Meeting Summary

Middle East and North Africa Programme | 13–14 December 2014

Islamism and its Alternatives in the GCC

Chatham House, the Royal Institute of International Affairs, is an independent policy institute based in London. Our mission is to help build a sustainably secure, prosperous and just world.

The views expressed in this document are the sole responsibility of the speaker(s) and participants, and do not necessarily reflect the view of Chatham House, its staff, associates or Council. Chatham House is independent and owes no allegiance to any government or to any political body. It does not take institutional positions on policy issues. This document is issued on the understanding that if any extract is used, the author(s)/speaker(s) and Chatham House should be credited, preferably with the date of the publication or details of the event. Where this document refers to or reports statements made by speakers at an event, every effort has been made to provide a fair representation of their views and opinions. The published text of speeches and presentations may differ from delivery.

© The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2015

CHATHAM HOUSE
The Royal Institute of International Affairs

Introduction

The following is a summary of discussions that took place at workshop sessions in Doha on 14–15 December 2014 in partnership with the Gulf Studies Center, College of Arts and Sciences, Qatar University. The discussion brought together academics, civil servants and journalists from various Gulf Cooperation Council countries and from the UK to analyse the role of Islam in social and political movements and to assess the future of political Islam and its alternatives in the Gulf states.

Key points that emerged from the discussions included:

- Political Islam needs to be understood in its historical context and not simply as a recent phenomenon. Indeed, it can be argued that insofar as political Islam is about the presence of Islam in the public sphere and about the nature of governance between rulers and subjects, it has been an integral part of Muslim societies since the time of the Prophet Muhammed.
- Political Islam was an important building block in the establishment and development of the Gulf states, particularly in the realm of education; and it is only relatively recently that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have viewed it as a threat.
- For decades the Muslim Brotherhood was a great ally of the ruling families because it provided a familiar narrative that served as a bulwark initially against the Pan-Arabism of Nasser and subsequently as a legitimizer of those families' right to rule. Post-Arab Spring, the Muslim Brotherhood is seen as a rival by those very same families – one that challenges the fundamental legitimacy of their regimes.
- The Salafi movement is split between those who are supportive of and loyal to the ruling families and those who are calling for change through either peaceful means or armed struggle.
- The marginalization of Shia in the Gulf has created a disenfranchised community that considers itself oppressed, and within that community there is a minority who feel justified in taking up arms against the state. Nowhere is this more evident than in Bahrain, which is on the fault line of a growing regional sectarian conflict between Shia and Sunni.
- Youth in the Gulf states is disenchanted with and wary of religious or political ideologies. In those countries that have parliaments and political parties, there is disillusionment and a sense that formal politics are risky, corrupt or boring.
- As the Gulf states seek to establish cohesive narratives that engage their citizens, they continue to be preoccupied with using the perceived threats posed by political Islam, the Muslim Brothers or Iran in an attempt to ensure loyalty to a sometimes notional idea of nationhood.

The meeting was held under the Chatham House Rule and the views expressed are those of the participants. The following summary is intended to serve as an aide-memoire to those who took part and to provide a general summary of the discussions for those who did not.

SESSION 1 | Political Islam in historical context

The historical overview

Political Islam needs to be understood in its historical context and not simply as a recent phenomenon. In the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammed, Allah's messenger, all institutions – political, military and social – were vested in one individual. After Muhammed's death, splits emerged and what evolved out of fractious debate was the caliphate system or 'the grand deal', as one participant put it.

The essence of the grand deal was a trade-off between religious and political institutions, on the one hand, and the ulema, the religious authorities maintaining equilibrium between the political leaders and the people, on the other. The ulema asked that the caliph adhere to the rule of Islam, to its practices and religious rules; in return, it would ensure that the people accepted the political system and did not rebel against the caliph. The ulema have throughout Muslim history been largely obedient to the political system. It is an understanding that embodies the Hanbali school of jurisprudence and the later perspective adopted by most salafis (including the Saudi religious establishment) that the ruler must be obeyed at any cost.[1] In asserting their position in the grand deal, the ulema displayed a sometimes brutal realism that was informed by the infighting that took place, after Muhammed had died, between the companions of the Prophet regarded as 'the best of the best generations'. Thus, order is the top priority, opposing *fitna* or strife and sedition. A participant commented on an 'inherent contradiction – those who took power by force were legitimized while those who opposed them were banned from using force' and asked how this could be resolved.

