

## ***Saudi Liberals***

*Adapted from the broadcast audio segment; use the audio player to listen to the story in its entirety.*

Oil-rich Saudi Arabia, the global capital of the hardline Islamist ideology known as Salafism or Wahhabism, has been inculcating the same teachings to its own young people that it exports to countries like Egypt. Yet Saudi youth are building up an intolerance for Wahhabism. According to Nasser al-Sarrami, a co-founder of the Saudi liberals online community, Saudi liberals came to their political outlook not because someone taught them about liberalism but because they are tired of Islamism.

"The spread of Wahhabi ideology that you referred to is a foreign concern. For us there is a greater problem. It controls our whole society. It presents itself as if it is the only voice in the society. But there are also other voices and it is the right of these voices – whether liberal, leftwing, nationalist, or call it what you will – to express themselves too."

Afshin Molavi, a senior research fellow at the New America Foundation, calls it "Post-Islamism" – a sensibility he says has also evolved in his native Iran.

"Iranians – unlike Egyptians, unlike Syrians, unlike Jordanians – do not have romantic, foggy notions about what Islamic government might be like. They lived through it. They've seen it. It doesn't deliver the goods. The price of bread and tomatoes and meat is higher. There is no greater political repression and guess what? Clerics can be just as corrupt as secular autocrats.

"During the post-2009 Iranian election protest uprisings, many young Iranians took to the streets. They were chanting against the government. They were chanting against the election that they felt was rigged. One of the more prominent chants they were using was, 'Forget Hizbullah! Forget Hamas! Think of us!' What they were saying essentially is, 'We're tired of our government supporting these radicals of the Middle East. We want them to support us.'"

Liberals face an uphill battle in Iran as well as Saudi Arabia where Islamists are deeply entrenched and firmly in control. Al-Sarrami says Islamists control the public discussion.

"The Wahhabi voice – the extremist Islamist voice, or the Islamist voice in general in Saudi Arabia – is a legacy. It has been building itself up for decades and controlling the public discussion for decades."

But this is changing. Liberals in the Saudi kingdom have begun to enjoy a power greater than their numbers because many of them are in the media. The media space is freeing up due to satellite television and the Internet.

Last year, the team of head writers for the Saudi TV comedy series "Tash Matash" wrote a script spoofing the Saudi religious police. It ignited a firestorm of controversy and opened a national conversation about whether disbanding the religious police might be a good idea. Al-Sarrami thinks the transition is underway.

"I and many of my friends are convinced that Saudi Arabia is now in an important, transitional phase of acknowledging the diversity of views inside the country. The secret is in the media because the media must be open to diversity, dialogue, and criticism – all of which are attributes of liberalism.

"When Islamists gain control of media, in any country in the world – even now after the Arab revolutions, or even in the future – when they gain control of the media, it ceases to be media. It becomes a pulpit for them to express their perspective, like any other pulpit, like a mosque. It becomes a place for religious preaching, and not for media. That's the difference."

*– Reported by Joseph Braude for America Abroad*