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Campaign Against Violent Extremism Since 9/11: The Case of the Gulf States

Adil Rasheed*

Abstract

In the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, GCC member states were heavily criticised in the West for promoting a fundamentalist version of Islam that allegedly catalysed the emergence of jihadist groups like Al-Qaeda. Thus, GCC states had to contend with both international censure as well as endemic extremist threat to their security that metastasized after 9/11 attacks. Diverging ideological approaches within GCC members further complicated matters. Whereas, Saudi Arabia and UAE took a strong stand against votaries of Political Islam, Qatar controversially supported non-violent Islamists as a means to offset the more militant strains. The differences in approach eventually led to a brief discord within the bloc that erupted on 5 June 2017 and lasted till 5 January 2021. Amidst these challenges, the GCC has managed to make significant contribution to the global campaign against terrorism and initiated several legislative and institutional reforms, including several successful counter-terrorism and counter-radicalisation programmes. Their ongoing cooperation with India in this regard has also been noteworthy.



Impact of 9/11 on GCC States

Of the 19 hijackers of the four commercial airliners that crashed on 11 September 2001 into the north and

south towers of the World Trade Centre in New York, the Pentagon in Washington DC and an open field in Pennsylvania, 17 were from the GCC countries — out of which 15 were citizens of Saudi Arabia and two from the United Arab

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CAMPAIGN AGAINST VIOLENT EXTREMISM SINCE 9/11:
THE CASE OF THE GULF STATES

Emirates (with one each from Egypt and Lebanon).¹

Not surprisingly, suspicions of a Saudi role grew in the US following the attacks that persist to this day and there is still an anti-Saudi strain in American political discourse. In fact, the FBI even started to release redacted documents pertaining to Saudi Arabia's supposed links to the 9/11 attacks on 11 September 2021, following an executive order issued by US President Joe Biden for the said purpose. For security purposes, not all the information was released, and the documents were abridged.²

In any case, there is little information in these documents to establish ties of Saudi leadership to the 9/11 attacks or to al-Qaeda. Still, GCC countries have come under heavy international criticism for promoting a fundamentalist version of Islam that is seen to religiously validate the jihadist violence of groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS.

The GCC states have not only faced the brunt of Western criticism over the 9/11 attacks, but have also had to contend with the rapid rise of radical extremism within their countries in the wake of the terrorist strikes and have been busy trying to keep out the political instability, civil war and sectarian strife that has

consumed their immediate Arab neighbourhood.³

Following the 9/11 attacks, the GCC sought to convince the international community that it would render its unequivocal support to efforts aimed at "combating terrorism wherever it is".⁴ However, the priority of Gulf Arab states was not as focused on participating in the Bush administration's Global War on Terror as on repairing the reputational damage caused by their alleged association with the 9/11 attacks and to restore the global image of Islam and the global Muslim community. Soon after the attacks, GCC leaders held an emergency meeting in the Saudi port city of Jeddah, wherein they expressed their staunch opposition to any attempt at linking Islam to what they described as 'heinous terrorist acts'.⁵ Then in early 2002, all six member states of the GCC bloc took out a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times*, which condemned 'false accusations' made against Saudi Arabia. This advertisement asserted that any claim of links between the Saudi government and those involved in 9/11 attacks is "unjust, unfair, and wrong".⁶

More than Saudi Arabia, it was the UAE leadership that first began to

systematically purge jihadi and Islamist groups from its territory post 9/11, by removing Islamist teachers and by revising any objectionable content in religious textbooks.⁷ In fact, the UAE took the lead in developing and propagating an anti-extremist narrative and in developing an alternative Islamic model based on tolerance, coexistence, and social openness — albeit these initiatives remained free of any reference to democracy or political pluralism. Later, Saudi Arabia joined the UAE in taking a more proactive role in combating al-Qaeda mainly after the 2003 terrorist attacks inside the kingdom.⁸

However, the more hard-line Wahhabi state of Qatar, stuck to its affiliations with Islamist groups and continued to support even populist movements, including leftist Arab nationalists. While the UAE took the stance that Muslim Brotherhood was the fundamental source of Islamist threat, providing the ideological foundation and narrative framework for al-Qaeda and other Salafi-jihadist groups, Qatar continued to support Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated groups. It has since held on to the view that peaceful political role of Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood would provide the best antidote to the jihadist problem, a view which found some support even in the US

administrations of former President Barack Obama and among present-day US leaders of the Democratic Party.⁹

