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Limits to the Saudis' jihadi crackdown

By Kamran Bokhari
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The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has historically played a major role in the development of jihadism. Key pillars of the Saudi state - oil, Wahhabism (a conservative form of Sunni Islam) and the strength of tribal norms - were instrumental in facilitating the rise of Islamist extremism and terrorism around the world prior to the September 11, 2001 attacks. These same pillars allowed Riyadh to contain al-Qaeda within Saudi Arabia in the wake of the insurgency that kicked off in the kingdom in 2003-2004. After this success on the home front, Riyadh is still using these pillars to play an international role in counter-jihadist efforts - a role welcomed by the United States.

During a visit to the kingdom last week, US Defense Secretary Robert Gates said the Saudi rehabilitation program for former militants impressed him, prompting him to consider sending Yemeni detainees at Guantanamo Bay to Saudi Arabia as part of Washington's efforts to close down the detention center. The Saudis probably have done "as good, if not a better, job of that than almost anybody," Gates said of the Saudi program. In separate comments, Gates called on Riyadh to assist Pakistan in the latter's efforts to combat its rapidly expanding Taliban insurgency - and Saudi Arabia in fact has been playing a role in efforts to contain the Taliban insurgency in both Pakistan and Afghanistan for some time.

Clearly, Saudi Arabia is taking a lead role in anti-extremism, counter-terrorism and de-radicalization efforts. Understanding what the Saudis are doing and how it has permitted them to succeed in this regard will shed light on Riyadh's domestic successes, and it will indicate what can be expected from its efforts abroad.

Saudi domestic counter-jihadist successes

The Saudis have had ample experience in dealing with religious extremists and militants since long before their struggle with al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in the aftermath of 9/11. The kingdom's founder, King Abdel-Aziz, faced a situation similar to that now faced by Pakistan before he defeated the Ikhwan in the 1920s. The Ikhwan (not to be confused with the Egyptian group Ikhwan al-Muslimeen, which is Arabic for "Muslim Brotherhood") was a tribal religious militia of extremist Wahhabis. Whereas the Pakistanis have nurtured jihadist

groups as tools of foreign policy in their dealings with India and Afghanistan, the Ikhwan helped Abdel-Aziz conquer most of present-day Saudi Arabia.

While Abdel-Aziz was not interested in conquering additional territories, the Ikhwan had larger regional ambitions. The group wanted to expand its jihad into places like Iraq, which the British then controlled. Just as Pakistan has found itself caught between its Islamist militant assets and the United States in the aftermath of 9/11, the nascent kingdom had to decide between the Ikhwan and its first Great Power ally, the United Kingdom. Exigencies forced Abdel-Aziz to choose the British, and he put down a subsequent Ikhwan rebellion.

Petrodollars

Notably, this all occurred before the discovery of oil and Saudi Arabia's subsequent emergence as a petrodollar-rich monarchy (and for that matter, even before the state was known as the "Kingdom of Saudi Arabia"). While the Saudis did not have their present financial resources, they did have one very important tool they wielded successfully against the Ikhwan threat. That tool was religion, which had become a key part of the fabric of the Saudi state since its first incarnation in the mid-1700s. Religion mixed in with a culture based on strong elements of tribalism and familism provided for a strong social contract involving the Saudi royal family, the family of Muhammad bin Abdel-Wahhab (founder of the Wahhabi school of thought) and the masses.

This historic Saudi-Wahhabi alliance has long provided the state with religious legitimacy, which the royal family has used to put down religious dissent on a number of occasions since the Ikhwan uprising. Key among them were the 1979 incident in which a group of Wahhabi militants took over the Kaaba, the dissent within the religious establishment in the aftermath of the 1990-1991 Gulf War, and the 2003-2004 al-Qaeda insurgency. The use of religion to consolidate national power has led to a significant blowback, as evident from the global emergence of violent Islamism. But unlike other states, Saudi Arabia has been able to mobilize the tribal, religious, security and commercial spheres of the country against Islamist rebels.

Religion and tribalism

The secret to the Saudis' success was turning the rebels' strongest weapon, religion, back against them. This was possible because the state enjoyed a monopoly over religious discourse thanks to the vast religious establishment that Riyadh had cultivated over the years. Paradoxically, while this religious establishment has been the source of much radicalism in Saudi Arabia and worldwide, it also has served the Saudis well in terms of giving the state a powerful tool with which to quell dissent and preserve the regime.

