

Topic: "Between Force and Choice: Sharī'ah in Saudi Arabia"
Speaker: Prof Madhawi al-Rasheed, MEI, NUS Visiting Professor
Theme: Developments in Islamic Thought: Traditions and Reform
Date: 25 October 2016
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The closed-door discussion on *Between Force and Choice: Sharī'ah in Saudi Arabia* was held on 25 October 2016. It was attended by about 30 participants from academic institutions, public agencies, community leaders and professionals.

2 Terrain Mapping: Prof Madawi al-Rasheed discussed the contextual differences between 'traditional salafiyyah' (e.g. Ibn Hanbal, Ibn Taymiyyah), 'reformist salafiyyah' (e.g. Afghani, Muhammad 'Abduh) and one form of 'contemporary salafiyyah'. The latter is a 'new' socio-political and religious identity inspired by the salafi methodology while being grounded thoroughly in modern conditions. Prof Madawi highlights that not all Salafis are Wahhabis but Wahhabis claim themselves to be Salafis.

3 Contemporary Political Salafi: A religiously inspired political movement that aspires to end Muslim's subjugation to the west, and advance Muslim's progress by adopting a 'purification' approach. It is believed that should Muslims reclaim pristine Islam as lived by the early generations of Muslims – i.e., by eliminating foreign cultural and folkloric practices, the Islamic civilization would rise again.

4 Resonance today: This Salafi thought spreads among young people due to sociological, political and international factors which include: (1) the direct access to sacred texts with lesser reference to the accumulated scholarly traditions; (2) emphasis on a pure 'de-cultured' Islam resonated with 2nd and 3rd generation Muslims who grew up in Western countries detached from their cultural origins; (3) a heightened consciousness of belonging to a global virtual Ummah through networking on social media; (4) empowering narratives that offered Muslims whose daily reality remains to be continuous foreign military intervention

a language of resistance and rebellion; (5) Saudi petrodollar sponsored the propagation of Salafi teachings; and (6) the US promoted the propagation of Saudi Islam (and Jihadi violence) as a tool to counter the Soviet Union and nationalist movements; and finally (7) the 4 cataclysmic events – i.e., overtaking of Mecca, signing of Camp David Agreement, Iranian Islamic Revolution and Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan, led to the Iran-Saudi rivalry for authentic representation of Islam.

5 Civil Jihad: Prof Madhawi's recent book, *Muted Modernists: The Struggle over Divine Politics in Saudi Arabia* focuses on the Saudi intelligentsia who grew up on the Salafi tradition yet offer a counter-narrative to the dominant one propagated by the official religious leadership. They caution against the application of timeless principles, such as freewill (*ikhtiyār*), consultation (*Shūra*), checks and balances (*hīsbah*) and moral education (*amr bi al-ma'rūf*) etc., in a simplistic manner, without a thought-through relevant approach, that would ensure the achievement of the greater good of all members, of a particular society, for that is detrimental to the flourishing of, not only that society, but Islam too.

6 A forward Vision: Dr Madhawi called for a greater awareness of the distinction between cultural salafi practices and theological Salafi thought and the need for Salafis, in particular, to inclusively appreciate the multiple/diverse contextual/cultural adaptations that had allowed the Universal message of Islam to spread far and beyond the Arabian Peninsula - while maintaining the core principles of Islam's teachings. Such an approach will allow Muslims to flourish and may only be well-managed and achieved in a context of a plural secular society that honours diversity.



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