Whatever its contradictions, the grand deal proved remarkably resilient in the early imperial successes of a rising Islam. Although the system saw disruptions, tensions and rebellions and even the caliphate divided into several regional power blocs (Baghdad, Damascus and Andalusia), it endured until the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War.

In a period of decline Islamists harked and continue to hark back to the golden age of a constantly advancing Islam. But such a view is ahistorical, one participant argued, because it is based on a misunderstanding of the age and how tolerant the environment was. 'The purists today would not tolerate practices such as the publishing of poetry with homosexual themes, debates on atheism (*Zanaahdiqah*) and in Andalusia the flourishing of music and drinking. Thus the golden age was not necessarily religious.'

With the collapse of the Ottomans, it was noted, there was 'no longer a centre of power, a single authority for the ulema to look to; and this void in Islamic power led to the disintegration of the religious institutions'. Arab nation-states emerged and became a new source of legitimacy that the ulema were meant to support. But this new status quo lacked the imperial or domestic successes that were the hallmark of the golden age of Islam. That in turn, one participant commented, had caused doubt, disunity and a vacuum largely because the Arab nation-states were weak, a product of the colonial era and in effect controlled by foreign powers. Doubts about the efficacy of the nation-states, the speaker asserted, were 'what led to political Islam, the voices who were unhappy with the concept of nation-states' that replaced the pan-Arabic world of the Ottoman Empire.

[1] Lacroix, Stephane (2011): *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

The concept of political Islam

An alternative view argued that insofar as it is about the presence of Islam in the public sphere and about the nature of governance between rulers and subjects, political Islam has been an integral part of Muslim societies since the time of the Prophet Muhammed: ‘Islam is what Muslims make of it. As long as you are making a claim on how others should lead their lives, even when saying secular things, you are still expressing views on how people ought to live. Even a modernizer such as Ataturk did not suggest completely leaving Islam behind. Even if he was secularizing, he was making a claim on religion.’ According to that argument, Muslims cannot be apolitical.

Modern political Islamism has its roots in the 18th-century alliance between the house of Saud and Muhammed Ibn Abdul al Wahab in the Nejd region of the Arabian Peninsula, which at the time was the most marginalized region in the Islamic world but is now seen as the origin of the Islamist movement in the Gulf. Native merchants spread Arab Islamist revival ideology in opposition to political rulers with strong ties to the colonial power, Britain. However, with the rise of Nasserism and the concept of pan-Arab socialism, Islamist ideology moved from opposing to supporting the Gulf political systems; and the Muslim Brothers became a leading movement in the Gulf. Education was much influenced by revivalist ideology and literature. The 1960s and 1970s saw the Gulf states become very important both financially and symbolically in the spread of Islamist movements.

Political Islam, it was noted, is not static. Rather, it has changed in response to events such as the 1967 defeat to Israel, the Iranian revolution, Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait and 9/11. But what gave it real impetus in the 20th century was the coming of oil. The merchant class that had initiated Islamist revivalism in the earlier part of the century were themselves displaced. Increasingly, the people affiliated with Islamism were members of the professional class.

With each watershed event, the ideology of political Islam shifted, proving itself both resilient and adaptable to changing circumstances. And whereas it lacked global reach at the time when the nation-states of the region began to emerge in the post-Ottoman era, it has become a world force thanks in no small part to the emergence of the Gulf states in the decades since the end of the Second World War. It was the efforts of these states and particularly the Saudis to promote ‘Wahhabism’ (a label often used for the Salafism developed in Saudi Arabia, although Saudi Salafists themselves reject the name) using oil revenues that gave Islamism a transnational voice. However, it was noted that although there are personal and ideological linkages that are not irrelevant, transnationalism does not mean Islamist movements are united and hierarchical.

