

Research Paper

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# Moving Target

## UK–GCC Relations and the Politics of ‘Extremism’



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# Contents

Summary	2
1 Introduction	3
2 The International Policy Discourse on Extremism	5
3 Views from the Gulf: ISIS as Part of a Wider Regional Conflict	12
4 Shaky Ground: The Confusion Over ‘Non-violent Extremism’	24
5 Conclusions	30
Acronyms	33
About the Author	34
Acknowledgments	35

## Summary

- Fifteen years after the United States declared a ‘war on terror’, the Western policy agenda has moved on to a broader focus on countering ‘extremism’. But just as ‘terrorism’ has long been an internationally contested notion, there is even less consensus on what defines extremism – and much less still on the increasingly central notion of ‘non-violent extremism’.
- Western and Middle Eastern countries, including the United Kingdom and the Gulf states, share a common interest in working together on counterterrorism, particularly to combat Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Al-Qaeda. The Gulf and UK governments also agree that countering extremism requires a mix of social, political and ideas-based approaches as well as security and law enforcement work. However, there are significant differences in their understandings of the drivers of ISIS.
- International cooperation against the broader and more nebulous phenomenon of extremism is more problematic, because there is no agreement on what extremism is. The UK and its GCC partners use the term to mean very different things, and differences of interpretation are all too often glossed over in the interests of international cooperation on counter-extremism.
- In the current UK policy formulation, extremism is in effect defined as ideology opposed to liberal democratic values. This exclusive focus on beliefs risks diverting attention away from wider political and social drivers of extremism, and lumps many diverse movements together as though they represent a single, homogeneous phenomenon.
- Internationally, the UK is working with a number of governments that in fact reject some of these values, especially Western democracy. These include governments in the strategically important Gulf region, as well as others in the wider Middle East region. Whereas the UK holds opposition to democracy to be part of its definition of extremism, Gulf governments typically consider it extremist to campaign for any rapid transition to democracy in their countries.
- For the purposes of international security cooperation, the generic focus on what is termed extremism risks generating confusion and mistrust between the UK and Gulf governments. These differences will also provide ammunition for domestic and international criticism of double standards. Instead, the extremism agenda should be replaced with a clearer, specific focus on named individuals, groups and movements, identified because of their intentions and plans.

# 1. Introduction

Fifteen years after the United States declared a ‘war on terror’, the Western policy agenda has moved on to a broader focus on countering ‘extremism’. But just as ‘terrorism’ has long been an internationally contested notion, there is even less consensus on what defines extremism – and much less still on the increasingly central notion of ‘non-violent extremism’. In the current international political context, the debate concerning extremism has centred on violent Islamist extremism, exemplified by Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Al-Qaeda (AQ), both recognized internationally as terrorist organizations. ISIS has risen to particular prominence since it took the Iraqi city of Mosul in 2014; and the Paris attacks of 2015, as well as subsequent attacks in Europe, the Middle East and Africa, have demonstrated its intent and capabilities to operate transnationally. The vast majority of its victims have been in the Muslim world, especially the Arab Middle East.

Governments in the Middle East and the West, including the UK and its allies in the Gulf, share a common interest in fighting and countering AQ and ISIS, which represent a threat to all of them. There are some differences of opinion on the root causes of ISIS’s development, with the Gulf Arab states placing greater focus on regional politics and in particular the role of Iran, and expressing frustration with those voices in the West that suggest that Iran can help counter ISIS. Such differences do not preclude cooperation, but they do mean that there are different priorities. However, in a fast-changing context in which ISIS’s ability to recruit internationally is not entirely unprecedented, but the reach and pace is new, the Gulf and UK governments can each learn through sharing their insights. Research into the complex drivers of this external recruitment has struggled to keep pace with the policy demand for rapid solutions to an urgent security threat. It is in this environment that UK politicians sometimes turn to overly simplistic depictions of an abstract ‘evil ideology’.

More broadly, the UK government is interested in cooperating with its international partners not only in counterterrorism, but also in countering so-called ‘non-violent extremism’. The latter has become a central UK policy priority, as highlighted in the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review<sup>1</sup> and the 2015 Counter-Extremism Strategy.<sup>2</sup> According to the latter, ‘terrorism is really a symptom; ideology is the root cause’; and the UK’s focus will now be on non-violent as well as violent extremism. But precisely what this means remains unclear and contested, as the definition is wide-ranging and has not yet been set out in law. The UK government’s Prevent strategy of 2011 defines extremism as ‘vocal or active opposition’ to ‘fundamental British values’: ‘democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs’.<sup>3</sup> While Islamist groups are in practice the main focus of policy, the government documents also emphasize that ‘Islamist extremism’ is not the only issue, and highlight other forms such as far-right, neo-Nazi, anti-Semitic

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<sup>1</sup> HM Government (2015), National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom, November 2015, [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/478933/52309\\_Cm\\_9161\\_NSS\\_SD\\_Review\\_web\\_only.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/478933/52309_Cm_9161_NSS_SD_Review_web_only.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> HM Government (2015), *Counter-Extremism Strategy*, October 2015, [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/470088/51859\\_Cm9148\\_Accessible.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/470088/51859_Cm9148_Accessible.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> HM Government (2011), *Prevent Strategy*, June 2011, p.108 (Glossary), [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/97976/prevent-strategy-review.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/97976/prevent-strategy-review.pdf).

and anti-Muslim extremism. The move towards an entirely beliefs-based (rather than action-based) definition of extremism is contentious within the UK, given its liberal traditions of freedom of speech and thought, and has raised practical questions from the legal establishment and the police about how counter-extremism policies can be meaningfully implemented.

A further, under-analysed issue is that the wide-ranging, values-based definition of extremism adopted by the UK government from 2011 has raised some serious dilemmas for foreign policy. The UK has advocated for other governments around the world to adopt its definition of non-violent extremism. But the concept of non-violent extremism has found its warmest reception among authoritarian governments that do not accept the focus on liberal democratic values that is central to the UK’s definition. Indeed, when it comes to international cooperation to counter extremism, the UK is working with a number of governments that themselves reject some of these values, including in the strategically important Gulf region and other parts of the Middle East. While there may be consensus on the need to counter ISIS and AQ, their wider definitions of extremism are very different.

For both the UK and the Gulf governments, ‘extremism’ is a wide-ranging concept that goes beyond political violence to encompass ideologies or ways of thinking that are perceived as threatening to the existing political system and society. However, states usually define extremism in relation to their own existing political system. The UK thus holds opposition to democracy to be part of its definition of extremism, whereas in the Gulf advocating for a rapid transition to democracy is considered extremist. This gap has only widened in recent years – since the Arab uprisings from 2011 and the related rise and fall of Muslim Brotherhood political movements in the region – as definitions of terrorism and extremism have been expanded in most GCC countries. Positions on such issues as atheism or LGBT rights are similarly polarized. Yet it appears that these differences are often being glossed over in bilateral discussions that take ‘extremism’ as their starting point and do not examine in depth what each government actually means by the term. There is a risk that UK cooperation, capacity-building and experience-sharing programmes on counter-extremism could inadvertently reinforce authoritarian tendencies among its Gulf allies, both by directly bolstering the capacities of security forces and by appearing to validate the criminalization of certain beliefs.

This paper focuses on the challenges of defining and understanding ‘extremism’ in the context of the Gulf Arab states, and the related issues this creates for UK policy. It begins with a review of the recent and emerging policy discourse on extremism in the UK and the Gulf, largely focusing on Saudi Arabia, which has the most extensive counter-extremism programmes. It briefly compares the policy discourse to the literature on extremism and its drivers. The paper moves on to discuss the UK’s cooperation with GCC countries in countering AQ and ISIS, where there is agreement about the end-goals but not necessarily about the means. Finally, the paper discusses – and questions – the wider preoccupation with ‘non-violent extremism’. The analysis draws on interviews and conversations with Gulf officials, academics, educators and researchers, as well as survey data and some of the relevant literature, in an attempt to pull together ideas and impressions from different angles of the debate on countering extremism, and to set out some areas for further investigation of a complex and rapidly evolving topic.

## 2. The International Policy Discourse on Extremism

‘Extremism’ is a conveniently broad term: everyone can agree they are opposed to it. It is by definition an excessive, negative phenomenon. Often, however, different governments and actors use the term to mean very different things, and make very different assumptions about the root causes, ideology, the role of violence and the question of whether states can themselves be extremist.

In the period after 9/11, the US and wider Western concern with counterterrorism – and particularly with the self-styled Islamist political violence of AQ – came to dominate the international policy agenda. Around the world, the US-declared ‘war on terror’ was frequently co-opted by governments seeking US support and resources against a wide range of opposition actors that they sought to discredit as ‘terrorists’, and to position their local adversaries as a global problem. While at least some of the US analysis suggested that an absence of democracy could contribute to terrorism – on the basis that a lack of peaceful means to political change would encourage some to turn to violence – the short-term imperative of counterterrorism cooperation with allies from Yemen to Egypt to Uzbekistan tended to overcome concerns about the longer-term impact of repression in many of these states.

Latterly, there has been a growing international policy discourse on extremism, rather than terrorism *per se*. The US discourse began to shift away from the ‘war on terror’ towards what was rebranded a ‘global struggle against violent extremism’ in the second term of the George W. Bush administration (2005–09), with the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff telling journalists in 2005 that the term ‘war on terror’ incorrectly created the impression that there might be a military solution to terrorism; instead, the undertaking needed to be understood as something ‘more diplomatic, more economic, more political than it is military’.<sup>4</sup> For the successor administration of Barack Obama, this became a decisive strategic change. A Department of Defense memo urged staff to stop using the term ‘global war on terror’,<sup>5</sup> and defence and intelligence officials started to use the term ‘countering violent extremism’ (CVE) instead. Along with the defence and security establishment, the US State Department and USAID were heavily involved in the formation of CVE as a wide-ranging policy field that aimed to tackle the long-term causes of extremism with insights from conflict analysis and development expertise as well as security studies.

The field of CVE thus developed relatively recently but very rapidly. It has an extremely broad scope, taking into account a wide range of factors that are believed to drive terrorism. In terms of solutions, CVE focuses on upstream, preventive and non-coercive approaches that seek to address the environment in which terrorist groups recruit and mobilize. Just as 21st-century US counter-insurgency (COIN) doctrine has focused on the broader population in which an insurgency finds a haven, CVE looks at ‘sympathy and support’<sup>6</sup> in broader communities, these communities’ beliefs

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<sup>4</sup> Schmitt, E. and Shanker, T. (2005), ‘U.S. Officials Retool Slogan for Terror War’, *New York Times*, 26 July 2005, [http://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/26/politics/us-officials-retool-slogan-for-terror-war.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/26/politics/us-officials-retool-slogan-for-terror-war.html?_r=0) – citing US defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld, national security advisor Stephen Hadley and others.

<sup>5</sup> Wilson, S. and Kamen, A. (2009), ‘Global war on terror is given new name’, *Washington Post*, 25 March 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/03/24/AR2009032402818.html>.

<sup>6</sup> McCants, W., and Watts, C. (2012), *U.S. Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism: An Assessment*, December 2012, Philadelphia, PA: Foreign Policy Research Institute, [http://www.fpri.org/docs/media/McCants\\_Watts\\_-\\_Countering\\_Violent\\_Extremism.pdf](http://www.fpri.org/docs/media/McCants_Watts_-_Countering_Violent_Extremism.pdf).

about violence, relations with the police and other parts of the state, and general resilience to radicalization. The Obama administration in particular has emphasized the role of political and social conditions. Thus, the then counterterrorism assistant to the US president (and now CIA director) John O. Brennan stated in 2009 that policymakers had to remember that terrorism is a tactic, and not an enemy that can be defeated. Instead, the Obama administration would focus more on the upstream factors: ‘the broader political, economic, and social conditions in which extremists thrive’, including corruption, state failure and a lack of dignity.<sup>7</sup>

CVE’s focus has been on ‘soft-power’ tools, including social programmes and working with civil society, and on development. Again, the links between development and extremism are complex, with no simple correlations. (For example, the literature on relative deprivation and political grievance suggests that the educated but unemployed are more susceptible to extremism than are the very poor.) US policymakers have repeatedly emphasized the importance of democracy in reducing the incentives for political violence.<sup>8</sup>

One of the difficulties with CVE is that the literature on terrorism, extremism and radicalization indicates that there are no simple or easily testable causal explanations; as set out below in more detail, these phenomena and processes tend to be highly complex and idiosyncratic. Whereas the ‘war on terror’ was criticized for privileging military approaches, CVE has come under criticism for having a scope that is so wide-ranging as to be almost all-encompassing,<sup>9</sup> with no clear measures of success; that a wide range of development and foreign policies may be labelled as CVE because it is fashionable and attracts funding; that it draws in too many agencies that would be better off focusing on their core expertise; and that there are many civil society actors<sup>10</sup> and development practitioners<sup>11</sup> who do not want their work to be associated with Western security agendas. Moreover, CVE has been criticized for downplaying the role that US foreign policy, and perceptions of it, may play in reinforcing drivers of extremism, from military intervention and occupation to support for violently repressive authoritarians.<sup>12</sup>

In Europe, meanwhile, a related but slightly different discourse around ‘violent radicalization’ emerged in response to the bombings in Madrid and London in the mid-2000s. A 2005 European Commission communication was the first to adopt the term, referring to a process of socialization that involved embracing ideas that could lead to acts of terrorism<sup>13</sup> – although the precise definition of radicalization is still contested, and there are different views about whether an individual’s views have to specifically justify violence in order to be dangerously radical. The discourse focused heavily

<sup>7</sup> The White House, Office of the Press Secretary (2009), ‘Remarks by John O. Brennan, Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism – As Prepared for Delivery, “A New Approach to Safeguarding Americans”’, speech delivered at the Center for International and Security Studies, 6 August 2009, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-john-brennan-center-strategic-and-international-studies>.