GCC Counter-Terrorism Drive Post 2003 Riyadh Attack

The GCC members states had started holding discussions about security and counter-terrorism cooperation since the time of the bloc's establishment in 1981.¹⁰ By 1983, Saudi Arabia made a proposal for an intra-GCC security agreement to 'combat activities that harm the security of any of the GCC states'.¹¹

In 1987, GCC leaders approved in principle a security strategy that covered intelligence-sharing and joint police training but could not accept possibilities of extradition and cross-border pursuit of criminals. However, a more concerted effort in this direction started gaining traction only after the 9/11 attacks. In the 1990s, even countries like the UAE were ambivalent in their stance towards Islamism. Although the UAE had disbanded Jamiat Al-Islah, an affiliate of Muslim Brotherhood in its territory, it still extended diplomatic recognition to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. But post-9/11, the UAE became unequivocal in its rejection of the forces of both Political Islam and Jihadism. It took a few years for

Saudi Arabia to come around to the UAE's position as it was initially reluctant to completely give up the intertwining of religion and politics.¹²

Taking cue, other GCC member states also started acting more assertively against the threat of terrorism after the 9/11 attacks. In October 2002, GCC interior ministers drafted the Muscat Declaration on Combating Terrorism, a document that sought to address the root causes of terrorism, and acknowledged the need for members to "streamline their collective fight against terrorism".¹³

By December of that year, Al-Qaeda affiliates took responsibility for conducting suicide bombings in three Western housing compounds in Riyadh, which claimed 29 lives and injured almost 200 people. Despite a strong crackdown by Saudi security forces, another attack on a residential compound in Riyadh took place in November 2003 that left 17 people dead. These attacks finally brought GCC leaders together in right earnest to prioritize security cooperation, with foreign ministers of the six member states meeting in the Red Sea port city of Jeddah decided to make counter-terrorism top item on the agenda for the GCC summit in Kuwait in December 2003.¹⁴

During this meeting, all member states agreed to join international conventions on combating terrorism. A wide-ranging counter-terror strategy was launched across the GCC. Fresh plans were drawn to avert attacks on ports and airports, oil infrastructure and critical water and power facilities. New and more practical initiatives were taken to reduce border vulnerabilities between member states. Investment in a range of advanced border security systems was increased, including air-borne Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) assets and the launch or expansion of electronic visa systems and border controls.¹⁵

At their respective national levels, GCC member states also joined international anti-terror conventions, codified and criminalized terrorist acts in domestic law and implemented a variety of counter-terror measures. These states introduced new regulations on terror financing which were then used to crack down on suspected money laundering operations.

In 2004, the UAE and Qatar legislated Counter-Terrorism Act No. 3 (2004) and Federal Law Number 1 of 2004 on Combating Terror Crimes. By 2006, Bahrain drew up a draft amendment to the Penal Code, which

expanded powers to deal with the financing of terror.¹⁶

On all these issues, GCC states worked on a bilateral and issue-by-issue basis with the US. For its part, the US provided GCC states access to its assets and expertise, including specialized ones that focused on specific national vulnerabilities or concerns, across a range of governmental programmes, notably the State Department's Anti-Terrorism Assistance (ATA) programme; the Treasury's Financial Action Task Force; and US Central Command's (CENTCOM's) training programmes and joint operations.¹⁷

Post Arab Spring: Rejection of Political Islam

The Arab Spring uprisings that started in 2011 and unleashed popular unrest against entrenched leaderships in the Arab world brought about a change in GCC policies. Until that time, some GCC states were ambivalent about the mixing of religious and political ideology and organizations. But the role of Islamist organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood in overthrowing monarchies in the region, forced most GCC states to pursue UAE's strictly anti-Islamist and anti-jihadist line, which it had adopted immediately after the 9/11 attacks.

