

Research Paper

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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 1961³ 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.

¹ *The Legal Status of the Arabian Gulf States: A Study of their Treaty Relations and their International Problems*, Al-Baharna H. M, p6, The University Press, Manchester, New York, India, 1968

² *Protectorates and Protected States*, UK Government, p2, no date, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/268033/pandpstates.pdf, accessed 21st January 2015

³ *The Legal Status of the Arabian Gulf States: A Study of their Treaty Relations and their International Problems*, Al-Baharna H. M, p3, The University Press, Manchester, New York, India, 1968

⁴ 'Divided south Yemen separatists vow to achieve independence', Al-Batati S, *Middle Eastern Eye*, 30th September 2014, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/divided-south-yemen-separatists-vow-achieve-independence-830553601>, accessed 21st January 2015

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”⁵ 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”⁶, “access to facilities agreement with Oman”⁷ and various military agreements with Saudi Arabia⁸ 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,⁹ along with squadrons of warplanes and the positioning of 15,000 US troops in Kuwait¹⁰ “hold the region together.”¹¹

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,¹² with Saudi Arabia spending \$67 billion (9.3% of its GDP) on arms.¹³ 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.”¹⁴ 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.

⁵ *Gulf security: changing internal and external dynamics*, Ulrichsen K, p4, The Centre for the Study of Global Governance, May 2009

⁶ *Ibid*, p4

⁷ *Ibid*, p4

⁸ *Security Cooperation in the Middle East*, Cordesman A. H, p6, The Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 2007, http://ncusar.org/programs/10292007_Final.Mil_Coop_in_ME.pdf, accessed 21st January 2015

⁹ ‘Embracing Crisis in the Gulf’, Jones T, *Middle East Report*, Volume 42, Number 264: ‘Pivot, Rebalance, Retrench: The US Posture in the Middle East, Fall 2012, <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer264/embracing-crisis-gulf>, accessed 19th January 2015

¹⁰ *Ibid*

¹¹ *Ibid*

¹² ‘Gulf states among world’s largest arms importers’, Sloan A, 25th March 2014, *MEMO: Middle East Monitor*, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/articles/middle-east/10510-gulf-states-among-worlds-largest-arms-importers>, accessed 21st January 2015

¹³ SIPRI Fact Sheet, April 2014: Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2013, Perlo-Freeman S and Solmirano C, p2, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2014

¹⁴ ‘Embracing Crisis in the Gulf’, Jones T, *Middle East Report*, Volume 42, Number 264: ‘Pivot, Rebalance, Retrench: The US Posture in the Middle East, Fall 2012, <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer264/embracing-crisis-gulf>, accessed 19th January 2015

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 organisations¹⁵ across multiple continents, including both Al Qa'ida and ISIS,¹⁶ can be traced back to the minority Wahhabi sect in several of the Arab Gulf States.¹⁷ 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,¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ 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,²⁰ further implying that the Al Saud have 'bought off' Al Qa'ida in an attempt to discourage domestic attacks.²¹

¹⁵ 'The Involvement of Salafism / Wahhabism in the Support and Supply of Arms to Rebel Groups Around the World', Moniquet C, *European Parliament*, 2013, http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/join/2013/457137/EXPO-AFET_ET%282013%29457137_EN.pdf, accessed 1st February 2015

¹⁶ 'Wahhabism to ISIS: how Saudi Arabia exported the main source of global terrorism', Armstrong K, 27th November 2014, *The New Statesman online*, <http://www.newstatesman.com/world-affairs/2014/11/wahhabism-isis-how-saudi-arabia-exported-main-source-global-terrorism>, accessed 21st January 2015

¹⁷ 'Kuwaiti Salafism and its growing influence in the Levant', Pall Z, *Carnegie: Endowment for International Peace*, May 2014, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/kuwaiti_salafists.pdf, accessed 1st February 2015

¹⁸ Izady M, 'The Gulf/2000 Project', http://gulf2000.columbia.edu/images/maps/GulfReligionGeneral_lg.png accessed 5th January 2015

¹⁹ *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia*, D. Commins, pp.177-207, I.B. Tauris, 2009

²⁰ 'Al Qaeda and the House of Saud: Eternal Enemies or Secret Bedfellows?', Bradley J, *The Washington Quarterly*, p146, 28:4, 2005

²¹ *Ibid*, p141

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

²³ ‘Al Qaeda’s Third Front: Saudi Arabia’, Riedal B and Saab B. Y, p37, *Washington Quarterly*, 31: 2, Spring 2008

²⁴ ‘Saudi Arabia does not support Islamic State terrorists – or any others’, Al Saud M, 17th August 2014, *The Guardian Online*, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/17/saudi-arabia-not-support-islamic-state-terrorists>, accessed 5th February 2015

²⁵ ‘Saudi Arabia’s clerics condemn IS but preach intolerance’, Maclean W and Taylor P, 10th September 2014, *Reuters*, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/09/10/us-saudi-islam-security-idUSKBN0H50EE20140910>, accessed 21st January 2015

²⁶ ‘You Can’t Understand ISIS If You Don’t Know the History of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia,’ Crooke A, *New Perspectives Quarterly*, 32:1, 20th January 2015