The tribal nature of Saudi society, with its norms of obedience to those in authority, complemented the state's religious tools. The Saudi *ulema* (scholars) supported by the tribes have laid great emphasis on Koranic notions of obedience to rulers as long as the rulers do not clearly defy Islam. Another important tribal and religious concept is abhorrence of social chaos, which also helped the Saudis isolate the Islamist rebels from the rest of society by arguing that jihadist activity would lead to anarchy.

Tribal social structure imposes a hierarchy that forms a strong bulwark against rebellions by forcing conformity upon the tribes, clans and families. This limits the social space available for rebels to operate in. Tribes cooperate with the authorities in taking action against belligerents, and then they also take responsibility for the "good behavior" of repentant

militants.

The power of the tribal norm is such that it is very unlikely that militants could influence enough tribes to mount a successful uprising. The Saudis have had some two-and-a-half centuries' worth of experience at skillfully managing tribal politics. The rise and fall of the first (1744-1818) and second (1824-1891) Saudi states and the establishment of the modern kingdom in the early 1900s were to a great degree a function of the ruling al-Saud family's ability to forge tribal alliances.

Prior to 9/11, one Saudi strategy for dealing with products of the Wahhabi establishment who exhibited levels of extremism deemed intolerable involved directing the radicals to fight in war zones like Afghanistan, Central Asia, the Balkans and the Caucasus. This maintained order and security while the rebels were away (and in many cases the radicals died in the fighting). Even after 9/11 - and particularly in the wake of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq - the Saudis employed this approach to defuse domestic tensions and to try to contain increasing Iranian influence in Iraq and the rise of Tehran's Iraqi Shiite allies.

But US-Saudi tensions in the aftermath of 9/11 reached a point where Riyadh knew this was no longer an option. Consequently, under the guidance of King Abdullah, the kingdom embarked upon a strategy of permanently dealing with the issue through reforms at the governmental and societal levels, a process that is still very much a work in progress. The aim was to curb further extremism, as well as to address existing radicalism.

High oil prices, which lasted until July 2008, gave the country the financial wherewithal to invest in such a major anti-jihadist initiative. But without a powerful religious establishment at its side, the money alone would not have permitted the Saudis to succeed. This religious establishment has played a key role in the country's rehabilitation program, which is designed to integrate militants who have surrendered or been captured back into society. While financial resources have played a critical role in efforts to bring previously radicalized youths back into the mainstream, the scholars have provided the theological gravitas to counter the jihadist ideology and wean the youths from jihadism.

As mentioned, the process is still in its infancy, and incidents of recidivism have occurred. For example, Said Ali al-Shihri emerged in Yemen as a key leader of the jihadist node on the Arabian Peninsula after undergoing the rehab program. Still, the Saudis' ability to put a major dent in the capabilities of jihadists in the kingdom and to avoid major backlash to the reform process highlights Riyadh's successful use of religion to curb extremism.

The jihadist threat within the kingdom remains, but a combination of unique circumstances enabled Saudi Arabia to make considerable progress on the home front. Fears still exist that because of the ultraconservative religious nature of the state, the monarchy might fall and be replaced by a radical regime - especially as the kingdom enters an extended period of transition. But for now, the Saudi situation is stable to the point where the Saudis can look beyond their borders and offer help to other jihadist trouble spots.

Replicating Saudi counter-jihadist successes

Saudi Arabia's counter-jihadist successes and position as a religious and financial leader of the Islamic world have prompted the United States and countries like Yemen, Afghanistan and Pakistan to seek Riyadh's help with jihadist problems.

Yemen

The first such place to do so is just south of the Saudi border. Yemen has become a jihadist hub where Saudi jihadists have regrouped along with their counterparts from Iraq, Somalia and elsewhere under new management. The country also faces other forms of unrest and insecurity that are weakening the state and raising fears of regional instability among Yemen's wealthier Arab neighbors. For example, Yemen's north-south divide is re-emerging, meaning that there are two competing branches of nationalism in the country. As a result, Sanaa and Riyadh have moved toward greater cooperation, especially on the issue of the jihadists; the Saudis can offer financial assistance and advice to the cash-strapped Yemenis regarding the Saudi rehabilitation program.

But unlike Saudi Arabia, where the Saudis have the upper hand in the relationship with the religious establishment, the Yemeni state is dependent upon its religious leaders and upon the Salafist-jihadists who dominate the country's security establishment. Moreover, Yemen is not as religiously homogenous as Saudi Arabia. While in Saudi Arabia, the religious establishment was strong enough to claim the mantle of Wahhabism and isolate the jihadists as "deviants," Yemen would have to develop an alternative religious discourse to successfully counter the theological challenge posed by the jihadists. Engendering a mainstream national religious identity takes a long time even for those states endowed with resources, which means there are serious limitations on how far Yemen can expect to succeed in anti-extremism and counter-terrorism efforts.

