A Guide Exploring the Causes of Radicalisation in the Persian Gulf
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Introduction:

This report discusses causes of radicalisation in the Persian Gulf. The aim of this research is to provide more detailed information about contemporary events, through an analysis of peer-reviewed academic articles. We have identified four recurring themes that heavily contribute towards radicalisation in the Persian Gulf. These themes are external intervention in the Persian Gulf; the effect of Wahhabism; the funding of terrorism and the geo-politics of the region, specifically focussing on the Saudi-Iranian and Saudi-Qatari relationships. A key finding was that an interaction of the aforementioned four themes is the most commonly occurring and particular to the Gulf.

External Intervention in the Persian Gulf as a Cause of Radicalisation:

One contributing factor which has encouraged the development of radicalisation within the Gulf has been the historically persistent interference and presence of Western powers in the region, creating a context of enmity amongst those who oppose their presence.

British Protectorates

During the nineteenth century, the ‘Persian Gulf Residency’ was established by the British through various treaties and agreements.\(^1\) Bahrain, Qatar, Oman and the Trucial States (the precursor to the United Arab Emirates [UAE]) were British ‘Protectorates’ until they gained their independence in 1971.\(^2\) Kuwait and South Yemen were also included in the ‘Residency’, but achieved independence earlier – Kuwait in 1961\(^3\) and South Yemen in 1963.\(^4\) As part of the agreement, the British defended the Gulf from international hegemony in exchange for the loyalty of oil companies.

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USA Presence
Soon after gaining independence from the British, the USA identified the region as being of great strategic military importance, due to its geographical position and access to vast amounts of natural resources. Consequently, the Gulf has remained a crucial area for US interests since the late 1970s. The emergence of “bilateral defence deals” with the US has restrained the Gulf’s own ability to formulate a military framework which is independent from Western control and influence. The “separate defence cooperation agreements with Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE”, “access to facilities agreement with Oman” and various military agreements with Saudi Arabia encourages reliance on the West for defence of the region from the GCC and Arab Shiites. It has been argued that the constant presence of the USA’s naval ‘Fifth Fleet’ in Bahrain, along with squadrons of warplanes and the positioning of 15,000 US troops in Kuwait “hold the region together.”

Export of Arms
The export of weapons and arms from the West to regions within the Gulf is facilitating radicalisation in terms of enabling dissent against a regime and the state oppression of those perceived to be a ‘threat’ to regime stability, to take place. Figures from 2014 show that the UAE and Saudi Arabia are the fourth and fifth largest importers of arms in the world, with Saudi Arabia spending $67 billion (9.3% of its GDP) on arms. Within the top five largest exporters of weapons, three are Western powers, including the US. The US’s role as main exporter of arms, combined with its strong military presence has made it “by far the strongest power in the Gulf.” This encourages radicalisation through the creation of a legacy of involvement within the psyche of those who live in the Gulf left by Western interference and persistent presence.

6 Ibid, p4
7 Ibid, p4
10 Ibid
11 Ibid

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The effect of Wahhabism in the Persian Gulf as a Cause of Radicalisation:

Demographics

The influence of Wahhabism, known by practitioners as Salafism, on the Arabian Peninsula has very strong connections to radicalisation region-wide. Funding for a myriad of Islamist organisations across multiple continents, including both Al Qa’ida and ISIS, can be traced back to the minority Wahhabi sect in several of the Arab Gulf States. The sect possesses inordinate influence over both domestic and foreign government policies of Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE in comparison to the deceptively diminutive size of the Wahhabi minority, respectively representing approximately 22%, 47% and 45% of the total population of these states. The total global population is estimated at somewhere between 4 and 7 million people, however, the overwhelming majority of Wahhabis reside in the Najd region of Saudi Arabia.

Wahhabism and Saudi Arabia

Gauging the actual power of Wahhabi doctrine over Saudi Arabian policies is difficult due to the informality of the ‘pact’ between the Wahhabis and the Al-Saud. This has been made especially complex since the reframing of the ‘pact’ in the wake of 9/11 and the 2003 Al Qa’ida attacks on Saudi Arabia. After these attacks, great pressure was put on the regime to purge potential radicalising forces within its borders. Al Qa’ida’s historic reluctance to directly target the Saudi royal family potentially evidences sympathetic voices within the monarchy that they do not wish to jeopardise by alienating appeasers, further implying that the Al Saud have ‘bought off’ Al Qa’ida in an attempt to discourage domestic attacks.

21 Ibid, p141

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Moreover, Wahhabism has been used in a dualistic sense, at times being considered to be a “guide” and “inspiration”\(^{22}\) for Islamic extremism, yet also being used by the Saudi regime as a tool to discredit Al Qa’ida’s aims and values.\(^ {23}\) The relationship between Islamist groups and the Wahhabi-influenced Saudi state remains a complex one: any connection is publicly disavowed by Saudi officials,\(^ {24}\) yet there are clearly connections between at least lower level Saudi clerics and radicalised militants in Syria and Iraq.\(^ {25}\)

**The Politicisation of Wahhabism**

The grafting of the fundamentalist Wahhabi ideology to the extremism of modern Jihadism is a fairly recent development, having emerged as a coherent, if constantly shifting, strain of the sect from the 1980s through to the present.\(^ {26}\) The movement’s politicisation took place in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. It subsequently became more radical through external conflicts, such as Chechnya, remaining connected to the Persian Gulf region due to Wahhabism’s theological roots in Najd and the presence of jihadis returning back to the Gulf States from foreign conflict zones.\(^ {27}\) This contributed to the radicalisation of those who were exposed to returning jihadists. Just as Saudi influence has radicalised Islamist groups abroad, so to have foreign groups, such as the mujahedeen of Afghanistan,\(^ {28}\) served to radicalise Saudi Wahhabis.

