



United States Institute of Peace

“Grading Counterterrorism Cooperation with the GCC States”

**Testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on
Terrorism, Nonproliferation and Trade and the Subcommittee on
the Middle East and North Africa**

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Introduction

Subcommittee Chairs Poe and Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Members Keating and Deutch, and members of the Subcommittees, thank you for the opportunity to testify on “Grading Counterterrorism Cooperation with the GCC States.” Your attention to the issues of terrorism and violent extremism in the Arabian Peninsula is appreciated.

I am the Director for Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) at the United States Institute of Peace, although the views expressed here are my own. USIP was established by Congress over 30 years ago as an independent, national institute to prevent and resolve violent conflicts abroad, in accordance with U.S. national interests and values. The rise and expansion of violent extremism continue to pose a significant threat to global peace and stability. Understanding what drives violent extremism and how to address it is a USIP priority.

I worked, earlier in my career, at the State Department and at the National Security Council staff at the White House where I focused on counterterrorism in the Middle East and Africa. My testimony is informed by these experiences as well as USIP’s work in conflict zones.

For this joint subcommittee hearing, I have been asked to comment on the progress America's GCC partners have made in combating violent extremism and where countries could continue to show progress to confront violent extremism and terrorists in the region. My testimony will cover the following questions: (1) How have GCC countries addressed violent extremism and terrorism within their own national borders; (2) How have GCC countries addressed violent extremism and terrorism regionally and internationally; and, (3) What recommendations can enable future GCC efforts to go beyond eliminating today’s terrorists and prevent terrorism from emerging in the first place?

Overview

The fragile and complicated geopolitical realities throughout the GCC countries cannot be easily separated – stances on Iran, Israel, Syria, and Yemen – complicate the threat landscape, efforts to assess counterterrorism success, and potential multilateral partnership opportunities. The dynamic and fluid political situations in the greater Middle East, including Qatar-GCC dynamics, varying support mechanisms in Iraq, and the ongoing war and ensuing humanitarian crisis in Yemen, will likely continue to take up much of the top-level attention of GCC leaders.

Therefore, the U.S. should widen its outreach beyond governments and GCC countries should share responsibility and enable additional support to those best equipped to focus on countering the next generation of violent extremism – communities, civil-society, municipal authorities, and local practitioners. Radicalization and recruitment are often local, individually detailed, or contextually distinctive, so national-level efforts should include creating operating space for local action for combating extremism.

1. How have GCC countries addressed violent extremism and terrorism within their own national borders?

There are three key areas where GCC countries have made some contributions within their own national contexts to address terrorism since the attacks of September 11, 2001: (A) rehabilitation and reintegration; (B) religious leader engagement; and, (C) countering the financing of terrorism.

A. Rehabilitation and Reintegration Programs

GCC countries, most notably Saudi Arabia, realized early in the War on Terror that those incarcerated for terrorism-related crimes would eventually be released back to their home communities. Saudi Arabia's programs, the most well-known and documented in the international press, focus on providing incentives to offenders to give up previously held behaviors and beliefs – including education, counseling, financial incentives, monitoring, and reintegration. Other GCC countries, including Bahrain, Kuwait, and the UAE, have also invested in rehabilitation programs for terrorist offenders. That said, there is ongoing debate over whether such programs should focus on “disengagement” – no longer undertaking violent activities – or on “deradicalization” – rejecting previously held radical ideological views – or which is more effective or even plausible. While improvements can be made, the use of rehabilitation and reintegration programs to reintroduce former terrorist offenders back into society is an important step forward for GCC states. Addressing rehabilitation and reintegration is likely to increase in importance as countries grapple with the return of foreign fighters where GCC countries have relevant experience to share.

