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FROM RADICALISM TO TOLERANCE: MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE MUSLIM WORLD LEAGUE²

Abstract

Following its establishment in 1962, the Muslim World League (MWL) was meant to be an organization that expands the outreach of Saudi Arabia and its then Wahabi version of Islam in the world in the time when other competing ideologies, especially Arab nationalism, were on the rise. This allowed it to carry out religious, cultural, aid and educational programs. At the time, The Saudi adopted version of Islam known as Wahabism was rejected in the western world. This study analyses news reports about the MWL published by mostly western media outlets, by using Critical Discourse Analysis as a theory. This study concludes that the coverage of MWL has changed recently from being negative to being positive with Mohammad Al-Issa assuming the leadership of MWL and with radical changes taking place in Saudi Arabia itself, politically, socially, religiously and culturally. Western media coverage of MWL now connects the organization to coexistence, religious tolerance, openness and moderate thinking and positive view of other faiths. It suggests that MWL has rejected all forms of radicalism and strict interpretation of Islam and calls for unity and building bridges with other religions.

Keywords: Muslim World League, media coverage, terrorism, religious tolerance, Saudi Arabia, Al-Issa

Introduction

The Muslim World League (MWL) was established in 1962 in Mecca (Saudi Arabia) as an attempt, as declared by the organization itself, to build bridges among Muslims and to promote tolerance as a value, in addition to expand the Saudi outreach in the Muslim and non-Muslim countries. However, and as Saudi Arabia adopted a strict religious ideology for decades to follow, the organization has been negatively portrayed in the Western media until recently. This coverage of the MWL has started to change only with major political, social and economic changes taking place in Saudi Arabia and the MWL itself, which was represented by the visit of Muhammad Al-Issa, Secretary-General of MWL, to Auschwitz and other symbolic

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2 * This paper has been published with the great help and effort by Mr. Mustapha M. Aljamal, who hold a BA in English and French literature from the Al-Azhar University.

religious and historical sites, and his efforts to build connections and bridges with other faiths which has been unprecedented in the history of MWL.³

According to its website, the Muslim World League implements a number of activities that intend to spread Islam especially in Europe where large Muslim communities live. This includes publications, publicity, coordinating among preachers and Muslim scholars, teaching Arabic and establishing Islamic centers. MWL focuses mainly on promoting 'Islamic solidarity' between adolescents and Muslim youths by organizing sports events, summer camps for young people, scholarships and exchange programs which aim to educate young Muslims to study Islam. Al-Issa noted that education is important in shaping the way children think, stressing that giving the children the appropriate education protects them in the future against some ideologies.⁴

Looking at western media coverage of MWL, one could notice that these media outlets portray WML as follows. MWL is highly involved in promoting global religious preaching dedicating itself to spreading Islamic teachings.⁵ The Muslim World League is one of dozens of Saudi-funded organizations that have headquarters in many Muslim and non-Muslim countries including in Europe where Muslim communities live. The main aim of these branches of MWL is to teach Muslims about Islam to make sure they abide by the religion. Additionally, MWL provides interested people and new converts with the needed information about how it views religion.⁶

The early western media coverage of MWL suggests two notions: Using MWL to promote the Saudi version of Islam and that the ideology pushed by the organization was considered as radical until recently. Since the 1970s, the Saudis have played an important role in financing and promoting global *Da'wa*, using the Muslim World League as a vehicle for much of this activity. In the period between 1962-1980, the Saudi government provided more than \$13 million to MWL. In addition to the funding of the Saudi government, MWL also relies on money given by some interested businesspeople and private institutions.⁷

In Europe, MWL collaborates with some local Muslim groups to set the foundations to meet the spiritual and religious necessities of Muslims whose number is increasing. MWL provides funds to build mosques and centers for Muslims where activities to preach about MLW's version of Islam take place.⁸ To further its goals, MWL cooperated in the past with other internationally recognized movements that

3 Sarah Feuer, *Course Correction: The Muslim World League, Saudi Arabia's Export of Islam, and Opportunities for Washington*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington, 2019.

