

# Jihad calling

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Plain and simple, it is US regional policy that has radicalised Islamists in the Arab Gulf, writes **Ammar Ali Hassan**

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Current events in Saudi Arabia form a chapter in the slide of Islamist groups in the Gulf towards violence. One can not help but to remark upon this departure from the relatively peaceful nature that characterised the Islamist movement in the Gulf for decades, especially when compared with the experiences of other Arab and Islamic nations that, during the same period, rode the crest of Islamist violence, responding to it with greater force and persistence until the organisations that had sworn themselves to the overthrow of the state were ultimately routed, forced into tactical ideological retractions or splintered into atomised cells that buried themselves deep underground to await the right moment to resurge to the surface and lock horns with prevailing regimes.

It is no coincidence that the qualitative shift of the Gulf Islamist movement, if we may coin the phrase, from peaceful proselytising activities to armed violence occurred at a time when some "tendentious" international parties found in the accusation levelled against a group of youths from Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries of involvement in the planning and execution of the 11 September attacks against the US an opportunity to pressure GCC governments in order to achieve a number of objectives on various non-security related issues. It is palpably clear that this transition had much to do with the zealous mindset that governed US neo-conservative attitudes and policies towards the Arabs and, specifically, the Bush administration's handling of the Middle East conflict. Pro-Zionist forces in the West, keen to stem the growing influence of GCC governments on this conflict, have sought to attribute the transition to the performance and traits of these governments. This line is very much at odds with the facts.

It was in the Arabian Peninsula in the 18th century that the first modern Islamist movement emerged. Wahhabism, named after its founder Mohamed Ibn Abdul-Wahhab, quickly spread beyond the Gulf to India, Sumatra, parts of Central Asia and the Caucasus, and parts of Africa. Much later, in the 1950s and 1960s, the Muslim Brotherhood established branches in Kuwait, Bahrain, Iraq and Yemen, and soon the influx of Egyptian Brotherhood rank and file fleeing Nasserist repression strengthened the Brotherhood presence in these countries. We can still see the Brotherhood imprint on many Islamic associations in the Gulf, such as the Islamic Forum and the Reform Society in Bahrain, and the Islamic Guidance and the Social Reform Society in Kuwait. Gradually there arose various Salafist societies alongside the Brotherhood. Among these are the Jamaat Al-Tabligh wal-Dawa (Society for Propagation and Preaching), originally founded in India, various Shia groups influenced by Al-Khomeini, and the Hizb Al-Tahrir (Liberation Party) that recruited actively in some Gulf countries. More recently, some Sunni and Shia charity and philanthropic societies have become visibly politically active. Among these are the Social Culture Society in Kuwait and the Muslim Youth, Islamic Awareness and Islamic Guidance societies in Bahrain.

In the past, incidents of Islamist violence in the Gulf were few and far between. There was, for example, the failed attempt on the part of Joheiman Al-Atibi to take over the Holy Kaaba in Mecca in 1979, the violent brushes between the Muslim Brothers and the Saudi Arabian government, the Shia riots in Bahrain, the aborted bombing plots in Kuwait and similar incidents involving illegal Islamist groups in Oman. For the most part, however, Islamists in the Gulf were non-militant fundamentalist groups due to the political, social and economic conditions particular to the region. On the one hand, tribally based regimes continued to enjoy widespread respect as the concrete heir to the traditional system of tribal elders. On the other, rapid modernisation and the enormous influx of oil revenues tended to bind the new generations of Gulf youth to material and spiritual modes of life relatively remote from religious extremism. At the same time, authoritarian regimes bolstered by relatively strict laws inhibited the spread of "alien" ideas on the part of migrants from other countries, including those who had belonged to contemporary Islamist movements in their original homelands.

Until fairly recently, the priority item on the Islamist "agenda" in the Gulf was moral reform, aimed primarily at fighting new social and cultural values associated with modernisation and sudden wealth. However, various internal and external factors combined to push numerous movements from across the Islamist spectrum into politics. In some cases, their activities extended beyond the peaceful drive to mobilise the public behind the demand for the full application of Islamic Law to acts of violence aimed at ruling regimes or at Western and specifically American military and civil presence in the area.

Still, for some time Islamist violence was successfully contained by dominant regimes or given an outlet by the US, keen to tap this energy in its campaign of attrition against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Then, after the humiliating withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan and the outbreak of the Persian Gulf War in 1991, the "Afghan Arabs" began to turn their sights homewards and against US presence in the Gulf region. Following their success in forcing the US out of Somalia, they began to dream of staging a repeat in the Gulf where there occurred several attacks against American military personnel and installations, culminating in the bombing of the USS Cole in October 2001.

However, it was the events of 11 September followed by the US war on terror and occupation of Iraq that let fundamentalist fury out of the bag. The military, political, economic, cultural and media repercussions that emanated from the airplane hijack bombings of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon reached their peak in the Gulf from where most of the planners and perpetrators of these attacks allegedly originated. The governments of these countries now came under pressure to comply with a range of American demands. Not only were they required to cooperate with American military and intelligence agencies in the actual hunt for persons belonging to Al-Qaeda, which claimed responsibility for the 11 September attacks, they were expected to help in other ways as well. There was, for example, an economic dimension that entailed, on the one hand, shutting down Islamic charities and societies suspected of financing Al-Qaeda operations and, on the other, helping to finance the war on terror or at least ensuring that Gulf oil taps remained open to fuel the American military machine. But there were other demands that were not so clearly related to security. Pressures to alter educational curricula, cultural content and official religious rhetoric seemed to aim straight at the heart of Arab-Muslim identity and remain a focus of heated controversy in the Arab world today.

From this standpoint, therefore, American foreign policy behaviour is directly responsible to a large extent for the relatively recent shift of a segment of the Islamist movement in the Gulf towards sympathy with, or actual membership in, Al-Qaeda. This responsibility, moreover, extends right back to the beginning, with the creation of the "Afghan Arabs", and extends through the policies and actions -- the US military presence in the Gulf, the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, and other dimensions of the war on terror -- that have been so instrumental in generating the gathering impetus of militant Islamism. And from beginning to present, Washington never once swerved from its unremitting pro-Israeli bias.

While the bulk of the Islamist movement in the Gulf remains peaceful in nature, focused on proselytising and philanthropic activities, Washington's continued pressures on GCC countries to fulfil its own political, economic, security and cultural demands, along with its insistence on lumping all Islamist groups in a single "terrorist" basket, is certain to propel the Gulf Islamist movement towards further radical militancy.