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The blame game

Holding Saudi Arabia responsible for Islamist terrorism lets Western governments off the hook

In cutting diplomatic ties on 5 June, amid a growing crisis between the Gulf monarchies, Saudi Arabia accused Qatar of failing to end its support for radical Islamists, reigniting arguments regarding the support of terrorism by countries in the region. Yet, it is Saudi Arabia and its export of Wahhabism, a rigid iteration of Islam, which is often blamed for the spread international terrorism. The narrative goes like this. Decades of Saudi transnational proselytising funded by billions of petro-dollars laid the foundations for al Qaeda and its affiliates, sympathisers and like-minded competitors, most recently the so-called Islamic State. In reality, this interpretation of Saudi agency and Wahhabism's assumed disposition to violent extremism distracts from the complex political, economic and psychological reasons people join terrorist groups and consequently risks undermining counter-terrorism responses.

In the aftermath of 9/11, many politicians, academics and journalists traced the ideological infrastructure of contemporary Jihadism back to Riyadh: unsurprising given that 15 of the 19 hijackers were citizens of Saudi Arabia. They portrayed the Kingdom as a financial, material and discursive promoter of religious militancy across the Muslim world, particularly in its exportation of Wahhabism – commonly represented as a strand of *Salafism* within Sunni Islam, which has become (mistakenly) synonymous with violent extremism.

Saudi officials challenge this view and point to the Kingdom as one of the leading nations in combating terrorism. Saudi Arabia is a member of the 68-nation strong Global Coalition to Counter ISIS; co-chairs the Counter ISIL Finance Group; belongs to the Global Counter-Terrorism Forum, an implementing mechanism for the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy; in 2015 spearheaded the launch of a multi-nation Islamic Alliance against Terror; and, in May, inaugurated in Riyadh a new Global Center for Combating Extremist Ideology. What is more, Salafism has historically been apolitical and the overwhelming majority of Salafis are peaceful. Many Islamic militants have little to do with Saudi Wahhabism: the Afghan Taliban, for example, follow a Deobandi strain

of Islam.

Nonetheless, the Saudi monarchy has grounded its political legitimacy, in part, on the support it gives to Wahhabism, as well as on the Kingdom's role as custodian of Medina and Mecca, where millions of Muslims flock on pilgrimage (hajj) each year. Wahhabism is an exclusivist Islamic doctrine first propagated by an eighteenth-century preacher, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. In something of a "Faustian bargain", Saudi Arabia devolved control of the judiciary, education system and "social morality" to an ultraconservative religious establishment in return for consecration. The Kingdom continues to rely on a symbiotic relationship between the regime and ulema (body of professional theologians), and its foreign policy has been conflated with, and determined by, domestic considerations; projecting Wahhabism internationally as a means of both appeasing its clerical constituents and extending Saudi political influence.

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Beginning in the 1960s, and accelerating with the injection of oil-profits in the 1970s, the Saudi monarchy has satisfied these commitments by sponsoring a vibrant set of financial, educational and charitable Islamic institutions around the world; bankrolling preachers, local religious associations and the cross-border circulation of theological literature. Capitalising on its financial largesse, the regime tried to reaffirm its domestic legitimacy by undercutting ideological rivals – most prominently Gamal Nasser's socialist Arab nationalism, and placing itself at the centre of an alternative, Pan-Islamic order. These activities were largely encouraged by Western states as a "counterfoil" against what was mistakenly assumed to be the local face of Soviet-backed communism.

The Shia-led revolution in Iran (1979) accentuated these dynamics by creating a rival contender for leadership in the Muslim world. This alternate model of Islamic governance, along with other domestic considerations, prompted Riyadh to expand its export of "Wahhabism" and sponsor the mobilisation of Sunni militancy more broadly, in a bid to consolidate its religious credentials and contain Iranian influence. The recurring cycles of strategic competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran ever since are in part responsible for much of the violence experienced by Muslim communities, including the current instability in Syria and Iraq.

At the same time, Riyadh's interventions have impacted on parts of Asia, the Balkans and elsewhere, shifting religious culture in "markedly conservative directions". They have aggravated sectarian tensions, polarised society and increased competition between rival ideologies. Wahhabism emphasises the authority of the Quran, strict monotheism, the elimination of religious innovations and the restoration of the Prophetic tradition. The fact that it not only claims absolute certainty and authenticity in its strictures, but presents a self-ascribed global and universalised identity (albeit one that is derived from a definitively Saudi cultural context) has encouraged a discourse directed at reforming other "non-Salafi" Muslims in both belief and practice. Consequently, Wahhabism has, in certain contexts, played a role in disrupting local Islamic traditions by insisting on a discriminatory and confrontational strain of fundamentalism hostile to Sufism, Shi'ism and other religions.