In the opinion of one speaker, the Muslim Brotherhood emerged as a response to colonialism in the region. In that sense, it had a political agenda – albeit one that was informed from its inception by theology. Salafism, on the other hand, developed from a purely theological stance.

But as a model for a 21st-century world, the following question was posed: ‘What does political Islam bring that is new?’ The speaker responded by noting that its understanding of economics is ‘very shallow – “Islamic economy” refers only to Islamic banking and ignores issues such as fair wages’. In addition, its ideological component was equally shallow and ‘informed by 19th-century capitalism and 19th-century authoritarianism’.

SESSION 2 | Political Islam in the region

Political Islam in the Gulf has seen its fortunes rise and fall. In the early era, when the nation-state was uncertain and insecure, Islamists provided a framework for socially conservative societies that was both reassuring and useful to the ruling families. But as the Islamists gained stature, they were perceived by the governing elites to pose a threat. As such, particularly in the KSA and the UAE, the Islamists have found themselves at the sharp end of a harsh crackdown.

The rise of political Islam in the Gulf states can be traced from the end of the Second World War through to the Iranian revolution of 1979. Islamists, especially the Muslim Brothers, found themselves highly valued. They were viewed as a positive force that could assist in state building. As is discussed below, the Brothers were deeply involved in the establishment and development of education. But their star began to wane in the wake of the Iranian revolution – an Islamist, albeit Shia, triumph that deposed a reigning monarch.

At the time of the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the Brotherhood itself was split: its Kuwaiti members had broken organizational ties with the International Muslim Brotherhood over its opposition to Muslim states joining the US-led alliance against Saddam Hussein. That sowed the seed for a high level of concern among the Gulf states about the intentions of the Brotherhood. While Islamists remained a useful counterweight to the perceived threat of Iran, after the Arab awakening of 2011 Islamists throughout the Middle East who had previously supported the status quo because they did not aspire to political change started to voice political opinions and support calls for change. At that point, the conflict between political Islam and the Gulf governments emerged into the open.

Political Islam, identity and nation-building

Nation-building in the Gulf, one speaker noted, is a work in progress. It has been made that much more difficult by rulers who, as another participant suggested, have ‘only loyalty to family’ and not to the concept of a state. And yet Islamists have been major players in sustaining those families and helping them to build the infrastructure of modern nations. The powerful role that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has assumed in the Gulf and the Middle East as a whole would not have been possible without the kingdom’s distinct brand of Islam and its skilful use of religion for political legitimacy.

Now, however, there appears to be confusion over what political Islam in the Gulf means. In Saudi Arabia and UAE, for example, the Brotherhood has been declared a terrorist organization. In Bahrain and Kuwait it functions openly, while Qatar was a strong supporter of the Morsi government and a number of other Muslim Brotherhood affiliates internationally despite having no official Brotherhood organization active in politics at home. As one participant noted: ‘There is no consensus on a definition of either Islamism or terrorism. They have this dilemma of not knowing what Islamism means so each Gulf country has responded based on its domestic political situation.’

Another argued that the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states perceive any form of organized force with the potential for mobilization as a threat; and he linked that to the role of political Islam in the Arab uprising in Egypt, where the Brotherhood abandoned its risk aversion and avoidance of elections and pursued confrontational politics. The excitement caused by the Brotherhood’s election victory sparked deep anxiety among the Gulf ruling families: ‘The idea of change in the Gulf is scary, and so they became more aggressive in managing their affairs’ in relation to political Islam. The response has been to decree political Islam a threat and to ramp up the counterterrorism agenda, placing state security at the top of that agenda.