<sup>8</sup> See for example The White House, Office of the Press Secretary (2015), ‘Remarks by President Obama at the Leaders’ Summit on Countering ISIL and Violent Extremism’, speech delivered at the UN Headquarters, New York, 29 September 2015. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/29/remarks-president-obama-leaders-summit-countering-isil-and-violent> – ‘So the real path to lasting stability and progress is not less democracy; I believe it is more democracy in terms of free speech, and freedom of religion, rule of law, strong civil societies. All that has to play a part in countering violent extremism.’

<sup>9</sup> Heydemann, S. (2014), ‘State of the Art: Countering Violent Extremism as a Field of Practice’, *United States Institute of Peace Insights*, Issue 1, Spring 2014, p.1, <http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/Insights-Spring-2014.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> See for example the controversy over the 2016 discovery that a British charity providing aid to Syria had been set up ‘to divert British Muslims into becoming involved in UK-based charities instead of travelling to Syria to join the jihad’, according to an investigative article by the *Guardian* newspaper: Cobain, I., Ross, A., Evans, R., and Mahmood, M. (2016), ‘Help for Syria: the ‘aid campaign’ secretly run by the UK government’, *Guardian*, 3 May 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/03/help-for-syria-aid-campaign-secretly-run-by-uk-government>.

<sup>11</sup> Fisher, J., and Anderson, D. M. (2015), ‘Authoritarianism and the securitization of development in Africa’, *International Affairs*, 91(1): pp. 131–51, doi:10.1111/1468-2346.12190.

<sup>12</sup> See for example Khouri, R. (2015), ‘Beware the hoax of countering violent extremism’, *Al Jazeera America*, 29 September 2015, <http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2015/9/beware-the-hoax-of-countering-violent-extremism.html>.

<sup>13</sup> A summary is available at: [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_MEMO-05-329\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-05-329_en.htm).

on ideas, identities and integration. The European Commission communication urged, *inter alia*, greater use of education, youth engagement and citizenship programmes to promote European identity and intercultural understanding; enhanced integration policies; and improved sharing by member states, through EU structures, of intelligence and expertise on radicalization; as well as setting out how European foreign policy efforts were being enhanced to reduce the conditions overseas that might contribute to the emergence of a ‘breeding ground’ for terrorism. There was, however, significant political controversy within Europe over the extent to which the attacks could be seen as linked to political grievances over the participation of the UK and Spanish governments in the Iraq war, a conflict that had divided European governments and split public opinion.

More recently, the ability of ISIS to recruit in Europe, and to carry out mass-casualty attacks in France and Belgium to date, has renewed the focus of international policymakers on extremism. In Europe in particular, attention has been paid to the transnational belief systems and networks that have apparently encouraged some European citizens, living outside conflict zones, to link their own social, economic and political concerns to a wider narrative of international or global conflict. Both US and European leaders have highlighted narratives of a ‘clash of civilizations’, or a war between Islam and the West, as discourses that can be exploited by extremist groups. None the less, some leaders, notably President Obama,<sup>14</sup> have also observed that these are widely held views not confined to an extremist minority. In the UK the 2011 review of the Prevent strategy<sup>15</sup> marked a shift from CVE to a focus on ‘non-violent extremism’ – discussed in more detail in the final section of this paper.

### Counter-extremism policies in the GCC: the case of Saudi Arabia

GCC countries have been prominent among the non-Western countries to adopt counter-extremism discourses and policies as well as counterterrorism policies. Saudi Arabia has been the most active, having had the biggest problems with domestic radicalization, with citizens travelling abroad to fight in conflicts, and with criticism from around the world that has linked Saudi interpretations of Islam with intolerance and extremism. The fact that most of the 9/11 hijackers were from Saudi Arabia, and that the attacks were orchestrated by the Saudi-born Osama bin Laden, citing salafist ideology, came as a shock for Saudi Arabia, and placed severe strain on the kingdom’s relations with the United States – with ramifications that continue to play out today over questions of legal action and sovereign immunity. Some Saudi officials initially responded defensively, or with denials. Riyadh remained preoccupied with the perceived threat from Iran, to the extent that the Saudi authorities largely failed to foresee or to prepare for the potential for domestic repercussions, including the return of fighters from Afghanistan after the fall of Kandahar in 2002.

Now faced with an AQ threat at home, with a wave of attacks starting in 2003, Saudi Arabia began to develop a wide-ranging programme of counter-extremism measures. Its security services have been significantly upgraded since 2003; and its broader approach has commonalities with the US CVE approach in that it extends far beyond the security sector to include preventive information campaigns, rehabilitation and aftercare for some convicted jihadis, and elements of religious and educational reform.

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<sup>14</sup> The White House, Office of the Press Secretary (2015), ‘Remarks by President Obama at the Leaders’ Summit on Countering ISIL and Violent Extremism’.

<sup>15</sup> HM Government (2011), *Prevent Strategy*.

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Saudi Arabia’s response to AQ, and latterly ISIS, beyond the security sector, has thus involved a mix of *countering* the messages and narratives of these organizations, *co-opting* their sympathizers, and – at some times and in some areas – *competing* with them for a constituency that could be swayed either way. This mixed approach has given rise to wildly different narratives about Saudi Arabia’s relationship with extremism, discussed in more depth in the next section.

In terms of countering extremism, Saudi Arabia has embarked on campaigns targeted at individuals deemed to be susceptible to radicalization, wider information campaigns directed at the public, and cautious reforms to education and state religious institutions. The underlying assumption is that violent jihadi groups have ‘deviated’<sup>16</sup> from Islam and that the Saudi state can deploy religious authority in order to counter extremist ideology. A variety of government initiatives focus on counter-radicalization information campaigns on television, and via the internet and social media. The most high-profile, and supported by several ministries, is the *Sakinah* (Tranquility) campaign, which seeks to analyse and understand extremist narratives, and deploys clerics to engage young Saudis who are looking for religious information online, with the aim of steering them away from violent interpretations. The Saudi ambassador to the United States has described these campaigns as part of a ‘war of ideas’.<sup>17</sup>

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Counter-extremism information campaigns in Saudi Arabia have relied in part on co-opting influential clerics who stand outside the ‘official’ religious establishment, particularly those from the *sahwa* (awakening) movement of the 1990s. These are former opponents of the Saudi government, such as Sheikh Salman Al Awda, who have come to a position of opposing violent jihad, and sometimes also of opposing peaceful political protest, while also supporting political reforms.<sup>18</sup>

Saudi Arabia’s deradicalization efforts targeting former or potential jihadis combine both countering and co-opting approaches. Since 2004 the authorities have embarked on an extensive deradicalization programme for jihadis who were deemed to have joined militant groups but not to have committed terrorist attacks themselves.<sup>19</sup> Counselling initially takes place inside prisons, and then during a 12-week residential course at the Mohammed bin Nayef Center for Counseling and Advice. Loosely based on an initiative in Yemen, the programme focuses strongly on religious dialogue and counselling from clerics, as well as help with reintegration into society, including family engagement, help in finding employment, and in some cases apparently even funding dowries and weddings. Liberal critics of the government have noted that those enrolled in this programme were afforded softer treatment

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<sup>16</sup> Reflecting this, Al-Qaeda is often called ‘the deviant group’ in Saudi media.

<sup>17</sup> Al-Saud, A. (2016), ‘Confronting Extremism’, *Huffington Post*, 21 March 2016, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/abdullah-alsaud/confronting-extremism\\_b\\_9420330.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/abdullah-alsaud/confronting-extremism_b_9420330.html).

<sup>18</sup> Lacroix, S. (2011), *Awakening Islam: Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

<sup>19</sup> See for example Porges, M. L. (2010), ‘The Saudi Deradicalization Experiment’, Council on Foreign Relations Expert Brief, 22 January 2010, <http://www.cfr.org/radicalization-and-extremism/saudi-deradicalization-experiment/p21292>: ‘Initially focused only on inmates who were not directly involved in terrorist attacks, [the programme] later included repatriated Guantanamo detainees and Saudi “freedom fighters” returning from Iraq, treating those groups at a separate Center for Counseling and Advice.’

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than were some Saudi campaigners for constitutional monarchy.<sup>20</sup> Official statements indicate that the recidivism rate is 10–12 per cent, although data on a number of mass arrests of terrorist suspects in 2014 point to a surge in the number of former detainees being arrested for new militant activity.<sup>21</sup>

At the same time, the Saudi leadership is to some extent competing with the more politically radical interpretations of salafism espoused by ISIS and AQ. One of the arguments made within Saudi Arabia for its role in the war in Yemen is that if Saudi Arabia did not take a stance against the Houthi coup, it would leave a vacuum for AQ to present itself as the only armed defender of Yemeni Sunnis. Saudi officials routinely suggest that the need to placate and appease religious opinion is a major constraint on the government’s ability to pursue certain forms of social change (such as women driving).

A broader set of reforms over the past 15 years have also tied into the counter-extremism agenda. As concerns about AQ grew, the then King Abdullah bin Abdel-Aziz Al Saud took a number of cautious steps towards reforming the religious establishment and bringing a wider range of religious voices into public forums – among them involving Shia Muslims in a national dialogue from 2003 onwards, expanding the council of religious scholars to include all four main schools of Sunni Muslim jurisprudence in 2009, and restricting unauthorized fatwas in 2010 – that could be seen as contributing to counter-extremism, although they were not specifically or solely attributed to this effort. In 2012, furthermore, King Abdullah launched an international centre for religious dialogue, based in Vienna. Concerns about extremism also appear to have influenced broader policies such as the intensification of efforts since 2011 to incentivize companies to employ Saudi nationals, regarded as a priority for the interior minister (who is also now the crown prince), Mohammed bin Nayef bin Abdel-Aziz Al Saud.

Such counter-extremism efforts also serve as an important element of international public diplomacy for Saudi Arabia, which has been criticized internationally for promoting conservative salafist interpretations of Islam that in themselves are regarded by some as extremist. Thus, for instance, former US counterterrorism coordinator Daniel Benjamin has argued that Saudi Arabia remains the ‘fountainhead for Islamic extremism’ because Saudi clerics, textbooks, literature, broadcasters and funds from religious institutions and NGOs play a role in stoking radicalism, especially negative views of other religions, even as Saudi intelligence invests extensive resources in ‘trying to prevent the terrorism that grows from this activity’.<sup>22</sup>

Overall, CVE research and policy, both in the West and in Saudi Arabia, sees extremism as a complex phenomenon that needs to be situated in a social and political context, and to be prevented and countered in part via a battle of ideas.