B. Religious Engagement

Given the centrality of religion for the communities within the GCC countries, it is unsurprising that religious engagement has been a part of most, if not all, GCC countries' efforts to counter terrorism. This is against the backdrop of the consistent propaganda from terrorist groups that use religiosity to justify their barbaric and nihilistic objectives. Some of the highest religious clerics in Saudi Arabia and other GCC nations have issued numerous fatwas denouncing terrorism, contesting ISIS and al-Qaeda's interpretation of Islam. Saudi Arabia has also recently modernized education curricula, including textbooks; though reversing the harms from past teachings containing intolerance and violence will take some time. The Kingdom has also established several institutions dedicated to countering violent extremism. The UAE provides support to the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies, a group of prominent Sunni and Shia scholars from across the Muslim world led by the renowned Sheikh Abdallah bin Bayyah. The Forum seeks to address the root drivers of violent extremism, advance protection for religious minorities, and support Muslim peacebuilders in countries experiencing violent extremism. These efforts, and others at the local level, that encourage (or at times monitor) local religious leaders to ensure they denounce terrorism and terrorist groups have been welcome additions to the counterterrorism arena. However, the religious landscape is far from simple. In some cases, research shows that state-led efforts that restrict religious spaces can actually fuel extremism. Additionally, state-endorsed messaging on religious matters that ignores state failures to meet citizens needs can come off as hollow and meaningless to at-risk audiences.

C. Countering the Financing of Terrorism

Following the attacks of September 11, 2001, the international community built up significant infrastructure, laws, and policies to deny terrorists the use of international financial systems. GCC countries responded by creating financial intelligence units (FIUs), affirming international commitments [such as membership in the Middle East and North Africa Financial Action Task Force (MENAFATF)], and disrupting terrorism finance with criminal justice operations within the Gulf region. Ministries began providing specialized training programs – with assistance from the U.S. and other international partners – to ensure that for financial institutions, criminal justice officials, and even customs and border officials, had training and were able to curb terrorist financing within national borders and transnationally. While institutional vulnerabilities and weaknesses endure, increasing state capacity led to significant improvement in curbing some terrorist financing. That said, choices by certain GCC governments or individuals living in those countries (who may or may not be known to governments) often call into question GCC commitment and dedication to stemming the flow of funding to all terrorist groups.

2. How have GCC countries addressed violent extremism and terrorism regionally and internationally?

International political pressure and security realities have spurred action by the GCC and member governments to address violent extremism through a variety of international avenues of cooperation mainly focused outside their own borders. These regional and international efforts take on new significance to reassure partners that counterterrorism efforts can and will persist even as questions of GCC cohesion and bilateral uncertainties remain.

A. Militarily

A primary way in which GCC countries are countering terrorism are their military efforts to capture and kill terrorists, deny the groups safe haven, and liberate populations from terrorist rule. GCC countries participate in the Coalition to Defeat ISIS; they also train and equip other nation's militaries to gain new counterterrorism skills, understanding, and assistance. While the outputs of eliminating terrorists from the battlefield are obvious, the lasting outcomes of these efforts are fleeting if the next pipeline of recruits are not stopped.

B. International Cooperation

Less apparent, but important have been the strides that GCC countries have made to cooperate and lead international efforts globally focused on counterterrorism and violent extremism. For instance, the UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia are all members of the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF), an informal, multilateral counterterrorism platform that promotes sharing good practices, experiences, expertise, and tools to promote a long-term counterterrorism approach. Borne out of the GCTF, the UAE helped establish the Hedayah Center, which “aims to be the premier international center and operational platform for expertise and experience to counter violent extremism by promoting understanding and sharing of good practices.” Hedayah’s work spans from training officials to producing research. Given that mandate, starting in 2013, USIP

helped build the capacity of Hedayah on community-oriented policing for CVE. USIP focused on helping Hedayah train institutional-level law enforcement and concentrated on enabling police academies to adopt content that enhanced the capacity of the police to develop partnerships with the community and respond professionally, in order to gain credibility and legitimacy as service providers, a key CVE imperative.

In addition to contributing to Hedayah, the UAE also contributed to an international effort to counter ISIS's attacks in the digital sphere with the Sawab Center Digital Communications Hub to Counter Extremist Propaganda (Sawab Center). Sawab Center, co-established by the UAE and U.S., is used and staffed by several nations participating in the Coalition to Defeat ISIS, and focuses on producing counter and alternative narratives to prevent youth from joining ISIS. Qatar has donated generously to the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF), a public-private partnership devoted to funding community-level initiatives to address violent extremism and resilience. This burden sharing effort continues to be of significant importance. GCC countries have also participated substantially in UN efforts to counter terrorism and violent extremism, including, Saudi Arabia's voluntary contribution to enable the United Nations Secretariat to launch the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre (UNCCT).