SESSION 3 | The Muslim Brotherhood in the Gulf

Shared concerns and commonalities

Central to what one participant called the 'marriage of convenience' between the Gulf states and the Brotherhood was the pan-Arab socialist discourse enunciated by Nasser in the 1950s. His call for Arab unity under his leadership frightened the Gulf ruling families, while in Egypt the campaign against the Muslim Brothers drove many of them to seek sanctuary in the Gulf states. Nasser's Marxist-tinged ideology was hated by the Brotherhood and, if successfully exported, posed a genuine threat to the survival of the ruling families. Thus both had a common enemy in Nasser and their antipathy to him and the ideology promulgated by him was the main driving force behind their historic alliance.

Both sides also agreed on the centrality of religion and understood the use of Islam as a strategy for political legitimization. The traditional, conservative religious values of the Brotherhood were appreciated, in particular, by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait; and the Muslim Brothers were given the space, time and opportunity to thrive, especially in the sphere of education. The Islamization of education was already well under way in Saudi Arabia, and the Brotherhood was given a free hand in other Gulf countries. In the UAE, one of the early education ministers was a member of Al Islah, associated with the Muslim Brotherhood; and as one speaker put it, 'their control of education was overwhelming'. Another noted that the Brotherhood controlled student unions and used them as the 'main tool for reproduction'.

The Brothers were highly successful in other spheres as well, penetrating official and semi-official organizations and running very profitable businesses. The revenues generated and the hands-off attitude of the Gulf states enabled the Brotherhood to establish both regional and global networks. The alliance was further strengthened by the Iranian revolution and the perceived threat that Shia Islam posed as well as by the war in Afghanistan, where, with the approval of the US and the KSA, the Muslim Brotherhood was heavily involved, as one speaker noted.

Strains on the relationship

However the 'marriage of convenience' began to break down just when the Brotherhood had achieved a deep penetration into the educational, political, business and social spheres of Gulf societies.

In the 1990 Gulf war, in which the GCC countries played a prominent role as strategic allies of the US-led campaign, the Brotherhood, as one participant noted, 'got confused with different branches taking different positions' for or against the invasion. The Gulf states, it was argued, felt betrayed: 'We needed you and you did not deliver.' In addition, the collapse of the Soviet Union meant there was no longer a shared ideological enemy. Nasser was long gone and pan-Arabism seemed to have gone with him. Arab nationalism was finished and the Gulf states, flush with oil revenues, were more self-confident. The attitude became one of 'we don't need you anymore'. The sense of betrayal became a mutual one.

After 9/11 the Saudis accused the Brotherhood, as one speaker put it, of 'politicizing our peaceful Salafi/Wahhabi beliefs'. That Salafists were embracing politics was laid at the door of the Muslim Brothers. This was dangerous territory for the Gulf states, several of which now saw the Brotherhood as questioning their fundamental legitimacy. The same speaker commented that '9/11 was the true divorce'. However, the final break came with the election of Morsi in June 2012. The following month

the UAE began arresting members of Al Islah, a Muslim Brotherhood-inspired organization. Dozens were sentenced to long jail terms. Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE declared the Muslim Brotherhood to be terrorist and Bahrain joined them, albeit in a somewhat equivocal way.[2]

Qatar, which had backed the Brotherhood in Egypt and elsewhere financially, militarily and politically, found itself at odds with other GCC members, most notably Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain, all of which temporarily recalled their ambassadors from Doha in 2014. The perceived role that the Qatari-funded Al Jazeera network played in promulgating a Brotherhood agenda contributed significantly to that decision.

[2] To date, Bahrain has not outlawed the Muslim Brotherhood political society Al Menbar.

SESSION 4 | Salafi movements in the Gulf

Salafism was born well before the emergence of the Muslim Brotherhood. Its origins are rooted in the mutual oath of loyalty taken by Muhammed Ibn Abdul Wahhab and Ibn Saud in 1744; the former assumed responsibility for religious affairs and the latter for political and military issues. In this context, it was noted by a speaker that 'Salafism was part of a political project, the creation of the Saudi state through tribal unification'.