### The debate over drivers and causes

The growing policy focus on extremism has fostered a substantial body of literature on the drivers and causes of extremism, drawing on earlier work on the causes of terrorism, as well as conflict analysis, social movement theory, and work on criminality, delinquency and gang dynamics. There

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<sup>20</sup> For instance, if those enrolled are asked to remain in the residential programme for longer than 12 weeks, they are paid US \$267/day for their time: Casptack, A. (2015), ‘Deradicalization Programs in Saudi Arabia: A Case Study’, Middle East Institute, 10 June 2015. <http://www.mei.edu/content/deradicalization-programs-saudi-arabia-case-study>. A *New York Times Magazine* report noted that inmates at the counselling centre were given a suitcase of gifts on arrival, including clothes, a digital watch, study supplies and toiletries. Zoepf, K. (2008), ‘Deprogramming Jihadists’, *New York Times Magazine*, 7 November 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/09/magazine/09jihadis-t.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Boghardt, L. P. (2015), ‘Saudi Arabia’s Old al-Qaeda Terrorists Form New Threat’, Washington Institute Policywatch 2370, 11 February 2015, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/saudi-arabias-old-al-qaeda-terrorists-form-new-threat>.

<sup>22</sup> Benjamin, D. (2015), ‘The King and ISIS’, *Foreign Policy*, 10 September 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/09/10/the-king-and-isis-saudi-arabia-egypt-iraq/>.

is considerable debate over which factors are most important, but a consensus that there is no ‘normal’, linear or inevitable path to radicalization or extremism.

Given this, the various different explanations are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but can be seen as different levels of analysis, such as:

**The role of ideology:** Narratives and beliefs are clearly important in framing grievances and legitimizing particular targets and actions, although opinions vary as to whether ideas are themselves a tactic adopted to rationalize behaviour, or a motivating factor in behaviour. But even if ideas are a motivation, there needs to be some further explanation as to why ideas that are widely disseminated become compelling to particular groups and individuals.

**The psychology of individuals** who carry out ‘extremist’ acts, often based on biographical data and interviews. Peter Neumann<sup>23</sup> argued in 2011 that research over the past decade pointed to three main common drivers:

- The perception of grievance, for instance with regard to injustice, exclusion or conflicted identities;<sup>24</sup>
- The adoption of an extremist narrative that speaks to the grievance; and
- Social and group dynamics, as radicalization often takes place through close personal networks, and with inspiration from a charismatic leader.

**The strategy of extremist organizations:** for instance, seen through the lens of social movement theory, or through the theory of asymmetric warfare, in which terrorist organizations are largely rational actors trying to resist or attack a state from their position as a minority with limited hard power.

**The wider political and social environment** in which extremist organizations recruit and operate, which can help explain the perception of grievance at the individual level, the perception that the extremist narrative is correct, and the strategic choices of extremist organizations (such as in the face of mass passivity over the issue that concerns them and limited peaceful means for change).

All these levels of analysis can be considered valid as part of a holistic effort to build up a picture of a complex phenomenon, and should be seen as complementary rather than as alternative explanations. However, the debate often becomes more polarized, especially when it moves into discussions of the role of ideology. At its most simplistic, the focus on ideology becomes confused with a focus on identities: in the case of Islamist extremism, discussion concerning the role of particular interpretations of Islam in driving Islamist extremism has often shaded into the perception that Muslims in general are being blamed. There is a consensus among most Western governments that they should avoid any such discourses, for fear of alienating Muslims and reinforcing the claims of Islamist extremist groups to represent an authentic version of Islam. They focus instead on denouncing an incorrect and violent interpretation of Islam.

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<sup>23</sup> Neumann, P. (2011), *Preventing Violent Radicalization in America*, Bipartisan Policy Institute, June 2011, <http://bipartisanpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/default/files/NSPG.pdf>, p.17.

<sup>24</sup> Various frameworks for understanding radicalization, such as those put forward by Marc Sageman or Fathali M. Moghaddam in the United States, have described an individual’s journey away from broader movements that protest peacefully against specific forms of injustice towards those that see radical action, such as violence, as the only options for fighting such injustice. See for example Sageman, M. (2008), *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008; Moghaddam, F. (2005), ‘The Staircase to Terrorism: A psychological exploration’, *American Psychologist*, 60(2): pp. 161–169. There is, moreover, still a heated debate as to whether the broader movements serve as a ‘gateway’ to violent groups or as an alternative to them – as is seen currently in debates in both the GCC and the UK over the Muslim Brotherhood and salafist parties.

Some Western officials – including in the United States – are well aware that as, in the main, non-Muslims, they are not necessarily the most credible messengers in this regard. They therefore place particular importance on the role of Muslim community and religious leaders, as well as Muslim governments, that are willing to counter the theological claims of Islamist extremists, including those from the GCC. None the less, the role of Saudi Arabia is perennially controversial because of the mixed messages emanating from senior Saudi clerics on issues of tolerance and sectarianism.

Earlier studies of radicalization in the UK have emphasized a variety of social and psychological factors, in addition to political and identity-based factors, that play a role in recruitment. For instance, a 2010 study by Bartlett, Birdwell and King,<sup>25</sup> based on interviews with people who had turned away from violent radicalism, suggested that the members of such groups tended to have limited knowledge of Islamic theology, focusing instead on simplistic political narratives of a Western war on Islam, as well as other radicals’ stories of excitement and adventure; status and internal codes of honour; and peer pressure. Press reports of a 2008 study by British security services also suggested that religious ideology was not a major motivating factor, and that a strong religious identity could actually offer protection against radicalization.<sup>26</sup>

However, the UK’s redefinition of extremism ensures that ideology is defined as being the central problem. This current policy discourse, exemplified by the Counter-Extremism Strategy’s statement that ideology is the cause of terrorism, neglects the causal complexity indicated by the research on extremism, radicalization and terrorism. This is likely to create weaknesses and missed opportunities in the struggle against the specific groups, particularly ISIS, that directly threaten UK security.

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<sup>25</sup> Bartlett, J., Birdwell, J., and King, M. (2010), *The Edge of Violence*, London: Demos, [http://www.demos.co.uk/files/Edge\\_of\\_Violence\\_-\\_full\\_-\\_web.pdf?1291806916](http://www.demos.co.uk/files/Edge_of_Violence_-_full_-_web.pdf?1291806916).

<sup>26</sup> Travis, A. (2008), ‘The making of an extremist’, *Guardian*, 20 August 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2008/aug/20/uksecurity.terrorism>.

### 3. Views from the Gulf: ISIS as Part of a Wider Regional Conflict

In terms of UK–GCC cooperation against extremism, there is scope for continuing and valuable cooperation against ISIS and AQ. Moving beyond the ideological focus of the domestic counter-extremism strategy, the UK can benefit from GCC insights into the wider factors that produce recruits, support and sympathy for the group.

The UK and the GCC states are in agreement that AQ and ISIS are illegitimate groups that represent a threat to their own security. Furthermore – and despite the UK’s ideology-focused definition of extremism – UK policymakers, like their GCC counterparts, also understand that, in practice, countering ISIS requires tackling the political and social factors that appear to have supported the group’s development.

[A positive factor for international cooperation against ISIS and AQ is that there is a clear consensus among international governments backing the proscription of both groups on the grounds that they are terrorist organizations.](#)

However, there are differences of opinion between the UK and some GCC states, as well as among the GCC states themselves, about the priority that should be placed on ISIS compared with other regional security issues – such as, in the eyes of Saudi Arabia, the role of Iran and its (state and non-state) allies; and the question of whether Hezbollah and the Hashd Al Shabi should be considered terrorist organizations. Views also differ about what the main causes of ISIS recruitment are. This section examines these differences in more detail.

A positive factor for international cooperation against ISIS and AQ is that there is a clear consensus among international governments backing the proscription of both groups on the grounds that they are terrorist organizations. No state recognizes ISIS or AQ as legitimate – unlike militant movements such as Hamas or Hezbollah, which have been defined by some states as terrorists and by other states as legitimate resistance fighters. This is largely because both AQ and ISIS regard all the states of the Middle East and North Africa region as illegitimate, and as legitimate targets for violent jihad, whereas most of the significant Middle Eastern militant movements of the second half of the 20th century targeted individual states or were born out of the dispute over the creation of the state of Israel. AQ and ISIS offensives have targeted large numbers of Muslim civilians, and are actively supported only by small minorities.

None the less, even fighting these groups has proved difficult. International ‘anti-ISIS’ efforts involving regional players have been at best sporadic, and have been hampered by deep divisions concerning the broader political trajectories in Iraq and Syria. Regional involvement in anti-ISIS airstrikes in Syria has largely tailed off. This in turn has allowed ISIS to project an image of success, as it has been able to survive military opposition from so many states. One of the issues that has impeded coordinated efforts to counter ISIS is that, for several of the key states in the region, the self-declared ‘caliphate’ may threaten them at home, but on the regional stage it also weakens

their enemies, provides geopolitical benefits, or appears as the lesser of two evils: for Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, ISIS is the lesser evil in Syria, and is an understandable reaction against Iran; for Iran, the rise of ISIS in Syria has provided an opportunity for the Syrian president to rehabilitate himself internationally as a self-styled force against terrorism. Thus, ISIS has been able to appear all the stronger because of the weaknesses and divisions of others. And indeed, while it seems that only a small minority of the public in the Middle East actually supports ISIS, many voices in the region will also say that it is understandable or unsurprising that such groups have emerged, given the underlying drivers of conflict: injustice, violence, exclusion and unemployment, and the lack of solutions to the region’s deep problems. This view is also widely held in the Gulf countries.

The relationship between the Gulf monarchies and ISIS is the subject of a highly polarized international debate, often characterized by sweeping statements that are untroubled by facts. Some blame Saudi Arabia in particular for inspiring, funding or at least instrumentalizing ISIS; others argue that Saudi Arabia and the Gulf are the West’s chief allies in counterterrorism. The polarization is all the more pronounced with the re-emergence of Iran on the international diplomatic stage: Riyadh’s preoccupation with pushing back Iranian influence diverts it from the fight against ISIS and, outside its own territory, gives it some limited overlaps of interest with the organization; while many Shia Muslims (and others) around the world link the anti-Shia sectarian rhetoric coming from many Saudi clerics and broadcasters to the sectarian violence of ISIS; and Iran actively tries to use such links to undermine Saudi Arabia’s image.

The Gulf states – especially Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait – have been a significant source of funding for ISIS and AQ, as well as a source of some foreign fighters. On the funding side, there have certainly been contributions by private individuals and charitable organizations in the Gulf. A report by the UK Parliament’s Foreign Affairs Select Committee in 2016 stated that some Gulf states had been slow to implement some of their anti-ISIS funding measures, although there had been a tightening up after ISIS seized Mosul in 2014, and that Saudi Arabia had only banned ISIS financing in March 2015.<sup>27</sup> Accusations of some covert intelligence funding, levied against Qatar in particular, are widespread but difficult to substantiate. The committee noted that the UK government had no evidence of any state in the Middle East providing funding to ISIS as a matter of policy, but that some of the individuals from the Gulf who had donated to ISIS on a private basis may have been close to ruling families.<sup>28</sup>

A foreign office official told the UK parliamentary inquiry that the UK government’s strategy had not been to try to ascertain who in the Gulf was funding ISIS, but rather to stop the funding.<sup>29</sup> It is likely that Gulf government attitudes to ISIS changed after the group became a more obvious threat at home. However, there is open Gulf government support for Syrian armed groups that share elements of jihadi ideology with ISIS but are more focused on the Syrian than the international context (especially Ahrar Al Sham and Jaish Al Islam, allied with Jabhat Al Nusra/Jabhat Fatah Al Sham).

As regards foreign fighters, only a small minority of Gulf youth has been drawn to fight for ISIS. According to an official Saudi government estimate cited by the Soufan Group consultancy,<sup>30</sup> some 2,500 Saudi nationals (or around 1 in 8,000) had gone to fight in Iraq and Syria as at October 2015,

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<sup>27</sup> UK Parliament, Foreign Affairs Committee (2016), *The UK’s role in the economic war against ISIL*, para. 44, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmfaaff/121/121.pdf>.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 45.

<sup>30</sup> The Soufan Group (2015), *Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq*, New York: The Soufan Group, December 2015, [http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG\\_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf](http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf).

not only for ISIS but for a wider range of groups. This estimate was, however, broadly unchanged since 2014, which raises some questions about its accuracy. Estimates for the other Gulf states are in the tens of people; it is Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and Jordan that are the main Arab source countries. Notably, however, Saudis apparently made up a far higher proportion of foreign fighters (around 40 per cent) in Iraq in 2006–07<sup>31</sup> than they do in Syria today: based on the Soufan Group’s estimated total of between 27,000 and 31,000 foreign fighters having travelled to Syria and Iraq as at late 2015, from at least 86 countries, less than 10 per cent were Saudis.<sup>32</sup> More Tunisians are believed to have gone than Saudis and Jordanians combined. Some Saudis note that this is despite Tunisia’s secular and now newly democratic political system, and suggest that it is simplistic of critics to point to Saudi Arabia’s interpretation of Islam, or its lack of democracy, as factors supporting recruitment.

