Socio-political implications of legitimizing radicalism on GCC countries[13]

Following September, 2001, radical non-state actors have become recognized as a prominent factor that fuels regional conflicts and influences global security systems.

Among the threats they pose: terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and threats to energy resources.[14]

Considering that modern Middle Eastern states were not established on a nation-state basis, the greatest security threat to these developing countries has always been the lack of balance between the concepts of the: nation and the state.

The result has been various border conflicts, inter-communal unrest and troubled relationships between the state and society.

Local threats within these states has been a constant threat to international security. Consequently, the civil war in Lebanon and the border conflict between Iraq and Iran had severe effects on regional and international security.

Furthermore, The fragile social infrastructure of modern Arab countries formed a suitable ground for several external players to extend their influence and fuel internal differences to serve their strategic interests.

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[13] Paper presented in a conference held by Bahrain's Centre for Strategic, International and Energy Studies, in November 5th 2012.

[14] Benjamin Miller, **States, Nations, and the Great Powers**, (Cambridge Studies in International Relations, 2007), pp. 12-15.

Radical non-state actors in the GCC countries and their impact on global security

Challenges emerging from radical non-state actors pose a great threat to the GGC countries' national and regional security. These forces have an independent identity and operate in an arena separate from that of the state. They include: extremist groups, sectarian organizations and transnational political groups. Their influence and impact have increased in an unprecedented manner during the past decade.[15]

The latest popular unrest in the Arab world has revealed that many of these new transnational actors adopt political programs that aim at: overthrowing the states hosting their operations, and seeking to establish alternative radical political systems. They pursue this through the acquisition of advanced weaponry, and by organizing militias un-integrated with official state apparatus such as the police and the army.

During the past three decades a number of these regional networks staged terrorist attacks as seen in Iraq under the "Islamic Work Organization" and in Saudi Arabia under the "Islamic Revolution Organization", which adopted armed violence towards security forces since 1980.[16]

In Bahrain, these groups became active in smuggling weapons to carry out violent activities. A coup plot was discovered in December 1981 and it was revealed later that its 73 members belonged to a variety of nationalities, reaffirming the presence of

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[15] Eman Ahmed Rajab, *"New players: styles and roles of non-State actors in the Arabian region"*, Journal of international politics, issue 187, January 2012. pp. 34-47.

[16] Katerina Dalacoura, *"Islamist Movements as Non-state Actors and their Relevance to International Relations"*, in Daphne Josselin and William Wallace (ed.), **Non State Actors in World Politics**. (New York: Palgrave, 2001)

trans-border cells in the GCC. Their role became more evident during a series of bombings carried out in Kuwait in 1983. Investigations revealed the involvement of 25 extremists belonging to various nationalities.

Although many activists have withdrawn from radical agendas and have transferred their efforts to the political domain, many extremist organizations remain committed to violence while attempting to acquire international legitimacy and recognition.

Examples of these latter groups include: "the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain", "the Salvation Movement", "the Haq Movement", and "the Islamic Freedom Movement".

Some Western parties advocate recognizing a political role for these extremist groups in the Gulf regardless of their radical agendas.

The absence of clear policy by the GCC countries to deal with these radical elements led to their transformation from benevolent forces to tools used by foreign organized networks to undermine the security and stability of GCC countries.[17]

In addition to these groups, we have seen in recent months the emergence of a third generation of non-state actors called 'virtual actors'. These groups are organized, but have no tangible structure. They are active through social networks and forge alliances with foreign forces which advise them on identifying ways of creating confrontations with the state, mechanisms for systematic escalation, and targeting security devices without leaving clear links between these forces.

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[17] Ibid

I would like to emphasize two major consequences of the rising role of radical non-state actors in the region:

First: the escalation of the identity crisis

Since the formation of contemporary Arab republics, the identity of these states have been composed of 4 major components:
1. Arab Nationalism as an ideology,
2. A revolutionary theme,
3. A military leader,
4. And a ruling party which monopolizes power.[18]

The exception was Lebanon which experienced a tripartite system, under which the President of the Republic must be a Christian, the Prime Minister a Sunni Muslim and the Speaker of the Parliament a Shiite Muslim. For many; this system was a major cause for the creation of militias who undermined the state, the outbreak of two civil wars, and the tense inter-communal relations which Lebanon inherited over the years.

Following the invasion of Iraq in 2003, a political system was established in which the president was a Kurd, the Prime minister a Shiite and the Speaker of the Parliament a Sunni.

And as of 2004, the US administration implemented programs for democracy promotion and minority empowerment in the Middle East which aimed primarily at enhancing the status of ethnic and religious groups in Middle Eastern politics.

In 2005, a prominent advisor of the US administration argued: "If the elections are inclusive and liberal, the political scene (in the region) is: no strong policy and ideology-based parties compete,

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[18] The Democratic Constitutional Party in Tunisia since 1956, The Ba'th Party in Syria and Iraq since 1963, the National Democratic Part in Egypt since 1978 and the General People's Congress Party in Yemen since 1982.

but rather only political groups claiming to represent communities: ethnic, religious, and regional ones".

This experiment however did not bring stability to Iraq, which has since suffered from a period of civil unrest and political turmoil. Further, it has posed a threat to neighboring countries, particularly the GCC countries all of whom have voiced their concerns over mounting sectarian tension and its impact on weakening the state's role.

The problem lies in the fact that the Iraqi case fanned sectarian flames across the Middle East; US and Iranian policies, both, aimed at Shiite minority empowerment in the region rather than on social and political inclusion of these groups, thus creating a social imbalance and growing tension between communities.[19]

Demands for further democratization and institutional reform in Bahrain was swamped by sectarian tendencies and inter-communal unrest.