The term comes from *al-salaf al salih* (the righteous ancestors), and the beliefs its adherents espouse are rooted in a strict reading of the Quran and Sunna. Salafists believe they are following the path of the ancestors. Theirs is a literalist understanding that allows no room for metaphysical interpretation. Salafi interpretation of *Tawhid*, the oneness of God, is correspondingly strict. As the same speaker put it, 'upholding *Tawhid* and erasing its violations is the primary aim of Salafism', adding that Salafists believe it is their role to protect Islam from *bida'a* (religious innovation), which is regarded as heretical. Salafists are hostile to Sufism; and, as the speaker noted, they are particularly hostile to Shia Muslims, whom they say attribute supernatural features that should be attributable only to God and in so doing violate *Tawhid*. There are two distinct spheres: belief, which is defined by loyalty, and unbelief, which is defined by disavowal.

Within Salafism, two main factions exist: the purist and the activist. The purists believe that Muslims should obey the ruler as long as he is not apostate and should disavow political engagement. Activists, though not overtly political, target the identity of Muslims and seek to destroy symbols of unbelief, thus engaging to a certain extent in the realm of politics. Unsurprisingly, conflicting interpretations emerge: 'The biggest disagreement between Salafists is in relation to politics.'

This becomes clear in what was presented as the further dissection of Salafism into four categories. 'Authority' Salafists are loyal to maintaining the status quo and therefore legitimizing the rulers. 'Institutional' Salafists have a political edge insofar as they 'play with the institutional rules of whatever country they are living in'. 'Revolutionary' Salafists are radical in terms of armed and unarmed challenges to the status quo. Finally, there are the scholarly Salafists, who are apolitical.

Examples of institutional Salafism would be the letters of demand addressed to al Saud in 1991 and 1992, which sought to 'advise the ruler, not seek change'. An example of an unarmed revolutionary event would be the Buraidah protest in 2014, which saw women and children protesting publicly against the incarceration of family members. The first armed challenge was said to have occurred in 1929 against the future king Abdel Aziz al Saud. The second was the attack on the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979.

Meanwhile, armed revolutionary Salafism has become externalized: 'You don't need a ruler or state authorities to carry out Jihad.' Thus, it was argued, armed Salafism has in effect 'privatized Jihad – go and launch your own, with private supporters'.

Challenges and the future of Salafism in the Gulf

Until the start of the Gulf War in 1990, one speaker noted, Salafists and the Muslim Brotherhood cooperated in the Gulf; but Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent allied liberation strained relationships and the two became increasingly competitive and hostile towards each other. Moreover, the rise of Iran in the region, and Shia activism in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province and in Bahrain, both present challenges to the Salafist movement. At a time of increasing fragmentation and

decreasing revenues in the movement, it is unclear how those challenges will be met. One speaker said that there was a crisis within Wahhabism. It is based on two pillars – the monopoly of truth and the monopoly of politics – both of which are hugely challenged at present.

However, the key questions facing Salafists in the Gulf are how far the movement will expand into the political domain and, as noted above, what form that intervention will take – peaceful or violent. Participants disagreed on the extent to which Salafism remained a viable force. One asserted that 'Salafis keep dividing into smaller groups. They are totally different from the Muslim Brotherhood and have no political future.' But another argued that 'Salafis are here to stay with all their kinds – pro-authority, political, apolitical, armed and unarmed opposition'. The same speaker could envisage the probable expansion of Salafism into the political domain as it decides between participation and Jihadism. On the unarmed front, there could be more protests from the people of the kind witnessed in Buraidah, while further crackdowns in an oppressive environment could lead to armed resistance and Jihadism.

SESSION 5 | Shia movements in the Gulf

Shia movements, like their Sunni counterparts, are marked by factionalism that emerges from the various schools of religious thought and interpretation as well as by a fundamental debate about whether and to what degree there should be political engagement.

Broadly speaking, political Islam among the Gulf Shia is informed by the prevalence of anti-Shiism in the region. Alienation is exacerbated by the fact that Shiism is often not recognized in the education systems, that Shia are excluded from the state security apparatus and that only a small number occupy official government posts. One speaker noted that in the KSA, for example, 'the education system actively works against Shia, who are referred to as r*awafidh* (rejectors) and *mushrekeen* (idolaters)' and children continue to be taught from texts that encourage discrimination and reinforce the claim that Shia commit *shirk* (which in this context means idolatry or polytheism) and plot against Islam. Another participant pointed out that this is precisely the claim that ISIS makes in justifying its killing of Shia.

