

The Call | Part One

SEASON 2
episode eight

Nicholas Lemann

Welcome to Underreported. I'm Nicholas Lemann, coming to you from my home. I hope you and yours are taking care during this difficult time. Today we welcome Krithika Varagur, author of the brilliant new book, *The Call: Inside the Global Saudi Religious Project*.

Krithika Varagur is an award-winning journalist who covers Indonesia for the Guardian and has reported widely from Southeast and South Asia for publications including the Atlantic, the New York Review of Books and the New York Times. She regularly corresponds for outlets like NPR and the BBC. And I suggest following her on Twitter for an entertaining and thoughtful feed from a young journalist on the ground.

In her new book, *The Call*, Krithika Varagur has doggedly pieced together an entire picture of Saudi religious funding and its effects more thoroughly than any other journalist has done. Krithika, thank you for calling in today. How are you doing?

Krithika Varagur

I'm pretty good, thanks. I'm in Brooklyn.

Nicholas Lemann

Comfortable, I hope?

Krithika Varagur

Yeah, mostly indoors, which is hard because it's a beautiful day and the best season of the year. But we're all doing what we can.

Nicholas Lemann

Well, I want to just start by asking you just to tell us a little bit about how you got interested in this project. I know it grew out of time you were spending in Indonesia, but if you could just kind of tell us the story of how this got to be a book.

Krithika Varagur

So I moved to Jakarta, which is the capital of Indonesia, in 2016. I was 22 and I went to be a journalist, and I was very interested in religion and politics in the world's largest Muslim-majority country.

Nicholas Lemann

I should say this is Krithika's first book and we're proud to be publishing it. I think you may be our youngest author ever.

Krithika Varagur

Yeah, absolutely. So almost as soon as I got there, and I write about this in my book, I kept hearing this kind of anecdotal, throwaway reference to Saudi influence or Arabization or what they call "Arabisasi" there. Kind of as an explanation for all of the developments in this conservative turn in Indonesia in the last couple of decades. But no one seemed to have specifics on what that meant.

So almost as soon as I moved there, within a few months, I started reporting on it for the Atlantic, and Foreign Policy, and things like that. About what exactly the Saudi money meant in the world's largest Muslim majority country. And that was among my most I mean, you can really tell when you're a freelance journalist because you don't, it's kind of like writing into an echo chamber.

But that reporting got a lot of feedback from America and from Indonesia, too, because people really wanted to know what this campaign meant. So that made me feel like I was on to something. And I kept reporting on it in Southeast Asia for a couple of years.

And then the book eventually took me also to the Balkans and Nigeria when I realized that this wasn't just an Indonesia thing, it was a global campaign. So that was pretty inherently interesting to me, especially because Saudi Arabia is one of the most kind of mysterious and closed nations in the world today.

Nicholas Lemann

You know, you just mentioned Saudi Arabia is not the world's most open society, and it's considered very challenging by reporters. How did you do the reporting for this book?

Krithika Varagur

So I definitely didn't assume that I would get a chance to go to Saudi Arabia, although it kind of worked out in the end. My book was always about the effects on the ground in three different countries, and I felt like that would be, if not straightforward, pretty accessible. Especially in the Balkans, which is very friendly to Americans, foreigners, Indonesia, where I'd been living. Nigeria was a little bit tricky, but I was able to go there.

So the book was really structured as an explanation of the effects of the campaign on the ground in very concrete and reported terms, which I think is how a journalist would come to this issue anyway.

But in the middle of the year, or towards the end of my reporting year, Saudi Arabia unveiled this kind of tourism program. So I was able to finally go there towards the end of my reporting project, which was a really amazing capstone to the end of this.

And I eventually ended up getting a research fellowship to visit as well. Basically, it was kind of like a write-around, what we would call a write-around in a profile. Almost like Frank Sinatra Has a Cold. I thought that might be the worst-case scenario.

It ended up being relatively better than that. I had pretty good access to Saudi ambassadors in different countries, Saudi ministry documents were also published online with some freedom, and I was able to get hundreds of interviews of people on the ground. So that was my approach.

Nicholas Lemann

Let's start by just kind of laying a baseline for the book. In the subtitle, you refer to the Saudi religious project. What is the Saudi religious project? Who thought of it, how long has it been going on, and what does it consist of?