²⁷ ‘The Rise and Fall of Arab Fighters in Chechnya’, Al – Shishani M. B, September 2006, *The Jamestown Foundation*, http://www.jamestown.org/fileadmin/Recent_Reports/Trans_and_Speaker_NCC09142006/AI-Shishani-14Sep06.pdf, accessed 1st February 2015

²⁸ ‘Terrorist Recruitment and Radicalisation in Saudi Arabia’, Hegghammer T, p50, *Middle East Policy*, 13:4, 2006

The funding of fundamentalist²⁹ 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.³⁰ The fostering of close ties to the Nusra Front can be seen as an attempt to increase Qatar's regional influence.³¹ Such geopolitical competition has served to increase tensions with neighbouring Saudi Arabia.³² 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 financier³³ and the U.S. State Department has also raised concerns over Qatari based terrorist fundraisers.³⁴ However, it should be noted that Qatar does not fund the Islamic State (IS)³⁵ and there is no credible evidence that the Saudi government is financially supporting IS either.³⁶

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.³⁷ 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

²⁹ The term fundamentalist in this case means Salafi or conservative Sunni Muslims. These groups seek to strictly adhere to and apply literalist interpretations of scripture based on the example set by the Prophet and his companions. 'Tentative Jihad: Syria's Fundamentalist Opposition', *International Crisis Group*, Middle East Report Number 131, 12th October 2012,

<http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Syria/131-tentative-jihad-syrias-fundamentalist-opposition.pdf>

³⁰ 'The Case Against Qatar', Dickinson E, 30th September 2014, *Foreign Policy*,

<http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/09/30/the-case-against-qatar/>, accessed 19th January 2015

³¹ 'Is Qatar bringing the Nusra Front in from the cold?', Roberts D, 6th March 2015, *BBC News Online*,

<http://m.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-31764114>, accessed 7th June 2015

³² 'Saudi Arabia and Qatar Vie for Influence in Syria', *Al Monitor*, April 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ar/politics/2013/04/saudi-arabia-qatar-vie-influence-syria.html#>, accessed 7th June 2015

³³ 'Treasury Targets Key Al-Qa'ida Funding and Support Network Using Iran as a Critical Transit Point', *US Department of the Treasury*, 28th July 2011, <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1261.aspx>, accessed 7th June 2015

³⁴ 'Country Reports on Terrorism 2013', United States Department of State Publication, *Bureau of Counterterrorism*, April 2014 <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/225886.pdf>, accessed 23rd January 2015

³⁵ 'Five Myths About the Islamic State', McCants W, 26th August 2014, *Brookings Institute*,

<http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/up-front/posts/2014/08/26-myths-about-islamic-state-mccants>, accessed 19th January 2015

³⁶ 'Saudi Funding ISIS', Boghardt L. P, 23rd June 2014, *Washington Institute*,

<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/saudi-funding-of-isis>, accessed 21st January 2015

³⁷ 'The Involvement of Salafism / Wahhabism in the Support and Supply of Arms to Rebel Groups Around the World', Moniquet C, *European Parliament*, 2013,

http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/join/2013/457137/EXPO-AFET_ET%282013%29457137_EN.pdf, accessed 1st February 2015

of the diaspora community.³⁸ A 2013 Brookings report found that much of this funding comes from private donors based in Kuwait or those in neighbouring countries funnelling 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”.³⁹

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.⁴⁰

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.⁴¹ 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.⁴²

Geopolitics as a Cause of Radicalisation:

³⁸ ‘Finances of jihad: How extremist groups raise money’, Keatinge T, 12th December 2014, *BBC News Online*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-30393832>, accessed 12th February 2015

³⁹ Remarks of Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence David Cohen before the Center for a New American Security on “Confronting New Threats in Terrorist Financing”, Cohen D, *US Department of the Treasury*, 3rd April 2014, <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2308.aspx>, accessed 1st February 2015

⁴⁰ ‘Regaining Control of the [Rebel] Financing Agenda in Syria’, Keatinge T, 20th January 2014, <http://warontherocks.com/2014/01/regaining-control-of-the-rebel-financing-agenda-in-syria/>, accessed 27th February 2015

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

⁴² ‘The Terrorist Funding Disconnect with Qatar and Kuwait’, Boghardt L. P, *Washington Institute*, 2nd May 2014, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-terrorist-funding-disconnect-with-qatar-and-kuwait>, accessed 21st January 2015

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-Nimr 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.⁴³ 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.⁴⁴ The Gulf States reproach Qatar's funding of

⁴³ 'Qatar's foreign policy: the limits of pragmatism', Khatib L, *International Affairs* 89: 2, 2013, http://fsi.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/INTA89_2_10_Khatib.pdf, accessed 1st February 2015

⁴⁴ 'Behind Qatar's Intervention In Libya: Why Was Doha Such A Strong Supporter of The Rebels?', Roberts D, *Foreign Affairs*, 28th September 2011, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/68302/david-roberts/behind-qatars-intervention-in-libya>, accessed 12th February 2015

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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