The violent radicalization of anti-Shia sentiment

Radical Sunni jihadists like Abu-Mus'ab al-Zarqawi stoked anti-Shia sentiment in the region after the fall of Saddam Hussein. His 2004 speech, *'halatak hadeet al rafida'*, contained 115 calls to wage Jihad against the Shia and urged all able-bodied males to fight against them. In 2010 Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, in what has been called his 'inaugural speech', presented himself as the inheritor of bin Laden, Anwar al-Awlaki and al-Zarqawi. He called for the creation of an Islamic state and, echoing al Zarqawi, urged his followers to wage war against Shia. Such violently extreme anti-Shiism and the threat posed by ISIS to Zainab's shrine in Damascus encouraged the rise of Shia militias such as Qasa'id Ahl Al-haq, the Abbas brigades and Kata'ib Hizballah – and vice versa.

The militias had the backing of younger clerics and were 'morphing into socio-political organizations', while Shia messianic sentiment linking the emergence of ISIS with 'end of time' rhetoric was on the rise. It was at this point that Grand Ayatollah al Sistani intervened with his widely reported statement calling for the defence of shrines, noting that anyone who bore arms outside the mechanism of the Iraqi security forces was sinning. This was misreported in some quarters as a call for militia action, although he had explicitly said otherwise. Sistani's call for intervention was couched in terms of the threat that ISIS posed to sacred shrines in Iraq at a time when there was deep concern that Baghdad would fall. However, he was referring to both Christian and Muslim shrines and did not use sectarian terms; hence he avoided speaking about only Shia shrines. This was at a time when many young clerics were calling for the formation of militias. The Grand Ayatollah's careful choice of language was a rebuke that provided balance against those sentiments and support for a beleaguered Iraqi government.

Bahrain and the Sunni-Shia conflict

Bahrain is on the fault line of the Shia-Sunni conflict. There is a wider view in the Gulf that there has been a Shia awakening since 2003 and a perception that Iran will 'win'. Indeed, it was under the shadow of that perception that policy and attitudes towards the Shia changed significantly in the kingdom. The largest Islamist party is Al Wefaq, which in the 2010 elections secured 18 seats in the lower house. The party left the parliament en masse in protest at the crushing of a pro-democracy movement in 2011. It boycotted the 2014 elections.

The picture that emerges of political Islam in Bahrain is one that reflects wider factionalism within the Shia community:

- Religious Bahraini Shia take their guidance from Najaf or Qum. Offered the choice of two schools of fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), Usuli and Akhbari, Bahraini Shia overwhelming follow the latter. As one participant put it, 'Bahrainis are proud Akhbaris'. Sheikh Isa Qassem and other leading clerics all follow the Akhbari school, which tends to avoid political engagement but has the clear aim of Islamizing society. In this regard, the Akhbaris share the impulses of the Muslim Brotherhood.
- Ayatollah al Sistani is the most significant figure for religious Shia in the Gulf. When he chooses to intervene in affairs such as the late 2014 arrest of Ali Salman, the secretary-general of Bahrain's leading opposition party, Al Wefaq, those interventions carry weight with the Shia community.
- The Bahrana, who are believed to be the original or indigenous population, have a strong affiliation with Iraq based on nostalgia for a Bahrain that once stretched from Basra to Oman.
- The Ajam, who are Bahrainis of Persian origin, tended until recently not to engage in politics.
- The Shirazi movement, which has transnational links, has shaped the political dialogue among Bahraini Shia too; but it is now seen as being less active and engaged.
- A rising trend, one that reflects disillusionment with the failure of Al Wefaq to break the political stalemate, is ritualization during Ashoura and the return of superstitions.

