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Open letter to Saudi King Salman bin Abdul-Aziz

Saudi Arabia should curb Wahhabi ideology to alleviate human suffering in the Muslim world

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by **Ani Zonneveld (/profiles/z/ani-zonneveld.html)** - @AniZonneveld (<http://www.twitter.com/AniZon>)

Dear King Salman bin Abdul-Aziz,

Assalamu-alaikum.

I am a 52-year-old Malaysian-born Muslim. I was raised in a harmonious interracial and interfaith society that accepted and respected other religious practices. The existence of different faith groups was viewed simply as different ways of connecting to the same God. Saudi Arabia started exporting its Wahhabi ideology in the 1970s, and it spread around the world, turning existing interpretations of Islam into one that is dogmatic and violent.

The result is a nearly unrecognizable form of Islam. It appears to get worse by the day. Murders, suicide bombings, sectarianism and religious hatemongering have become commonplace. We cannot continue on this path of religious-based mayhem in the name of Islam. The Muslim world needs a change. You are in the best position to take us out of this misery.

As a child, I remember celebrating Mawlid — the Prophet Muhammad's birthday — with uplifting songs, prayers and even a parade. Now it is taboo to observe Mawlid even in America, and adherents to the Wahhabi brand of Islam would rather emphasize his death. The same clerics tell us we cannot critically engage with the Quran or use our God-given right to think in order to reconcile the contradictions that exist between the Quran and hadith, the collection of record of the prophet's sayings that serve as a source of religious and moral guidance.

When I was growing up, weddings and community events were colorful and featured music and dance, without segregating the sexes. This is no longer the case in many Muslim communities. Music, dance and unsegregated gatherings are deemed haram, or forbidden. Artistic expressions must be Sharia-compliant, meaning no depiction of humans or animals.

The Quran liberated women from subhuman status, gave us rights to choose whom to marry, to work, to be in leadership positions and to ultimately live in full dignity. And yet in 2015, Wahhabi imams have relegated women to subhuman status by allowing husbands to cane their wives into obedience (<http://www.therakyatpost.com/news/2015/01/28/okay-husbands-cane-wives-train-says-selangor-mufti/>) and promoting a version of Sharia (<http://www.rawa.org/temp/runews/2011/10/02/sharia-law-has-led-to-the-legislation-of-child-marriage-in-6-countries.html>) that permits forced and child marriages and condones honor killings. Women have become sexual objects through forced veiling, which makes our voices, skin, hair and faces off limits, and even a handshake is deemed a potentially arousing sexual experience.

How is this Wahhabi chokehold (<http://muftah.org/interview-imprisoned-daughter-saudi-arabias-king-abdullah/#.VMrOS2jF8bs>) different from the practice of burying daughters alive?

“ There is nothing Islamic about the way many countries in the Muslim world are run today. ”

Our society is increasingly looking like the age of jahiliyya, or ignorance that preceded the birth of Islam. You have the power to change that by lifting the ban on women driving in Saudi Arabia, abolishing the male guardian system, granting full voting rights for women and promoting equality in all spheres of life for all people. This would deflate the theological foundation of the criminal beliefs of the ISILs, Talibans and the Boko Harams of the world.

There are many reform-minded (<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=15485&LangID=E>) Saudi men (<http://www.google.com/url?q=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.hrw.org%2Fnews%2F2014%2F07%2F07%2Fsaudi-arabia-15-year-sentence-prominent-activist&sa=D&sntz=1&usg=AFQjCNHJC1dmT2RgNSFM2Lt815DWCA4HDw>) and women (http://www.google.com/url?q=http%3A%2F%2Fnews-sa.com%2Fsnews%2F6493-2015-01-30-15-00-12.html&sa=D&sntz=1&usg=AFQjCNG9xOHbm2beOH_RNxIVsBIW5-E19Q) whom you should include in discussion rather than imprison them. This will have a profound effect on millions of women and men in the Muslim world and beyond.

Enough with the vilifying of minority sects and non-Muslims. You should sit down with the supreme leader of Iran and sign a covenant of peace till the end of time.

The divisive sectarianism and ideology of Islamic Sunni supremacy is sickening. We are tired of the infighting, the dehumanizing of “the other” at the minbar (mosque pulpit), the talk of takfir (excommunicating of fellow Muslims) and the slaughter of “the other” by assuming a God-like role as the judge and the punisher. There were no Sunni, Shia or other sects during Muhammad’s time, but there were believers of many faiths, nonbelievers and even pagans, all residing in dignity in your country — protected by the prophet.

The Quran teaches us all people are equal in the eyes of God: “We have created you men and women, into nations and tribes for you to learn from each other. Surely, the most honorable among you in the sight of God is the most righteous.” (Quran 49:13). Imagine a Saudi Arabia where all people can come together to exchange ideas freely and share in our humanity.

The Muslim world remains corrupted by power and money, the very dynamic Muhammad spoke against. Imagine a Muslim world void of corruption and endowed with good governance. Such an environment would ensure that the ISILs and Saudi dissidents would not flourish. There is nothing Islamic about the way many countries in the Muslim world are run today.

Saudi Arabia’s Wahhabi ideology is the root of all the ills in the Muslim world. You have the power to uproot it once and for all through your influence in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the hundreds and thousands of madrassas the kingdom funds. As host to millions from around the world during the annual hajj, the kingdom can send a message of change to Wahhabi-influenced ideologues.

We do not have a pope in Islam, but by adopting the official title of custodian of our (http://www.google.com/url?q=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.saudiembassy.net%2Fabout%2Fcountry-information%2FIslam%2Fguardian_of_the_Holy_Places.aspx&sa=D&sntz=1&usg=AFQjCNH2523ibUpSPM) two holiest sites (<http://www.google.com/url?q=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.saudiembassy.net%2Fabout%2Fcountry->

information%2FIslam%2Fguardian_of_the_Holy_Places.aspx&sa=D&sntz=1&usg=AFQjCNH2523ibUpSPM
Mecca and Medina, you have assumed a unique position of influence to shift our Muslim world onto a positive path.

I recognize that my letter is an idealistic plea. After all, you are a king with all the earthly needs one can imagine and so powerful that you have Muslim and non-Muslim nations at your feet. But do what Muhammad did: Promote equality and a just system that benefits all people. That is the true meaning of the straight path we recite in al-Fatihah.

With deepest sincerity,

Ani Zonneveld

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Ani Zonneveld is the founder and president of the Muslims for Progressive Values (<http://mpvusa.org/>).

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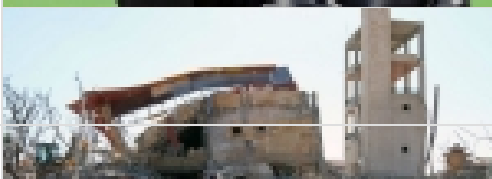
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