4 Evgenii Novikov, "The World Muslim League: Agent of Wahhabi Propagation in Europe, the Jamestown Foundation", available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/the-world-muslim-league-agent-of-wahhabi-propagation-in-europe/> (accessed 20.10.2019).

5 Pew Research Centre, "Muslim World League and World Assembly of Muslim Youth", available at: <https://www.pewforum.org/2010/09/15/muslim-networks-and-movements-in-western-europe-muslim-world-league-and-world-assembly-of-muslim-youth/> (accessed 20.10.2019).

6 Ibidem.

7 Ibidem.

8 Ibidem.

didn't necessarily share its vision of the world.⁹ In recent years, some organizations have competed with the Muslim World League that they had previously sought as partners.¹⁰

According to the Pew Research Center, some 80% of people around the world suffer restrictions on religious practices, with extremists present in all aspects of religious life and that they perceived as part of Islam. Al-Issa and people at his organization seek to alter this by supporting moderate views and representations of Muslims and interpreting the Holy Book in a correct way.¹¹ A major issue MWL now wants to resolve is the connection between the rise of radicalism and Islamophobia especially in western societies.¹²

To fight hate against Muslims and non-Muslims, MWL held a meeting for scholars from 150 countries, who represent 27 Islamic sects to discuss effective means to stop hatred and bigotry. Following this meeting, the Mecca Charter was issued, calling on all people to accept differences and reject all forms of violence of religious motivations.¹³ The charter states that all people should unite and be equal before God, regardless of race, ethnicity or nationality.¹⁴

Generally speaking, media outlets in Europe and the US, for legal and political reasons, adopt a similar line with governments when it comes to covering groups and institutions that have positions, including WML. This is not to negate that MWL adopted, until recently, a strict interpretation of Islam, which was reflected in the media coverage about it. Media outlets have reflected this change in MWL, first covering it as a radical institution to most recently covering it as a moderate group that seeks to spread moderate agenda about Islam. This can't be separated from politics and changes taking place both in Europe and at home in Saudi Arabia.

The MWL has increased its donations to Muslim countries during the COVID19 pandemic in an attempt to build more bridges and expand its outreach in line with its new approach. This approach aims to change the stereotypical image of MWL as a group that adopts a radical ideology to a group that calls for religious reforms. This paper highlights how western media and authors have covered WML in the past and now, and the main differences between these coverages in light of the dramatic changes taking place at the organization and in Saudi Arabia at large. The outreach of Al-Issa to Christian and Jewish organizations is part of broader emerging relations in the Arab Gulf and the region as a whole that calls for ending conflicts and achieving reconciliation, including political and diplomatic rapprochement.¹⁵

9 Ibidem.

10 Ibidem.

11 Ibidem.

12 Ibidem.

13 Kelsey Dallas, "Why a prominent Muslim leader is visiting with Latter-day Saints this week", available at: <https://www.deseret.com/indepth/2019/11/4/20947892/mormon-lds-church-muslim-leader-salt-lake-city-religious-extremism-intolerance-saudi-arabia> (accessed 20.10.2019).

14 Ibidem.

15 "World Muslim League helps Bosnia and Herzegovina with 300,000 Dollars", *Sarajevo Times*, available at: <https://www.sarajevotimes>.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Discourse Analysis

Following a workshop in Amsterdam in 1991, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has emerged concerned with the investigation of ideologues and power through the semantic investigation of data, be it written or verbal.¹⁶ Ever since, the theory has emerged as a prominent and leading theory in the disciplines of language and politics and has been a leading theory for those who study the relationship between speech and social life. CDA helps understand the world and its complex relationships through analyzing speech acts and words.

Critical Discourse Analysis sheds light on how inequality is produced and constructed, along with social power, and dominance in our daily life by looking at texts and speeches in social or political contexts.¹⁷ In discourse analysis, social life is viewed as interrelated types of various social practices, be it economic, political, cultural or family. Every practice reflects various social elements in a stable setting.¹⁸ In order to be able to merge power and discourse, knowledge, some elements are needed such as attitudes and ideologies and different representations of social life.¹⁹

Many scholars have applied CDA in their research addressing the notion of legitimation which determines when and what a person might say to a group of people that would be treated as legitimate or otherwise by them such as Amer in his analysis of the New York Times coverage of the Second Palestinian Intifada.²⁰ This research paper applies CDS as theoretical framework in order to provide a better understanding of the World Muslim League (WML) and the changes the organization has gone through recently through analyzing the media coverage of the organization and contrasting it with the past coverage in order to provide a clearer understanding of WML.