Turning to the UK, as at November 2015 an estimated 760 people had travelled to fight in Iraq and Syria, out of a British Muslim population of 2.7m. At around 1 in 3,550, a higher proportion of the British Muslim population has thus been attracted to fight in Iraq and Syria compared with the Saudi population. While caution should be taken when drawing inferences from such small numbers, the figures at least underline that the problem is international.

A mass analysis by Voices from the Blogs of more than 2 million Arabic-language postings on social media, conducted over a three-and-a-half-month period from July 2014, classified more than 47 per cent of studied tweets and posts from Qatar, 35 per cent from Pakistan, 31 per cent from Belgium, almost 24 per cent of posts from the UK and over 21 per cent from the United States as being supportive of ISIS, compared with just under 20 per cent from each of Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Iraq.<sup>33</sup> Overall, around 80 per cent of posts on ISIS were opposed to the group.

ISIS, whose leading cleric is from Bahrain, has also recruited for attacks within the Gulf. The group has carried out a series of attacks on Shia and Ismaili mosques in Saudi Arabia. A Saudi national carried out the bombing of a Shia mosque in Kuwait in June 2015; and responsibility for a shooting at a Saudi Shia mosque in the Eastern Province city of Saihat in October of that year was claimed by a self-styled Bahrain branch of ISIS.<sup>34</sup> Between March and October 2015 Saudi Arabia arrested some 540 people<sup>35</sup> accused of belonging to ISIS – an average of more than two a day. In a December research visit to Oman, a number of interviewees noted their fears that ISIS would target their country in future, given its religious diversity and large Ibadi Muslim populations, as well as their concerns that heightened security fears could be used to justify greater restrictions on civil society and freedom of speech.

## Transnational ideology and extremism: confusion over salafism

In the international debate about the drivers of extremism, one of the most contentious topics is the role of the dominant religious and political world views that come from Saudi Arabia. ISIS lays claim to the legacy of Mohammed Abdel Wahhab, the cleric who partnered with Ibn Saud to found the first

<sup>31</sup> According to Saudi government figures cited in Artis Research and Risk Modeling (2009), *Theoretical Frames on Pathways to Violent Radicalization*, August 2009, [http://www.artisresearch.com/articles/ARTIS\\_Theoretical\\_Frames\\_August\\_2009.pdf](http://www.artisresearch.com/articles/ARTIS_Theoretical_Frames_August_2009.pdf).

<sup>32</sup> The Soufan Group (2015), *Foreign Fighters*, p. 4.

<sup>33</sup> A summary of the analysis is available in Malik, S. (2014), ‘Support for Isis stronger in Arabic social media in Europe than in Syria’, *Guardian*, 28 November 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/28/support-isis-stronger-arabic-social-media-europe-us-than-syria>.

<sup>34</sup> Associated Press via New York Times (2015), ‘Saudi Arabia: 5 Killed at Prayer Hall; New ISIS Branch Claims Responsibility’, *New York Times*, 16 October 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/17/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-5-killed-at-prayer-hall-new-isis-branch-claims-responsibility.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/17/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-5-killed-at-prayer-hall-new-isis-branch-claims-responsibility.html?_r=0).

<sup>35</sup> Data collated by Muir Analytics from press reports, and cited in Moore, J. (2015), ‘Saudi Arabia braces for ISIS’, *Intersec – The Journal of International Security*, 23 November 2015, <http://www.intersecmag.co.uk/saudi-arabia-braces-for-isis/>.

Saudi kingdom, and portrays Saudi Arabia as an illegitimate state that has betrayed his legacy. For their part, official Saudi clerics and politicians call ISIS and AQ religious deviants, and state that they are distorting Abdel Wahhab’s legacy, particularly through their use of violence.

Rather than being representative of salafism or so-called ‘Wahhabism’, ISIS is seeking to redefine it, in conflict and competition with a Saudi state and religious establishment who would also assert their authority to represent the authentic salafist traditions. The interpretations of Islam preferred by the Saudi state today focus heavily on political quiescence and obedience to the ruler, to avoid the sowing of division, and emphasize a quest for personal purification rather than for political change. However, all the significant opposition movements that have come out of Saudi Arabia have involved clerics, and have been framed in both religious and political terms. There are elements of mainstream Saudi religious and political practices that may provide some fertile ground for further radicalization – particularly when it comes to sectarianism and attitudes towards religious minorities.

At the same time, there are arguments that salafist clerics may be the best placed to make the theological arguments against ISIS by challenging its own sources of legitimacy. (There is a recurring question of whether extremist Islamist ideology is better countered by those who sympathize with some of its elements but reject violence. A parallel debate has taken place in the UK about the relative merits of countering extremism through liberal teachings versus working with Islamist-leaning groups who are highly critical of the UK political system.)

Saudi Arabia’s leadership has historically derived some of its legitimacy from a de facto partnership with clerics. In Saudi Arabia’s early phase of state formation, Ibn Saud formed a partnership with the cleric Mohammed Abdel-Wahhab to help legitimize his rule. This is the origin of the name ‘Wahhabism’, but Saudi salafists themselves typically reject the term and often regard it as pejorative. Again, in the early 20th century, when King Abdel-Aziz Al Saud founded the third Saudi kingdom, he worked closely with clerics who were influenced by Abdel-Wahhab, and with a devout fighting force, the ikhwan, who led the military effort to expand the kingdom’s territory. But in the 1920s the king began to consolidate the country’s borders, and formed an alliance with Britain – which sought to end territorial conflicts and enforce a peace in the Gulf in order to protect the sea lanes. In 1930 King Abdel-Aziz put down a rebellion by the ikhwan, ensuring they were subjugated to Al Saud decision-making on foreign policy.

This, very broadly, remains the establishment’s understanding in Saudi Arabia – that there are areas where clerics have authority, particularly in justice, education and family law, whereas politics and foreign relations are for the king and his government. (This is sometimes described as an informal bargain, though is perhaps better seen as an ongoing process of bargaining, and a division of labour that is constantly being renegotiated and contested – for instance, with the late King Abdullah’s efforts gradually to reduce the role of clerics in justice and education.)

ISIS, like AQ before it, challenges Saudi Arabia’s legitimacy on both religious and political grounds.<sup>36</sup> ISIS has used Mohammed Abdel-Wahhab’s texts in its schools, claiming to represent the real interpretation of his legacy. Some make the case that ISIS’s swords, cut-throat executions of captives and covered faces deliberately recall the imagery of the early Saudi ikhwan. By contrast, Saudi Arabia argues that ISIS has ‘deviated’ from the correct interpretation of Islam, with its focus on

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<sup>36</sup> It has also been observed that ISIS has a thinner theological output than that from AQ; ISIS focuses on publishing videos, not lengthy religious treatises. It is unclear precisely how important theology is in ISIS’s recruitment, but it should not necessarily be assumed that recruitment is motivated by religiosity. This is one of the problems with the notion of ‘non-violent extremism’, especially in the context of current UK and wider European concerns about salafism: an individual could be extremely conservative or devout in their religion, without causing harm to others.

political violence and the targeting of civilians. Some Saudi voices blame this on the ‘hybridization’ of traditional salafist ideas with the modern political Islam of the Muslim Brotherhood, or note that ISIS as an organization came from Iraq and Syria rather than Saudi Arabia.

While there is some truth in this historical account of cross-border influences and hybridization, there are also serious issues of intolerance – both religious and political – inside Saudi Arabia. Indeed, there is a live debate within the kingdom about religious reform and intolerance. Some of this debate – which intensified after 9/11 – has stemmed from Saudi liberals, and some from Islamic thinkers. Stéphane Lacroix, a scholar of Saudi religious and political movements, has noted that there are Saudi salafists who criticize ‘Wahhabism’ on the grounds that it represents an excessive tendency to rigidly follow the teachings of Abdel-Wahhab, rather than returning to the original Islamic texts.<sup>37</sup> There are others who argue that Abdel-Wahhab’s legacy was more pluralistic than modern ‘Wahhabism’ appears to suggest.

There is concern in the West, and more widely internationally, about the influence of ‘Wahhabism’ or salafism on Muslim communities around the world. In the Netherlands, for instance, in December 2015 the parliament adopted a motion calling on the government to consider banning salafist organizations on the basis that these are breeding grounds for radicalization and do not support democracy, although the government subsequently stated that any general ban (other than against specific organizations that had broken the law) would be in violation of freedom of religion.<sup>38</sup> In the aftermath of the November 2015 Paris attacks, the French prime minister said that salafism is a ‘real danger’,<sup>39</sup> while a French MP from the right-wing Les Républicains party, Nathalie Kosciusko-Morizet, has called for salafism to be banned.<sup>40</sup>

This is a highly complex issue that is often reduced to simplistic analysis, as though salafism itself is a form of extremism. Generalizations should be treated with caution, as the term in fact refers to a particular conservative and literalist approach to Islamic texts, rather than one single interpretation of them. It represents a desire to return to the roots of religion – the word salafism is a reference to ‘the [righteous] ancestors’, or ‘[pious] forebears’ – a tendency that recurs across the other major world religions, in competition with ‘modernizing’ currents. For many salafists, moreover, there is a focus on literal interpretations of the key religious texts, rather than relying on clerics to mediate; and this direct relationship with religious texts means there are many different interpretations of salafism.<sup>41</sup>

Criticisms of salafism focus not only on concerns about linkages to violent jihadi movements, but also on interpretations of salafism that reinforce negative views of religious minorities, beliefs about gender relations and so forth – all of which are areas that different societies seek to regulate, but which are not necessarily associated with specific problems of terrorism.

Religion, rather than being regarded as a driver, should be regarded rather as one of the domains in which a contest for power and authority is playing out. States in the region have always sought to

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<sup>37</sup> Lacroix, S. (2005), ‘Post-Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia?’, *ISIM Review*, 15, Spring 2005: p.17, [https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/bitstream/handle/1887/16981/ISIM\\_15\\_Post-Wahhabism\\_in\\_Saudi\\_Arabia.pdf?sequence=1](https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/bitstream/handle/1887/16981/ISIM_15_Post-Wahhabism_in_Saudi_Arabia.pdf?sequence=1).

<sup>38</sup> Pieters, J. (2016), ‘No ban on Salafist Islam Says Dutch Cabinet’, *NL Times*, 26 February 2016, <http://www.nltimes.nl/2016/02/26/no-ban-on-salafist-islam-says-dutch-cabinet/>.

<sup>39</sup> Buchanan, E. (2015), ‘Paris attacks: ‘Islam has to fight against its own pathologies’ warns French PM Manuel Valls’, *International Business Times*, 17 November 2015, <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/paris-attacks-islam-has-fight-against-its-own-pathologies-french-pm-warns-1529092#>.

<sup>40</sup> Kosciusko-Morizet, N. (2016), ‘Nathalie Kosciusko-Morizet: «Vaincre la guerre asymétrique du terrorisme»’ [‘Winning the asymmetric war on terrorism’], *L’Opinion*, 18 July 2016, <http://www.lopinion.fr/edition/politique/nathalie-kosciusko-morizet-vaincre-guerre-asymetrique-terrorisme-107059>. This op-ed also advocates a ban on Gulf funding for religious institutions in France.

<sup>41</sup> At a Chatham House workshop session on religion and politics in the Gulf in January 2015, one scholar identified seven different schools of thought among Gulf salafists regarding how to respond to the 2013 coup in Egypt, as the contestation of authority complicated salafist thinking over which authority to obey.

utilize particular interpretations of religion that happen to support their political objectives (as has also been a feature of Western history). Even those that decry political Islam use their own political power to control, restrain or influence Islam, while some, such as Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Oman and Jordan, use elements of religious discourse to legitimize their own monarchy. Meanwhile, various social and political movements have sought to challenge the official interpretation of Islam and to argue that they themselves represent a more Islamically legitimate form of government.

Pertinent here is the observation by Thomas Hegghammer, in a 2008 biographical study of Saudi militants who fought for AQ, that the notion of ‘Saudi extremism’ ‘ignores the fundamental issue of why some Saudis go to Iraq while other Saudis do not’.<sup>42</sup> Hegghammer’s point is worth emphasizing at a time of extensive Western criticism of ‘salafism’.

### The political context: my enemy’s enemy

The extremism of ISIS cannot be understood in isolation from the wider conflicts taking place within the Middle East, and their global impact, in an international context in which there are various competing attempts to globalize different identities.

