

## The Call | Part Two

SEASON 2  
episode nine

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Nicholas Lemann

This is Nicholas Lemann. Welcome to Underreported, a podcast from Columbia Global Reports. We're back with Krithika Varagur, author of *The Call: Inside the Global Saudi Religious Project*. In the 1970s, Saudi Arabia, flush with the wealth generated by large increases in the price of oil, launched a project to expand its influence by funding the global spread of Wahhabism, its brand of Islam.

Over the years, this has become a vast project. It's the Saudi version of China's infrastructure building campaign, or the United States' projection of military power. The problem is that the Saudi religious mission matches a great deal of money to a very low degree of central control. That means the Saudi government has wound up funding religious organizations that have turned extreme and violent, even if that wasn't its intention.

That brings us to your book, *The Call*. In our first segment, we were talking about just what is the Saudi religious project and how was it set up and how it's administered, which I think the adjective you could apply is lightweight. For this book, this is a book for which Krithika has done an amazing, enormous amount of reporting in a short book. And she's gone to three countries very widely dispersed, to follow how the Saudi religious project looks on the ground.

They are Indonesia, Nigeria, and Kosovo. And, you know, we're trying to be a little counterintuitive here because they're not you know, what most American readers think of as three Muslim countries. But we'll get to that.

So what I'd like to do in this part of the podcast is just have you describe one-by-one, with a little bit of interruption by me, what you found in each of these countries. And why don't we just cover them in the order they are in the book? So we'll start with Indonesia, which is, as you said in the first podcast, how you got on to the story in the first place. So tell us about that.

Krithika Varagur

Indonesia is a great example. It's the diversity of the Saudi soft power project because it's a huge country, it's the fourth most populous country in the world, right after America. The world's biggest Muslim majority country. And, it was at the time

that Saudi Arabia was casting its net across the Muslim world, a very new post-colonial nation-state that was open to a lot of different influences.

So something that is a recurring theme in my book is that the Saudi campaign was spread through personal relationships. And in Indonesia, the person who did the most to seed the Saudi campaign was a man named Mohammad Natsir, who was originally a founding father, but he was kind of sidelined by the secular-minded government. And he became kind of the leader of the Islamic resistance.

So he had a very dramatic life story. He was exiled into the jungle, pushed out of politics and so on. But he was very pious, went on hajj and pilgrimage to Saudi several times, and became a personal favorite of the Saudi King Faisal. Who was at the same time prototyping his idea for “Islamic solidarity,” which was his idea of how Saudi could relate to the world. Mohammad Natsir is the person who in the 1960s started channeling Saudi funds to a variety of mosques and individuals and small Islamist groups, homegrown groups in Indonesia.

And then the biggest flagship project of Saudi Arabia in Indonesia happened right after the Iranian Revolution, which was a very stressful event for the kingdom. And they scrambled to counteract the revolution across the Muslim world because it was so popular. It seemed like a very exciting, you know, win for the Muslim world, not even necessarily as a Shia thing, just as a very exciting Islamic revolution.

So 1999 was Iran. 1980, Saudi opened a full-fledged university in Jakarta, called LIPIA, which to this day is under the Saudi embassy’s jurisdiction, is completely staffed, and every language, every class is instructed in Arabic, and which is directly a branch of Imam Muhammad in Saud University in Riyadh.

And the fact that this university exists is amazing to me. It just epitomizes Saudi dogma and soft power. It’s the idea of using kind of things like education and scholarships as a way to cede influence. Also to see the whole variety of all these different outlets that Saudi money uses from charities, which they used in the westernmost part of Indonesia after the Boxing Day tsunami of 2004. To building mosques; there are at least 150 Saudi funded mosques in Indonesia. To supporting this kind of homegrown Islamist political party called the Prosperous Justice Party.

So, you know, the thing that really impressed me about Indonesia, and why this is the place that brought me into the project, is you get the full spectrum of Saudi influence, from grassroots to highest level at the embassy. And one reason – you know, I’ve lived in Indonesia longest, so it’s really the most in-depth case study.

What I learned there in terms of nuance that I think is important for this project, is that it's not a one-way relationship.

It's really obvious if you spend any time in Indonesia that Indonesians love Saudi Arabia too. A lot of them spend their whole lives saving up for pilgrimage. A lot of random products have Saudi branding on them from the shrine in Mecca, to just like the word Saudi. And it's really obvious, when you spend any time in Indonesia, which I think was important for me to learn that, there's a lot of grassroots feeling, positive feeling, towards Saudi Arabia. Which is why their campaign was able to reach as many people as it did.