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In Indonesia, Saudi-funded Salafi institutions were central to the mobilisation of militant Islamist groups following the collapse of President Suharto's New Order regime in 1998, and formed the basis of Jihad in the Moluccan archipelago. In Kosovo, it is reported that radical and fundamentalist approaches to Islam and the roots of modern day foreign fighters can be traced back to when Muslim charities from Saudi Arabia started operating there during the mid-1990s. More broadly, Riyadh's pumping of US$4 billion in official aid – admittedly with the practical and financial support of the US and the west – to prop up the Mujahideen insurgency in Afghanistan in the late 1970s and 80s, accompanied by the conflict's framing by Saudi-Wahhabi clerics as an international Jihad, facilitated a transnational synthesis of ideas, experience and personal connections that ultimately underpinned international terrorism as we know it today.

The ideological foundations of both al Qaeda and Islamic State are commonly assumed to derive from this heritage. IS's adoption of Saudi textbooks and its broader educational curriculum has led political commentators, IS theologians and its online acolytes to cast the Caliphate as broadly analogous with the Kingdom, and describe Saudi Arabia as "an ISIS that has made it".

So it is tempting to see clear, linear pathways from Saudi sponsorship to

Jihadi terrorism. Certainly Riyadh cannot be absolved from culpability in fostering violence. But these arguments rely on a reductive understanding of violent extremism that neither reflects current research nor translates into effective counter-terror measures.

For a start, merely linking terrorist groups to Wahhabism does not help us understand their operative logic. Recipients of Saudi proselytising were not passive agents. From London to Kabul to Jakarta, Wahhabi discourse was consumed, contested and re-imagined in transnational processes largely unintended by its initial sponsors. It assumed its own momentum. Wahhabism has simply become a pejorative term for what is in reality a broad range of different beliefs and affiliations that often contradict or contest one another, ranging from non-violent or apolitical iterations to "salafi-jihadism".

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Moreover, there is nothing intrinsically terror-inducing about Wahhabism or Salafism. Ideologies are not necessarily a precondition to violence, as the profile of European foreign fighters after 2013 reveals: the vast majority have had criminal backgrounds with only a few possessing even a basic understanding of Islam. Where Wahhabi influence has manifested in violence, it is usually because it is mapped onto the dynamics of pre-existing conflicts, rather than being the driver of militant activity itself. The revival of a politicised form of radical Islam which has been taking place in the Arab world since the 1970s is not driven by ideology alone. It is also due to the failure of Arab leaders to meet the expectations of their populations and their brutal crackdown on those who demand for better governance. Conflating dangers of "radical" ideas with the causes of violent extremism risks ignoring the constellation of structural, individual and environmental factors that include, but are not dictated by, ideology, which are part of the radicalisation process.

This has serious implications for counterterrorism efforts. Scapegoating Saudi Arabia, and Islamic extremism more generally, as *the* preeminent drivers of terrorism allows Western nations to externalise the problem and avoid any form of societal introspection. That is not to say that Saudi Arabia cannot do more. Official Saudi clerics can be reticent about criticising Islamic State's discourse and private Gulf sponsors continue to

funnel money to a range of militant groups. In a leaked email from 2014, former Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, described the governments of Saudi Arabia and Qatar as "providing clandestine financial and logistic support to ISIL and other radical Sunni groups in the region." Saudi sponsorship of proxies in Syria to counteract Iranian influence, and its region-wide pushback to suppress the popular activism on display during the Arab Spring, has prolonged conflict, provided space for terror networks to flourish, and radicalised non-fundamentalist actors by incentivising the use of sectarian violence as a means of eliciting external patronage.

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In short, there are a great many reasons to change the approach of the US and Western states to Saudi Arabia. Greater pressure is needed on all regional players (and indeed all intervening national actors, from Turkey to Russia to Western states themselves) to end their patronage of non-state proxies and dilute the destructive impact of state-sanctioned sectarian competition. Similarly, rather than focusing on repudiating Wahhabi or Salafi ideology, countries concerned by radicalisation should focus their resources on examining why this content resonates with individuals in their own societies, and what factors trigger violent behaviour and accentuate the vulnerability of individuals to terrorist recruitment.



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