The ‘cold war’ between Iran and Saudi Arabia is a major impediment to the fight against ISIS (as well as AQ). Both countries are faced with direct security threats from ISIS, but neither sees the organization as the primary threat – and neither is willing to cooperate with the other against what could be regarded as a common threat. This is true of the regional players more broadly. For Saudi Arabia, ISIS is fighting Iran and its allies in Iraq, Syria and now Yemen; for Turkey, it is a force against President Bashar al-Assad and probably preferable to empowering the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) militia; and for Iran, it has damaged the credibility of the wider Syrian opposition and allowed Assad to be projected as a force against terrorism. Even for Israel, the short-term impact is that Hezbollah remains focused on Syria, where it is draining its resources, rather than looking south towards Israel.

**In 2014, when ISIS seized the Iraqi city of Mosul, there were some hopes that Iran and Saudi Arabia might be able to bridge some of their differences in order to work together against ISIS. Rather, however, ISIS has become another point of dispute in their broader political–sectarian conflict.**

Instead, Iran and Saudi Arabia each wishes to position itself as the force that fights terrorism and extremism, versus a rival that promotes it. Were the two countries to cooperate in the face of a mutual threat, much more progress could be made. In 2014, when ISIS seized the Iraqi city of Mosul, there were some hopes that Iran and Saudi Arabia might be able to bridge some of their differences in order to work together against ISIS. Rather, however, ISIS has become another point of dispute in their broader political–sectarian conflict. A blame game has emerged, with the Iranian authorities holding Saudi Arabia responsible for funding or inspiring the group. Meanwhile, Saudi officials and analysts have argued that the rise of ISIS is largely a reaction to sectarian violence instigated by Iran and its allies, and the over-ambition of Iranian regional policy.

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<sup>42</sup> Hegghammer, T. (2008), ‘Saudis in Iraq: Patterns of Radicalization and Recruitment’, *Cultures & Conflicts*, 12 June 2008, <http://conflicts.revues.org/10042>.

Saudi Arabia’s powerful defence minister and deputy crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdel-Aziz Al Saud, stated in a recent interview with the *New York Times* that it was frustrating for his country to be at once blamed for terrorism and its target.<sup>43</sup> Saudi Arabia has a history of supporting salafi-jihadi groups, above all in Afghanistan – although this was in close coordination with the CIA, 30 years ago.<sup>44</sup> Since then, Riyadh has become much more alert to the risk of ‘blowback’ at home. After 9/11, Saudi Arabia worked hard to reassure Western governments that it was a counterterrorism ally, both through intelligence-sharing and by means of a wider programme of rehabilitation for militants in conjunction with educational and religious reforms, as international calls for reform dovetailed with the personal views and priorities of the then King Abdullah. Moreover, with a wave of attacks on state institutions and expatriate compounds in 2003–04, and when a suicide bomber came close to a successful attack on Aramco’s Abqaiq refinery in 2006, it became increasingly clear that AQ and like-minded groups were a domestic threat to the kingdom. A concerted counterterrorism campaign reduced AQ’s efficacy within Saudi Arabia, although this also displaced fighters into Yemen. The now crown prince and interior minister, Mohammed bin Nayef bin Abdel-Aziz Al Saud, is regarded as being particularly aware of these risks, having himself survived an assassination attempt by a Saudi fighter from Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in 2009. Now ISIS is ramping up a campaign inside Saudi Arabia. Rather than attacking Westerners as AQ did in 2003–04, ISIS has largely targeted Muslim minorities – bombing Shia and Ismaili mosques, in the hope of inflaming existing sectarian tensions – as well as targeting the security forces.

Although the immediate domestic security threat stems from ISIS, key Saudi decision-makers none the less hold Iran to be the larger regional threat. This assessment is a matter of debate inside Saudi Arabia. ISIS has carried out numerous attacks inside Saudi territory and seeks to appeal to the conservative Sunnis who make up the majority of the population.<sup>45</sup> But, as a rival state with appreciable demographic, financial and military resources, Iran is regarded as a greater external threat. Riyadh-based diplomats see a difference of opinion between Mohammed bin Nayef and Mohammed bin Salman, with the latter – whose ascent to power paved the way for intervention in Yemen – appearing to be more preoccupied with Iran.

One of the reasons for the priority placed on Iran may be that the Saudi authorities know that the United States and others will be leading a region-wide struggle against ISIS. By contrast, they have expressed fears that the United States is no longer containing Iran. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), agreed between Iran and the E3/EU+3 (or P5+1)<sup>46</sup> in July 2015, is widely seen in the region as a political deal in nuclear clothing. In Saudi Arabia the perception is that the nuclear agreement has emboldened Iran to ramp up its interventions in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, as well as in Yemen and the Gulf – with Bahrain and, unusually, Kuwait recently reporting the discovery of weapons caches. This is a point of serious difference between the Gulf countries and their Western allies. Saudi Arabia, the UAE and other Gulf countries depict Iran as interfering all over the region. By contrast, Western governments tend to distinguish between Iran’s obvious interference in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, and the role that it plays in the Arabian peninsula. While Western countries

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<sup>43</sup> Friedman, T. L. (2015), Letter from Saudi Arabia, *New York Times*, 25 November 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/25/opinion/letter-from-saudi-arabia.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/25/opinion/letter-from-saudi-arabia.html?_r=0).

<sup>44</sup> In two conversations with the author in Riyadh in October 2015, Saudi interlocutors asked the rhetorical question, ‘Who created Al-Qaeda?’, and went on to discuss the role of the United States, rather than their own country.

<sup>45</sup> Obaid, N. and Al-Sarhan, S. (2014), ‘The Saudis Can Crush ISIS,’ *New York Times*, 8 September 2014.

<sup>46</sup> China, France, Germany, Russia, the UK and the United States, with the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

acknowledge that Iran has given moral, technical and some weapons support to the Houthis in Yemen, they do not see these as decisive factors in Yemen’s conflict, and have tended to regard claims by Gulf states of Iranian meddling in their own territory as overstated (sometimes to distract from domestic problems).

Saudi state-sanctioned clerics have trodden a fine line: notably, members of the official council of ulema have denounced the Syrian regime and its allies, while calling for support for the jihad rather than urging young Saudis to go and fight for other groups.<sup>47</sup> In 2014 Saudi Arabia and a number of other Arab states joined the United States in airstrikes against ISIS targets in Syria, despite the clearly reiterated viewpoint of the Saudi leadership since 2011 that Assad is the root of the problems in Syria and that ISIS is just a symptom. Saudi officials and opinion-formers were strongly opposed to Russia’s airstrikes in Syria, beginning in the autumn of 2015, which hit the wider opposition and civilian populations – and were furious that the US administration was not doing more to stop the Russian action.<sup>48</sup> A senior Qatari official stated that Russia would be faced with a second Afghanistan in Syria,<sup>49</sup> and some 50 Saudi clerics called for jihad against Russia.

There are also concerns in Yemen that AQ fighters have largely benefited from a conflict that has pitted two of their enemies, the Gulf states and the Houthis, against each other – although latterly the Saudi and UAE coalition (helped by advance negotiations and US special forces) recaptured the city of Mukalla from AQ. Some Saudi and Yemeni officials suggest that AQ is being stoked by the former president Ali Abdullah Saleh – who was forced to step down, under the terms of a GCC-brokered agreement reached in late 2011, after 33 years of highly personalized rule – as a strategic tool to influence the West in his favour, just as Assad has done. While in office, Saleh was certainly adept at capitalizing on the ‘war on terror’. But he is not the only Yemeni politician to have found AQ to be useful in a political context where it is deeply entrenched and where boundaries between AQAP and tribal militias can be ambiguous. The internationally recognized Yemeni president, Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, while exiled in Riyadh, included in his delegation to peace talks in 2015 Abdel-Wahhab Al Humayqani, who, according to the US authorities, heads AQ in the Yemeni province of Al Baydah.

Iran for its part, long isolated as a ‘state sponsor of terrorism’, has sought to capitalize on the fact that Western countries’ terrorism threat perceptions have changed since 9/11. Governments in the West have focused on the salafi-jihadi groups that have directly threatened their own territory, particularly AQ and its affiliates, and now ISIS. This emphasis has overtaken long-standing Western concerns about Iran’s allies – Hezbollah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas – because these groups are regionally rather than internationally focused. Instead, the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq under the ‘war on terror’ unseated two of Iran’s own enemies, the Taliban and Saddam Hussein.

In this context, Iran’s diplomats have adopted a new narrative on terrorism and extremism, especially when speaking to Western audiences, in an effort to position Tehran, as against Riyadh, as the better ally of the West. In December 2013 President Hassan Rouhani submitted a resolution on a World Against Violence and Extremism to the UN General Assembly, calling for all nations of the world to denounce violence and extremism. Iranian diplomats point to common interests with the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan, which they contrast with those of Saudi Arabia. They

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<sup>47</sup> Jamestown Foundation (2012), ‘Fatwa Wars Continue As Saudi Cleric Bans Jihad In Syria’, European Country of Origin Information Network (ecoi.net), 15 June 2012, [http://www.ecoi.net/local\\_link/223589/331126\\_en.html](http://www.ecoi.net/local_link/223589/331126_en.html); Stein, E. (2015), ‘Jihadi discourse in Egypt under Muhammed Mursi’, paper presented at the 2015 annual conference of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies, p.7, <https://brismes2015.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/stein.pdf>.

<sup>48</sup> Author’s interviews and conversations in Riyadh, October 2015.

<sup>49</sup> Press roundtable, London, October 2015.

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blame ‘Wahhabi ideology’ for inspiring jihadis, and Saudi money for funding them. At a conference at the Korber Foundation in November 2015, Sayed Mohammed Sadegh Kharrazi, a former Iranian ambassador and the son-in-law of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, emphasized: ‘Who was behind 9/11? The Saudis, Jordan, UAE ... They forget all this and just talk about Iran.’<sup>50</sup>

In 2015 Ayatollah Khamenei published two open letters to Western youth, calling on them to reject extremism. In the second, issued just after the Paris attacks in November, he stated:

Today, there are very few people who are uninformed about the role of the United States of America in creating, nurturing and arming al-Qaeda, the Taliban and their inauspicious successors. Besides this direct support, the overt and well-known supporters of takfiri terrorism – despite having the most backward political systems – are standing arrayed as allies of the west ...<sup>51</sup>

He further wrote that ISIS reflected the impact of ‘imported cultures’ on the Islamic world. In another apparent reference to Saudi Arabia, he commented:

If the matter was simply theological, we would have had to witness such phenomena before the colonialist era, yet history shows the contrary. Authoritative historical records clearly show how colonialist confluence of extremist and rejected thoughts in the heart of a Bedouin tribe, planted the seed of extremism in this region.<sup>52</sup>

Again picking up on the international discourse around extremism, in January 2016 the Iranian foreign minister, Mohammed Javad Zarif, published an op-ed in the *New York Times* under the title ‘Saudi Arabia’s Reckless Extremism’,<sup>53</sup> in which he contrasted Iran’s anti-extremism initiatives with what he called Saudi sponsorship of extremism, stating that many terrorists were either Saudi nationals or ‘brainwashed’ by Saudi-sponsored demagogues. Zarif notably drew a parallel between Saudi Arabia’s state beheadings and the beheadings carried out by ISIS – even though Iran is an even bigger user of the death penalty (by hangings rather than beheadings).

### The political context for recruitment: circles of sympathy

Beyond the few thousand Gulf citizens who have joined ISIS, the circles of sympathy are larger – starting with those who may actively send money to ISIS or AQ affiliates, extending to those who promote them on social media, and then outwards to those who think they are using the wrong methods but essentially have a just cause.

When discussing why young people from the Gulf might join ISIS, many Gulf nationals, especially Sunni Muslims, cite what they see as legitimate frustration over the regional role of Iran, and the violence or other abuses carried out by its allies, as one of the drivers of ISIS recruitment. The phenomenon of ISIS should not be regarded simply as an issue of ideology; in reality, its ideology serves as a lens through which some people view a complex regional conflict, and which shapes their contribution to it.

Surveys generally suggest that active support for ISIS is very limited, although of course the results have to be treated with caution given the risks associated with open sympathy for proscribed groups. A 2014

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<sup>50</sup> Author’s notes from the meeting.

