**Does God need a moral police force? Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice**

Santa Clara University School of Law

Mohammed Alzahrani

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# Does God need a moral police force? Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice

Does God need a moral Police? The question is simple yet fully loaded. To the residents of Saudi Arabia and other close neighbors which are predominantly Muslim, the answer is well known. The life of a typical Saudi Arabian citizen begins with the indoctrination of Islamic teachings and the teachings are supposed to provide a complete code of law and conduct to the individuals. Muslims are expected to live in accordance with the teachings in the Holy Qur’an, some jobs are considered haram and many aspects of morality are closely guarded by the codes.

Saudi Arabia and a select number of countries in the Middle East are known for their strict enforcement of Islamic values and codes. Adherence to the Islamic culture characterizes life in Saudi, for instance, the citizens are expected to observe strict modes of dressing with insistence on modesty, strict separation of genders especially in public places and observance of prayers among other things. The enforcement of Sharia Law and its edicts such as the ones mentioned is conducted by a force of approximately 3,500-4000 people called Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (Saudi Arabia) who patrol the streets of Saudi Arabia to ensure that the same is fulfilled[[1]](#footnote-1). The role of this little police force has been debated by many people, with rising critics to its modes of operations and also strong support from conservative Muslims who prefer the preservation of the Sharia laws.

The position of the “moral police” as it is commonly has been heavily debated especially by religious leaders as pertaining to its legitimacy. The critics of the force cite its brutality in its enforcement and bring forth the idea that the need for it is not clearly presented in the Holy Quran. They suggest that Islam as a whole is a religion of peace and that there is no compulsion in religion. The conservative position of those who support the force argue that Islam as a whole is guided by the Sharia law which establishes principles of protection of life, protection of values, religion, lineage and the property[[2]](#footnote-2). There are some cited sections of the Holy Quran that tend to support the objectives of Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice in Saudi Arabia. Despite all this, it is important to gauge the value or impact that the police force has especially in the current age, and whether or not the impact can be said to be negative or positive.

The legality of some of the decisions made by the force has come under a lot of scrutiny in the recent years. While they have the backing of the Quran, at least from the general interpretation and are a critical state entity, the legality of some of the actions, especially excesses, has been questioned. Some of the excesses border human rights abuses, which has attracted the focus of the international community[[3]](#footnote-3). Some of the citizens have dared to go against the strict authorities and sue the entity in cases that have generated a lot of public and international focus.

From the above analysis, it is critical to evaluate the significance of the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice in Saudi Arabia’s role in the enforcement of the religious laws, whether or not the enforcement has been conducted in the most appropriate way, whether or not the actions have borne any public good and whether or not the force stands legitimacy in the present times. From a religious point of view, it is critical to evaluate whether the force is acting in line with the set edicts. This will be the focus of this research paper.

# Principles of Islamic Morality

The context of morality and ethics in Islam stems firstly from its main creed. That there is only One God, the Creator and sustainer of the whole Universe and that all and sundry have to believe in Him. One of the primary roles of any Muslim is to live a life of high moral standards. Prophet Muhammad (SAW) spent more time teaching and disciplining the people of his time (and today) the significance of having good manners. In the end, His life reflected the teachings which were given to Him by Allah[[4]](#footnote-4). This leads to Allah describing Prophet Muhammad in the Holy Quran as “And indeed, you are of a great moral character.”[[5]](#footnote-5). In this regard, it can be seen that Prophet Muhammad’s high moral standards ended up making him more than just a spiritual leader, but a model for the high moral standards expected in Islam.

It can also be deduced that in some narrations Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, made the distinctions of the people based on their moral standards and behavior, as can be seen when the Prophet remarked, “The most perfect man in his faith, among the believers, is the one whose behavior is the most excellent; and the best of you are those who are the best to their wives.” Ahmad.

The aspect of vice and virtue is well entrenched in the Holy Quran. The Noble Quran notes “Say: the things that my Lord hath indeed forbidden are: shameful deeds, whether open or secret; sins and trespasses against truth or reason; assigning of partners to Allah, for which He hath given no authority; and saying things about Allah of which ye have no knowledge[[6]](#footnote-6). It can also be noted that Islamic principles to sins and trespasses of Muslims as being against the aspect of truth or reason. It indicates Allah’s blessings to Muslims of a high moral sense, devoid of any corruption by the external.

Overly, it is important to appreciate that the underlying idea of morality and ethics from an Islam perspective is that of love. The Quran and the Hadith admonishes the importance of having good manners, adopting good characters, being kind to everyone, being charitable to those in lack, helping others when they need the same help, being able to forgive others when they wrong us, showing utmost respect to elders, being kind to animals and the enforcement of other traits such as honesty.

