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Building Resilience to Radicalisation in MENA

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Because my expertise primarily concerns domestic politics of the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), my comments will be limited to building resilience to radicalisation in those countries. These environments are unique because leaders of all six GCC states have publicly and repeatedly proclaimed their commitment to fighting radicalisation and have the financial wherewithal to create innovative rehabilitative institutions and pursue other means of de-radicalisation. Although rhetoric and policy do indicate a deep-rooted commitment to fighting radicalisation, it remains to be seen the extent to which such efforts are (a) long-term, systemic, and preventative rather than reactive; and (b) stifle not only potentially violent groups but also the activities of nonviolent organisations inside such countries or limit religious practice in one of the most conservative sub-regions of the Middle East. I elaborate on these points below.

Leaders of all states in the GCC have, since the September 11th attacks, spoken a great deal about their commitment to countering radicalisation, with all taking concrete policy actions towards this end, particularly through the implementation of anti-terrorism laws. In these states where independent civil society is unlikely to be encouraged, however, education and engagement with religious institutions are the best means through which to encourage de-radicalisation and counter narratives harmful to these efforts. These efforts, notably, will require significant and long-term commitments to reform. Although some efforts have been made towards that end, by and large the sector remains underdeveloped, with greater emphasis on short-term or reactive, or curative, programmes instead.

Because terms like Islamist, radicalisation, extremism, and radical are so vaguely defined, it is relatively easy for the governments of the Gulf States to use them to their own political advantage. For instance, the UAE's crackdown on its local branch of the Muslim Brotherhood and the revocation of citizenship from dissidents in other Gulf states have been done in the name of defending national security from terrorist activities and radical ideologies, even in cases where such charges are inappropriate. Furthermore, not knowing whether simply holding radical beliefs is enough to lead to prosecution or whether this requires action to fulfil those ideas is another major issue; indeed, if people can be prosecuted for what they believe, overstretch on the part of the state seems increasingly possible.

The flow of terrorist financing throughout the Gulf states has been of particular interest, even though most Gulf states, barring Saudi Arabia, (<http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s/>) have

not had many nationals join Daesh themselves. Prior to the Arab Spring and resulting conflict in Syria, most Gulf countries lacked strict terrorist financing laws and began to implement them in the years following 2011, aside from Oman and Qatar whose laws predated that era. There is a general need to define what exactly constitutes terrorist financing, yet new legislation indicates a desire to stem the tide of opportunities for financiers of terrorism in the Gulf.

Aside from issues of the feasibility and commitment to long-term implementation of counter radicalisation programmes, the other major challenge to fighting terrorism and radicalisation in the Gulf states is the dual use that terrorism laws can have to both restrict violent extremism and to punish political enemies. Below is a country-by-country summary of counter-radicalisation programmes and anti-terrorism laws, highlighting both the beneficial and problematic aspects of each.

Bahrain's Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs organises workshops for clerics and popular figures following both Shi'i and Sunni sects, in addition to conducting an annual review of Islamic Studies curricula to ensure correct interpretation of texts. Of course, the motivation for such thoroughness may be the perceived threat of Shi'i incursion, yet, in any case, this measure is a welcome reform to potentially problematic education practices.

In 2015, the Bahraini government implemented a new anti-terrorism law, amending the 2006 legislation. The new law allows the government to strip citizenship from those involved in terrorist acts and also bans public gatherings in Manama. More troublingly, the law allows the government to "take all necessary measures...to impose civic security and peace whenever law is violated" and gives to "the security bodies all required and appropriate powers to protect society from terror incidences and prevent spreading them." As a result of the broad powers granted to security services, the Bahraini government has substantial authority to imprison politically problematic figures in the name of safety; a variety of human rights groups has decried the legislation, yet the government maintains that such legislation is necessary in the current regional security climate.

Kuwait has used a variety of public relations campaigns to spread the message of so-called "moderate" Islam, using radio, television, and billboards. The Ministry of Interior has also transferred the Center for Counseling and Rehabilitation from Kuwait's Central Prison to a new location, aiming to expand the centre following the model of Saudi Muhammad bin Naif's Center for Counselling and Rehabilitation. While these steps are positive, many contend that Kuwait's education system, which is strongly influenced by the study of religion, is in need of an overhaul, and in 2015 Kuwait's Ministry of Education and the National Center for Education Development signed a five-year technical cooperation agreement with the World Bank to improve the quality of education, a measure that will likely be helpful to long-term reform.

Until 2015, Kuwait's legislation to prosecute terrorists was underdeveloped, and it increased penalties for violent terrorist acts as well as for terrorism-related cybercrimes in that year. Kuwait's latest counter-terrorism law, passed in 2015, controversially requires

all citizens and residents of the state to provide DNA samples to authorities, making Kuwait the only country to require this. Anyone who refuses this testing will face up to one year in prison and/or a fine of up to 10,000KD (26,336GBP). This law is currently being contested and potentially revised, yet, at present, represents a dangerous incursion into personal privacy. A cybercrime law, also passed in 2015, criminalises “the publication of incitement to overthrow the regime in the country,” in the name of counterterrorism, yet this and other articles in the law could be used to justify punishing members of the political opposition.

Oman’s Grand Mufti, of the Ibadi sect, Shaykh Ahmed al-Khalili published an essay in October 2014 encouraging all Muslims to reject extremism and instead support tolerance – values that he regularly promotes publicly and which are supported by many followers of Ibadism, the prominent sect in Oman. The government also has an advocacy campaign, “Islam in Oman,” to encourage inclusivity and tolerance and highlighting similarities among different sects. A programme called “Tolerance, Understanding, Coexistence – Oman’s Message of Islam,” produced by the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, has been another means of promoting interfaith discussion. Oman also passed amendments to the Anti-Money Laundering and Financing of Terrorism Acts and has approved longer prison sentences for these offences.

