

Middle East Dialogue...Glorious Past, Uncertain Future

FREEDOM IN ISLAM IN THE THOUGHT OF TAREK AL-SUWAIDAN

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With forty-plus years of high exposure to all forms of media and extensive use of evolving means of communication from the cassette to the blogosphere, Kuwaiti preacher and televangelist Tarek Al-Suwaidan is a media savvy, technologically adept celebrity. Notwithstanding this expertise, it took a forty-second long YouTube segment to shake the foundations of his successful career. Posted on April 11, 2012, the YouTube segment prompted well-known religious scholars in the Arabian Peninsula to brand Al-Suwaidan a *kaafir*, or disbeliever. Titled “Tarek Al-Suwaidan [and his] Boundaries of Freedom of Expression [Speech],” the clip presents an excerpt from one of Suwaidan’s speeches. The speech was given at *al-Nahdha* Conference in the well-known Kuwaiti liberal institution, the Graduates Association. The speech came during the 2011 Arab uprisings and the unfolding protests calling for freedom and justice. Al-Suwaidan decided to respond back in self-defense and explain his positions in writing through a lengthy Statement that was uploaded on his website shortly after the spread of the YouTube clip.

Titled “Freedom: A Legitimate, Sacred Right,” the Statement is a clarification of the speech’s ideas with a focus on the concepts of freedom and apostasy in Islam. A successful businessman and educator, Al-Suwaidan’s organizational skills and pedagogical tools are at their best when constructing the Statement. I intend on analyzing Suwaidan’s Statement and conceptualization of freedom in Islam. Second, I will compare Al-Suwaidan to several Muslim modernists based on his background and Statement. What implications does such portrayal of freedom in Islam have on the tradition and on unfolding events in the Arab world?