# Arabic Legal Systems

The enforcement of these regulations can be seen as a moral duty for every Muslim. It has been done for many years and the fact that the state has come in strongly to defend it indicates the seriousness it holds to the country and to the Islamic population worldwide.

Despite the universality of application of Islamic Law in the societies of Saudi Arabia, it is critical to note that the country’s legal system has developed over the years to the current state. It has been developed over the years since the Islamic *Ummayad* and the Abbasid Empires which presented itself as a dichotomy between Islamic and secular legal systems. During the same times, there existed several institutions and individuals that were charged with the implementation of a range of laws and interests of the society. These institutions or people served within specific Islamic jurisdictions known as *Qadi* where the judges had the responsibility of dealing and addressing the secular matters. The Muhtasib, as noted above, were responsible for the promotion of good (*ma’ruf*) and the prevention of wrongdoing, known as (*hisba*). The ancient hisba entity was headed by the muhtasib and played a role in the prevention of vice and the promotion of virtue.

# Moral policing and history

The concept of moral policing is not a new one in the Islamic world as noted above. It has been there since the foundation of Islam in the year 610 by Prophet Muhammad (SAW). Exploring and affirming the link that exists between the Shariah Law, the teachings of Hadith and others on morality and the way they are interwoven into religion and finally into the society at large is a critical component of the Saudi Arabian government[[7]](#footnote-7). This is a key construent of the largely Islamic country which has remained religiously conservative in culture and in ways of life, making it a unique one in the largely external modern world.

From the start of the religion, there have been perceptions concerning the aspect of morality and the protection of it, if any. The Sunni teachingspresupposes the close role that the state has to play in the achievement of the state security which in turn is critical in the creation of a conducive environment of the Muslim religious duty of connecting and remaining to the virtue and forbidding the vices that may come their way*, al-amr bi-al-maʿruf wa-al-nahy ‘an al-munkar* (Hassan, 2009)*.*

For many years, therefore, many people have regarded the state as having a responsibility to enabling people to enjoy the religious duty of connecting to the vice and striving to avoid the vice. Therefore, the process of enforcing the religious duty is imperatively assigned to the administration of *Hisbah*, the doctrine that is dedicated to accountability and designates that the state has a divinely sanctioned duty to come in and use its abilities in encouraging virtue and forbidding vices in order to keep everything in standard with the expectations of the Shariah[[8]](#footnote-8). For many years, *Hisbah* has played a significant role in the management of the public worship areas and ensuring that the moral behavior is upheld and the same is reflected in the administration of the markets and was entrusted to *muhtasib (*محتسب*).* In the end, some of the responsibilities of Muhtasib has been distributed to state organs such as the *Hay’at al-Amr bi-al-Maʿru>f wa-al-Nahy ‘an alMunka (*Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice in Saudi Arabia*),* also known as *Hay’ah* or the *Mutawwa.*

# Role of Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice in the modern world

The current Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice was instituted in the 1930s by the first king of the modern state, Abdulazis Al-Saud in order to maintain the conservative aspects of the state. At its inception, the CPVPV had five main roles:

* Preserving and protecting the virtues and teachings of Islam.
* Preventing the aspect of blackmail and ensuring that it is eliminated
* Fighting sorcery as it is against the teachings of Allah
* Fighting and eliminating trafficking in humans
* Ensuring that all and sundry remain obedient to the laws of the state.

The patrols of the Mutawween include but are not limited to the following:

* Fighting to eliminate all the loopholes that allow trading in drugs to persist, and striving to eliminate the trade in alcohol and drugs.
* Checking observance to the dressing code
* Ensuring that men and women are not seen together in the public places
* Preventing people from participating in bad or unaccepted western practices and customs.

The punishment for such offenses has always been severe, ranging from beatings and humiiliations to serving jail terms.

The ICPVPV, from its inception, has been used by the ruling class as a political tool for protecting the interests of the Saudi Ruling Family[[9]](#footnote-9). Over the years, different kings have used the force to advance their interests, leading to the rise in liberal voices in the country that are demanding for the overhaul of the system as it does not serve a significant purpose in the current dispensation.

The religious police force has been condemned over the years for violating and flouting the available laws on criminal procedure especially when arresting, detaining and interrogating the suspects. The force has nearly unlimited powers and the powers have in many aspects been abused.

The organization has been characterized by many excesses, many of which go unreported or are quashed off. It is also critical to appreciate that the force operates in secrecy and a lot of ambiguity for outside observers. It is nearly impossible to determine the exact scope in which the organization operates in, especially in terms of mandate. According to the Human Rights Watch, there has been a lack of reporting aspects in the way the CPVPV operates. The understanding that the outside world has on the way the entity is run is majorly built by speculating and maybe the few instances that the cases are discussed in public or the media. This behavior by the organization is the rising discontent in which the organization addresses the issues surrounding human rights’ abuses. The discontent is rising from both the conservative side and the liberal side, majorly engineered by the liberals.