WML as a radical organization in the Western media (1962-2016)

According to a report published by Evgenii Novikov in 2005, the Muslim population in Europe has increased significantly during the last century, and due to the isolation of a considerable number of Muslims, they were vulnerable to misinformation. This coincided with the creation of the MWL in 1962 in Saudi Arabia, which pushed these Muslims to seek guidance from Saudi clerics who adopted a Wahabi

com/world-muslim-league-helps-bosnia-and-herzegovina-with-300000-dollars/ (accessed 20.10.2019).

16 Ruth Wodak, *Critical discourse analysis*, Sage, London, 2013, pp. 185-186.

17 *The handbook of discourse analysis*, Teun A. Van Dijk (ed.), Wiley, United States, 2001, pp. 349-371.

18 Norman Fairclough, *The critical study of language*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2013, p. 264.

19 Teun A. Van Dijk, Principles of critical discourse analysis, *Discourse & society*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 1993, pp. 249-283.

20 Mosheer M. Amer, 'Telling-it-like-it-is': the delegitimation of the second Palestinian Intifada in Thomas Friedman's discourse, *Discourse & Society*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 2009, pp. 5-31.

ideology, according to documents published on the Muslim World League website (WML). Novikov notes that with the radicalism of this ideology, there are fears that this it could serve as a gateway to more violent organizations especially that Saudi Arabia at the time formally allowed the spread of WML propagation, which Novikov describes as “radical and strongly anti-American.”²¹

In his report, Novikov claims that the mid-1980s, and in response to the Iranian Revolution in 1979, Saudi Arabia began supporting and financing an ideological counterattack to spread Wahhabism. To make this counter campaign a success, Novikov adds, the Saudis engaged in the most expansive preaching campaign, and they strongly exported Wahhabism around the world.²² At the time, when Wahabism was influential in Saudi Arabia, Saudi leaders saw in this ideology an answer to Iranian expansionism in the region, especially that the post-1979 Iran adopted spreading and exporting the revolution to other countries, and Saudi Arabia was one of these potential countries due to its strong ties with the US, centrality in the Muslim world, and having a Shiite minority. Starting from the mid-1970s, Saudis spent around \$90 billion to promote their ideology outside, targeting both, Muslims and non-Muslims, according to an estimate by former CIA Director R. James Woolsey.²³ After the Arab Spring, the competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia reached a new level, with a new regional order unfolding in the region.²⁴

However, following the September 11 terrorist attacks, all aspects of European Muslims’ lives have changed where they started to be treated with suspicion by the European population. As a result, MWL engaged in a process to fight Islamophobia and the increasing incitement against Muslims.²⁵ MWL advised Muslims not to engage in activities that might create tension and suspicion among the population. Accordingly, MWL began assigning Imams and religious figures who have a good knowledge of local laws and values.²⁶ MWL clerics took European mosques as their main headquarters, as mosques were considered to be out of reach by law enforcement agencies, enabling them to present their ideology in an effective and systematic manner. According to an article on WML titled “Swiss Muslims Looking for Ways to Train Their Imams”, there are direct instructions on how to introduce Imams into European mosques without arousing the suspicion of the authorities.²⁷

21 Evgenii Novikov, “The World Muslim League: Agent of Wahha bi Propagation in Europe, the Jamestown Foundation”, available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/the-world-muslim-league-agent-of-wahhabi-propagation-in-europe/> (accessed 20.10.2020).

22 Ibidem.

23 Ibidem.

24 Philipp O. Amour, “Introduction: The Regional Order in the Gulf Region and the Middle East”, in: *The Regional Order in the Gulf Region and the Middle East*, Philipp O. Amour (ed), Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

25 „The Muslim World After 9/11”, RAND Cooperation, USA, 2004, available at: https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2004/RAND_MG246.pdf (accessed 24.10.2020).