Nicholas Lemann

Could you give a sense of the range of effects of dawa in Indonesia? I get the feeling from what you said, and from your book, that it's not best understood as the money just flows very neatly to one entity, like the university that operates under tight Saudi control. So if you could give some idea of the variety of recipients and where they are religiously, politically, etc.

Krithika Varagur

Absolutely. So in Aceh, the westernmost province, a Saudi charity campaign helped to rebuild the province after the tsunami. They also tried to set up a branch of LIPIA there, and orphanages. That's one kind of Saudi charity. It's always mixed with a little bit of proselytization. It's never completely straightforward.

In Jakarta, one of the most interesting people I met was this guy named Amin Djamaluddin, who is like this one-man super right-wing reactionary think tank. And he was funded by a Saudi businessman in the eighties. And he has written 17 polemical books about why certain minority sects are bad, like the Shia or the Ahmadiyya.

And he was very responsible for some for some serious crises that happened in Indonesia, including the persecution of Ahmadiyya people. They've been driven from their homes into refugee camps, their schools have been attacked and so on.

And this is one man, but he's had this outsized impact, and his office was bought for him by a Saudi businessman in the nineties. It just kind of, it kind of spirals out of control on the ground, and I think that's a perfect example of that.

A more recent development is that the Saudi ambassador supports this phenomenon

called Papua Dakwah, which is proselytizing Islam in Papua, which is the easternmost part of Indonesia, is majority Christian, and is ethnically quite distinct from the rest of Indonesia. And this preacher named Ustad Fadlan, who is a big proponent of Papua Dakwah, has come to the religious attaché's office several times, and it's very clear that they are supportive of this project.

So even though in absolute terms Saudi money is decreased, they still have their eye on the ball in terms of supporting these high-impact phenomenon in far flung parts of Indonesia. And that was actually pretty surprising to me because I kind of thought that it had peaked definitively in the nineties, and I don't think that's the case.

Nicholas Lemann

So now I'd like to turn to Nigeria and ask you to tell the story of the Saudi religious project there.

Krithika Varagur

Nigeria is home to the largest population of Muslims in Africa, and because of that, it was a very big prize and priority for the Saudi campaign in the 20th century. Very similar to the role Indonesia played in Southeast Asia. But the similarities didn't end there. So I'll say this reporting was the first time I went to West Africa, so I was really plunged headfirst. But I was amazed at how the beats of Saudi influence were so similar to Indonesia.

They found in this case, also they found one man, a very influential religious figure named Abubakar Gumi, who lived in northern Nigeria, which is the Muslim part of Nigeria, Muslim majority, part of Nigeria. They cultivated him through several visits to the kingdom and basically made him the conduit for Saudi funding into Nigeria. Which again, was becoming a country in this post-colonial moment.

So he was the main point-person, just like Mohammad Natsir in Indonesia. And the first thing that Saudi did in Nigeria was distribute scholarships to this very unique university called the Islamic University of Medina, which is an international dawa university in Saudi Arabia that's specifically targeted towards foreign students.

So a lot of the students who went to IUM as the first two classes were from Nigeria and from Africa. They came back home and they became a very influential class of Salafi clerics. This class of clerics eventually built up this homegrown Salafi movement called Izala, which kept spinning off into successive, somewhat more and more extreme, somewhat more and more intolerant movements.

In the nineties, Izala became the Ahlussunnah movement, which broke away and was this kind of extreme Salafi group. And then some of these Salafi preachers started preaching in northeast Nigeria. Eventually in the 2000s, the disciple of one of these clerics founded a group that will be familiar to all of us as Boko Haram, which is a Salafi jihadist group, and is responsible for some of the worst – thousands of kidnappings, hundreds of terror attacks throughout the Sahel region.

And in each case, in a pattern that we've seen in the last 50 or so years, one Salafi group becomes mainstream, kind of breaks off in this more extreme and intolerant one, and eventually culminates in this very extreme movement. So it's very interesting that Salafi clerics and Saudi alumni were the ones who made this change happen.

Another consequence of Saudi investment in Nigeria has been this anti-Shia campaign. So in a way that I, again, I didn't expect, Sunni-Shia rivalry is alive and kicking in northern Nigeria. There is a rather combative Shia movement there called IMN, which was somewhat inspired by the Iranian revolution. And they've been extremely persecuted by Salafis, and later by the Nigerian military.

And again, there were not many Shia in Nigeria a hundred years ago. All of this happened in the last half-century. So the fact that it developed to the point where there are millions of Shia, and they're being persecuted along these very sectarian terms, was a very stark illustration of what Salafi rhetoric does in the wild.