There have been occasions when Sunni and Shia political Islamists have joined forces in Bahrain. In the 1990s, one speaker noted, there was an alliance between Shia clerics, secularists and Sunni Islamists. In 2010 Al Wefaq allied itself with the Salafist Al Asalah society and the Muslim Brotherhood Al Menbar society over the issue of corruption and land deals that benefited the ruling Al Khalifa family. 'This alliance with the Sunni parties was a red line for the Al Khalifas and from that point a decision was made to break the alliance and dismantle Al Wefaq' according to the same speaker. The speaker said the situation was very grim for Al Wefaq since the society potentially faced a permanent legal ban: 'The thinking of the government is to cleanse now and think about the consequences later.'

Shia in other GCC states

As noted above, Shia in Saudi Arabia have suffered harshly at the hands of the government. A leading sheikh, Nimr Al-Nimr, was sentenced to death in 2014 on charges of disobeying the rulers and taking up arms (a sentence yet to be carried out); he was the only Saudi Shia cleric openly to endorse the protest movements in both Bahrain and in Syria. Since 2011 protests in the Eastern Province have left more than 20 dead. By contrast, witness the response to the killings of Shia in Al Ahsa in November 2014, one day before the Shia holy day of Ashura. The assailants, linked to Islamic State, were quickly hunted down; and Sunni participation in their funerals, including high-ranking government officials, was significant.

The UAE, one participant said, had 'some tolerance toward Shia but had carried out a very brutal crackdown on Shia of Lebanese and Iraqi origin'. Shia in Kuwait are politically and economically influential. Like their Saudi counterparts, they tend to follow the Shirazi school, while those in Qatar are followers of Najaf. Only a minority of the Shia population in the GCC states follow the official Iranian interpretation of Shia Islam.

One speaker noted that when communities are marginalized by their states, as in the case of the Shia in the Gulf, they try to see themselves as part of a wider community. This, in the view of the speaker, reflected a problem with the national narratives of the Gulf states. Where there is a narrative, it is incomplete and the gaps are significant – to the extent that the Shia reality is not reflected in education and its historical and cultural contributions are ignored. For example, museums in the region depict a skewed narrative that is simplistic and filled with omissions. All of this contributes to the broader sense of alienation that Shia feel, while at the same time increasing the suspicion among the Sunni community that Shia are controlled by Iran.

SESSION 6 | Beyond political Islam

Several speakers established a link between moving beyond the Islamist/non-Islamist dichotomy and incorporating values based on civil rights within frameworks that could accommodate Islamic values as well. It was noted that there were very contradictory discourses within the GCC about democracy. Saudi Arabia has been consistent in that it has never claimed to be democratic. But some states have elements that promote democracy and thus are in conflict with other elements claiming democracy is bad for the economy and not suitable for the region. For its part, Kuwait has gone the furthest down the road of establishing a constitutional monarchy.

The leftist movements of the 1950s and 1960s that were at the core of political mobilization in the Gulf were eventually discredited. But the concern with human rights and democracy that was part of the left's legacy has sparked interest among young scholars, many of whom have been educated in Western universities, to revisit these movements; and they are beginning to document the history of both leftists and nationalists. This may reflect a frustration with political Islam and its misuse and abuse as a weapon. However leftists, nationalists and liberals remain a very small group in the Gulf and have only limited social and financial bases. And as one speaker commented, 'liberal in the Gulf is different from the meaning it has in the West'; there are 'illiberal liberals' who want change but worry about violence and the threat to the economy that change might bring.

Some participants commented on women in the Gulf, noting that they are often the more vocal in using new media to step outside the status quo dialogue and engage in everyday resistance. An example is of women driving in Saudi Arabia and posting videos of themselves online: 'Women are the strongest movement in the kingdom right now, pushing for driving and civil rights; but the government is a long way off meeting those expectations.' Equally, though, there are women who are conservative and reject the push for change. One speaker noted the role of women in Islamist movements, commenting that 'when women were given the vote in Kuwait, their vote went heavily to Islamists'.