26 Ibidem.

27 Ibidem.

Novikov argues that the passive approach of European countries towards their own Muslim population starting from the 1960s has been the most critical factor for the expansion of Wahhabism and radical Islamic groups in Europe. He claims that it was in Europe where the September 11 attacks were primarily planned.²⁸ Novikov blames WML for spreading this ideology which at the time was ignored by European governments which allowed for radical groups to emerge as they found the proper fertile soil for them to expand without restrictions.

The Initial establishment of the Muslim World League was meant to combat the spread of socialism and nationalism of President Nasser of Egypt. At the time, the MWL league won the support of the Muslim Brotherhood, which was in opposition to Nasser, to establish associations all over the world. Saudi Royals gave huge sums of money to the organization and the umbrella organizations working under it throughout the years to help spread the message of MWL that was largely based on a strict version of Islam supported by Salfi and Wahabi notions, to which large number of Muslims, both in the Muslim world and Europe, have subscribed to.²⁹

Not only this, Teresa Harrings of the Moshe Dayan Center has referred in a study about the MWL to the efforts it makes to help countries in need such as Somalia as 'Wahabi Colonialism.' The author referred to the role of the organization in presenting the Saudi version of Islam to the world and its role during the Arab Spring, which the organization has warned against, noting that it aims to divide Muslims and to increase Iranian influence in the region.³⁰

The German Die Welt news network has quoted a study by British scholar Susanne Schröter which accused the MWL of being a vehicle to spread radicalization by using 'Saudi money.' Die Welt noted that Saudi foundations such as the Central Council of Muslims in Germany main strong ties with important Muslim associations that have inauspicious ties with the Muslim World League.³¹

The New York Times has noted in a report that Saudi Arabia has a great influence all over the world through local organizations that receive funds from the Kingdom such as the Muslim World League.³² The Newspaper quoted an American official, following a visit to 80 countries around the world that with this version of Islam "there must be diplomatic, cultural and economic consequences."³³

28 Ibidem.

29 Ibidem.

30 Teresa Harrings, "The Muslim World League: Creeping Wahhabi Colonialism?", available at: <https://dayan.org/content/tel-aviv-notes-muslim-world-league-creeping-wahhabi-colonialism> (accessed 23.10.2020).

31 Gudrun Krämer, Anti-Semitism in the Muslim world: A critical review, *Die Welt des Islams*, Vol. 46, No. 3, 2006, pp. 243-276.

32 Scott Shane, "Saudis and Extremism: Both the Arsonists and the Firefighters", available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/26/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-islam.html> (accessed 24.10.2020).

33 Kareem Fahem, "Amic Scholars Promote Sharia as an Alternative to Extremism", available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/19/world/middleeast/islamic-scholars-promote-sharia-as-an-alternative-to-extremism.html> (accessed 23.10.2020).

MWL as a moderate organization: Visit to Auschwitz (2016-2020)

Following his assumption of leadership of the MWL in 2016, Al-Issa led a delegation of 62 Muslims from about 28 different countries to visit Auschwitz, the notorious German Nazi death camp, in partnership with the American Jewish Committee (AJC). It was the largest Muslim delegation to visit Auschwitz.³⁴ The move by Al-Issa was unprecedented and paved the way for other moves to build more bridges with other Jewish organizations, including those in the United States.

WML has made use of COVID19 to send aid as a form of interfaith engagement. Speaking of this, Issa said: "I work every day with my fellow religious leaders on how to unite our efforts for the common good of all."³⁵ Al-Monitor interviewed Al-Issa and he stated that MWL engages with people of faith including with religious figures. He noted that the aim of this effort is to build more bridges among people and bring down all walls built to separate them from each other, noting that actions speak louder than words.³⁶

On April 30, 2019, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between MWL and AJC were signed. The visit took place prior to the international visit, Holocaust Remembrance Day. Al-Issa noted that it is an "honor" to mark this day while being among Jews and Muslims, stressing that crimes taking place today are in fact against all humanity. He went on using a moderate discourse by saying "Any violation of us all is an insult to all of God's children."³⁷