In terms of what Saudi is still doing there today, they have a pretty active consulate in the largest city in the north, which is Kano. They still have a good relationship with a lot of clerics and Saudi alumni there. They still send them books and they still build mosques, several mosques a year in northern Nigeria. So the consulate is pretty active.

At the same time, they don't really need to be. What I was amazed in Nigeria is that the Salafi movement has become so mainstream and so enshrined even in regional governments that, you know, is active Saudi money at this point, it's almost kind of a wash.

And one, you know, one of my favorite people I met during my reporting was a very sweet guy named Dr. Fadul Khulod, who lives in Nigeria's capital of Abuja. And he runs the Nigerian branch of a global Saudi charity called the Muslim World League, which is a massive charity. I said in the last episode, at least \$1 billion in funds over the years. Headquartered in Mecca. Super influential.

And I said – he was very nice. He welcomed me, gave me a ton of books. He gave me a box of dates. I said, “How many employees do you have? It’s pretty quiet around here, it’s just me.” I said, “How long has it been?” He’s like, “Like ten years.” I said, “Why is that?” He said, “You know, I started this office in the nineties because Dr. Gumi hand-selected me and said, ‘We need a branch of this charity here.’ I had dozens of employees. Then 9/11 happened. And then Saudi money everywhere became this kind of hot potato. And it was subject to scrutiny both from Nigeria and from international parties. So we had to shut everything down for almost a decade while they went through all of our records and determined whether we were legitimate or not.” And he said, “I wasn’t concerned. I know we’re above ground. I believe in our mission. But that’s the way it was.”

And slowly, one by one, he had to fire everyone else. And now it’s just him, this old man keeping, you know, keeping his memories of Dr. Gumi and of the early decades of Saudi dawa alive. I mean, to me, nothing symbolizes the Saudi campaign in Nigeria better than him, because it worked so well that it’s become redundant.

Nicholas Lemann

So one other question about Nigeria. When something like Boko Haram happens, to the extent that we know, what is the attitude about that back in Riyadh? Is that seen by the Saudis as a problem they can’t solve, as a problem they should solve, or not a problem at all?

Krithika Varagur

It’s definitely seen as a problem. I think that the you know, the specter of terror finance has really haunted Saudi Arabia in recent years. The New York Times once called them the arsonist and the firefighters.

So I think the kingdom is aware of the diffuse nature of the project and how it led to these consequences. And Saudi Arabia’s even been the site of some mediations between Boko Haram and the Nigerian president.

So they’re trying to do their part, but their grounds for legitimacy is really compromised, because it’s such a gray area. Infamously, ISIS uses Wahhabi textbooks in its schools. So the line that they try to draw, which is that “This extreme Salafism, or hardline Wahhabism, is what we support, but we don’t support this other Salafi jihadism,” is almost impossible to enforce in practice.

So, yes, I would definitely say Saudi Arabia’s concerned. They don’t want to actively support terrorism, but you don’t always get points for good intentions.

Nicholas Lemann

Let's finally go on to Kosovo, and tell us how you chose that as one of your reporting sites, and what you found there.

Krithika Varagur

So I definitely wanted to do some reporting in Europe. Originally, I thought I was going to go to Bosnia, because I'd heard a lot about the Mujahideen there. We'd gone from Afghanistan to Bosnia, and stayed on, and according to popular media, had rooted Salafism in Bosnia.

I actually went to Bosnia. I think the first time, I quickly realized within days of being there this was BS. There was not a strong Salafi movement there. They really had it under control. This was the least of their problems.

However, as I traveled through the Islamic Balkans and learned about Kosovo, which was one of the last sites of a massive Saudi charity campaign before 9/11. This was in the end of the Yugoslav Wars in '98, '99, and Kosovo eventually declared independence from Serbia in 2008. So this is really among the last big pushes that Saudi made. And I was interested in how Saudi charity in this very small majority Muslim nation had changed its religious landscape.

Because now in Kosovo, it has a very strong secular tradition. But there are a lot of Salafis. So much so that there is a Salafi TV station headquartered in Pristina. Which is almost – if you told anyone who was a war correspondent there in '98, '99 that this was the case, they would not believe you. The DNA of the Albanian-speaking world is so secular in many places that this is a really shocking development.

So I was really interested in meeting these Salafi clerics who had brought this change about in just two decades. And the cool thing about reporting in Kosovo was that I could really see the shape of the whole campaign, because almost everyone involved was still alive. It's not like in Indonesia, where Mohammad Natsir died a long time ago. So that was really cool. And also this idea of the last, kind of last stand of Saudi dawa before its brand took a huge hit from 9/11 was super interesting.