For instance, Saudi Arabia took the decision to classify the Muslim Brotherhood as a major regional threat and even supported the 2013 coup in Egypt. In solidarity with the new Egyptian President, Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, Egypt formally designated the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization in 2014. Disagreement between Saudi Arabia and Qatar over the former's opposition towards Islamist movements like Muslim Brotherhood led to the latter's subsequent boycott from June 2017 to January 2021.¹⁸

Thus, the process of proscribing political Islam in Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain that somewhat partially began after the 9/11 attacks grew in strength after the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings. In recent years, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have categorically opposed all kinds of Islamist and jihadist groups — be it Salafist-jihadist groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS, Iran-backed militias in the Levant and Yemen, Sunni affiliate forces like Hamas and Islamic Jihad, or pan-Islamist Sunni movements like Muslim Brotherhood. In fact, GCC states have in recent years been at the forefront of international counterterrorism campaigns — foiling terror attacks and sharing intelligence with international organizations and states, conducting numerous arrests, initiating counter-

terrorism training and counter-radicalisation programmes, as well as fighting terror funding.

MBS' 'Return to Moderation' Reforms in KSA

Many GCC rulers currently pursue a more moderate version of Islam, particularly the young Crown prince of Saudi Arabia Muhammad bin Salman (popularly known as MBS). In fact, the death of King Abdallah in January 2015 and the accession of King Salman clearly marked a major shift in the kingdom's foreign and domestic policies.

In the context of promoting Vision 2030 abroad, the Saudi crown prince has taken up a new religious diplomacy, stating that he wants Saudi Arabia to revert to the "moderate Islam" the country practised in the early 1970s¹⁹. He has stated that "[w]e only want to go back to what we were: a moderate Islam that is open to the world, open to all religions"²⁰. In MBS's view, "return" refers to the country's pre-1979 and to Iran's revolution during the reign of King Faysal, who opened up the country and limited the role of the religious establishment²¹. Yet as the late Jamal Khashoggi has suggested, the 1979 narrative is weak because Saudi Arabia "was never moderate" and as there is no clear dividing

"before-and-after" line in these events²². Again, the Hanbali school of Islamic jurisdiction followed in Saudi Arabia is regarded as the most strict of the four Sunni schools of Islamic law.²³

Saudi approach of pursuing a moderate Islam is in alignment with its 'Vision 2030' programme. It projects the kingdom as the champion of "moderate Islam" as opposed to the "extremists" – namely Iran, the Muslim Brotherhood, and their affiliates. The tolerant image also paves the way for a Saudi strategy that draws in foreign investment — such as the Silicon Valley mega-investors, who could finance the futuristic, green energy, robot-run NEOM city²⁴ at the border with Jordan and Egypt and the Line city.²⁵

In a televised interview, MBS was asked about the meaning and application of 'moderation'. He reiterated that he is committed to following the Quran and the Sunna. However, he added that he is not required to follow the interpretative school of Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab and that he intends to follow only the most reliable statements of the Prophet, which have been transmitted from several chains of transmission, such that Muslim scholars consider their fabrication impossible (*mutawatir*). Such hadiths, however, are very few in number, indicating a substantial

reduction in the number of hadiths the Prince considers worthy of referring to.²⁶

Among the major social reforms initiated by the Saudi state are the lifting of restrictions on female driving, cinemas and musical concerts. Thus, the state has embarked on a campaign, covering a variety of educational, cultural, and archaeological initiatives, which even celebrates its pre-Islamic heritage²⁷. It is important to mention here, the walled city of al-'Ula that has been lying largely neglected in a northwestern oasis of the Arabian Peninsula for over 2000 years. In ancient times it was an oasis on the Spice Route. However, in modern era, the nearly 5000 denizens of this far-flung town on the Saudi periphery have been living close to stone monuments made by Nabataean²⁸ sculptors. However, ever since the rise of Mohammed bin Salman as Crown Prince in June 2017, Saudi Arabia has gone to great lengths to publicize forgotten al-'Ula city. In fact, the government has invested \$15 billion on advertising and developing the site, attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors²⁹.