Members of the delegations honored those killed in the Nazi camp by holding a memorial candle they placed at the memorial.³⁸ After the ceremony and remembrance prayers ended, Al-Issa delivered a speech in which he noted that honoring those killed in the Holocaust is a celebration of life and of the living at the same time. Al-Issa added that the visit enabled human stories to emerge because of terror. Al-Issa praised efforts made by some Muslims to save Jews during the Holocaust, noting that they represent the true spirit of Islam, noting that the visit made by MWL and the American Justice Commission and supports this spirit and spreads love, brotherhood, and peace among peoples.³⁹ A few days before the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the camp by Soviet forces, the visit was dubbed as "the largest leading Islamic delegation" to visit the site.⁴⁰

The tour to the Auschwitz-Birkenau memorial, governed by the Nazis in Poland

34 Krakow Poland, "Muslim World League Historic Joint Visit to Auschwitz", *AJC Global Voice*, available at: <https://www.ajc.org/news/american-jewish-committee-muslim-world-league-historic-joint-visit-to-auschwitz> (accessed 20.10.2020).

35 Ibidem.

36 Ibidem.

37 Ibidem.

38 Ibidem.

39 Ibidem.

40 Vanessa Gera, "25 Muslim faith leaders make 'groundbreaking' visit to Auschwitz", available at: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/islamic-faith-leaders-make-groundbreaking-visit-to-auschwitz/> (accessed 20.10.2020).

during the German occupation of Poland in 1939, was led by the leaders of MWL and AJC.⁴¹ AJC said that Al-Issa headed a delegation of a large number of Muslims from different places during the visit, which the committee described as “pioneering”. During their visit, the delegation performed prayers in Birkenau, the most notorious site of mass killing of Jews in Germany. The delegation of AJC included figures in the organization, including decedents of Holocaust survivors.⁴²

Al-Issa noted that his visit is a sacred duty, and an honor, warning against he dubbed as “irrational crimes against humanity,” which he viewed as “a violation of us all, and an insult to all of God’s children.”⁴³ He also declared the continuity of the partnership between the Muslim World League and the American Jewish Committee, which he described as a joint mission in Warsaw, by undertaking many activities such as visiting the Pauline Museum that represents the history of Jews in Poland, holding a meeting with Muslims in Warsaw and attending prayers, participating in a planned program at Nozyk Synagogue, and taking part at an interfaith dinner in Warsaw.⁴⁴

At its international conference at the United Nations headquarters in Geneva, the Muslim World League discussed the ideas, ideologies, and social spirit that lead to extremism, as well as factors that shape people’s national IDs and how they could contribute to make Muslims in Europe feel more secure. The conference also discussed threats caused by extremist ideology, the impact of religious pluralism and how to promote tolerance as well as initiatives to protect young people from extremist and violent ideology. Scholars, figures and political leaders attended the conference, including Al-Issa who makes sure to have a strong presence at international events about Muslims.⁴⁵

At the conference, Chiara Sulmoni, President of START InSight, stressed the importance of the early prevention of extremism. She talked about the importance of timing and age, based on the findings of researchers that characterize the radicalization process in Europe, which will help mitigate it.⁴⁶ Salmouni called for greater role for the private sector in preventing extremism in Europe and the need to have models for Muslims to follow and the critical role of a counter-narrative to defeat extremist ideology, warning against the “politicization” of the issue.⁴⁷

Dallas Kelsey noted that while the rise in religious intolerance and extremism appears to be a serious dilemma for interfaith friendship, Al-Issa believes that

41 Ibidem.

42 Ibidem.

43 Krakow Poland, “Muslim World League Historic Joint Visit to Auschwitz”. . .

44 Ibidem.

45 Chihara Sulmoni, “Youth and extremism: START InSight took part in the Muslim World League’s international conference in Geneva”, available at: <http://www.startinsight.eu/en/youth-and-extremism-start-insight-took-part-in-the-muslim-world-leagues-international-conference-in-geneva/> (accessed 20.10.2020).