Krithika Varagur

I would say the religious project is to spread their state-sponsored brand of Wahhabi Islam throughout the Muslim world, which has added weight because what we call Saudi Arabia now was also the birthplace of Islam in the seventh century.

So it's not quite comparable, I think, to any other religious soft power project in the world, because this really is a country that gave birth to a religion, trying to reassert its place in the greater world.

In terms of who wants – Saudi Arabia is a relatively young country, it's less than a century old. It came together in 1932 as the third Saudi state ruled by the Saudi royal family. And in the 18th century, their family made a pact with a preacher named Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, who was a very austere revivalist, extreme, somewhat intolerant preacher who believed that the kind of Sufi practices and folk Islam that he saw around him in the Arabian Peninsula were really negative developments for Islam.

So he's a very austere monotheist, kind of a Unitarian, and he joined forces with the House of Saud to give religious legitimacy to their royal family. And in exchange, they gave him and his clerics protection and they said, "We'll help you; you help us." And in some way or another that's been in place for the last three centuries.

So once Saudi Arabia became what we call a modern nation-state in the 1930s, they had this baked into their foreign policy that what the Wahhabi clerics wanted would be part of their foreign policy, too.

So in the 20th century, spreading Wahhabi Islam became a pillar of their foreign policy in the Muslim world. It really became prominent in the 1960s when King Faisal, who was a very global-minded monarch, came to power. And his ambitions for the Muslim world dovetailed with what America wanted in the Cold War, which ended up being to fight Communism.

From the Saudi perspective, they wanted to fight Communism and socialism because they were threats to this monarchy. The Iranian revolution was Shia, the Arab nationalism in Egypt was completely antithetical to their theocratic state. So they wanted to fight Communism and socialists. America famously also wanted to fight Communists and socialists, and they found each other to be fellow travelers.

Nicholas Lemann

Let's spend a minute on terminology. This book has a glossary and Krithika has made her way through a really complicated set of subgroups and of Islam and the names for them. But, you know, I'm just going to stick to two in this interview. What is the difference between Wahhabi and Salafi?

Krithika Varagur

So first of all, Wahhabi is almost never used by someone who is a Wahhabi. It's kind of used by other people. It's kind of like hipster. Like no one who arguably is a hipster would ever call themselves that. It's kind of a derogatory term. So Wahhabi

refers to the very specific Saudi brand of Islam that came from Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, and it's all about excommunicating people who don't follow the same interpretation of your religion. It's really against worshiping at shrines and all kinds of folk practices. But it's very-site specific. It's very much rooted in Saudi Arabia and the House of Saud.

Salafism is a 20th century revivalist movement. That was mostly a reaction to colonialism. It came out of Egypt from a bunch of really influential thinkers like Mohammad Abduh and Rashid Rida, which thought that the way to fight the West was not to adopt the way of the West, but to go back to earliest Islam and imitate the salaf, the pious forefathers, the earliest Muslims.

So coming from this other circuitous direction, they ended up in many of the same places as Wahhabis, where they said, "We can't have these practices like Sufi practices, worshiping at shrines and so on. And we need to eliminate all these innovations and just be more literalist and go back to the Quran." Because Wahhabism is so site-specific to Saudi Arabia and because Wahhabism and Salafism have a lot in common in the way they're expressed, Saudi investments often create Salafis abroad. Because Wahhabism doesn't really make that much sense if you're just a Muslim living outside the Gulf. Because what do you care about the Saudi royal family?

But Salafism is much more straightforward. It's about going back to the Quran and the Hadith, which anyone can read. And there's like a huge corpus of Salafi text that anyone can access. So, you know, I think the best way to describe them is like, that they have elective affinities, but it's important not to use the word Wahhabi indiscriminately. Because it's often used as an insult and it just makes, you know – specificity is important. Otherwise, you kind of just get into this fearmongering and things like that.

Nicholas Lemann

With the proviso that you can never really know anybody's motives, I'm curious, what's your read on why the Saudi royal family is doing this and has been doing this for so long?

You know, we have an image here in the West, that is probably just a stereotype, that the family is not itself deeply pious. And there's a little kind of bread and circuses going on that they're investing in religion to keep the population in a very non-democratic country, quiet.

Similarly, looking abroad, is this about religion per se? Is it about power projection? That is by a means cheaper than, say, building up a global military like the US? What's your read on that, knowing that we can't see inside the mind, the collective mind of the Saudi royal family.

