

GULF ARAB STATES AND THE JIHADIST WARS OF NO POLITICAL CONSEQUENCE

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Publication Date: 23 December 2014**

The Syrian civil war has been the third major jihad of modern times for Gulf Arab states. The first, Afghanistan, was a new experience, the inaugural transnational jihad of the modern era in which Saudi Arabia and the United States jumped into the fray against the Soviet invasion. Each with different motivations, they poured some \$20 billion in the fight and Saudi interior ministry may have facilitated travel for anything between 35,000 and 40,000 young men to join in.¹ Sensing Russian weakness, Washington wanted to take the fight to the Soviets, while Al Saud were willing to provide the manpower because of a new turn that Saudi Arabia took in the 1980s: scared by the 1979 Wahhabi revolt at the Grand Mosque in Mecca the regime moved to boost its Islamic credentials. The class of *ulama* (religious scholars) were given wider powers over society, the kingdom embarked on a programme of global proselytization (printing Qurans and funding mosques), and Saudis were publicly encouraged to join the Afghan jihad. The Mujahideen were public heroes.

Afghanistan came back to bite both Saudi Arabia, the United States, and others. Egyptians who fought there played a role in the Gamaa Islamiya insurgency against the Mubarak regime in the 1990s and the Islamist war with the military authorities in Algeria in the same decade. The United States became the target of Bin Laden's al-Qa'ida organisation, suffering the 1998 attacks on its embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salam and then the 9/11 attacks in 2001. Saudis who had passed through Afghanistan also formed the nucleus of the militants who staged attacks against the government and foreigners under the name of al-Qa'ida from 2003.

So when jihad came around again in 2003 it was a much more calculated affair. Riyadh was a quiet ally of the United States in the invasion of Iraq, but was horrified to see Shia dominate the post-war political scene and Iran increase its influence there. Saudis quickly emerged as a central, if not the main component of an insurgency that was at once anti-occupation and anti-Shia. This had become observable as early as a few months after the invasion, when reports emerged of security officials telling al-Qa'ida sympathisers in interrogations that they should take their fight to Iraq, and during the siege of Falluja in November 2004 when a group of

¹ Atwan, Abdel Bari. *The Secret History of al-Qa'ida*. London: Abacus, 2007; 154.

Saudi religious scholars issued a letter to the Iraqi people authorising there. The trick was to ensure that the numbers were not too large to give the American ally a sense of official sanction of this undeclared jihad.

After US criticism became public and pointed in 2007, the Saudi government took striking measures: then interior minister Prince Nayef harangued religious scholars in a widely reported meeting, “do you know that your sons who go to Iraq are used only for blowing themselves up?”² The Mufti, the state’s official spokesperson on religious matters, said Saudi youth had become a “commodity, bought and sold”.³ The security blowback was minimal. By 2006 increased security cooperation with US and other Western agencies had produced a victory over the al-Qa’ida insurgency, thus the security threat of “returnees from Iraq” was manageable. Indeed, the low-level militant threat had the advantage of tightening the relationships of a hyper-dynasty perennially fearful for its survival with its Western allies.

With the Syrian conflict since 2011 this pattern of smarter jihad has been honed further. Saudi Arabia and Qatar engaged in a war of choice, for different reasons. For Saudi Arabia it was a chance to hit back against the Iranians by removing one ally (Syria) after they gained another (Iraq); for Qatar it was a chance to install another Muslim Brotherhood government. Both policies should be understood as part of the wider *problematique* the colonial-era Gulf dynasties faced in responding to the movement of Arab uprisings. Both states sponsored Salafi jihadist groups, according to their tastes and whims. While jihad was shunned at an official level in Saudi Arabia’s case, given the background of American sensitivity over Saudi involvement in 9/11, again security agencies turned a blind eye to manageable numbers travelling to Turkey, Jordan or Lebanon to make war on the Alawi regime while the sectarian *jihadisque* discourse freely dominated in media. There was no flow of fighters from Qatar to Syria, while Kuwait, which did not lead organisation, funding and arming of anti-Assad forces in the manner of Saudi Arabia and Qatar, did see some nationals join the war.⁴ Popular financial contributions, through charity funding-raising, sanctioned by the state, was huge in all three territories.⁵

What this brief summary of state involvement in these modern wars of exported jihad hopes to show is the striking degree to which they are wars without political consequence for their sponsors. There has been no Madrid train bombings⁶ or 7/7 bombings⁷ to bring down a government or reverberate around the political system because there is no meaningful political process in the first place that is capable of influencing dynastic deployment of vast resources. The political impact of the Iraqi adventure came in the form of the Bush administration’s crusade for democracy in 2005, which cajoled the Mubarak regime to lower the level of rigging in parliamentary elections and persuaded the Saudi regime to allow some men to take part in municipal elections which were revamped decades after the ruling family

² “Saudis warn clerics over militants in Iraq,” Reuters, 20 June 2007.

³ “Saudi cleric issues warning over Saudi militants,” Reuters, 1 October 2007.

⁴ See: “It ain’t half hot here, mum,” *The Economist*, 30 August 2014 and Barrett, Richard. “Foreign Fighters in Syria,” The Soufan Group, June 2014, <http://soufangroup.com/foreign-fighters-in-syria/?catid=13>.

⁵ The UAE lowered its profile in the Syrian conflict, concerned over potential Brotherhood gains; the Bahrain regime, by contrast, played to its Sunni base for wider cause of out-manoeuvring the Shia opposition.

⁶ Bomb blasts that killed 191 people and wounded around 1,800 on 11 March 2004, three days before general elections.

⁷ Coordinated suicide bomb attacks on London’s transport system that killed 52 people and wounded over 700 on 7 July 2005.

smothered popular representation in 1964. Acts of political violence targeting civilians en masse were perpetrated solely in Saudi Arabia, which manipulated them to further entrench the ruling family's position.⁸ Nationals engaging in Syrian jihad are not the political trauma for the Gulf that it is for the Europeans.

This brings us to the question of ISIL, the Islamic State in Syria and the Levant, which renamed itself "the Islamic State" (*al-dawla al-islamiyya*) after seizing territory in north Iraq in June 2014 and reintroduced the office of the caliphate (ended by the Turkish republic in 1924). Conventional wisdom views ISIL and the caliphate as a threat to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states involved in the Syrian conflict. I would argue that on both security and political counts this is not the case. Saudi Arabia can reapply the policies used to handle militancy from 2003, it can rest assured of the full support of its Western allies, it can reassert its claims to represent the true Sharia state with extensive powers granted to the *ulama* (who do not care for caliphal claims to authority). ISIL can be convincingly represented to the diverse wings of the religious establishment and the public generally as extreme. This is not to say that ISIL merely replicates the problems attendant to the al-Qa'ida era. For one an attack on Shi'ite worshippers in the Hasa region in November 2014 marked a shift⁹: it evidenced the application of Wahhabi sectarianism domestically rather than, as in the three jihads discussed above, via export abroad.

⁸ A British man was killed in a suspected suicide car bomb attack outside a theatre in Doha in March 2005.

⁹ "Saudi arrests key suspects in Shia attack," Al Jazeera, 25 November 2014.