46 Ibidem.

47 Ibidem.

it could change the world. Kelsey described Al-Issa as a prominent Muslim leader, who has held the position of Secretary-General of the Muslim World League since August 2016, clinging to his idea that peace can be achieved through personal relationships, and went to Utah to make new friends with similar values.⁴⁸

MWL and World Churches

Aiming to talk about the need for understanding and cooperation among nations, Al-Issa met with representatives of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He added that communication between religions is the cure to end religious isolation, which is one of the sources of extremism and violence as quoted in an interview with Deseret News/KSL Editorial Board. "The idea that we are alike, that we are brothers and sisters, has not been emphasized enough," he added.⁴⁹

For the sake of proving and spreading his new approach that wants to prove to the world that MWL no longer adopts a Wahabi ideology, Al-Issa travels often to address issues such as tolerance and bridging the gap between nations as well as building bridges among them to bridge religious differences. He pointed that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints is "a natural ally", because it emphasizes knowledge, where the Other is an important player.⁵⁰ "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints welcomes opportunities to build friendships with people of other faiths," said Eric Hawkins, a spokesperson for the church. Al-Issa considered embracing diversity is the path to counter extremist ideologies, which results from people who think there is only one lifestyle to live a religion to follow. He noted that embracing diversity will deter terrorism and increase religious freedoms.⁵¹

In 2017, following meeting with Pope Francis, Al-Issa put forward the first agreement between MWL and the Vatican. Al-Issa headed the largest Muslim delegation which attended the memorial held on the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz.⁵² During an informal meeting for interfaith dialogue, Pope Francis and Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran held talks with Al-Issa to confirm that that religion is contrary to violence; religions have the moral authority to contribute to humanity and radicalism gives rise to fear, stressing at the same time the need to protect religious freedoms.⁵³

48 Kelsey Dallas, "Why a prominent Muslim leader is visiting with Latter-day Saints this week", available at: <https://www.deseret.com/indepth/2019/11/4/20947892/mormon-lds-church-muslim-leader-salt-lake-city-religious-extremism-intolerance-saudi-arabia> (accessed 20.10.2020).

49 Ibidem.

50 Ibidem.

51 Ibidem.

52 "Saudi leader of Muslim World League: Interfaith partnerships during pandemic 'religious, moral duty'", Al-Monitor, available at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/03/saudi-leader-muslim-world-league-coronavirus-interfaith.html> (accessed 20.10.2020).

53 "Vatican to set up joint committee with Muslim World League", St. Joseph Catholic Church, available at: <https://stjoerayne.org/2017/09/22/vatican-to-set-up-joint-committee-with-muslim-world-league/> (accessed 20.10.2020).

MWL in the Balkans: Expanding Influence

A delegation of the Muslim World League headed by Al-Issa visited the Genocide Memorial Center in Srebrenica-Potocari, and offered condolences to the victims, stressing the need to preserve peace in the Balkans and maintain good relations between the various countries in the hope of achieving peace. The delegation expressed its strong interest in establishing relations with the various Balkans, stressing that this is what it stands for, and that its belief is also committed to making peace. Al-Issa expressed his hope that the others would do the same.⁵⁴

Al-Issa emphasized that a method involving mutual communication and good relations is the best way to resolve the situation around the world, and that history will continue to be witness to what happened in Srebrenica. He said: "History is the best witness as it speaks of the best. What happened in Srebrenica."⁵⁵ Al-Issa stressed the need to highlight collective experiences including tragic ones adding that history should always deliver the final verdict and the need to apologize for mistakes done in the past regardless of who or where they were committed.

"This visit is very important," said Munira Subasic, president of the Association Mothers of Sinuses of Srebrenica and Ziba. "The Holocaust, Srebrenica is the place everyone should visit. Some need to ask for forgiveness, some need to be with us, and some to learn from the past," continued Subasic.⁵⁶ Al-Issa thanked the Serbian Patriarch for organizing the event, stressing the importance of dialogue between religions, and expressing his happiness with this visit that strengthens cooperation between senior Orthodox Christian and Muslim clerics.⁵⁷

At a conference in Zagreb on interfaith relations on February 4, 2020, Croatia's decision to promote coexistence, and not merely abstract coexistence, pleased Al-Issa.⁵⁸ Former Croatian president Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović inaugurated the international conference organized by the leaders of the Muslim community in Croatia and MWL and the Croatian Bishops Conference, which aimed to highlight human fraternity to achieve peace in the world.⁵⁹

The conference was held as Croatia's headed the Council of the European Union and Andrej Plenković, Prime Minister of Croatia, expressed assurance and hope that will improve the work of Croatia, noting that starting an interfaith dialogue is part

54 "Muslim World League delegation visits Srebrenica Memorial Centre", Sarajevo N1, available at: <http://ba.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a409109/Muslim-World-League-delegation-visits-Srebrenica-Memorial-Centre.html> (accessed 20.10.2020).

