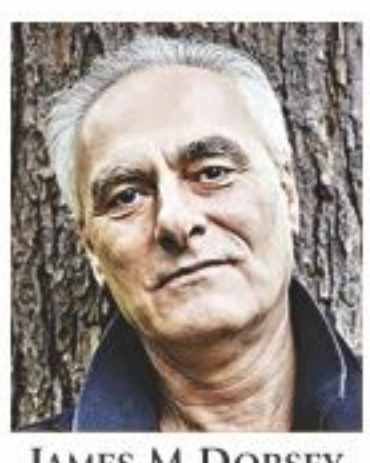


Crown Prince Salman’s vow to moderate Saudi Islam

Easier said than done



JAMES M DORSEY

SAUDI Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's recent disavowal of the kingdom's founding religious ideology had a master's voice quality to it. His words could have literally come out of the mouth of his Emirati counterpart and mentor, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed, but with one major difference: the UAE unlike the kingdom has no roots in ultra-conservative Sunni Islam.

The absence of an overriding puritan religious history has made it easier for Prince Mohammed bin Zayed to campaign against Sunni Muslim ultra-conservatism and since the popular Arab revolts of 2011 suppress any expression of political Islam.



While Prince Mohammed bin Salman's proposed reforms have largely been welcomed by Saudi youth, they are likely to stir mixed responses as a result of deep-seated attitudes that have been cultivated for decades.
 PHOTO: AFP

developed by Mohammed ibn Abdul Wahhab, an 18th-century preacher with whom Prince Mohammed bin Salman's forefather forged a power-sharing agreement that has constituted the basis of Saudi national ambitions ever since, from a definition of Sunni Islam by prominent Islamic scholars.

The frontal assault on Wahhabism as well as other Saudi-inspired interpretations of Islam, such as Salafism and Deobandism, came in a statement last year by a UAE-funded conference in the Chechen capital of Grozny. Participants included the imam of the Al-Azhar Grand Mosque in Cairo, Ahmed El-Tayeb; Egyptian Grand Mufti Shawki Allam; former Egyptian Grand Mufti and Sufi authority Ali Gomaa, a strident supporter of Egyptian general-turned-president Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi; Mr Al-

Sisi's religious affairs advisor, Usama al-Azhari; the mufti of Damascus Abdul Fattah al-Bizim, a close confidante of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad; and influential Yemeni cleric Habib Ali Jifri, head of the Abu Dhabi-based Islamic Tabah Foundation who has close ties to Prince Mohammed bin Zayed.

While the Grozny statement constituted a milestone, it will take more than statements for the Saudi and UAE princes to succeed in their endeavour. Like many of Prince Mohammed bin Salman's announcements, his vow to return Saudi Arabia to "moderate Islam" was long on expressions of intent and short on details that would put flesh on the skeleton.

To be sure, since emerging almost three years ago as Saudi Arabia's strongman, Prince Mohammed has

taken several steps to roll back the influence of the kingdom's ultra-conservative religious establishment and relax its strict moral codes. The steps, including reducing the power of the religious police, lifting the ban on women's driving, and allowing forms of entertainment like music, film and dance that were long banned, seem, however, more designed to upgrade rather than abolish autocracy and enable badly needed economic reform and diversification.

Recent arrests of some of Saudi Arabia's most popular Islamic scholars as well as human rights activists, judges and intellectuals, whose views run the gamut from ultra-conservative to liberal, coupled with Prince Mohammed bin Zayed's campaign suggest that Prince Mohammed bin Salman's definition

of "moderate Islam" is one that is primarily apolitical, quietist and adheres to a religious school of thought that teaches unconditional obedience to the ruler.

Moreover, changing deeply engrained attitudes that have been embedded in the kingdom's education and social system since it was founded in the first half of the 20th century and shaped pre-state life will take time. While Saudi Arabia has in recent years taken steps to alter its school curriculum and remove bigoted and violent content from textbooks, it still has a long way to go, according to a 2013 study by a US State Department contractor, the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy.

The study, disclosed by *The New York Times*, reported among multiple questionable textbook references that seventh graders were being taught that "fighting the infidels to elevate the words of Allah" was among the deeds Allah loved the most. Tenth graders learned that Muslims who abandoned Islam should be jailed for three days and, if they did not change their minds, "killed for walking away from their true religion." Fourth graders read that non-Muslims had been "shown the truth but abandoned it, like the Jews," or had replaced truth with "ignorance and delusion, like the Christians."

Some of the books, prepared and distributed by the government, propagated views that were hostile to science, modernity and women's rights. The books advocated execution for sorcerers and warned against the dangers of networking groups focused on humanitarian issues like Rotary Club and the Lions Club that allegedly had been created "to achieve the goals of the Zionist movement."

Even if all the questionable references were removed, changing

those attitudes could be a generational task. While Prince Mohammed bin Salman's proposed reforms have largely been welcomed by Saudi youth, who constitute a majority of the kingdom's population, they are likely to stir mixed responses as a result of deep-seated attitudes that have been cultivated for decades.

