

מרכז עזרי לחקר איראן והמפרץ הפרסי



The Ezri Center for Iran & Persian Gulf Studies

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Does the Jihad Movement Distress the Gulf States?

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Does the Jihad Movement Distress the Gulf States?

By Dr. Glen Segell, Fellow – The Ezri Center for Iran and Persian Gulf Studies, University of Haifa

The Persian Gulf States didn't see a change of leadership with the Arab Spring that brought transformation to Egypt, Libya, Syria, Tunisia, Yemen, and others. The Gulf States leadership understands their small and closely knit population, being of the same tribal basis and identity. The processes and institutions of democracy are alien and would not appeal to them. On the other hand the processes and institutions of Islam such as Sharia and Jihad are part and parcel of their very essence. The Gulf States are no stranger to those who believe in, and are members, of Jihad movements. For this reason the Gulf States leadership have united, and support western efforts, to confront radical and extreme Jihad movements that could threaten their rule. They know their dynasties could be toppled in the heat of the moment, yet they also know that Jihad movements come and go, with apparent short longevity, mainly with local implications. They are intense and violent but soon dissipate. They are not exported. So nipping the Jihad movements at their source when they become vocal and with immediacy is the strategic dictum of "attack is the best form of defense"

Jihad movements and revolutionaries

In many ways Jihad movements such as the "Islamic State" (*al-dawla al-islamiyya* in Iraq and Syria) resemble revolutionary movements outside of Islam and indeed these in many ways resemble Jihad movements. Once the leaders have aged or died or both then the next generation of leaders are more placid. The progression of time sees the relaxation of impositions on the general population. The success of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution saw its finale with the death of the last of its leaders Andropov in the 1980's. So too with modern epoch Islamic Jihad movements and revolutionaries. The first modern day Sunni Islamic revolution was in Sudan and the first modern Shia Islamic revolution was in Iran. Only a few years apart yet both shook the world. Despite the media and academic attention applied to the Iranian revolution, because it was an American ally, the more significant revolution was the Sunni Islamic revolution in Sudan. This was because of the non-state movements it inspired and because the Islamic world is a majority Sunni.

The al-Qa'ida (the base) movement looked towards Sudan as a base for its global Sunni Jihad aspirations. When the dream faded because of the inability to project the values and its forces globally, it turned its attention on confronting the world powers in Afghanistan. Saudi Arabia, the United States and the Soviet Union all joined the fray in Afghanistan. For the last 35 years the

remote mountains of Afghanistan have been battleground of the first transnational Jihad movement of the contemporary epoch with the rest of the world. If the Jihad movement had not proclaimed its global intentions then the world would have gladly let a small band of bearded heretics stake their tents and tend their goats in the name of Islam. Afghanistan has no natural resources such as oil and is of little geo-political strategic value.

Too be sure the religious fervor of the Jihad movement in Afghanistan had its positive side. It aided in reducing the illicit drug cultivations and exports from Afghanistan. However the idealism generated by this modern Sunni Jihad movement saw Saudi Arabian sponsorship of tens of thousands of volunteer fighters against the Soviet atheism. Given that the Soviets engaged in battle and the potential threat to Iranian oilfields, the United States saw opportunity to support the Sunni Jihad fighters as a proxy conflict of the Cold War, but not in support of the Jihad. The Royal Saudi family agreed to support this formula of American funding and Saudi manpower because it also wanted to advance its Islamic credentials following the 1979 Wahhabi revolt at the Grand Mosque in Mecca.

The Jihad movement is localized and not global

The Shia Iranian movement didn't progress outside of its own nation-state boundaries; it was localized and so attention focused on the Sunni Islamic revolution. The Sunni Islamic revolution in Sudan, the Jihad movement in Afghanistan, and the insecurities perceived by the Royal Saudi family also saw a radicalization by and within Saudi Arabia. The Mujahideen in Afghanistan were proclaimed as public heroes where Saudi youth were encouraged to join. The Saudi *ulama* (religious scholars) were given wider powers over society. Printing presses worked non-stop at printing Qurans for Islamic global missionary purposes while mosques worldwide received funding. Despite this the Jihad movement conflict remained localized in Afghanistan. Sudan soon slipped over the horizon and the battlefield didn't leave the remote Asian mountains. The Jihad was localized.