This initiative has emanated from MBS' wish to juxtapose Islam with nationalism as the source of the Saudi monarchy's political legitimacy. This conceptual reorientation helps in

MBS's ongoing social and economic reforms that is eroding Islamic fundamentalism's dominance in the public sphere. A new Founding Day is now attributed to the country's establishment linked to the rise of the Al Sa'ud dynasty in 1727, rather than its alignment with the Wahhabi movement in 1744 (which was celebrated earlier as the Founding Day). The emphasis on al-'Ula goes further in that it harkens back to the pre-Islamic era of the Arabian Peninsula, known as "*jahiliyyah*."³⁰ Loosely translated as "ignorance", the term *jahiliyyah* has been a synonym for backward and immoral conduct during the pre-Islamic era for centuries. The advent of Islam was intended to emancipate believers from *jahiliyyah*.

On 16 February 2023, Saudi Arabia unveiled its new grand plan to transform Riyadh, the capital city. Looking remarkably like the Holy Kaaba in Mecca, a new super-structure called the Mukaab – "cube" in Arabic is being built in Riyadh³¹. It will stand 400 metres high, wide and long, big enough to hold 20 Empire State Buildings, according to the Saudi kingdom's Public Investment Fund (PIF). The plan is to create "the world's largest and modern downtown" in Riyadh, which is scheduled to be completed by 2030 and helmed by Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman. The

Mukaab “will house over 100,000 residential units, 9,000 hotel rooms and 1.4 million square metres of office space, as well as dozens of entertainment and culture venues.”³²

As part of a soft power approach, mainly by Saudi Arabia, GCC states have also increasingly brought about gradual and incremental changes in their socio-political systems. However, it is also useful to point out here that along with this approach aimed at moderation, a quietist Salafi movement (*salafiyya ilmiyya*) is also being practised in much of GCC and Arab world, which goes largely unreported. This school opposes popular protests and calls for strict obedience to the ruler of the state. In fact, the support of this school to status quo regimes saved many Salafis from repression in Muslim countries that were ruled by dictators like in Libya. By merit of their apolitical stance, Quietist Salafis are considered moderate, although dogmatically they follow a very literalist interpretation of Islam. The followers of Rabi al-Madkhal (or the Madkhalis), constitute a large section of the so-called Quietist Salafis in GCC states)³³. The failure of the political experiment in Egypt and the rapid deterioration of the security and social situation in other countries has in fact made *Salafi ilmiyya* even more popular in recent times, than the non-

violent Salafi activists (*salafi harakiyya*), let alone the Salafi terrorist groups (*salafi jihadiyya*)³⁴.

Counter-Terrorism, Counter Radicalism Programmes in GCC³⁵

There may be political and ideological reasons for much of the violent extremism and terrorism in Arab Gulf states, but this is catalysed by the region’s enormous youth bulge, which has easy access to the Internet and is intensively active online with heavy usage of social media and mobile phones.

In the immediate aftermath of the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011, Islamist groups carried out many terrorist attacks in GCC states, killing 414 people from 2012-16 — according to the University of Maryland’s Global Terrorism Database³⁶. Many citizens of GCC members states also joined jihadist groups like ISIS as the Arab Spring gave way to the rise of violent extremism and terrorism in many Arab states.

The Arab Centre for Research and Studies provides details of Gulf-based fighters joining terrorist organizations like ISIS, which stood at 5,500 in 2015³⁷. Saudi nationals topped the list of jihadists joining ISIS

from GCC states, a figure of 3,000 which was the second highest in the world.³⁸

To counter this new threat, GCC member states (including Saudi Arabia) have taken a variety of measures to prevent religious and political extremism and mitigate its impact on society. In early 2000s, governments in the Gulf had started amending their educational curricula, clamped down on divisive and hateful rhetoric and discourses, and only over time developed elaborate counter-radicalisation and de-radicalisation programmes. Given below is a list of some of the most prominent counter-terrorism and counter-radicalisation institutions and projects launched by GCC states to counter the metastasizing menace.

The Terrorist Financing Targeting Center (TFTC)

The United States and GCC member states formed The Terrorist Financing Targeting Center (TFTC) to counter regional money laundering and terrorist financing networks.

They seek to bolster multilateral efforts among Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the United States of America through three actions: identifying, tracking,

and sharing information about terrorist financing networks; coordinating joint disruptive actions; and offering capacity-building training and assistance in countering the financing of terrorism.