An unpublished survey of aspirations of 100 male Saudi 20-year olds indicated the problems Prince Mohammed is likely to encounter beyond opposition from ultra-conservatives to moderating the kingdom's adopted interpretation of Islam. The men "wanted social change but they pull back when they realise this has consequences for their sisters. Their analytical ability and critical thinking is limited," said Abdul Al Lily, a Saudi scholar who conducted the survey and authored a book on rules that govern Saudi culture.

Some 50 percent of those surveyed said they wanted to have fun, go on a date, enjoy mixed gender parties, dress freely, and be able to drive fast cars, Al Lily said. He said issues of political violence, racism, international interests or the dragged out Saudi war in neighbouring Yemen did not figure in their answers.

However, Al Lily's interviewees bolted when confronted with the notion that liberties they wanted would also apply to their womenfolk. "People ended up not doing anything when confronted with the idea that someone might want to go on a date with their sister. They pulled back when they realised the consequences," Al Lily said.

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How small changes are having a big impact in slums

SHEIKH RUBAIYA SULTANA and SADIA SUBRINA

LAST year, on December 11, 115 families of Saat Tola slum, located near ICDDR,B, Mohakhali, became homeless after a devastating fire destroyed their improvised houses. A week earlier, a fire broke out at the nearby Korail slum, causing similar loss of property. For the urban poor in Bangladesh, "slum" and "fire" have unfortunately become synonymous.

What happens after the destruction of urban slums by fire? The origin of slum fires often remains unknown. These fire hazards are sometimes accidental and sometimes arson to evict the slum dwellers. Who initiates arson never comes to light. The story of slum fires dissipates fast. In the wake of media coverage, typically there are some quick rehabilitation efforts but nothing long-term happens. Life goes on and slum dwellers return to the same rituals of everyday struggle for survival.

Trends have been changing lately. Some socially-conscious and empathetic architects, planners, NGOs, researchers, and activists have come forward and intervened to improve the lives of slum dwellers. Disasters and calamities—natural and manmade—always bring sorrow. However, some good can also emerge from disasters. Economist Joseph Schumpeter's notion of "creative destruction"—a constant process of destruction of the old and emergence of the new—is an apt metaphor for slum improvement. Ironically, slums

Lessons learnt: an effective intervention in the lives of slum dwellers may begin with small steps. It is important to understand the everyday practices of slum dwellers, rather than impose on them what professionals think slum dwellers need.



Small modifications, such as widening the alleys or a minor adjustment to room size, can bring a huge change in the everyday lives of slum dwellers.
 COURTESY: AUTHORS



destroyed by arson open up new possibilities for creative intervention.

After the fire in Saat Tola slum, we, along with a group of architects, planners, engineers, together with architecture students from different universities in Dhaka, went to study the damage caused by fire and the condition of the fire victims. While working on this informal settlement, some intriguing questions came to mind.

First, what and how much can we, as professionals, do for slum dwellers? Next, if we do something for them, are they ready or capable to

accept or afford these proposed changes? We tried to assist them in their house rebuilding processes by providing some design solutions, ranging from small interventions like using jail windows (for more light) to large interventions like creating open spaces for community gathering or constructing double-storied houses.

As a result of our efforts we found some new insights into how slum dwellers adapt to outside design interventions. We observed that communities are willing to accept cost-effective, short-term solutions as opposed to expensive long-term

design interventions, which may not bring immediate improvements to their lives. In a nutshell, micro interventions are likely to be accepted more readily than macro interventions. Why?

Slum dwellers are more likely to understand and accept the proposed changes that yield tangible benefits. They do not accept what they do not see through the lens of their everyday economic practices. Small modifications, such as widening the alleys, minor adjustment to room size, a single window, a hygienic toilet, and a slightly bigger kitchen,

can bring a huge change in their everyday lives.

Oazifa Begum, a local resident, states that after replacing the corrugated tin wall with metal *jali* in the corridor, the space is full of light and air. To her, it is much better. These interventions may sound small, but in reality, sometimes these small solutions prove to be lifesavers. For example, a slightly wider road allows fire trucks to navigate more easily and put off the fire. Ambulances can come to their aid during emergency situations. In short, easy and small changes make sense to them.

As slum dwellers typically do not own the land, they always live in fear of eviction. Hence, they are reluctant to invest in long-term solutions even if these make their living conditions better in the long run. As opposed to micro interventions, macro solutions such as creating open community spaces, vertical extension of their dwellings, and infrastructures like water supply system do not always encourage the slum dwellers because they feel that their future is uncertain.

Lessons learnt: an effective intervention in the lives of slum dwellers may begin with small steps. It is important to understand the everyday practices of slum dwellers, rather than impose on them what professionals think slum dwellers need. Architects, planners and researchers must try to understand slum dwellers from the internal dynamics of how an informal settlement functions. Slum dwellers tend to accept what they view as immediate benefits to their daily lives. Professionals must anthropologically consider what these marginalised people need and what they can afford. It is true that a combination of slum dwellers' perception and professionals' knowledge is what's necessary. Once the slum dwellers realise the positive results of open spaces, wider roads, well-lit and airy spaces, they will perhaps be ready to sacrifice a part of their earnings for a better and healthy lifestyle.