From the above analysis, it has been noted that there exists a close link that is often undefined between the religious police force and the state, especially in the enforcement of critical aspects. To a given extent, it cannot be defined explicitly whether the force belongs to the state or operates under a different mandate or reports to a different obligation. While the establishment of the force is closely argued to be commanded by the Sharia as the state has a responsibility to promote the needed virtues and fight vices, it is clearly uncertain whether the Mutaween is expected to fulfil or act in line with the mandate of the regular police or whether its efforts are to complement the mainstream police through the enforcement of codes[[10]](#footnote-10). The same can also be argued in the sense that Saudi Arabia being a largely Muslim country, the Mainstream police is expected to be able to enforce Islamic law and governance processes and as such there should be no reason for the Mutaween or the force to specifically enforce the moral code.

# Unilateral perspective

Most of the insight available about Mutaween can be said to be one-sided: it is what is availed about the organization by external sources other than the government or its agencies. In their paper titled “Religious Police in Saudi Arabia,” Al-Humaidan, Al-Juwair & Al-Jalah takes a contrarian view of the subject, especially on the part of injustices or human rights abuses, by arguing that despite the many allegations, the exact situation in the country has been injured by the press which has painted a worse image of the situation[[11]](#footnote-11). They argue that most of the information that the outside world knows about Saudi Arabia and the religious police represents a unilateral perspective that has been built over the years and catalyzed by the many stereotypes that the Western press holds about the country and the Islamic policies. They take a conservative view of the situation, to a larger extent defending the establishment of the police force, and argue that the world’s understanding of the police force is devoid of the truth either due to the lack of adequate information about the police force which spurs speculation or because the people who report such incidents lack a clear understanding of the nature of Saudi Arabia, the Islamic history, and about the culture and the state system that borrows heavily from Islamic teachings[[12]](#footnote-12).

The conservative voices further argue that most of the information that has been written about the police force concerns the individual cases that involved Saudi residents or non-Saudis or those that are not Muslims who irrespective of the fact that they were involved in the actual challenge or issue, are portrayed as representatives of the entire society. Al-Humaidan, Al-Juwair & Al-Jalahema et al, 2017 further claims that some of the cases are genuinely criminal as the perpetrators were caught deliberately breaking the laws by the religious police. The individuals implicated then end up pointing fingers towards Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice. This malignment is hence clearly misguided[[13]](#footnote-13). While the discussion concerning the extreme tendencies of the morality police force comes to the fore, there is a bias towards one side of the debate, especially the apprehension part, and the debate fails to address the religious constraints, the cultural and legal considerations that led to the apprehension. This in return leaves a big section of the debate out. Such allegations, therefore, may not be seen as taking an objective stance in the debate but rather is guilty of poor fact-finding mechanisms, deliberate maligning and misrepresentation of facts in order to meet a given set of malicious facts.

This supposition can be supported by the fact that there is nearly no single source of news that discusses the positive impact that the police force has had on the Saudi society but rather supposes there is none, taking it only as an oppressive force that should be reformed or de-established[[14]](#footnote-14). It is also important to note that most of what the media portrays about the force has heavy undertones of western cultural approaches especially to the concepts of society and relations, social morals and ethics, life, behavior and norms, and religion and values. There is every reason, therefore, to believe that the religious or political metrics and standards that the West has about the police force is wrong and could be misguided.

# The moral police and the future

This report does not support or refute the fact that there are excesses committed by the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice but rather presents the position of both the sides. The resentment by the community in Saudi Arabia concerning the police force, however, cannot be taken in vain. In an article titled “Who’s a dinosaur? Published in The Economist, the author argues that gone are the days when the religious police force could disrupt life and business in their enforcement actions without the rest of the society raising a voice. The social media platforms such as Twitter has acted as a ground for the locals to air out their grievances concerning the excesses[[15]](#footnote-15). The use of satire in such cases has been applied in such cases to mock the force and the government at large. These aspects have led to the government yielding to the pressure and clipping some of the powers of the moral police. In the present times, the pressure for the society to be open to the world implies that there is pressure for religious and cultural tolerance in the country, an area that the past has not supported. This necessitates the need for reforms.

# Conclusion

The question of whether God needs a moral police or not is the subject of the debate about Saudi Arabia and has been there for as long as the country has existed and as long as Islam has been central to the country’s practice which dates to many years ago. While the debate is mainly driven by the liberals, it is important that reforms are introduced to ensure the actions of the religious force do not exceed limits or do not contravene human rights. It is also important to acknowledge the many checks and balances that technology has necessitated which ensures that the excesses do not go unreported.

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