1. Saudi Arabia: Terror Threat and Responses

Although Saudi Arabia follows the Salafi-Wahhabi version of Sunni Islam, in line with the 1744 pact between Ibn Abd Al Wahhab and Muhammad bin Saud, the state has struggled to eradicate the extremist Salafi-Wahhabi radicals in its population since the time of its resurgence in the early 20th century — be it the Battle of Sabilla against Ikhwan forces in 1929, the Siege of Kaaba by radical extremist Juhayman Al Otaibi and his followers in 1979, or the rise of Salafi jihadist groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS in recent decades. Saudi Arabia has also viewed largely non-violent, yet politically radical movements like the Sahwa (‘the Islamic Awakening’) — having links with Muslim Brotherhood — with much apprehension since 1979. Of the 3,000 Saudi nationals who joined ISIS ranks as fighters in 2015, as many as 750 are said to have returned to the country.³⁹ To end this threat of violent extremism and terrorism, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman has categorically stated: “We

will not spend 30 years of our lives dealing with extremist ideologies. We will destroy them today and immediately.”⁴⁰

Saudi Anti-Terror Laws and International Conventions

The government of Saudi Arabia is signatory to a number of international conventions and actively participates in the global campaign against terrorism. It took the lead in launching a 41-country Islamic alliance to counter the threat of ISIS, even as it is a member of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS⁴¹. Saudi Arabia has also participated in combined military action with the US in the Counter ISIS Coalition’s Counter Finance Working Group (CIFG). Part of the Egmont Group’s Financial Intelligence Unit, the Saudi Arabian Financial Intelligence Unit (SAFIU) combats terror funding and money laundering activities.

Mohammed bin Naif Centre for Counselling and Care

The purpose and intention of this Centre is to de-radicalize, reclaim and then re-integrate extremists into the mainstream of the Saudi society. Established in 2006, it offers special care programmes for people convicted of “immoderate thoughts”, veering towards violent extremism and in support of terrorism⁴². The

main purpose of the programme is to return extremists to the “true understanding of Islam, based on peace and moderation.”⁴³ Most of the inmates at the Centre have either surrendered themselves, been caught by Saudi security forces for planning terrorist activities, or are former Guantanamo detainees.

The Mohammed bin Nayef Counselling and Care Centre is based in Riyadh and named after the son of a deputy prime minister, and a deputy minister for security. He had played a leading role in establishing the programme, which was launched on the heels of several terrorist attacks in Saudi Arabia including bombings and kidnapping.⁴⁴

Since its establishment, thousands of inmates have graduated from the Centre. A report puts the success rate of reclaimed radicals at 80 percent, with remaining 20 percent considered “hard-core” and impervious to attempts at de-radicalising them.⁴⁵

Al Sakinah Campaign

In 2005, Saudi Arabia launched Al Sakinah initiative, an online counter-radicalisation campaign, aimed at fighting extremism and even recruitment on the Internet.

It was launched at a time when the country itself had about 17,000

Islamist websites. In response, the government introduced legislation that would punish any website disseminating radical messages or for promoting the activities of any radical or terrorist organization.⁴⁶

Al-Sakinah campaign engages with extremist elements on social media, discusses and holds dialogue to challenge their beliefs. The project employs moderate Islamic scholars and specialists in strategic communication to interact with people who have come under the influence of hard-line ideologies.

Their attempt is to tactfully discredit the extremist narrative that has brainwashed impressionable minds, but who have still not crossed the threshold of crime and can be reclaimed.

By 2015, Al Sakinah website claimed to have successfully persuaded 1,500 online radicals to give up their extremist outlook and find wisdom in peace, development and moderation, out of a total number of 3,250 radicals engaged on the Internet that showed a success rate of under 50 percent.⁴⁷

Along with the UAE's Al Sawab Centre, the Sakinah campaign launched a programme in 2017 which targeted 650 online supporters of extremist ideologues and groups

and managed to convince 74 people to give up their radical way of thinking.⁴⁸

King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Inter-Religious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID)

Saudi Arabia launched a major inter-faith dialogue initiative in 2012, known as the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Inter-Religious and Inter-Cultural Dialogue (KAICIID).

The initiative set up an intergovernmental organization which has a board of directors that belong to a large number of representatives from various world religions.⁴⁹

Prior to establishment of the organization, an initiative was launched five years earlier when in 2007, Saudi King Abdullah met Pope Benedict XVI. In 2008, Saudi government also held an interfaith dialogue bringing together Muslim, Hindu, Christian, Buddhist and Jewish religious leaders.