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A WORD

A DAY



COLONNADE
 NOUN

A row of evenly spaced columns supporting a roof, an entablature, or arches.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

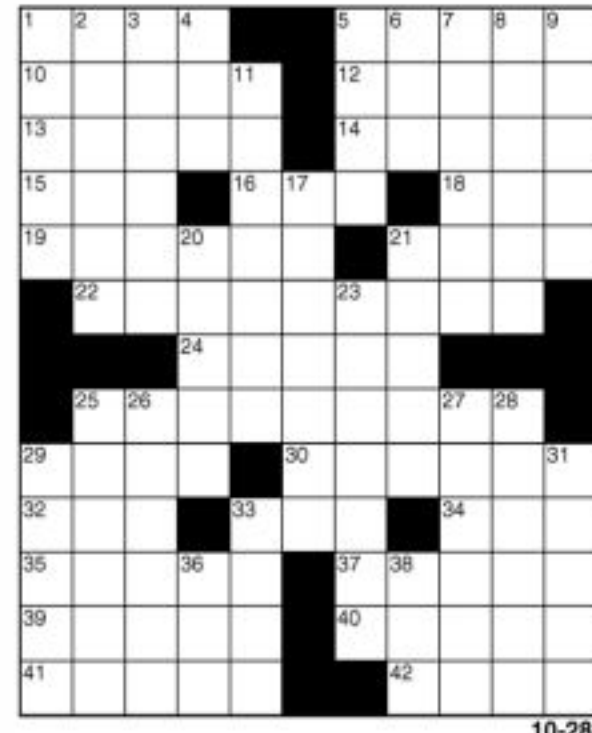
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 5 Preferences
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 22 Distant docking site
 24 Homer work
 25 Large sofa
 29 Single
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32 Little spring
 33 Art's Lichten-stein
 34 Tourist's aid
 35 Where the Salmon flows
 37 Higher than
 39 Spanish hero
 40 Middling card
 41 Plane count
 42 Shoulder muscle, for short

DOWN

1 Attacked by a wasp
 2 Wyoming range
 3 Snare
 4 Lilliputian
 5 Tale teller

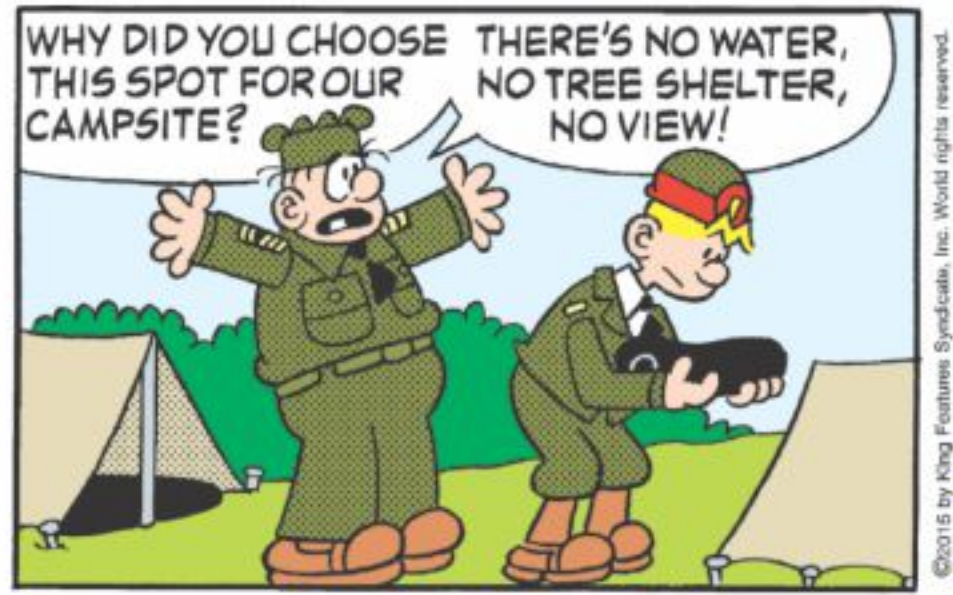
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 7 Frat party
 8 Off course
 9 Fashion
 11 Cloying sentiment
 17 Eroded
 20 Renounce
 21 Dramatic no-show
 23 Thick-rinded fruits
 25 Quick sketch
 26 Woolly mammal
 27 Take away
 28 See the world
 29 Shrinks back
 31 Used up
 33 Reactor parts
 36 Producer's hope
 38 Garden part



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

MESAS BASES
 OMAHA ELUDE
 SPLAT LEGIT
 HILL ATLEAST
 ERA NOM ROO
 SENT PECAN
 DIP NUN
 SPEAR EDNA
 WEE LOB SEC
 INPLACE PUT
 TOPIC ALITO
 CRETE RACER
 HARES DYERS

BEETLE BAILEY
 BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES
 BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