So Kosovo is about 99% Muslim today. It's the most Muslim nation, if you want to call it that. It has a contested status in Europe. And it also had the highest per capita rate of foreign fighters to ISIS out of any country in Europe. All of which are pretty remarkable developments for a small Balkan country.



So what I wanted to learn was what its religious landscape was like. I was really – I had pretty good access there. I was really interested to meet some of the Medina alumni there. Imams like Enes Goga, and Ekrem Afdiu, who studied in Medina on scholarships and became Salafis, and became really popular, influential preachers in Kosovo after the war.

The most interesting thing I think I took away was a more nuanced picture of what Saudi dawa did. Because when we talk about religion in the Balkans, or when the news media does, it's so often sensationalized and reduced to this kind of ISIS statistic that I mentioned. Which is really alarming, but it's not the whole picture.

I really got a sense after going to Kosovo several times – it's a wonderful country – that this religious revival really was a grassroots phenomenon too, and it really spoke to people who had been through unspeakable traumas during the war, with seeing their mosques destroyed and bombed by Serbs, who had just been and seen really halfhearted development efforts after ceasefire.

And I learned that Saudi charity, while it had really had some unsavory effects, it also filled in these gaps of the spiritual needs of this new country. So, getting to see that, and how this religious landscape changed, and how Salafism now has a route in the Albanian-speaking world because of Saudi dawa, was really interesting insight, in my opinion.

Nicholas Lemann

We're getting short on time now. And I wanted to ask one final question, although it's kind of a big question. To people in the US who aren't expert on this, there's kind of two big things going on in Saudi Arabia. One is MBS being the person in power still, relatively newly. And the second is the price collapse for oil. Are those two developments likely to affect the large subject of your book?

Krithika Varagur

Absolutely. And they already have. Vision 2030 is officially part of Saudi dawa now. You go to that Saudi university in Jakarta that I was talking about; it's blanketed in Vision 2030 banners. If you go on the Saudi Dawa Ministry website, it's full of Vision 2030 stuff. If you look on their annual ministry reports, from year to year, around 2018 I want to say, they started including counter-extremism as part of their activities. Again, we don't ever really know what Saudi moderation and counter-extremism mean, but the fact that it's part of it means that Vision 2030 has already changed it.



To me, that's actually a good thing. One of my takeaways for an American audience, and definitely of interest to me, was that having and keeping your eye on the ball, especially from the West, is a positive development. The fact that a lot of Saudi terror finance was cleaned up after 9/11 means that changes are possible. If we had a defeatist attitude at the time, nothing good would have ever happened.

But now they've really cleaned up their financial flows. I don't actually think Saudi dawa is negative. It can be channeled to positive events for sure. Especially in all of these developing countries. If they're supporting mosques, charities, orphanages. There's absolutely nothing wrong with that.

So I think if we can use Vision 2030 to hold them accountable for some of the awful effects that their campaign has had abroad, that could be an upside. In terms of oil revenues crashing. Definitely relevant. They have had fewer resources all throughout the century. Ever since 2014, when they had the first big oil crash. The material capacity of them to spend money on this has decreased. So that's just going to accelerate a trend that's already been happening.

As I say in my book, we're already dealing with the legacy effects of their campaign. It peaked at least 10 years ago, if not more than that. And what the oil crash is going to do is just hasten the speed of their decline. I think their ideas in a lot of these countries are now self-sustaining, so maybe it won't matter.

And also, they're not the only players on the field anymore. A lot of Gulf countries, like UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, all have interests abroad now. So it's no longer a Saudi monopoly. So I think both of those things are very relevant to the Saudi project, and they should be part of how we talk about it. Most concisely, would be to not attribute every development in terms of fundamentalism or terrorism to Saudi money, because that simply doesn't reflect reality anymore.

Nicholas Lemann

Okay. Well, we have to stop here. Thank you. Again, your upcoming book is called *The Call: Inside the Global Saudi Religious Project*, and it goes on sale tomorrow, April 21st. The starred review from Kirkus praises how "Varagur wisely allows many voices to be heard, and shows how Saudi influence is now more transparent, but still insidious." I do hope you will check it out.

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good to read, we'll send you a bonus Columbia Global Reports book of your choice, if you're a new or current subscriber, learn more at [globalreports.columbia.edu](http://globalreports.columbia.edu). I'm Nick Lemann, for Columbia Global Reports. Thank you for listening. Take care.