The Moderate Islam of 'Vision 2030'

In 2015, Saudi Arabia launched its 'Vision 2030' as an economic

programme that seeks to transform the country into a post-oil knowledge-based economy. It envisions Saudi Arabia as “a tolerant country with Islam as its constitution and moderation as its method”.⁵⁰

As part of the Vision’s new tolerance-promoting measures, the government has ruled that all Saudi-based Islamic clerics that travel abroad for charitable activities should receive prior government clearances from the Ministry of Islamic Affairs (MOIA). The clerics also need to secure government clearance before appearing on national television.⁵¹

Saudi Arabia has also reduced the powers of the religious police, known as the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice or ‘*mutaween*’. This police was established in 1976, with the role of supervising markets and public morality.⁵²

In a purge of extremist Imams at the mosques, the government laid off as many as 10,000 substitute imams.⁵³ Moderate Islamic clerics now have a seat in the country’s Council of Islamic Scholars.

The Global Centre for Combating Extremist Ideology (Etidal)

In May 2017, Saudi Arabia established The Global Centre for Combating Extremist Ideology

(Etidal), committed to becoming a “global reference in combating extremist ideology and promoting moderation”, particularly on the Internet. Inaugurated during the US-Islamic Summit of 2017 in Riyadh, held during former US President Donald Trump’s first visit to Saudi Arabia, it has given the institution the Arabic name ‘Etidal’ (which means ‘moderation’).

The goal of the centre is to actively combat, expose, and refute online extremist ideology in cooperation with governments and organizations worldwide.⁵⁴ In fact, the centre is managed by board of directors, which has 12 representatives from different international organizations.

Etidal employs technologies to detect, track and report on presence of extremist content on the Internet. The Centre claims to be able to detect extremist content on the Internet within seconds and neutralise it before it spreads by other users. In 2022, the Global Center for Combating Extremist Ideology joined hands with Telegram to take down 6,824 channels and removed more than 15 million pieces of ‘extremist’ online content.⁵⁵

2. The United Arab Emirates (UAE)

Working closely with the United States and other international

organizations, the UAE has been at the forefront of global counter-terrorism campaigns in all forms.

To curb incidents of controversial Islamic rulings by dubious clerics, the UAE government has established a *Council of Fatwa* to unify and supervise the fatwa sources from across the country. The step has been taken to regulate random religious opinions being issued by extremist religious clerics.⁵⁶

The Dubai government established the *Dubai Economic Security Centre* in 2016 to protect the emirate's economic and financial image from alleged charges of money laundering, if not funding of terrorism. Earlier in 2015, the Ruler of Dubai Sheikh Mohamad bin Rashid Al Maktoum had urged the state mufti to issue moderate fatwas that promote tolerance.⁵⁷

Hedayah: International Centre of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism

Hedayah, which literally means 'guidance' in Arabic language, is an Abu-Dhabi based international organization that according to its website seeks to "prevent and counter violent extremism through evidence-based and innovative programmes, strategic

communications and world-class research".⁵⁸

The international centre of Hedayah involves a community of various organisations, such as the United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC) as well as several governments of Middle East, Europe and Asia. The UK government has supported this institution with a donation of \$1.4 million. Its main objective is to assist with the implementation of pillars of the UN Global Counter Terrorism Strategy.⁵⁹

Created as part of Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) in 2012, the Hedayah hosted the global countering violent extremism (CVE) exhibition in Abu Dhabi. Hedayah also holds major international seminars on counter-terrorism and has tackled the issue of de-radicalising and rehabilitating extremists into normal life.⁶⁰

The Sawab Centre

Established in partnership with Global Coalition against ISIS in 2015, the Sawab Centre is the main point of contact for the 73 members' coalition effort in discrediting ISIS' online radicalisation.⁶¹

Funded by the US and the UAE, the Sawab Centre has a 24/7 operations room, having officials

from the UAE, US and from other member states that monitor and analyse ISIS online content. They also produce research-based content to undermine ISIS propaganda and radical messaging. ('Sawab' which means 'reward' in Arabic), the centre highlights the ISIS' own inept governance in areas under its control, its crumbling infrastructure and poor health services.⁶²