During the political crisis which Bahrain earlier witnessed, it was noted that; while Shiite opposition leaders claim they only wanted jobs, equal opportunity and greater representation in government, Shia demonstrators held up pictures of Iranian leaders and the leaders of the Iranian-backed militant group Hezbollah. The Unemployed Youth Movement has adopted a yellow flag that resembles Hezbollah's trademark banner. It was apparent that many radical Shia opposition groups were fighting for control more than reform.

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[19] Vali Nasr, **The Shia Revival. How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future**, W. W. Norton & Company, 2007, p. 287.

The second outcome of the rising role of radical non-state actors is the erosion of state legitimacy and rising sectarian and ethnic tension

Iran and Iraq do not only suffer from instability and economic decline; they are also exporting their problems to neighboring countries.

The Iranian economy is suffering a crisis that threatens the regime's security and stability. The World Bank ranked Iran 157 out of 186 states in economic growth. The report noted unemployment had risen to 38%, compared to 9.6% in the Middle East, and 7.9% worldwide. According to the Heritage Foundation, Iran ranked 161 among 169 countries in economic freedoms.[20]

In October 2012 the Iranian Riyal was reported to have lost 60% of its value in eight days.[21]

Despite this, the Iranian regime continues to insist on allocating the bulk of its annual budget to developing missile systems and uranium enrichment projects, as well as financing political groups and militias and its foreign-based security cells.

Iran contributes $200m annually to fund Hezbollah in Lebanon. It also pays about $3m annually to its followers from armed militias in Iraq. Further, it finances the centers run by the Quds Brigade to train armed militia, and shipments of arms and missiles sent by Iran to its allies.[22]

In this particular policy of supporting militias and paramilitary groups, Iran and US policy coincide in a remarkable way. The US

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[20] Antony H. Cordesman and Abdullah Toukan, *"US, Gulf and Israeli Perspectives of the Threat from Iran II"*, Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Washington DC, January 2011.

[21]http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2012/10/how-does-a-currency-drop-60-in-8-days-just-ask-iran/263159/

[22] U.S Department of State, *"State Sponsors of Terrorism"*, April 30, 2009.

administration has repeatedly ignored requests to disband ethnic and sectarian militias, and rather recognized their role in 'maintaining' Iraq's security. For example, Iraq's Kurds have repeatedly insisted that the *peshmerga* (which is believed to compromise some 100,000 troops today) remain intact as a fighting force as a condition of their remaining loyal to Baghdad instead of seeking an independent state.

The *Badr* Organization which is the Iranian-trained wing of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, played an important role in the U.S.-led crackdown on militia groups during the insurgency. The group, which consists of around 10,000-strong militia, has reportedly remained armed, and today operates mainly in Shiite-controlled southern Iraq.

The *Mahdi Army* controls much of Sadr City, a Baghdad slum of some 2.5 million Shiites. It is currently regrouping and rearming itself and some of its members were elected to seats on the Iraqi National Assembly.

Similarly the *Wolf Brigade*, which was formed in October 2004 as a commando unit composed of roughly 2,000 fighters (mostly Shiites from Sadr City), was frequently used in conjunction with Iraq's army and police forces.

Once outlawed and regarded as terrorist organizations, these militias are now in charge of maintaining law and order. On June, 2005, for example, Iraqi President Jalal Talabani praised the Kurdish *peshmerga* security force and the Iran-trained Shiite militia, the *Badr* Organization, in maintaining law and order.

In the past, the U.S. government has said it opposes the use of unsanctioned militias. The U.S. military however fought alongside

the Wolf Brigade and other sectarian militias in counterinsurgency operations.

In this policy it is the state and central government that get undermined by these militias.

Following the Iraqi example a number of similar radical groups in Bahrain, established on sectarian lines, have infiltrated western institutions, and are publicly implementing radical agendas to overthrow the government by the use of force, yet many of their leaders enjoy a certain degree of international recognition.

The need for a new strategy in dealing with non-state actors

This underscores the need for the GCC countries to develop a clear strategy for dealing with these forces that pose a threat to their security and stability.

This can be done through the establishment of a cultural project that limits the risk of extremist ideologies and sectarian fanaticism.

The GCC countries have covered substantial ground in military and security cooperation, but further efforts are required to come up with means of reducing the threat of terrorist networks that are used to destabilize regional security, which include Hezbollah, Al-Quds Brigades, and other violent organizations affiliated to the ideologies of both; *Wilayat al-Faqih* and the *Shirazi* Schools.

Conclusion

Traditionally Gulf security is said to be determined by its three large states: Iraq, Iran and Saudi Arabia, but it is becoming more apparent that inter-communal relations within these countries count more.

The current sectarian divide in the region is not between Sunni and Shia countries, but rather between the state and radical Shia groups *within* these countries.

Both, clerics of *wilayat al-Faqih* and the *Shirazis* believe that: "there are no boundaries in Islam" and emphasize that modern Arab governments are illegitimate from a religious point of view. Thus Tehran participated in creating, training, funding and supporting militant groups in neighboring Arab countries.

Following the invasion of Iraq in 2003, American policy coincided with Iranian policy to back militias and paramilitary groups in Iraq and have very active empowerment programs for similar groups in the GCC.

With both strategies, inter-communal relations, national identities, central governments and ultimately national boundaries in the region are at risk.

It must be emphasized that such policies endanger the security and stability not only of the GCC countries, but it poses a potential threat on international security, and a clear strategy has to be implemented by all parties affected to minimize the risk presented by these policies.