**Funding of terrorism in the Persian Gulf as a Cause of Radicalisation:**

\(^ {22}\) *Ibid, p140*

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The funding of fundamentalist groups in the region, who engage in militant behaviour, such as those fighting in Syria, is primarily derived from private donors, most notably in Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait. Individual and private donors and group backers from the aforementioned states support groups such as those currently fighting in Syria. In particular, it is widely accepted that terrorist organisations, such as Jabhat al-Nusra are sponsored by the Qatari state. The fostering of close ties to the Nusra Front can be seen as an attempt to increase Qatar’s regional influence. Such geopolitical competition has served to increase tensions with neighbouring Saudi Arabia. For example a former Qatari Interior Ministry official, Salim Hasan Khalifa Rashid al-Kuwari, has been named by the U.S. Department of the Treasury as an al Qaeda financier and the U.S. State Department has also raised concerns over Qatari based terrorist fundraisers. However, it should be noted that Qatar does not fund the Islamic State (IS) and there is no credible evidence that the Saudi government is financially supporting IS either.

**Private Donors**

The European Parliament report on Salafist support for groups throughout the MENA area in 2013 stated that private donations continue to be sent to Salafis through informal methods of transfer also known as Hawalas, which are common throughout the region. This is the primary source of financing that terrorists can draw on, where external funding is provided by donors sympathetic to the cause, often in Gulf state countries or from members of terrorist networks.  

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of the diaspora community. A 2013 Brookings report found that much of this funding comes from private donors based in Kuwait or those in neighbouring countries funneling money through Kuwait; Treasury Undersecretary David Cohen recently said that Kuwait is at the “epicentre of fundraising for terrorist groups” and that Qatar is “a permissive terrorist financing environment”.

**State Failure to Prevent Funding for Terrorists**

In particular, Kuwait has consistently been identified as having been exploited as both a source of funding for extremist groups and as a key transit point. In part this was due to the failure of Kuwait to comply with the Financial Action Task force (FATF) 49 recommendations; a 2010 review revealed “many shortcomings,” particularly in relation to countering terrorist finance, including a complete lack of the criminalization of terrorist-financing, no established Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU), and no implementation of the relevant UN terrorist-financing conventions and Security Council resolutions.

**Reasons for Private Donations**

One of the key motivations for private financial donations is providing financial support to groups using terrorism. This allows those who cannot, or will not join the Jihad physically for whatever reason, to achieve the honour and heavenly reward of waging Jihad by proxy. Social media is relied upon to solicit donations for terrorists and to communicate with both donors and recipient radicals on the battlefield. The US State Department’s annual Country Reports on Terrorism for 2013 noted that private donations from Persian Gulf countries were “a major source of funding for Sunni terrorist groups” and it looks as if this counterterrorism issue is set to persist for years to come.

**Geopolitics as a Cause of Radicalisation:**

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41 ‘The Importance of Financing in Enabling and Sustaining the Conflict in Syria (and Beyond)’, Keatinge T, Perspectives on Terrorism, 8:4, August 2014

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The Effects of Saudi Arabian-Iranian Relations

Poor Saudi-Iranian relations have heightened the Sunni-Shia divide in the Gulf and allowed extremists to manoeuvre more easily. The fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq concerns Saudi Arabia: the Saudi regime perceives the increasing Shia dominance in the region as a threat to its internal stability, as it could encourage the Shia dominated Eastern province and Bahrain to seek more political power, exemplified by the Arab Spring of 2011. Consequently, the Saudi regime has increasingly allowed an anti-Shia discourse to be publicly pronounced.

An increasing number of Sunni Saudi Clerics have recently released fatwas promoting sectarian hatred against the Shiite minority, which have been condemned by Iran. Allowing radical elements to speak out could be seen as a political move by the Al Saud to release pressure from the Saudi streets, while endorsing harsh sectarian beliefs against the disadvantaged minority.

This has escalated recently, with Sunni radicals leading attacks against Shiites in the Al-Ahsa region. This has exacerbated tensions and forced a strong response from the Saudi state. Repeated attacks has also forced some Shiite clerics to radicalise, however they have been quickly silenced by the Saudi regime. A Riyadi Court sentenced prominent cleric Nimr al-Nirm to death, for calling for celebrating the death of Crown Prince Nayef back in 2011.

Effects of Saudi & Qatari contending foreign policies on extremism

Qatar and Saudi Arabia have in recent years competed for influence across the Arab world. This rivalry has led to some tensions between the two states resulting in numerous diplomatic incidents. The main points of divergence are related to Qatar’s support of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Al Qa’ida linked groups in Syria. The short-lived withdrawal of the GCC ambassadors in Qatar highlighted this underlying tension in the allied bloc.

Qatar’s aggressive foreign policy has been underlined in the Libyan civil war and the current Syrian conflict. Through this, it has been unable to differentiate between radical and moderate elements of the groups it supports, drawing criticism from its allies. Qatar has argued that its support for Islamists in Libya were justified, as it believed in the long run they would embrace participatory politics. The Gulf States reproach Qatar’s funding of

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extremist groups that are directly linked to Al Qa‘ida which could potentially operate in the long run in their own backyards.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our research has shown that there are numerous, interlinking factors which contribute towards radicalisation in the Persian Gulf. It is necessary to consider these factors together in order to appreciate that ‘radicalisation’ does not result from one single motivating factor, but that the convergence of the themes we have discussed in the above report produces various responses which can radicalise an individual.

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