawaz Sharif* who heads the Pakistan Muslim League, was the darling of the Saudi *Wahabi* establishment which hung their hopes of extending the *Salafi* influence in this nuclear powered country on *Sharif*. The Kingdom was instrumental in the past in financing thousands of religious schools in Pakistan that graduated the fundamentalist extremists upon whom *Sharif's* popularity seemed to rest. Saudi Arabia has ceased supporting these *madrastas* some time ago. The King, anxious to broadcast a more moderate message to his citizens and abroad, while still tacitly supporting *Sharif* was no longer willing to overtly cozy up to *Sharif* who continues to remain popular with the religious establishment in Pakistan and who is locked in what is presently perceived as a dangerous and unsettled political battle with Pakistani President *Zardari*.

On the Arab front, the King dispatched his foreign minister to heal the rift that occurred between Saudi Arabia and Egypt on one side and Qatar and Syria on the other over dealing with the Iranian. Syrian president *Bashir Al-Assad* is expected to visit Riyadh with Egyptian president *Mubarak* on Wednesday to reconcile their differences. Egypt's rapprochement with Syria, while maintaining an aggressive campaign against Iran, appears to be in harmony with the policies adopted by the European Union and the United States.

For most observers, these initiatives undertaken by King *Abdullah* are a pragmatic mix. His educational and social reforms could not take hold without revolutionizing the religious institutions in the Kingdom. He has also elected to conduct his foreign policy based solely on political rather than religious considerations. Thus, while the *Shi'a* in Iran are no doubt a sore subject for the Kingdom, the King's approach to dealing with *Sharif* in Pakistan, the Gaza problem and Iran appear to be driven entirely by politics and are in full agreement with the West. King *Abdullah* deserves our support.

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² March 4, 2009 - http://www.alhayat.com/arab_news/gulf_news/03-2009/Article-20090303-cdf991b8-c0a8-10ed-012b-29edf3e37972/story.html