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Gulf Crisis: Battle for Future of Mideast & Muslim World?

By James Dorsey

Synopsis

The crisis in the Gulf between Saudi Arabia and Qatar is part of a larger struggle to establish a Saudi-dominated regional order in the Middle East and North Africa. While projecting Saudi Arabia and UAE as leaders in the fight against extremism, the outcome could empower a strand of Sunni ultra-conservatism that potentially enables radicalism.



*Saudi Sheikh Al-Madkhali, leader of the Madkhalists, and renegade Libyan General Haftar (inset).
Source: Libya Tribune*

Commentary

A CAMPAIGN led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to force Qatar to halt its support for Islamists and militants is actually a struggle to establish a

Saudi-dominated regional order in the Middle East and North Africa that suppresses any challenge to the kingdom's religiously-cloaked form of autocratic monarchy.

It is a battle that has pockmarked the Middle East and North Africa since World War Two, but kicked into high gear with the 2011 popular Arab revolts. Saudi Arabia and the UAE waged a concerted campaign to roll back achievements of the uprisings. The two states' effort has projected Saudi Arabia and the UAE as leaders in the fight against extremism. Yet, if successful, their campaign could empower a strand of supremacist Sunni Muslim ultra-conservatism known as Madkhalism that advocates absolutist, non-democratic forms of governance, and threatens to perpetuate environments that potentially enable radicalism.

Defining Political Islam as 'Terrorist'

While Saudi Arabia and the UAE differ in their view of Sunni Muslim ultra-conservatism, they agree on defining political Islam as 'terrorist' because it advocates an alternative worldview or form of governance.

The outcome of the crisis in the Gulf, these differences notwithstanding, is impacting the larger Muslim world rather than only the Middle East and North Africa. A Saudi defeat of Qatar would cement the kingdom with its advocacy of ultra-conservatism, efforts to impose globally its anti-democratic values that make a mockery of basic human rights, and exploitation of the moral authority it derives as the custodian of Islam's two holiest cities - Mecca and Medina - as an almost unchallenged force in the Muslim world.

The irony of the Saudi-led campaign against Qatar is that it pits against one another two autocratic monarchies that both adhere to different strands of Wahhabism, the ultra-conservative worldview that legitimises the rule of Saudi Arabia's governing Al Saud family.

Both countries see strands of Islam as crucial to their national security and the survival of their regimes. Qatar is sandwiched between the Islamic republic of Iran and the Islamic kingdom of Saudi Arabia, both of which it views as potential threats. Qatar sees political Islam, the force that emerged strongest from the 2011 revolts, as the future of a region that is in transition, albeit one that is mired in violence, geopolitical rivalry and Saudi and UAE-led counterrevolution.

Madkhalist Strand of Ultra-Conservatism

Saudi Arabia is struggling with the fact that its four decade-long public diplomacy campaign, the largest in history, has let an ultra-conservative, often militant, inward-looking, intolerant genie out of the bottle that it no longer controls. Riyadh sees the solution in Madkhalism, a strand of ultra-conservatism within the larger Salafist movement that advocates absolute obedience to the ruler.

In doing so, Saudi Arabia is perpetuating the fallout of its public diplomacy that has been a key factor in Muslim societies such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Pakistan and Bangladesh becoming more conservative, more intolerant towards Muslim and non-Muslim minorities, less pluralistic and less democratic.

It is a strategy that risks nurturing the kind of anti-Shiite sectarianism that serves the kingdom's purpose in its power struggle with Iran as well as creating an environment that potentially fosters radicalism. Libya, a war-torn landscape of rival militias and governments, is an example of the Saudi strategy at work.

Much of the world's focus on post-revolt Libya, torn apart by armed militias and ruled by rival governments, has focused on the rise of Islamic State (IS) in the country. Yet, equally devastating for the country has been the proxy war between, on the one hand Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt that depends on handouts from the the kingdom and the emirates or its economic survival, and Qatar on the other. Libya's travails that created opportunity for IS are in many ways the product of battling Gulf states that support groups representing the rival strands of Islam they back.

As a result, Saudi Arabia and the UAE's favourite General Khalifa Belqasim Haftar, rather than being a beacon of struggle against militant or jihadist Sunni Muslim ultra-conservatism, heads [a force that is populated by Madkhalists](#) who advocate a form of governance not dissimilar to that of the kingdom or IS.

Led by Saudi Salafi leader Sheikh Rabi Ibn Hadi Umair al-Madkhali, a former dean at the Islamic University of Medina, Madkhalists seek to marginalise more political Salafists critical of Saudi Arabia by projecting themselves as preachers of the authentic message in a world of false prophets and moral decay. They propagate absolute obedience to the ruler and abstention from politics. Al-Madkhali and his followers position Saudi Arabia as the ideal place for those who seek a pure Islam that has not been compromised by non-Muslim cultural practices and secularism.

Madkhalists Gain Control

Haftar, a former Libyan military officer who joined the 2011 uprising against Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, integrated the Madkhalists into his fighting force after Sheikh Al-Madkhali called on his followers in Libya in the fight against the Qatar-backed Muslim Brotherhood. The integration of the two forces gave the Madkhalists control of key military positions in the port city of Benghazi and elsewhere in eastern Libya.

Madkhalist influence in the region illustrates the kind of society Saudi-backed ultra-conservatives envision. The alliance with Haftar has allowed them to gain control of the body that governs religion as well as mosques in areas administered by the internationally recognised government of Libya.

The long and short of this is that there are no truly good guys in the battle between Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar. Nonetheless, at the core of their high-stakes battle is a struggle over what Islam-inspired worldview will be most prominent in the Muslim world as well as the ability of Muslim nations, especially those in Saudi Arabia's orbit, to chart a course of their own.

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