However, youth seems to be increasingly sceptical of ideologies; and there is disillusionment in the Gulf in those countries where there are parliaments and political parties. Young people believe that, as one speaker put it, 'politics are either risky or corrupt or boring'. And yet they understand and expect the need for social change. Where, asked one participant, is that change to come from? Will it come from a move towards constitutional monarchy? Is Turkey a model for the GCC states? Can Islamist movements set aside sectarian concerns and forge alliances?

It was argued by one participant that political Islam's support base within the younger generation is being eroded. Others argued the converse, saying, for example, that many in the GCC states deeply admire Erdogan but that the real challenge may be to bridge the sectarian divide among Islamists. As noted above, that divide has been bridged from time to time when those groups have been able to find common ground, such as the fight against corruption. Bahrain's Al Fateh Youth Coalition published a manifesto in 2013 that is remarkably close to the demands of Al Wefaq. But, as one speaker pointed out: 'Being activist means acting like a Shia, and that kind of stereotype means it is taboo for Sunni and Shia to work together.'

Conclusions

Overall, the discussions emphasized the diversity and fragmentation within the various strands of political Islam in the Gulf. Yet despite the multiplicity and plurality of these movements, there was no sense among participants that either Islamists or liberals were themselves becoming more pluralistic or more tolerant of opposing views. Bridging the gap between the secular and the religious was seen as a priority.

It was argued by one speaker that political Islam offers form over content. The use of Islamic values and rhetoric is symbolically valuable for political and social movements to frame their thinking. But Islam has not developed a consensus on what these political and social movements should be seeking. Political Islamist movements and activists were pulling in different directions. Some were seeking accommodation within nation-state frameworks, others focusing on more transnational goals. It was also argued that people in the GCC needed to focus on the inclusion of minorities within their own societies, as the marginalised were more likely to be attracted to transnational movements that the nation-state governments tended to see as a threat.

About the MENA Programme at Chatham House

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Programme undertakes high-profile research and projects on political, economic and security issues affecting the Middle East and North Africa. To complement our research, the MENA Programme runs a variety of discussion groups, roundtable meetings, workshops and public events which seek to inform and broaden current debates about the region and about UK and international policy. We also produce a range of publicly available reports, books and papers.

www.chathamhouse.org/mena

Future Trends in the GCC Project

This paper forms part of the MENA Programme's ongoing project on 'Future Trends in the GCC'. The project aims to research, analyse and anticipate some future scenarios for the political and economic development of the GCC states. The research has four main strands:

- **Citizenship and political development:** Looks at citizens' shifting attitudes and political aspirations particularly those of the under-30s who make up the majority of the GCC's population, exploring the dynamics of reform.
- **Citizenship and the economy:** Explores changing economic realities within the GCC, analysing the potential of GCC countries to reform and diversify their economies and the links between citizens' political and economic expectations.
- **Islamism and post-Islamism in the Gulf:** Considers the diverse aspirations of Islamically inspired movements and their respective trajectories amid regional changes.
- **External 'threats' and internal community relations:** Focuses on the intersections between shifting regional dynamics, transactional movements and community relations within GCC countries.

The project seeks to deepen understanding of these various themes while analysing the prospects for GCC countries to adapt to ongoing changes in the region and develop their systems accordingly. These themes are explored in the context of relevant changes in the wider Middle East region. Engaging with younger-generation scholars, researchers and analysts from the GCC countries is a core element of the project.

www.chathamhouse.org/about/structure/mena-programme/future-trends-gcc-project

About the Gulf Studies Center

The Gulf Studies Center at the College of Arts and Sciences, Qatar University, is committed to advancing cutting-edge research and scholarship on the Gulf region. As a centre for interdisciplinary research, the Gulf Studies Center has three primary research areas: energy and economics, politics and security, and social issues. The Gulf Studies Center also hosts a graduate programme offering both an MA and a PhD in Gulf Studies.

Independent thinking since 1920

The Royal Institute of International Affairs
Chatham House
10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE
T +44 (0)20 7957 5700 F +44 (0)20 7957 5710
contact@chathamhouse.org www.chathamhouse.org

Charity Registration Number: 208223