For its part, Qatar was pivotal in the adoption, during the 13th UN Crime Congress, of the so-called Doha Declaration to focus on education to prevent extremism and criminality, in the years leading to the 14th UN Crime Congress in 2020. At the 13th Crime Congress, Qatar announced a new education initiative for young people in the Middle East displaced by violence. It also signed a four-year \$49 million funding agreement with the UN Office on Drugs and Crime to deliver projects linked to the Doha Declaration, including countering extremism through prisoner rehabilitation and social integration programmes, as well as education in justice. Qatar also brought the Research Center for Islam and Ethics to Qatar University to moderate teachings of Islamic through counter to extremist ideologies. Silatech, another Qatar-funded body, has been instrumental in holding regional workshops to promote entrepreneurship and engagement as a means of deterring youth from violent extremism.

Qatar enacted laws concerning terrorism and terror financing in 2004, 2010, and 2014. The 2004 Law on Combating Terrorism outlines broad provisions for defining and punishing acts of terrorism, including granting information, training or material support to such groups. The 2014 Cybercrime Prevention Law criminalises terrorism-linked cyber offenses and has been criticised for criminalising the publication of “false news” and content considered violating the country’s “social values” or “general order,” terms which are never defined. The legislation also allows law enforcement enhanced ability to monitor internet activity and electronic data.

Saudi Arabia has, like its neighbours, used public awareness campaigns to combat radicalisation. Such programmes are centred on reinforcing the values of Wahhabism through advertisements, television programmes, and lectures in schools and mosques. While positive developments, they are relatively short-term, rather than systemic,

reforms. For more long-term anti-radicalisation, the Ministry of Interior operates the Sakina Campaign for Dialogue, a de-radicalisation programme at the Mohammed bin Naif Counseling and Care Center, a rehabilitative centre for former terrorists meant to “fix incorrect concepts” and “deepen patriotism.” Despite these developments, the Saudi government has failed to complete its reform of the educational system to modernise curricula, including textbooks, some of which are said to include derogatory information about Shi‘i Muslims and non-Muslims. Because the most powerful and prominent Saudi religious scholars are employees of the state, they are closely monitored for potentially extremist messages. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs trains and regulates all imams and monitors mosques and religious education, though privately funded television stations can still spread radical ideas.

Saudi Arabia in 2014 created a 41-article new counterterrorism law. The Kingdom’s latest terrorism law, drafted in 2015, removes sentencing guidelines, a ban on all demonstrations, and the provision for criminalising defamation of the state. Nonetheless, it uses a vague enough definition of terrorism that grants the interior minister legal authority to imprison people or monitor their communications and financial information without judicial oversight. Terrorism is defined as “any act carried out by an offender in furtherance of an individual or collective project, directly or indirectly, intended to disturb the public order of the state, or to shake the security of society, or the stability of the state, or to expose its national unity to danger, or to suspend the basic law of governance or some of its articles, or to insult the reputation of the state or its position, or to inflict damage upon one of its public utilities or its natural resources, or to attempt to force a governmental authority to carry out or prevent it from carrying out an action, or to threaten to carry out acts that lead to the named purposes or incite [these acts].” Such a wide-ranging definition can easily be used to justify the detention or revocation of citizenship of political dissidents, even if they do not support violent extremist ideologies.

The UAE supports Hedayah, the International Center of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism in Abu Dhabi, which has conducted workshops with former terrorist fighters and endeavours to adopt global best practices to combat violent extremism. The Emirati government is also working with the American government to launch the Sawab Center in Abu Dhabi, a social media platform to counter Daesh’s online propaganda. The UAE also hosted the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies. Perhaps most importantly, the Emirati government has embarked on major educational reform and plans to open in Al Ain a branch of Egypt’s Al-Azhar University as a means of promoting “moderate” Islam.

The UAE’s counterterrorism law, passed in 2014, like that of neighbouring Saudi Arabia, grants the government sweeping powers, largely due to the vague definition of terrorism. Terrorist acts are defined as, among other things, “stirring panic among a group of people” and “antagonizing the state,” without requiring the intent to cause death or serious injury. It also grants the sentence of death or life in prison for anyone who aims “to undermine the stability, safety, unity, sovereignty, or security of the State” or “to undermine national unity or social peace.” Another article also grants sentences of between three and 15 years for anyone who “publicly declares his animosity or lack of

allegiance to the State or the regime.” The legislation also allows the courts, upon request from the office of the public prosecutor, to order travel bans and surveillance on persons “deemed dangerous from a terrorism-related perspective.” Further, under new counter-terrorism legislation, peaceful groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, the Council on American-Islamic Relations, and Cordoba Foundations are dubbed terrorist groups and thus banned inside the UAE.

In my estimation, the primary challenge in combatting radicalisation in the GCC is to pass legislation that will be long-term and systemic, as well as restrictive enough to prevent radicalisation yet lenient enough to allow the practice of independent groups that provide important alternatives to violent extremism. By closing this space, these states actually make violence a more likely outlet for political activism. A focus on long-term systemic changes to educational systems of the Gulf should yield positive results in terms of preventing attraction to radical ideologies. A serious and inclusive discussion about what constitutes “moderate” Islam would also be helpful in instructing such reforms and ensuring freedom of nonviolent Islamist practice in the GCC.