<sup>51</sup> Khamenei, A (2015), ‘Today terrorism is our common worry’, open letter published on official website Khamenei.ir, 29 November 2015, <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/2681/Today-terrorism-is-our-common-worry>.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Zarif, M. J. (2016), ‘Mohammad Javad Zarif: Saudi Arabia’s Reckless Extremism’, *New York Times*, 10 January 2016, [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/11/opinion/mohammad-javad-zarif-saudi-arabias-reckless-extremism.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/11/opinion/mohammad-javad-zarif-saudi-arabias-reckless-extremism.html?_r=0).

survey commissioned by the Washington Institute, in which a local market research firm conducted face-to-face interviews with 1,000 nationals in each of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the UAE, found that less than 5 per cent expressed support for ISIS.<sup>54</sup> A 2015 update, looking only at Kuwait, found that ‘the fight against Daesh’ was ranked as the country’s top policy priority (based on the first and second choices of around 1,000 respondents), and that just 3 per cent expressed support for ISIS.

A survey of attitudes among Arab millennials to religion and religious leadership, conducted in late 2015 by the Abu Dhabi-based Tabah Institute under its Futures Initiative, in collaboration with Zogby Research Services, found that a majority of respondents in seven of eight Arab countries surveyed agreed with the statement that groups and movements such as AQ and ISIS represent a ‘complete perversion of Islam’s teachings’.<sup>55</sup> The exception was Kuwait, where only 45 per cent of respondents agreed with this sentiment, while 39 per cent agreed that ‘they are mostly wrong, but sometimes raise and discuss issues that I agree on’. In Saudi Arabia the equivalent figures were 56 per cent and 28 per cent respectively, while 10 per cent agreed with the statement that ‘they are not a perversion at all’. In Bahrain, where Shia Muslims are believed to make up a majority of the population, one in 10 respondents considered such groups and movements to be ‘mostly right’. Sectarianism in Bahrain has intensified significantly in recent years, and assuming that six out of 10 respondents were likely to be Shia, this would translate to a worryingly high proportion of Sunni responses; however, the sample size was fairly limited, and caution should always be taken when extrapolating from opinion polls on such sensitive subjects. All these figures contrasted sharply with the near-universal condemnation from respondents in the UAE, where 92 per cent agreed that these groups and movements represent a complete perversion of Islamic teachings. It is notable that the survey responses implied greater sympathy for groups such as ISIS in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, both of which have suffered ISIS attacks, than in the UAE, which has not.

In the same survey, when asked to select from seven possible factors drawing young people to join extremist groups, the most likely choice overall was ‘corrupt, repressive and unrepresentative governments’.<sup>56</sup> In Saudi Arabia respondents placed greater emphasis on the role of ‘foreign occupation of Arab lands’, ‘alienation’ and ‘search for adventure’ than did their counterparts in the UAE, who saw ‘extreme religious discourse and teachings’ as more important.

There is no simple economic explanation as to why young people seek to join ISIS. Studies of the previous wave of recruitment by AQ suggested that unemployment was a factor, although poverty was not. In Saudi Arabia there is a perception that a labour market push to create more jobs for Saudis is strongly backed by the interior minister because jobs are in effect a security issue.

In conversation with officials and academics from the Gulf concerning the factors that drive ISIS recruitment, it is common to hear political, psychological or social explanations rather than religious ones, with the sense that there are various pathways via which people may come to join ISIS. For instance, according to Major-General Mansoor Al Turki, the spokesman of the Saudi interior ministry:

We don’t see a specific pattern. People can be rich or poor. Sometimes there’s a religious background. We’ve had some who went abroad on a scholarship, failed on studies and came back – or sometimes they got radicalized abroad. If we want to see any pattern, it’s young people: 18 to 22 ... It’s not necessarily

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<sup>54</sup> Pollock, D. (2014), ‘New Poll Shows Majority of Saudis, Kuwaitis, Emiratis Reject ISIS, Back Two-State Solution with Israel’, Washington Institute Policywatch 2329, 23 October 2014, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/new-poll-shows-majority-of-saudis-kuwaitis-emiratis-reject-isis-back-two-st>.

<sup>55</sup> Futures Initiative at Tabah Foundation (2016), *Muslim Millennial Attitudes on Religion and Religious Leadership, Arab World*, Abu Dhabi: Tabah Foundation, [http://mmgsurvey.tabahfoundation.org/downloads/mmgsurvey\\_full\\_En\\_web.pdf](http://mmgsurvey.tabahfoundation.org/downloads/mmgsurvey_full_En_web.pdf).

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

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people who were raised religiously. Some have been jailed for crimes; jailed for rape and drugs and suddenly he’s a member of ISIS. They can be convinced it’s the chance to clean their soul and face God with a clean record.<sup>57</sup>

Similarly, a former official commented that Saudi ex-AQ recruits whom he had interviewed for a government television programme tended not to be very religious. In some cases, ‘they had committed all sorts of sins!’, and had come to see militancy, and even suicide bombings, as a way to compensate. He linked this to broader social attitudes: ‘Our society is not tolerant of failure’, as well as to education: ‘We have not taught them enough of mercy. That failure is part of the learning process and is not the end of the hope.’<sup>58</sup>

Shafeeq Ghabra, professor of political science at Kuwait University, highlights the role of ‘injured identities’, arguing that it is partly the desire to have an impact, to ‘be somebody’, and to have a sense of meaning: ‘In ISIS you can be the foreign minister.’<sup>59</sup> Indeed, one of ISIS’s top clerics is a 30-year-old Bahraini, Turki Albinali.

At a discussion with the Saudi Institute of Diplomatic Studies in January 2016, one Saudi participant expressed the view that part of the political context that was fuelling ISIS was the West’s focus mainly on ‘Sunni terrorist organizations’ while other terrorist organizations (meaning those backed by Iran) were being ignored or appeased:

Terrorism is terrorism. When some radical Sunni groups perceive their ‘brothers’ are being hit or singled out by Western forces, while other terrorists from the other side of the sectarian divide are left alone, it contributes to widespread conspiracy theories in the region, for instance the idea that the US is conspiring with Iran or Shiites.<sup>60</sup>

Another young Saudi highlighted how his peers would share videos of brutal violence being meted out against Sunni Muslims in Iraq or Syria at the hands of Iranian-backed militias, apparently – as they saw it – for purely sectarian reasons. Just as Western media are particularly responsive to videos of Westerners being beheaded by ISIS, such footage has an element of ‘it could be you’ for Sunnis in the Gulf – a sense that is probably only compounded by the relatively limited coverage via the Western-dominated international media of these instances of violence against Sunnis.

In contrast to the view in the US that an absence of democracy contributes to the risk of extremism, there are opposing views in the Gulf about the impact of the Arab uprisings on ISIS, with some placing more of the blame on repressive regimes and others arguing that the uprisings unleashed chaos. According to Major-General Al Turki: ‘Such a spring created a chaos which provided radical people with the space to operate and to control land. Once you have chaos, the chance to have terrorist organizations is very high.’ By contrast, Dr Ghabra focused on the failure to achieve peaceful political transitions.

On the positive side, there is some common ground between the UK and GCC governments in understanding that these are complex phenomena. All governments are prone to generalizations about ideology, but in practice they use a wider range of policies to address domestic extremism, dealing with a more holistic complex of political, economic, social and psychological factors.

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<sup>57</sup> Author interview, Riyadh, October 2015.

<sup>58</sup> Conversation with author, London, 2015.

<sup>59</sup> Ghabra, S. (2016), ‘The Arab world at the crossroads: collapse or reform?’ Public lecture at LSE, January 2016, podcast available via event page at <http://www.lse.ac.uk/middleEastCentre/kuwait/events/SG-12-01-16.aspx>.

<sup>60</sup> Partnered workshop between Chatham House MENA Programme and the Prince Saud Al Faisal bin Abdel-Aziz Al Saud Institute for Diplomatic Studies, Riyadh, January 2016.

But there are blind spots. GCC stakeholders – not only governments – have valuable insights to offer on the drivers of violent extremism, especially the extremism that arises from within their own communities. Both governments and other stakeholders have insights that go beyond blaming ‘ideology’. Assessments put forward by Gulf stakeholders variously include issues of frustration, a sense of injustice, alienation and ‘injured identity’ – i.e. factors centred on subjective experience that becomes politicized – as well as the perception that Arab and Islamic states are failing to protect Sunni Muslims against extreme injustice and brutality.

Governments in the Gulf are in some instances ready to understand that exclusion and sectarian discrimination can contribute to radicalization – such as when they talk about the government of Nouri al-Maliki in Iraq and its role in producing the conditions that led to the emergence of ISIS. Such insights are, however, rarely applied to the role of exclusion and sectarian discrimination in Saudi Arabia or Bahrain, or of political exclusion and state brutality in Egypt – despite, in the case of the latter, the long legacy of prison brutality fostering radicalization. Even in the case of Iraq, little attention is paid to the legacy of Saddam Hussein, or to the reasons why young Iraqi Shia may take up arms for the Hashd Al Shabi for the sake of what they see as self-defence against an existential threat from ISIS. Thus, the UK should draw on GCC stakeholders’ insights into the drivers of ISIS recruitment, but also seek to apply a similar holistic understanding to other violent non-state actors in a context of regional conflict.

Meanwhile, the desire to mobilize support against Iran in favour of the Syrian opposition and of the Yemeni government under Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi has also encouraged the proliferation of sectarian rhetoric.<sup>61</sup> In some cases, it is a matter of governments (especially in Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Bahrain, but less so in the other Gulf states) turning a deaf ear to sectarian rhetoric coming from independent clerics and privately operated media. In other cases, state media and state-appointed clerics can be similarly sectarian. In an escalation of tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the run-up to the 2016 hajj, Saudi Arabia’s grand mufti, who is the country’s foremost state-appointed cleric, was quoted as saying that the leaders of Iran were not Muslims, but rather Zoroastrians who were particularly hostile to Sunnis.<sup>62</sup> All this leaves Saudi Arabia’s own Shia minority in a quandary. Leading Saudi Shia commentators want the government to focus on fighting sectarianism, urging, for example, reforms to education textbooks and the introduction of laws to ban sectarian discrimination and hate speech. Instead, however, they see sectarianism increasing in the Yemen war and the media coverage of it.

In his 2008 paper, Hegghammer concluded that the successive waves of Saudi foreign fighters going to join the conflicts in Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Bosnia, Chechnya and later Iraq was grounded not so much in the Wahhabi religious tradition or some inherent Saudi radicalism, ‘but rather in the strength of so-called pan-Islamic nationalism in Saudi Arabia’, and a strong sense of imagined community with a wider Muslim umma, encouraged both by the state and by Islamist opposition movements that had engaged since the 1990s in ‘a political culture of one-upmanship of declared solidarity with Muslim causes abroad’.<sup>63</sup> It may be that this pan-Islamic solidarity, emphasized by Hegghammer, is being replaced by a pan-Sunni solidarity, in a context of heightened regional sectarianism.

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<sup>61</sup> Al-Muslimi, F. (2015), ‘How Sunni-Shia Sectarianism Is Poisoning Yemen’, Carnegie Middle East Center, 29 December 2015, <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/62375>; Sons, S., and Matthiesen, T. (2016), ‘The Yemen War in Saudi Media’, Muftah, 20 July 2016, <http://muftah.org/yemen-war-saudi-media/#.V87KUjWYvc8>.

<sup>62</sup> Nehme, D. (2016), ‘Top Saudi cleric says Iran leaders not Muslims as haj row mounts’, Reuters, 7 September 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-iran-mufti-idUSKCN11D0HV>.

<sup>63</sup> Hegghammer (2008), ‘Saudis in Iraq’.

## 4. Shaky Ground: The Confusion Over ‘Non-violent Extremism’

UK–Gulf cooperation against ISIS and AQ is thus complex. But there is at least agreement on the common threat. Broader cooperation to counter ‘extremism’ is more problematic, as the UK and the countries of the Gulf define extremism in very different ways. There is a shared view that extremism need not by definition involve violence, and that it may consist of beliefs that are deemed to undermine the ‘system’. However, given their very different political systems, attitudes to democracy and the right to change political leadership, as well as social attitudes, they have highly contrasting views on what constitutes a threatening, ‘extremist’ belief system.

Traditionally, the UK has focused on violent extremism, but from 2009 onwards it began to revise its counterterrorism strategy, CONTEST, to focus more on ‘non-violent extremism’. The emphasis has shifted from seeking to counter certain ideas that are deemed instrumental in justifying or promoting violence, to a point where extremism is defined wholly in terms of ideas – regardless of their relationship to violence. In the early years of Prevent, the UK government engaged with Muslim faith-based organizations, some of which were conservative and critical, as part of the strategy to counter extremism. Subsequently, however, policy has shifted to view at least some such Islamist groups as extremist in their own right, on the grounds that they criticize the UK’s political system and liberal values, even if they do not espouse violence.