3. What recommendations can enable future GCC efforts to go beyond eliminating today's terrorists and prevent terrorism from emerging in the first place?

The sudden rise of ISIS was perhaps the starkest example of how terrorism had metastasized in innumerable ways post-9/11. It clarified for many national security experts that decapitation of terrorist leaders and the networks that supported them did not preempt new permutations of terror groups from emerging. With the acute problem of ISIS in focus, new policy recommendations emerged, and international consensus strengthened around the need to address the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism. From the United States' Gulf allies to NATO allies, all agreed that today's terrorist networks had reached a level of pervasion and sophistication that required concerted, long-term action beyond security measures. Terrorist groups' violent acts, intolerance, and aggravation of existing conflicts must be met with helping vulnerable communities resist terrorist recruitment and insisting that governments do more to meaningfully address the underlying grievances violent extremists continually exploit. It also requires GCC partners avoiding counterproductive actions, such as using anti-terror legislation to silence critics and suppress dissent or engaging in military actions that result in unnecessary civilian casualties.

To improve and expand upon their current activities, GCC countries can devote additional attention and resources to preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) efforts to stem the emergence of tomorrow's terrorists. Governments can do much more to enable individuals in civil society – who are often better able to understand local vulnerabilities and perform the actions necessary to address such conditions – to support their full participation in the solution. Nations can take systematic steps that address the underlying social, political, economic, governance, cultural, and development-related conditions that contribute to individuals radicalizing and communities joining violent extremist groups. Many of the mechanisms needed to craft and implement these improved practices already exist. From examining the sources of radicalization to helping civil society leaders address violent extremism in their own

communities, progress can be made to reduce the highly dynamic and constantly evolving threat of violent extremism.

A. Research

Empirical research, locally driven and contextualized, provides a foundation for building effective and targeted policies or programs to prevent and address violent extremism and terrorism. It can provide outsiders and local citizens alike with the data and information they need to make decisions. Research can help distinguish when to use a scalpel and when to use a hammer. For its part, starting in 2016, USIP partnered with the State Department to incubate the RESOLVE Network, which stands for “Researching Solutions to Violent Extremism.” Today, RESOLVE is assisting researchers and policymakers to uncover and analyze which factors and trends contribute to the growth and spread of violent extremist groups. RESOLVE helps put locally-driven research and empirically sound insights into the hands of national and international policymakers to enable the development of actionable policy recommendations capable of improving counterterrorism and CVE practices.

B. Enable Nonviolent Action

Prevailing thinking on radicalization and recruitment is mostly deductive – the premise being, if experts know what the terrorists use in recruitment efforts, and then governments or others address those grievances, then individuals and communities will be less likely to join terrorist groups. An inductive lens leaves open the possibility that being part of a terrorist group is more complex than the reasons a member said he joined. If group identity and the perception of power are part of what makes terrorist groups attractive, alternatives should give young people vehicles to fill those needs positively. Engaging in nonviolent campaigns and movements gives people an opportunity to be part of a larger cause, create meaningful social bonds in service of a mission, and have the power to address concerns collectively. Nonviolent resistance using methods like strikes, boycotts, demonstrations, and satire has been shown empirically to be twice as effective as armed struggle in achieving major political goals.

Nonviolent movements empower their participants – including disenfranchised youth – and build bonds of trust between groups in society and between citizens and their governments. They help pull away extremist recruits by offering an effective alternative for communities to combat corruption, exclusion, and other injustices that fuel violent extremism. They give dignity of ownership – they are not premised on waiting for governments to help address grievances or outside actors to counter narratives. They give people the ability to act for themselves and see the results of their actions. Investing in the transfer of knowledge and skills in community organizing and strategic nonviolent action is an under-appreciated but potent way to stem violent extremism.