There was no decisive victory for any party to the first decade long struggle in Afghanistan. The Jihad movement in Afghanistan was overshadowed by the intra-Islamic conflict between Sunni Iraq and Shia Iran; of which there was also no decisive victor. However the seeds were sown amongst the participants in both conflicts to try to take the Jihad elsewhere and then to also return to Afghanistan after 9/11 in 2001. The 1990s saw the rise of sporadic Jihad movement inspired attacks in Egypt (Gamaa Islamiya insurgency), Algeria, Nairobi and Dar es Salam Tanzania (attacks on American embassies), and then the 9/11 attacks in 2001. In the Islamic world the germ was growing for both an increase in militants attacks against governments and foreigners as well as the Arab Spring. Yet these attacks were one off attacks. Despite the rise of

radical and extremist Islamic groups in Africa such as al-Shabab in Somalia and Boko Haram in Nigeria, the Jihad movement has not made any significant headway in the last 35 years.

The United States and Europe have not fallen despite the 9/11 attacks in New York and Washington in 2001, the four simultaneous bomb attacks on the London public transport system in 2005 and the Madrid Train bombing in 2004. If the Jihad movement so wished, and if it was serious in its intent, and if it was capable, then it could have perpetrated suicide bombings with the frequency and intensity worldwide that have been seen in Baghdad and Jerusalem. No security force can defend, prevent, deter, or dissuade a solitary and solo bomber. However the Jihad movement has remained localized within a small area remote area of the world. The Jihad movement has not had any global successes in the way that Communism gripped entire continents of sovereign states for decades.

The Jihad movement can be deadly

This is not to say that the Jihad movement cannot inflict chaos in an instant, such as toppling the monarchical leadership of the small Gulf States whose population could see appeal in the values of Sharia and Jihad. The small size of these states and their weak domestic security forces and army would not be able to prevent a coup d'état, revolt, or revolution, especially if it had Islamic tendencies and appeal. Within hours a Jihad movement could be in power, threaten the world's oil reserves, but then lack direction in governance. This potential threat of the Jihad movement has distressed the Gulf States and inconvenienced Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia was the home of the Wahabi that perpetrated 9/11 and perpetuated al-Qa'ida. Unwittingly Saudi Arabia's paranoia saw significance in its support of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. This war was a turning point not only for Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States but also for the Sunni Jihad movement. The vacuum created in Iraq due to the war granted the Jihad movement a new battleground; and it moved down from the remote mountains of Afghanistan to the proximity of the Arabian Peninsula.

The Jihad movement fantasizes a caliphate

The political and security vacuum in Iraq and its Sunni-Shia cycle of violence was a dream come true for the Sunni Jihad movement. It offered all the elements for success that Afghanistan lacked. It offered a Shia presence to mobilize Sunni idealistic volunteer fighters. Shia Iran dominated central government in Iraq as a direct consequence of the democracy installed by America that meant that the majority ruled and the majority population in Iraq is Shia. It offered foreign and non-Islamic intervention that mobilized Sunni idealistic volunteer fighters to combat

the new Crusade led by the United States. More important for the Jihad movement than either Shia or Western involvement was the role of Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia supported proxy movements opposed to the Shia regime in Baghdad including supporting an insurgency that included the influx of foreign fighters into Iraq via Syria. The Jihad movement gained a propaganda coup by depicting the Royal Saudi family as supporting the American led coalition as aiding the “Crusaders.” In turn the Jihad movement projected that they, the Jihad movement, would be the true saviors of Islam by creating a caliphate.

This situation led to the advent and ascend of al-Qa’ida in Iraq, a Jihad movement that had not been present during the days of Saddam Hussein’s rule. Extremely strong counter-insurgency operations by the American led coalition in Iraq between 2006 and 2010 saw a false proclamation of conquest over the Sunni al-Qa’ida insurgency in Iraq. However unwittingly with the American withdrawal from Iraq in 2010, the scene was set for the Sunni Jihad “Islamic State” movement to control Sunni areas of north-west Iraq and east and south-east Syria in the name of the caliphate.

The Jihad movement and caliphate distress the Gulf States

Consequently the year 2014 has been a watershed for the Jihad movement. The “Islamic State” and the caliphate was foreseen as a worst case scenario by analysts in the Iraq conflict as early as 2007. It was foreseen that Iraq could split into three states, Sunni, Shia and Kurd. It was foreseen that the Sunni areas could be controlled by a combination of al-Qa’ida forces, and released prisoners of the former Iraq army and Iraq Ba’ath party. The Syrian civil-war was not foreseen and hence the merger of their Sunni Jihad elements with those in Iraq was a calamity especially when the “Islamic State” seized territory in north and west Iraq in June 2014 and reintroduced the office of the caliphate, last heard of in the 1920s during the days of Turkish Ottoman rule of the region. It was this declaration of the caliphate and perceived popularity of the “Islamic State” Jihad movement that has caused distress to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states spurring their involvement in the Syrian and Iraq conflict.