55 Ibidem.

56 Ibidem.

57 "Serbian Patriarch receives Secretary General of the World Muslim League", The Orthodox World, The Orthodox World, available at: <https://theorthodoxworld.com/serbian-patriarch-receives-secretary-general-of-the-world-muslim-league/> (accessed 20.10.2020).

58 "Muslim World League Leader Pleased with Croatia's Religious Communities Living Together", available at: <https://www.total-croatia-news.com/politics/41283-muslim-world-league> (accessed 20.10.2020).

59 Ibidem.

and parcel of the EU Treaty. It is worth noting that the conference was held under the patronage of the President of Croatia, the Prime Minister and the Speaker of Parliament, considering human fraternity as a basis for peace and security in the world.⁶⁰ The Mufti of the Croatian Muslim community, Aziz Hasanović, stressed the need for religious dialogue, based on the ongoing dialogue between Croatian Muslims and the Catholic Church, which reveals one aspect of co-existence in the country.⁶¹ President Grabar said that Croatia is central in Europe when it comes to religious dialogue, stressing that the MWL initiative is an opportunity for his country that pays attention to and promotes religious freedoms and dialogue.⁶²

Al-Issa informed the President of Bosnia and Herzegovina in a letter that he will support Bosnia and Herzegovina in combating the Coronavirus pandemic by donating \$300,000 from the MWL's special funds.⁶³ Al-Issa visited Bosnia and Herzegovina to meet with Šefik Džaferović and paid respect to Srebrenica massacre victims. In addition to cooperation, spreading and promoting Islamic values, Al-Issa made sure to use the occasion to support Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁶⁴

On his recent trip to Auschwitz-Butochari in Bosnia and Herzegovina, on February 10 to raise awareness about the treatment of minorities, Al-Issa praised the victims of the genocide in Srebrenica by visiting the memorial center in Butochari, making him the highest-ranking Islamic leader ever to visit the camp.⁶⁵ Speaking of Srebrenica, Al-Issa said: "It reminds us of what the forces of hate can do if good people and those in a position of strength do not do something to stop them," adding that there is a need to revive the memory of those killed in Srebrenica and expose mass crimes committed against Bosnia all over the world as this contributes to humanity as a whole.⁶⁶

Public figures, family members and many others attended the conference, and they were greeted by Al-Issa. "The Srebrenica Memorial Center is open to all who admit genocide, want to spread the truth about it, and are willing to stop it in the future if it happens again", said Hafizović, praising Al-Issa and MWL for their role in speaking about the genocide, stressing that is also an interfaith center for dialogue, and that all people of faiths are welcome to attend its activities.⁶⁷

60 Ibidem.

61 Ibidem.

62 Ibidem.

63 "World Muslim League helps Bosnia and Herzegovina with 300,000 Dollars", Sarajevo Times, available at: <https://www.sarajevotimes.com/world-muslim-league-helps-bosnia-and-herzegovina-with-300000-dollars/> (accessed 20.10.2020).

64 Ibidem.

65 "After historic Auschwitz trip, Muslim World League pays tribute to Srebrenica victims", available at: <https://www.pnews-wire.com/news-releases/after-historic-auschwitz-trip-muslim-world-league-pays-tribute-to-srebrenica-victims-301001963.html> (accessed February 10, 2020).

66 Ibidem.

67 Ibidem.

Conclusion

When the Muslim World League was established in 1962, it aimed at spreading the Saudi version of Islam which opposed the expanding Arab nationalism under Nasser. The Saudi government has given huge amounts of money to the organization which served as an arm for Saudi Arabia all over the world, expanding the Saudi understanding of Islam to many countries. However, this Saudi understanding of Islam at the time was dubbed as radical and strict, following the teachings of Wahabism.