C. Engage Religious Figures Beyond Ideology

While religion is extremely significant in today’s most virulent terrorist groups, it interacts with a wide range of other factors. The causality between religion and violent extremism is far from linear. What remains clear is that formal and informal religious leaders are integral members of civil society and key contributors to public and political discourse. They should be included in

efforts to address violent extremism. Partnering with religious leaders and faith communities to impact this challenge is critical. Religious leaders are already engaging on the religious topics distorted and twisted by terrorist ideologies, but room remains for them to engage on addressing the broader swath of conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism. Religious figures are well placed to – and often already are – connecting state policies to community needs and responding to the broader economic, social, and psychological drivers of violent extremism that may not appear to be “religious” in nature. In other words, their effectiveness as agents to prevent or counter violent extremism goes far beyond their ability to challenge violent religious discourse. Religious figures could play a leading role in promoting nonviolent alternatives to combatting the injustices that fuel violent extremism; however, support by national and foreign governments and international organizations to religious figures doing this work must advance with an understanding for their legitimacy, security, and concern about co-optation for it to be credible.

D. Security Sector Improvements

Security forces can help prevent and counter radicalization if they tangibly improve security for civilians they are charged with protecting. They can do so by responding to violent extremist threats and by working with communities based on transparent partnerships to solve concrete security problems in ways that respect human rights. But in many countries around the world, including some GCC countries, governments use people’s fear of their security forces to maintain power. Where trust between police and the people they serve is weak, few mechanisms exist to bring security officials and civilians together to address security challenges. Working with the security sector to help build skills that allow them to know what to look for and earn the public’s confidence and then bringing them together with communities to build cooperation enables communal progress on urgent security concerns.

When security forces fail to protect citizens from security threats, including terrorist violence, or perpetuate cycles of abuse and corruption and act with impunity, violent extremists take these deficits to sow distrust and radicalize individuals and communities. Abuses and mistreatment by state sanctioned officials – from the humiliation of paying corrupt officials to victimization from sexual violence that scars for generations – generate fear, distress, and disable meaningful cooperation between the citizens and the state.

Moreover, during significant military operations, states must take care to respond effectively and avoid responses that may end up being counterproductive. The responsibility to prevent civilian casualties during state-led operations undertaken by GCC countries must be a priority. All partners, including the U.S., should insist on this imperative. Beyond the reality that certain behaviors are outside of norms, laws, and moral standards, they also play into the hands of terrorists who exploit such abuses in their efforts to recruit and radicalize.

E. Enable the Population to have a Stake in Their Future

Cultural and political biases and past practices often constrain women from being fully engaged as positive contributors to efforts that prevent and counter radicalization to violence and extremism. Failing to leverage the role of women and girls in peace and security is simply inadequate, especially given women’s primary stake in countering the terrorist narratives that often target their rights. Meaningful women’s participation in security approaches, deepens

understanding of the threat and leverages the unique roles and voices of women in the context of preventing violent extremism locally, and must be further embraced by GCC countries for them to achieve sustainable progress against terrorism.

Conclusion

The complexity associated with being able to uncover, understand and address the dozens of factors that contribute in differing ratios to every individual that joins a terrorist organization is astonishing. However, that does not mean that states cannot be motivated to make progress.

In 2016, the Community of Democracies published an empirical study examining terrorism and liberal democracies and found that weak institutional capacity, weak political legitimacy, and breakdowns in the social contract between citizens and governments are all related to the underlying drivers of violent extremism. Indeed, preventing radicalization, recruitment, and the advent of the next ISIS must go beyond countering propaganda-filled messages and addressing financial flows. Nations can empower their civil society, take on governance reforms, make their politics more inclusive, and respect human rights – all ways that demonstrate to generations of youth that they have a stake in their own future and their human dignity matters. Despite important progress on aspects of counterterrorism such as military efforts, religious engagement, and international cooperation, GCC partners have room for improvement on overall scores.

From the GCC to countries across the globe, there is much room for improvement in countering terrorism. Progress is possible, however. Through sustained U.S. leadership and concerted efforts to promote good governance and civil society partnerships, we can build our collective success.

Thank you for your continued focus and attention to this critical issue. I look forward to answering your questions.

The view expressed in this testimony are those of the author and not the U.S. Institute of Peace.