Krithika Varagur

One of the most important things about the Saudi royal family is that there are thousands of them. So some of them are pious, some of them are playboys. One of the biggest soft power exponents, King Fahd, was famously a playboy and loved going on jets and stuff like that. So in some ways, it's not even a contradiction for them.

But, you know, I would say it's been stretched to the breaking point. Part of it is this traditional pact between the Wahhabi clerics and the Saudi royal family. Just because of the history there, they cannot break it off. And the clerics are still very influential, even if they've been muzzled under Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, who kind of finds this alternative power base to be very threatening to him.

I would say in the 20th century for this new country that was trying to project itself on the world stage, especially in the postwar era, when there was a lot of global movements, Islam was one way for this country to make these bonds with dozens of other countries, from Asia to Africa to Europe to Yugoslavia.

This was a time when, I mean, look, Saudi Arabia never had such a prominent place in the medieval Islamic world. If you think of all the great Islamic capitals, Cairo, Damascus, you know, Istanbul, you don't get scholarship coming from Saudi Arabia. So what are they going to build as a soft power apparatus? So I think the birthplace of Islam is a good one.

And then what kind of Islam? It's this one that they've been yoked to for 200 years? So, you know, history was a powerful motivator. And I would say in the 21st century, the nature of their project has become so diffused that it's almost a completely different thing than when it started in the mid-century.

I would say the most extreme designations, like funding jihadi groups and extremist groups, is much, much lower now than it was in the 20th century.

So it's not even clear that they know what they want at this point. It's very clear from the way Vision 2030 is worded that MBS wants to move beyond religion in some ways, and help people view his kingdom as not just this Islamic theocracy, but

it's, first of all, it's easier said than done. Second of all, he can't get rid of the clerics altogether. Third of all, that this vision that he's offered in place of religion has proven somewhat hollow, as evidenced by the murder of Jamal Khashoggi.

So what he's offering in place of religion is not, is not a very substantive alternative yet either. So I would say that the kingdom is definitely trying to divest from this image that people have of them as propagating extremism, but they are experiencing some growing pains.

Nicholas Lemann

Well, this leads to another question, which is kind of organizationally or logistically, how does this all work? You know, if you think about, I don't know, again, I'm going more on stereotypes than reality, perhaps, about, you know, British colonial world rule in India. You picture all of these British civil servants going and sort of running everything. But this isn't like that, is it? Or how does it actually work? Who decides how the money flows? How much money is there, if we know? And how is the project managed? Or is it managed?

Krithika Varagur

Parts of it are more managed than others. So one word that I use in my book, which gives it the title is *dawa*, which means "the call" to Islam. It means that proselytization -- Saudi does have a Dawa Ministry, so that's more managed than a charity. And a charity is more managed than an independent businessman or a lesser prince who can really use their money however they want to at this, even at this point.

So I would say the Dawa Ministry is pretty bureaucratic. It oversees religious attachés at Saudi embassies in about two dozen countries, which is like this kind of diplomatic outpost that's in charge of Islamic stuff, who's in charge of giving money to mosques and scholarships and things like that.

So that part is pretty managed in terms of facts and figures. The ministry reports are one of the few concrete things that I was able to get my hands on for this book. But, you know, the financial flows are very obscure. They're not, they don't need to report it to anyone, especially members of the royal family. And a lot of princes and princesses have their pet charities and things like that.

So, you know, at its peak, I think that the Saudi government has professed to giving the Muslim World League charity up to \$1 billion over the years, which is

a substantial sum of money. And it goes pretty far in some of the countries where it lands. Especially in Asia and Africa, where a few million dollars can make a big difference.

But I would say that it's very diffuse, and that's one reason why they have ended up in so many different places. Just to give one example, Saudi Arabia for several decades now has been really against Muslim Brotherhood, political Islamism. And yet so many outposts of Saudi Dawah end up supporting Muslim Brotherhood-related parties or Islamists. And that's because they don't have control over where this money goes.

It's so diffuse, it's at so many different countries, and it ends up supporting a huge variety of Islamist groups on the ground. So I would say that if people read this book and come up with anything, it's that there's way less control than either kingdom would want you to think, or that you would want to maybe fear.

Nicholas Lemann

That brings us to the end of part one of our discussion with Krithika Varagur, author of *The Call: Inside the Global Saudi Religious Project*. Look out for part two of our discussion right here next Monday. I'm Nick Lemon. Thank you for listening. Be well and stay safe.