Like Saudi Arabia, Yemeni society is also tribal, but it is much more fragmented than that of its richer, larger neighbor. Unlike Saudi Arabia, where the House of al-Saud sits at the top of the tribal hierarchy, Yemeni tribes are neither as strong nor as organized. Moreover, the Yemeni state is dependent upon the tribes for support - explaining why Saana's bid to win tribal assistance in dealing with militants has not attained the desired results.

The huge differences in economic conditions, religious hierarchy and tribal structures between Saudi Arabia and Yemen accordingly will make it difficult for Riyadh to reproduce in its southern neighbor the successful results it has enjoyed at home.

Afghanistan and Pakistan

Saudi Arabia enjoys a disproportionate amount of influence over both Pakistan and Afghanistan. For example, Saudi intelligence chief Prince Muqrin has recently been involved in efforts to negotiate with the Afghan Taliban. Likewise, the Pakistani interior minister and the two most senior generals of the Pakistani military have made trips in recent months to the kingdom - most likely not just for monetary assistance, but also to benefit from the Saudi experience in dealing with the Taliban problem.

Ground realities in Afghanistan and Pakistan make these states much more difficult nuts to crack than even Yemen, which shares some basic social similarities with Saudi Arabia. The security situations in Afghanistan and Pakistan are in advanced stages of deterioration (though to different degrees). Both South Asian neighbors face full-blown insurgencies, making it difficult for the respective states to maintain their writ in the affected areas. This is quite different from anything Saudi Arabia has ever faced, and it also is different from Yemen, where the jihadists have not transformed themselves into a guerrilla movement.

On the religious front, Afghanistan and Pakistan lack religious establishments. Instead, they both have highly fragmented religious landscapes consisting of rival Islamist groups,

competing Sunni sects and networks of *madrassas* (seminaries). Even the two countries' more mainstream ulema are divided into various groups. Unlike in Saudi Arabia and (to a lesser degree) Yemen, only a tiny minority adheres to Salafist/Wahhabi Islam in Southwest Asia. Even so, the Deobandis (the sect of the Taliban and other Islamist militant groups) are a growing movement, posing a challenge to the Shi'ites and the majority Barelvis (a South Asian form of Sufi Islam).

On the social level, while tribes exist in both South Asian states, they are very weak compared to the Arab states in question. In Afghanistan, the tribal hierarchy is almost nonexistent in terms of being able to project power because of the rise of the mullahs and militia commanders. In Pakistan, the tribes are limited to Pashtun areas, and even there the mullahs and militiamen have significantly degraded the power of the tribal *maliks* (chiefs).

These factors place significant limits on how much the Saudis can assist Islamabad or Kabul in their respective counterinsurgency efforts and anti-extremism drives.

For these reasons, the Saudis have focused on trying to broker talks between the Taliban and the Western-backed Karzai regime in Afghanistan. Even on this issue, Riyadh is not having much luck, because the Taliban elements it has been dealing with thus far have been former leaders of the movement, while current Taliban chief Mullah Muhammad Omar and his associates have rejected the idea of talks because they feel they have the upper hand in the insurgency and do not see the West as "staying the course" in their country.

Meanwhile, in Pakistan the Saudis have been focused on efforts to create a consensus among various stakeholders on how to deal with the militancy. Riyadh maintains strong ties with Pakistan, especially with the military establishment and right-of-center forces, particularly the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, as well as with several of the country's Islamist political parties. As a result, the Saudis may be able to use their financial and energy clout to get the religiously and socially conservative forces in Pakistan to agree to support a major state initiative to contain the violence. But in sharp contrast to the way Riyadh took a focused approach to its own Islamist rebels, Islamabad lacks coherence.

Therefore, given the social fragmentation and complexities of the two South Asian states, the Saudis will not be able to help either Afghanistan or Pakistan much in terms of bringing down the violence those countries face. It can, however, assist in curbing religious extremism by undermining jihadists, given the ideological proximity of the Deobandis and the Wahhabis. But since the Saudis are still working on the ideological front through rehabilitation at home, it will be awhile before they can help others.

Saudi Arabia's successes in rolling back religious radicalism at home are the result of the confluence of certain unique circumstances that simply do not exist in more troubling jihadist hot spots like Yemen, Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Saudi example thus offers few lessons for Sanaa, Kabul and Islamabad in dealing with their own situations. Ultimately, while the Saudis will be able to play an important role in providing financial assistance and some help in ideologically undermining Islamist extremism and radicalism, they will be able to do less on the physical battlefield.