3. Qatar

The last major terrorist activity in Qatar was in 2005, when a suicide bomber drove his car into the Doha Players Theatre, which killed a British citizen and injured many others.⁶³

Many critics have questioned Qatar's policy of giving shelter to Islamist parties, even members of radical groups like Muslim Brotherhood and controversial clerics like Yousef Al Qaradawi. The intensive coverage of speeches by Al-Qaeda leaders like Osama bin Laden by Qatari television channel and media network Al Jazeera is also questioned by some international security experts as having spread radical propaganda to the Arab youth.⁶⁴

However, these critics overlook the fact that Qatar has taken several measures to combat terrorism and

radicalisation. Thus, the country enacted the Cybercrime Prevention Law in 2014 to criminalise efforts at radicalisation through the cyberspace.

This law has enabled authorities to monitor online data and internet traffic to determine any extremist threat⁶⁵. The country also maintains its own list of terror suspects and performs strict screening of international passengers.⁶⁶

Qatar's 2010 Combating Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing Law have enabled the government to freeze accounts of UNSC designated terrorist groups. Qatar introduced new for terrorism in 2010. In the 13th United Crime Congress held in Doha in 2015, the Doha Declaration was adopted, which included provisions to fight terrorism.⁶⁷

The Research Centre for Islamic Legislation and Ethics (CILE)

Launched in 2012, The Research Centre for Islamic Legislation and Ethics (CILE) seeks to promote the moderate understanding of Islamic thought to discredit sources of extremist interpretation of the religion. It functions as an organ of Qatar Faculty of Islamic Studies, which is part of the University of Hamad bin Khalifa.⁶⁸

According to CILE website, the mission of the centre entails: "Producing, applying, recommending and disseminating Islamic ethical thought and research by engaging scholars of Text and scholars of context to bring about a leading credible school of thought with transformative impact."⁶⁹

Qatar Foundation:

Founded in 1995 and funded by the Government of Qatar essentially pursues a science and research agenda and seeks to expand the country's technological capacity.⁷⁰ However, the Qatar Foundation also aims at countering extremism through certain sub-programmes like 'Silatech' (which means 'your connections'), by offering employment and business opportunities to youth where the threat of radicalisation among the unemployed is higher.

4. Bahrain

The Kingdom of Bahrain has witnessed more terrorism-related incidents than its neighbours. In almost a decade, there have been several terrorist incidents (around 150), but the frequency has declined considerably in recent years. Many of the attacks have been the result of Shiite-Sunni communal tensions in Bahraini society, which peaked

during the periodic bombings that increased in 2015.

It is noteworthy that Bahrain is ruled by a Sunni king and administration, although the majority of population is Shiite. The government has blacklisted Shiite Hezbollah as a terrorist organization. However, the country also faces threats from Sunni terror groups like ISIS, Al-Qaeda, Al-Nusra Front, etc. and the country has even designated the Islamist organization Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization.⁷¹

Bahrain is perhaps the only GCC state that does not solely rely on government agencies or political organizations to carry out its counter-terrorism initiatives, but even allows civil societies like 'This is Bahrain' and 'Bahrain Tolerance Foundation' for the said purpose.

Hamad Centre for Peaceful Co-Existence and the Declaration of Tolerance

The King Hamad Centre for Peaceful Co-Existence seeks to uphold and promote the Declaration of Tolerance by the Kingdom of Bahrain which envisages religious freedom for all. Established in Los Angeles in 2017, the institution seeks to promote international talks regarding inter-faith dialogue and tolerance.⁷²

In the spirit of inclusivity, Bahrain has allowed the opening of Roman and Orthodox churches in the country. It has also appointed Jewish and Christian on global platforms by the funding of King Hamad Global Centre for Interfaith Dialogue and Peaceful Coexistence at the University of Sapienza in Rome. By encouraging religious freedom, Bahrain seeks to build a climate of moderation that is inimical to the growth of violent extremism.