Following the Iranian revolution in 1979, MWL served as an umbrella organization to make sure that the Iranian version of Islam does not reach the region, especially that Saudi Arabia has a Shiite minority. When the Arab Spring broke out, MWL saw in it an attempt to make Muslims more divided, urging Muslims to unite against efforts to topple governments and replace them with new ones.

The western media coverage of MWL was negative until recently. MWL was associated with exporting extremist ideology to the world, trying to expand Saudi outreach in the Middle East, Africa, the Balkans and Europe. Western media coverage of MWL connected it with extremism and Wahabism and adhering to a strict version of Islam that promotes religious intolerance and terrorism.

This media coverage of MWL has changed drastically recently with major political, religious, economic and cultural changes taking place in Saudi Arabia and at MWL itself. Following the visit of Al-Issa to Auschwitz, the American Jewish Committee headquarters, various world churches, and sites of Muslim victims of genocide in the Balkans, a new discourse has emerged from MWL. This new discourse was reflected in coverage which calls for religious tolerance, co-existence, expanding education and forgiveness, and being open to dialogue and refusing radical ideologies.

This major change in discourse and coverage can't be viewed in isolation from major changes – taking place in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East at large. Al-Issa has been prominent in advocating for this change in discourse and agenda. Despite radical change in discourse of MWL, the organization still has a long path to change the image that has been created about it in the West, as decades of adhering to Wahabism need years of networking and education to change the existing perception about MWL among governments, bodies, as well as ordinary people.

MWL has expanded its relief efforts recently during the outbreak of COVID19 pandemic, providing humanitarian assistance to Muslim and non-Muslim alike. Humanitarian assistance is used as a means to reflect this change in the discourse of MWL from one that promoted Salafism in the past to one that calls for religious

tolerance now, including being open to dialogue with Jewish and Christian organizations all over the world. MWL has been active in the Balkans too which reveals a Saudi interest in expanding its outreach in this important part of the world that is fundamental to Sunni Islam, which reveals once again that politics and religion cannot be viewed separately in the circles of the MWL.

More studies exploring political change through discourse analysis in Saudi Arabia and the GCC as a whole as study cases should be conducted. Speech acts and expressions are very telling of changes taking place in the world, globally and regionally. This is particularly important with political changes taking place in the Arab Gulf and with new blocs emerging in light of ongoing political changes in the region. Discourse analysis becomes critically important to understand changes taking place, and the Muslim World League is no exception. This is true to scholars of political science and media studies who could have important contributions to the field by applying CDA as a theory to understand current and regional politics.

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ОД РАДИКАЛИЗМА ДО ТОЛЕРАНЦИЈЕ: МЕДИЈСКО ИЗВЕШТАВАЊЕ О СВЕТСКОЈ МУСЛИМАНСКОЈ ЛИГИ

Сажетак

Од свог оснивања 1962. године, Светска муслиманска лига се сматра за организацију која би требало да шири утицај Саудијске Арабије и њене верзије вахабитског ислама у свету, у тренутку када су друге идеологије биле у залету – рецимо арапски национализам. Стога, она се бавила верским, културним, образовним и програмима помоћи. У то време, вахабитски ислам био је одбијен у западном свету. Ова студија анализира новинске чланке о Лиги који су објављени пре свега у западним медијима, користећи анализу дискурса. Закључак истраживања јесте тај да се медијско извештавање о Лиги променило, од негативном ка позитивном од како је Мухемед ал-Иса преузео вођење, али и због радикалних промена које се дешавају у Саудијској Арабији на политичком, друштвеном, верском и културном плану. Извештавања западних медија сада повезује Лигу са верском толеранцијом, отвореношћу и позитивном односу са другим религијама. Што значи да су је Лига одбила све форме радикализма и стриктне интерпретације ислама, и да позива за јединство и стварање мостова према другим религијама.

Кључне речи: Светска муслиманска лига, медијско извештавање, тероризам, верска толеранција, Саудијска Арабија, ал-Иса