The Gulf States tackle the Jihad movement

By and large the Gulf States were spared any involvement or any distress from this modern epoch Jihad movement from 1979 to 2011. Kuwait was briefly occupied by Iraq but not as an issue of the Jihad movement. It has only been since the Arab Spring and more so the Syrian civil-war since 2011 that the modern epoch Jihad movement has seen any involvement by, or any distress for, the Gulf States. This distress has brought about hereto unseen and unexpected events in the

Persian Gulf. The GCC partners and allies Qatar and Saudi Arabia have chosen to sponsor different cohorts even though both are supporting Salafi Jihadist groups; and in doing so they have squabbled.

The goal of Saudi Arabia is to support groups that confront Shia Iran, while that of Qatar is to support those groups that could that install another Muslim Brotherhood government. The UAE had a low profile in the Syrian conflict, concerned over potential Brotherhood gains, until it joined in the American led air strikes against the “Islamic State”. Bahrain has been very supportive of any and all Sunni groups as a consequence of its local Shia opposition and Iranian support thereof. The Gulf States of Qatar, Bahrain and Kuwait have also saw a small number of their citizens going to war against the Syrian Alawi regime while their governments engaged in popular financial contributions including charity funding–raising.

To be sure the royal families of the Gulf States were spared the democratization movement of the Arab Spring. Instead they are facing the radicalization movement of the Jihad. For the first time in the contemporary epoch, Islamic states have willingly joined non–Islamic coalitions against the Jihad movement. This is a unique intra–Islamic episode brought about the distress of the Gulf State leadership who fear for their rule and power.

Whereas the Kuwait liberation in 1990/1991 saw extreme hesitancy of Saudi Arabia and other states to even provide bases for attacking Iraq in order to liberate Kuwait, today is the opposite. The Gulf States and others such as Jordan are actively engaged in combat, through air strikes in a coalition with Western states. At the same time they are funding and providing manpower and logistics for local groups to combat the “Islamic State” in Iraq and Syria. The Jihad movement has distressed the Gulf States whose leaders, whose royal families, fear for their every existence. They have seen the manner in which Arab Spring states leaders have been overthrown and whose countries are now in the throws of chaos.

The Forecast and Prediction for the Gulf States

While engaged in low intensity combat against the Jihad movement both Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States are holding their breath of the mantra that Jihad movements come and go, with apparent short longevity, mainly with local implications. They are hoping that if the Jihad movement can be contained to a civil–war situation in Iraq and Syria, as it was in Afghanistan, then time will play against the veracity and expansion of the Jihad movement.

The bottom line is that the reaction and involvement of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states and their joining forces with the West against the Jihad movement is short–term panic and long term prudence. Even though an “Islamic State” ideal is here to stay in Iraq and Syria for the time being

because of their failed state characteristics and the dream of a caliphate notion amongst naïve youth, the Jihad movement has diminutive global projection and limited governance ability.

Saudi Arabia has little to fear from others refuting its claims to represent the true Sharia state. The *ulama* and those who control the holy sites of Mecca and Media have no concern for caliph type claims to authority. The core of “Islamic State” leaders are al-Qa’ida and repeat the same errors that have beset their predecessors since 1979 Afghanistan. They apply Wahhabi sectarianism domestically with little success of export. They even lack enthusiasm for attacking Shia Islam with an exception being an attack on the Shi’ite worshippers in the Hasa region in November 2014.

Thus the leadership of the Gulf States should be more concerned with the long-term potential threat of Iran and proxy Shia groups in their own states more so than the Sunni Jihad movement. However, even these can only create limit unrest as an inconvenience. The Sunni Jihad movement should offer little or no long term distress to any Gulf State, nor indeed to the West. The last 35 years has shown that Jihad movement is local, it soon dissipates and it cannot be projected globally or sustained. Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz, slowly squashed al-Qa’ida, capturing or killing its leaders in his kingdom, forcing the leftovers underground as radical preachers. Nonetheless, as the Arab Spring has demonstrated, there remains the latent possibility of a cataclysmic overnight domestic revolt and change in leadership from any source; more so from Jihad movements than those promoting westernized values such as democracy.