5. Kuwait

Terrorist attacks have been low in Kuwait. The most significant one was a suicide bombing in prominent Shia mosques in 2015, which left 27 people dead and over 200 injured. Later, Kuwait sentenced seven people to death for their involvement in the bombings.⁷⁵

Barring a few attacks, the number of Kuwaitis radicalised by terrorist organizations are said to be high. It is believed that ISIS drew over 100 fighters from Kuwait. According to UNHCR, Kuwait and Qatar were key sources of private donations channelled to armed groups in Syria, including ISIS in 2014-15⁷⁶. However, Kuwait has enforced strict controls on charities and fundraising activities since 2015 and cash fundraising in mosques has been banned⁷⁷. The government has also

been engaging with universities to spot early warning signs of radicalisation among the young and vulnerable sections of the population.

6. Sultanate of Oman

Out of all the GCC states, Oman has experienced the lowest number of cases of terrorism and radicalisation.⁷⁸ In fact, no known Omani has joined ISIS till date.⁷⁹ This is despite the fact that the country's neighbour Yemen has witnessed war in recent years and Al-Qaeda as well as ISIS have built up their bases there.

One of the key reasons for the country's resilience against radicalisation is Ibadism. Most Omanis practice the Ibadi school of Islamic jurisprudence that opposes conflict between different sects of Islam and allows other religions a space in Muslim societies with some restrictions. It is for this reason, that Oman has several churches, Hindu temples as well as Sikh and even Buddhist place of worship.

In addition, government has imposed strict legislative measures against people indulging in acts of terror. The Royal Decree of 2017 gives from life imprisonment to even death penalty for offences related to terrorism. In 2009, an Omani national

— Ali Abdul Aziz Al Hooti — was given life imprisonment for helping and conspiring attacks by Pakistan's anti-India terrorist group Lashkar-i-Taiba.

Oman has also established institutions and agencies for tackling extremism in society. In January 2007, the National Committee for combating Terrorism was established. The counter-terrorism response forces include Royal Oman Police Special Task Force and The Sultan's Special Forces. Oman is also part of the Middle East and North Africa Financial Action Task Force and revamped the Combating the Financing of Terrorism Law in 2016.

The Message of Islam in Oman

The 'Message of Islam in Oman' is an initiative to encourage positive interaction between people of different faiths. Launched by Omani Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, the programme has toured 46 countries from Japan to France to promote inter-faith dialogue and religious harmony. On the United Nations International Day for Tolerance on 16 November every year, Oman sends invitations to various international figures to visit Muscat and speak on religious harmony and international peace.

India-Gulf Counter-Terrorism Cooperation

According to Mohammed Sinan Siyech, there are three key areas of counterterrorism cooperation between India and GCC countries — terror financing, persons of interest, and travel routes.⁸⁰

It is noteworthy that remittances from the Gulf constitute half of the remittances sent to India.⁸¹ Although most of these transfers are conducted through legal channels, a significantly large amount of money is being transferred to India through the informal hawala system.

'Hawala' is an informal method of transferring money, which does not involve any actual movement of physical money. Thus, 'hawala' is an unregulated, alternative remittance channel that operates outside the conventional banking system. This illegal alternative is used mainly by poor immigrants to avoid transaction charges and taxes imposed on them by their home country.⁸² The illegal and unregulated nature of 'hawala' transactions draws in money-launderers, criminals and terrorists to use this option. Some sources estimate that India has lost over 1.5 trillion in tax revenue to 'hawala' transfers in the last 60 years.⁸³ In fact,

terrorist group Indian Mujahideen (through its financier Abdul Wahid Sidibappa) is said to have transferred money from UAE through hawala system and so did Lashkar-i-Taiba while conducting 26/11 Mumbai attack.⁸⁴

However, India and GCC countries have cooperated in combating terrorism in recent years through their engagement with the Financial Action Task Force (FATF). Gulf countries have also been used as transit points for Indians travelling to conflict-ridden regions like Syrian, Iraq and Afghanistan. Even in this respect, there has been an increase in India-GCC cooperation.

There has also been greater intelligence sharing in counter-

terrorism between India and GCC member states and in this regard at least 30 problematic individuals have reportedly been deported from Gulf countries to India.⁸⁵

With the recent restoration of diplomatic relations of Qatar with other important GCC member states and Saudi-Iran reconciliation and establishment of relations after several decades, there is reason to believe that Gulf countries, along with their neighbouring states, would be able to take a more united stand and coordinate their efforts in combating all forms of violent extremism and terrorism out of West Asia for the good of the region and greater international peace. ■

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