For the UK, whether an individual is an extremist is now set out in the policy discourse in very broad terms, in relation to four values that the government has identified as being fundamental to the modern British state and society. In 2011 the then prime minister, David Cameron, set out four tests for whether a group is extremist:

- Do they believe in universal human rights – including for women and people of other faiths?
- Do they believe in equality of all before the law?
- Do they believe in democracy and the right of people to elect their own government?
- Do they encourage integration or separatism?<sup>64</sup>

In 2013, moreover, the prime minister’s task force on extremism defined Islamist extremism as follows:

Islamist extremists deem Western intervention in Muslim-majority countries as a ‘war on Islam’, creating a narrative of ‘them’ and ‘us’. They seek to impose a global Islamic state governed by their interpretation of Shari’ah as state law, rejecting liberal values such as democracy, the rule of law and equality ...<sup>65</sup>

The perception of a ‘war on Islam’ is erroneous and regrettable, but one that is none the less fairly widespread among Muslim communities – whether in the UK or in the Gulf – in the aftermath of the ‘war on terror’. This is bolstered by the strongly expressed views of some Western critics of Islam – in a context in which the now Republican nominee for the US presidency has talked of banning all Muslims, even US citizens, from entering the United States. The UK government has various options

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<sup>64</sup> Cabinet Office, Prime Minister’s Office, 10 Downing Street and The Rt Hon David Cameron MP (2011), ‘PM’s speech at Munich Security Conference (Transcript, as delivered)’, 5 February 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pms-speech-at-munich-security-conference>.

<sup>65</sup> HM Government (2013), Report from the Prime Minister’s Task Force on Tackling Radicalisation and Extremism, *Tackling extremism in the UK*, December 2013, [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/263181/ETF\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/263181/ETF_FINAL.pdf).

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to counter such a world view through intelligent debate and a ‘battle of ideas’, rather than necessarily via a securitization approach.

The practical utility of the focus on ‘non-violent extremism’ is unclear, since there is a lack of specific evidence for linking (for instance) an individual’s personal opposition to the idea of democracy to (for instance) a greater risk of harmful or violent behavior on the part of that individual. There may be more of a case for monitoring, and seeking to counter, political speech and organization that is directly intended to incite or legitimize violence (such as by trying to dehumanize people on the basis of their identity) than for linking wider beliefs about rights and democracy to ‘extremism’. The notion of a distinction between ‘non-violent’ and ‘not-violent’ extremism may be helpful here: Alex Schmid distinguishes between groups that choose not to use political violence (‘not-violent’) and those that reject violence as a central matter of principle using concepts developed from Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King and others (‘non-violent’).<sup>66</sup>

The notion of non-violent extremism has also been criticized for potentially creating ‘thought crimes’<sup>67</sup> or criminalizing peaceful dissent. This presents a particular dilemma for a liberal democracy: is it philosophically and morally coherent for a liberal democracy to ban opposition to the idea of liberal democracy? Freedom of expression and opinion are regarded by many as fundamental British values. Similarly, the lawyers and campaign groups that do the most to uphold the first value cited by the prime minister – universal human rights – tend to be somewhat sceptical of the notion of non-violent extremism and do not themselves try to advance human rights by arguing that its opponents are extremists.

There have been various examples of the misuse of legislation on extremism or terrorism to silence peaceful protesters, such as the arrest under the Terrorism Act of an octogenarian Holocaust survivor who heckled former home secretary Jack Straw at a Labour Party conference in 2005 (for which the then prime minister Tony Blair publicly apologized);<sup>68</sup> however, these have been the exception rather than the rule, partly because the UK has relatively strong checks and balances on the powers of the executive and the security forces.

Thus, UK legislation and strategy on non-violent extremism is still evolving and remains domestically contentious. There is still no agreed legal definition of extremism for criminal law purposes. An additional layer of complexity is added when the UK government seeks to promote its own notion of non-violent extremism overseas, including in its relations with countries that have very different political systems; and when it seeks to work with other governments on countering ‘extremism’ in the absence of a shared definition of what this means.

There are dialogues, experience-sharing and exchanges between UK and Gulf officials concerned with countering extremism, as though this is a shared mission. But the GCC governments define extremism, and terrorism, very widely, and in ways that would typically cover a wide range of peaceful opposition activities.

Their interpretations of extremism as including opposition to democracy or universal human rights are clearly at odds with the UK definition of extremism. Yet this profound difference appears to be glossed over in joint discussions, and this is likely to create confusion.

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<sup>66</sup> Schmid, A. P. (2013), *Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review*, ICCT Research Paper, March 2013, [http://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Schmid-Radicalisation-De-Radicalisation-Counter-Radicalisation-March-2013\\_2.pdf](http://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Schmid-Radicalisation-De-Radicalisation-Counter-Radicalisation-March-2013_2.pdf).

<sup>67</sup> See for example Gleave, R. and McNamara, L. (2015), ‘Non-violent extremism: some questions about laws and limits’, One Crown Office Row UK Human Rights Blog, 22 May 2015, <https://ukhumanrightsblog.com/2015/05/22/non-violent-extremism-some-questions-about-laws-and-limits-robert-gleave-and-lawrence-mcnamara/>.

<sup>68</sup> BBC News (2005), ‘Hero’s return for Labour heckler’, 29 September 2005, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/4292342.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/4292342.stm).

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The main problem is that the expansive definitions of terrorism and extremism in the GCC criminalize a great deal of peaceful opposition activity, in stark contrast to a UK definition of extremism that privileges the safeguarding of democracy and human rights. In the GCC, since the Arab uprisings of 2011, the general tendency has been to widen the definitions of terrorism, extremism and cybercrimes. Typically, as in the UK, terrorism is defined by law but extremism is not (except in the UAE). The definitions tend to be wide-ranging. For instance, in Saudi Arabia’s 2014 law, 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].<sup>69</sup>

This broad definition allows a wide range of activities to be described as terrorist. Meanwhile, peaceful campaigners for political reform continue to be subject to repressive measures. Mohammed al-Qahtani and Abdullah al-Hamid, activists from the Saudi Association for Civil and Political Rights in Arabia, were given lengthy custodial sentences in 2013 for their activities in campaigning for a constitutional monarchy in Saudi Arabia. Human Rights Watch noted that the court verdict described al-Qahtani and al-Hamid as ‘deviants’ and compared them to AQ in seeking to change the regime, but that it was stated that both seek to do so through peaceful means.<sup>70</sup> Separately, the imprisonment of convicted ‘blasphemers’ in Saudi Arabia, currently including a liberal blogger and a poet, also highlights the stark differences between what is regarded as extreme in Saudi Arabia and in the UK, where Muslim groups that call for blasphemers to be punished would be regarded as extremist.

In Bahrain peaceful opposition leaders have been imprisoned for ‘inciting violence’; Sheikh Ali Salman, the leader of the country’s main political movement, the (Shia) Al-Wefaq National Islamic Society, and Ebrahim Sharif, former secretary-general of Wa’ad, a smaller secular movement, were imprisoned in 2014 and 2015 respectively for speeches in which they were deemed to be inciting hatred of the government (despite explicitly condemning violence). In June 2016 the Bahraini authorities suspended the activities of Al-Wefaq, and also revoked the citizenship of the country’s highest Shia clerical authority, Sheikh Issa Qassim, thereby clamping down simultaneously on both the political and the religious leadership of the country’s Shia majority. Official statements justified these actions on the grounds of fighting ‘extremism’.

The UAE takes a very different approach, as it does not cater so much to extremely traditionalist religious sentiment at home. It has sought to counter ‘takfirism’<sup>71</sup> and to highlight the values of tolerance – which in some ways may seem better suited to cooperation with the West. However, its zero-tolerance stance as regards political dissent, whether by Islamists or by liberal campaigners for a constitutional monarchy, sits uneasily with the UK’s concept of opposition to democracy being extremist in itself.

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<sup>69</sup> Johnson, C. (2014), ‘Saudi Arabia: New Terrorism Law in Effect’, Law Library of Congress Global Legal Monitor, 4 February 2014, <http://www.loc.gov/law/foreign-news/article/saudi-arabia-new-terrorism-law-in-effect/>.

<sup>70</sup> Human Rights Watch (2013), ‘Challenging the Red Lines: Stories of Rights Activists in Saudi Arabia’, 17 December 2013, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/12/17/challenging-red-lines/stories-rights-activists-saudi-arabia>.

<sup>71</sup> Takfir is the act of declaring someone an infidel and thus no longer a Muslim.

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In 2015 the UAE issued a new anti-extremism law that introduced criminal penalties for ‘takfirism’. In extreme circumstances these could extend to the death penalty if declaring someone to be an infidel resulted in their being killed. The UAE’s deputy foreign minister, Anwar Gargash, has stated that terrorism and extremist ideology have a symbiotic relationship, and has highlighted the UAE’s ban on the Muslim Brotherhood as well as on some Shia organizations as an indication that the federation does not view terrorism as ‘linked to a particular doctrine’ [or sect].<sup>72</sup> In early 2016 the UAE established the position of federal minister of state for tolerance; Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, who also holds the defence portfolio, described the establishment of a new ministry of happiness, tolerance and the future as reflecting an understanding that ‘sectarian, ideological, cultural and religious bigotry only fuel the fires of rage’; and stated that ‘There can be no bright future for the Middle East without an intellectual reconstruction that re-establishes the values of ideological openness, diversity, and acceptance of others’ viewpoints, whether intellectual, cultural, or religious.’<sup>73</sup> So far, however, the UAE’s calls for tolerance of different religious viewpoints have not been matched by evidence of tolerance for different political viewpoints, and it remains to be seen whether this ‘intellectual reconstruction’ could include opening up more space for peaceful political debate within the country.

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There are also significant differences among the GCC states over the role of political Islam and its relationship to ‘extremism’. In 2014 the UAE issued a list of 85 designated terrorist groups and organizations that included a wide variety of Muslim political and social organizations. This action reversed the usual centre–periphery dynamics of the ‘war on terror’, which has generally been defined either by Western countries proscribing Islamist groups around the world, or by non-Western countries seeking to have their own domestic (Muslim) dissidents designated as terrorist by the United States. In this case, the UAE’s terrorism list proscribed not only regional organizations, but a number of Muslim groups operating legally in Western countries – among them Islamic Relief, a UK-based charity which has received funding from, *inter alia*, the British government, the Muslim Association of Sweden and the US Council on American-Islamic Relations. These included various groups who were, or were perceived by the UAE to be, affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, which the UAE regards as a serious threat both at home and abroad.

In Kuwait and Bahrain, for their part, local Muslim Brotherhood societies have long been a recognized part of the political scene. Qatar has actively supported Muslim Brotherhood parties in the region, and has a close relationship with the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey, which is associated with the movement. The polarization of views between Qatar and the UAE on the role of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists gave rise to a severe dispute between the two countries in 2013–14, following the coup against the Muslim Brotherhood-headed government in Egypt in 2013; and has contributed to conflicts in the region, especially in Libya, where Turkey and Qatar back one warring faction against a more secular faction supported by the UAE and Egypt.

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<sup>72</sup> Emirates News Agency via *Khaleej Times* (2015), ‘UAE ready to commit land forces to fight terrorism’, 1 December 2015, <http://www.khaleejtimes.com/nation/government/uae-ready-to-commit-land-forces-to-fight-terrorism>.

<sup>73</sup> Al Maktoum, M. b. R. via *Arab News* and others (2016), ‘Promoting happiness is the key to success’, syndicated article, 28 February 2016, <http://www.arabnews.com/columns/news/887441>.

In 2014 the UK government commissioned a review of the activities of the Muslim Brotherhood, partly in response to calls from the UAE to take action against the group. The main findings were published in 2015,<sup>74</sup> and included the finding that aspects of Muslim Brotherhood ideology were contrary to ‘our’ [UK] values and national interest, but did not find grounds to ban the group from operating in the UK and found no link to terrorist activity in or against the UK. During the review process, the UAE and Qatar lobbied the UK heavily on different sides of the debate, and the long delays in publishing findings were widely attributed to the desire not to offend key allies whose own views on the issue were sharply polarized. This highlights the lack of consensus on what constitutes extremism, even among the GCC states, which have broadly similar threat perceptions in general.

Of course, extremism and terrorism are not the only reasons given by authorities in the Gulf for arresting dissidents; the GCC countries have much wider sets of laws criminalizing a variety of forms of peaceful dissent deemed to have insulted the state or harmed its reputation, etc. Charges laid against Saudi human rights activists have recently included ‘annoying others’, ‘disobedience’ of a father, ‘harming the reputation of the kingdom’, ‘sowing discord’, ‘being in touch with disreputable organizations’, ‘appearing on foreign television stations’, ‘accusing government organizations of corruption’, and ‘criticizing the Council of Religious Scholars’.<sup>75</sup> A 2015 report on Oman by the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association notes that many very wide-ranging laws limit freedom of assembly and expression. For instance, the Telecommunications Act makes it illegal to knowingly send a message that violates public order and morals or is harmful to any person’s safety.<sup>76</sup>

While the issues of repression in the Gulf go far beyond those of extremism specifically, this broader context raises questions about the risks that may be associated with working closely with Gulf governments on issues of extremism, rather than against groups that are internationally designated as terrorists. As security cooperation also involves cooperation between the UK private sector and the Gulf authorities, there are also political and ethical risks associated with such cooperation because of the wide definition of crimes and security threats – for instance, when private companies in the UK sell surveillance or facial-recognition software that may be used to identify and harass peaceful protesters.

Such cooperation also provides ammunition for charges of double standards. It can be seen as undermining the government’s claim to be upholding democratic values in the struggle against extremism, reducing the credibility of the UK’s values-based approach to extremism. Focusing more narrowly on cooperation against internationally recognized terrorist groups would be a better option because there is a clear common interest in this regard, whereas the wider issue of extremism often results in conversations or approaches that are at cross-purposes.

Broader conversations on values remain important, both to address some of the root causes of violence, and to promote ways of living together in a diverse and globalized world. This is a larger and more positive endeavour than simply countering the minority phenomenon of extremism. These values are contested and debated within states, not only between states.

In March 2015 a group of GCC nationals visiting the UK as part of the UK government’s Counter-Extremism Fellowship Programme convened at Chatham House to discuss counter-extremism measures; during the discussions, they acknowledged that definitions of extremism were

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<sup>74</sup> HM Government (2015), *Muslim Brotherhood Review: Main Findings*, 17 December 2015, [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/486932/Muslim\\_Brotherhood\\_Review\\_Main\\_Findings.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/486932/Muslim_Brotherhood_Review_Main_Findings.pdf).

<sup>75</sup> Human Rights Watch (2013), ‘Challenging the Red Lines’.

<sup>76</sup> United Nations Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association (2015), ‘Country visit: Oman (A/HRC/29/25/Add.1)’, <http://freemovement.net/reports/oman/>.

very different between their countries and the UK. They highlighted that in their countries, atheism would be regarded as extremism; so would advocating abortion or LGBT rights. In the UK, by contrast, propaganda against LGBT communities is considered to be one of the indicators of extremism. Yet within the group some participants spoke of ‘people with beards’ in their own countries as extremists – by which they meant people who appeared to be very devout and possibly Islamist. This sort of discussion quickly becomes a gateway to a broader discussion about desirable values in society, with ‘extremism’ becoming a broad point of reference to any attitudes seen as undesirable. This can open up a valuable conversation with Gulf interlocutors on issues of national identity and social values, at a time of change and contestation.

The extremism framework is certainly one that attracts many from Gulf governments to have this sort of values-based exchange with the UK. This is something that UK policy circles and civil society may latch on to, in a context in which other sorts of values promotion – particularly support for emerging democratic culture or actors – have been cut back. Just as repressive governments are using the preoccupation with extremism as a vehicle by which to clamp down on wide forms of dissent, those who want to promote liberal values are also seeing opportunities – including to have conversations about human rights not just with human rights activists but also with people in interior ministries or police.

It is, however, also potentially counterproductive, or even dangerous, to frame this discussion in purely security terms. Extremism is not only the opposite of moderation, but is associated with criminality and security threats. A wide ranging definition of extremism can thus itself be at odds with promoting tolerance and moderation.

The period since 9/11 has provided many examples of ‘counter-extremism’ measures that have been counterproductive – both by making people feel targeted, isolated and cynical, and that they are victims of injustice, and by distorting the focus of policy – which becomes driven by the violent minority and not by the majority of people who are not being recruited by organizations such as ISIS. The focus on counter-extremism itself creates the impression that extremist groups are the best placed to get political attention, and inadvertently provides incentives for extremism and violence. Furthermore, the focus of powerful Western governments on counter-extremism also leaves room for governments – including allies in the Gulf – seeking Western security support to frame a wide array of challengers as extremists.

## 5. Conclusions

There is no consensus on what ‘extremism’ is, let alone the causes or solutions. The concept of ‘non-violent extremism’ widens the definition even further and raises serious concerns about casting the net too wide. GCC governments, like many other non-democracies, tend to define extremism to include non-violent dissidents who challenge their political red lines, and the UK should ensure that it is not seen as endorsing these definitions. Even within the GCC, there is no consensus on the definition, as seen with the wildly varying views on the Muslim Brotherhood. Conversely, there is a risk of Western stakeholders sometimes conflating religiosity and extremism, for instance in the discourse around ‘Wahhabism’.

Religion, rather than being seen as a driver, should be regarded as one of the domains in which a contest for power and authority is playing out. The focus on extremist ‘ideology’ sometimes distracts from the need to examine the underlying political, as well as economic, drivers – of violence, of hatred and of the definition of the enemy.

The extremism represented by ISIS should be interpreted in the context of a wider conflict centred in the Middle East, which various actors are seeking to globalize. For some, this conflict has become a hybrid between an actual war in a region that is central to several world religions, and the latent conflicts and frustrations within disparate societies around the world. This global complexity increases the temptation to focus simply on ideology, but the development of ISIS, as distinct from AQ, is rooted in the specifics of recent and current Middle East politics. In particular, the virulent sectarianism that ISIS propagates – a different strategy from most AQ affiliates, except that of Abu Musab Al Zarqawi in Iraq – is in part a product of the invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent Iraqi and later Syrian civil wars, and of the fierce contest for influence between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

GCC stakeholders – not only governments – have valuable insights to offer on the drivers of violent extremism, and especially the extremism that arises from within their own communities. Both governments and other stakeholders have insights that go beyond blaming ‘ideology’ to examine a more holistic complex of political, economic, social and psychological factors.

However, it is rarer for such insights to be extended to groups that emerge from other communities (for instance, to understand why young Iraqi Shia might take up arms for the Hashd Al Shabi). The UK should draw on these insights, and also seek to apply a similar holistic understanding to other violent non-state actors.

On cooperation against ISIS:

- There is no simple economic explanation for why young people from the Gulf or the UK seek to join ISIS. Explanations put forward by Gulf stakeholders variously include issues of frustration, a sense of injustice, alienation and ‘injured identity’ – i.e. factors centred on subjective experience that becomes politicized – as well as the perception that existing states are failing to protect Sunni Muslims against extreme injustice and brutality.
- Many Gulf nationals, especially Sunnis, cite what they see as legitimate frustration over the regional role of Iran, and the violence or other abuses carried out by its state and non-state allies, as one of the drivers of ISIS recruitment. The phenomenon of ISIS should not be regarded

simply as an issue of ideology; in reality, its ideology represents a lens through which some people view a complex regional conflict, and which shapes their contribution to it.

- The extremism of ISIS cannot be understood in isolation from the wider regional conflict – and the global pull that this conflict exerts – in an international context in which there are various competing attempts to globalize different identities. Iran and Saudi Arabia are both parties to this conflict. Both could also help reduce it. But neither should be regarded as each wishes to portray itself: as the force that fights terrorism and extremism, versus a rival that promotes it.
- Viewing ideology as the main driver for ISIS may hinder counter-ISIS action, as the movement is driven by real-world realpolitik, not only theology or ideology. Conflict analysis is a more useful framing than is ‘extremism’ in this context. The drivers of the political tensions need to be understood, and not just the religious and ideological rhetoric that seems to fuel violence, intolerance and sectarianism.
- The ‘cold war’ between Iran and Saudi Arabia is a major impediment to the fight against ISIS (as well as AQ). Both countries are faced with direct security threats from ISIS, but neither sees the organization as the primary threat. Were they to cooperate in fighting it, much more progress could be made.
- This conflict is contributing to sectarian polarization, incitement and hatred on both sides of the Sunni/Shia divide. Political elites in Saudi Arabia and Iran are in part responsible for this, but responsibility is diffused and involves bottom-up as well as top-down dynamics.
- The UK should be counselling its allies in Saudi Arabia, and its new contacts in Iran, against such short-sighted incitement. Unlike many areas on which Saudi Arabia rebuts criticism, this is not an internal issue, but an international one that increases the risks of sectarian violence globally. Saudi Arabia will maintain the line that the state is not responsible for what the media or private preachers say, but the kingdom’s media and clerics would not enjoy the same freedom to incite against the Saudi authorities. In this regard, the UK should commission a detailed study of examples of incitement in Saudi state media as well as private media.
- Iran, for its part, will hold that, as a Shia Muslim country, it has no interest in promoting sectarianism, since Shia Muslims are firmly in the minority in the Islamic world. However, Iran’s policies over the past decade, and in particular its intensifying alliances with Shia militias, have in practice contributed to sectarian tensions.
- Western policymakers should seek to identify areas where Iran and the GCC countries could cooperate in ways that would help to counter ISIS – for instance in Iraq, where Iran and Saudi Arabia both back the government of Haider al-Abadi, and where Saudi Arabia has recently reopened its embassy for the first time in more than two decades.
- More empirical biographical and data-driven research on ISIS recruits from the Gulf, and on returnees, would be enormously valuable. The UK should support collaboration between UK and Gulf researchers to develop more empirical research into the backgrounds and biographies of ISIS recruits – for instance, building on the existing work of the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR) at King’s College London to build a similar database on Gulf recruits.

On the broader definition of ‘extremism’:

- Definitions of ‘extremism’ are contested. Some definitions emphasize the justification of violence on a massive scale as an essential part of ‘extremism’ – and as a differentiation from intellectual or religious ‘radicalism’. This is a useful approach in that it focuses on beliefs about potential violent threats to society, rather than more broadly on beliefs that deviate from the current, historically specific societal consensus on political values.
- Since 9/11, violent interpretations of political Islam have dominated the Western agenda on extremism. The spectacular violence carried out by certain salafi-jihadi groups has led to political attention that is disproportionate to their lethality. Beyond this, there have also been concerns about right-wing and left-wing extremism. There is also a heated debate about the notion of ‘non-violent extremism’. One potentially useful nuance is to distinguish between ‘non-violent’ and ‘not-violent’ ideologies.
- The GCC states tend to define extremism, terrorism and other political crimes both widely and vaguely. Furthermore, there is no consensus among these states on their definitions. The dispute between Qatar and the UAE over the role of the Muslim Brotherhood is a case in point. Moreover, non-violent liberal or secular activists have been detained in the Gulf under terrorism and incitement laws.
- This creates difficulties for UK policy. Within the UK, the definition of extremism includes opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy. Internationally, the struggle against a specific kind of extremism – ISIS and the like – involves cooperating with some governments that are themselves deeply opposed to democracy.
- The GCC states sometimes use their own counter-extremism and counterterrorism laws to target individuals and groups pushing for democracy, even if they are advocates of non-violence. This is one of the reasons why the UK policy focus on ‘non-violent extremism’ is potentially a slippery slope. It also means that cooperating with the GCC countries to counter ‘extremism’ is problematic, and risks bolstering repression. GCC countries will manipulate UK rhetoric on extremism, non-violent extremism and hate speech to excuse and justify their own actions against dissidents. These differences will provide a constant source of ammunition for domestic and international criticism for double standards.
- The new UK government has an opportunity to review the approach. Adopting a more targeted focus on cooperation against internationally recognized terrorist groups would be a better option. This could complement wider efforts to promote some of the values discussed above, without these necessarily having to be tied to a security agenda.

## Acronyms

AQ	Al-Qaeda
AQAP	Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
COIN	counter-insurgency
CVE	countering violent extremism
EU	European Union
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
USAID*	

\* Standalone acronym; USAID was established as the United States Agency for International Development.

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Cover image: The aftermath of a suicide bombing inside a Shia Muslim mosque in the Saudi Gulf coastal town of Qatif, 400 km east of Riyadh, on 22 May 2015.

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