The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries are being affected by the rise of terrorism and radicalism which in turn has been driven by the creation of ISIS’ state in Iraq and Syria in mid-2014. The group’s presence in Iraq and Syria is inciting many Gulf civilians to travel to Syria to take part in the conflict against al-Assad or to act as local fundraisers for the organization. Furthermore, after a while, the Gulf fighters are either moving back to their home countries or to other conflict zones such as Libya and Yemen, and vice versa. This paper examines how GCC countries are countering the threats posed by ISIS to their national security by focusing on the counter-ISIS policies developed on the national level. The paper identifies three patterns of threats that include the recruitment of their citizens to join the conflict in Syria, the local replica of ISIS that has recently targeted Shiite mosques in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and private donations channelled to the armed groups in Syria. These threats are examined in detail in the first section of this paper as they represent different aspects of ISIS’ influence and appeal in the Gulf societies. In order to avoid generalizations, the analysis and discussion in this paper are based on the examination of the profiles of a sample of 15 Gulf fighters recruited by ISIS during 2014–2015 originating from Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Kuwait. The paper also examines the policies adopted at the national level in the GCC countries to curb ISIS’ influence and appeal, and identifies the main challenges encountered by these countries in countering ISIS.

**KEYWORDS**

ISIS; GCC countries; foreign fighters; Syria; radicalization; counter-terrorism policies

**ABSTRACT**

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries are being affected by the rise of terrorism and radicalism which in turn has been driven by the creation of ISIS’ state in Iraq and Syria in mid-2014. The group’s presence in Iraq and Syria is inciting many Gulf civilians to travel to Syria to take part in the conflict against al-Assad or to act as local fundraisers for the organization. Furthermore, after a while, the Gulf fighters are either moving back to their home countries or to other conflict zones such as Libya and Yemen, and vice versa. This paper examines how GCC countries are countering the threats posed by ISIS to their national security by focusing on the counter-ISIS policies developed on the national level. The paper identifies three patterns of threats that include the recruitment of their citizens to join the conflict in Syria, the local replica of ISIS that has recently targeted Shiite mosques in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and private donations channelled to the armed groups in Syria. These threats are examined in detail in the first section of this paper as they represent different aspects of ISIS’ influence and appeal in the Gulf societies. In order to avoid generalizations, the analysis and discussion in this paper are based on the examination of the profiles of a sample of 15 Gulf fighters recruited by ISIS during 2014–2015 originating from Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Kuwait. The paper also examines the policies adopted at the national level in the GCC countries to curb ISIS’ influence and appeal, and identifies the main challenges encountered by these countries in countering ISIS.

**Introduction**

The growing intensity of the armed conflict in Syria is being accompanied by a flow of Gulf civilians who are recruited by armed groups taking part in the conflict against the al-Assad regime. This flow of so-called foreign fighters into Syria has been of primary concern to academic and policy-making circles in Europe and the Arab region following ISIS’ announcement mid-2014 of the creation of a ‘parallel state’ in Iraq.

This development has appealed to many citizens in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, as well as in other Arab countries, and they have travelled to Syria to defend it against the military operations of the international coalition led by the US.
and its regional allies. Between the formation of this coalition in August 2014 and January 2015, the total number of air strikes against ISIS was estimated at more than 1000, destroying 3222 targets (Pavgi 2015), while ISIS managed to recruit approximately 20,730 foreign fighters during the same period (Moore 2015). Saudi Arabia, according to data from the International Center for the Study of Radicalism and Political Violence (ICSR), is the second greatest Arab source of foreign fighters in Syria after Tunisia (Zelin et al. 2014); both it and Kuwait constitute the two most affected Arab countries by the local replica of ISIS. In addition, according to UNHCR, both Kuwait and Qatar are the main sources of private donations channelled to armed groups in Syria, including ISIS (Ababsa 2014).

Each of these aspects of ISIS’ influence on the societies of the GCC countries (Sharq Al-Awsat 1 July 2014) has its echo in the official discourse of the Gulf leaders. On the one hand, they are aware of the threats posed by allowing their citizens to travel to join ISIS in Syria, especially if they decide to return to their home countries after a while and unleash a wave of local terrorism that repeats the experience of the returnees from Iraq after 2003. For example, Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz, the former King of Saudi Arabia, adopted clear stances on this issue:

> The Kingdom … rejects terrorism in all its forms and manifestations and we will not allow a group of terrorists to take this religion as a shelter in order to serve their personal interests to terrify the Muslims or target our homeland or any citizens or residents. (Sharq Al-Awsat 29 June 2014)

In March 2014, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, also stated that he considered terrorism ‘the main challenge’ that requires mutual cooperation.

In addition, the GCC countries – except Oman – are taking part in military operations against ISIS in Syria which are carried out by the US-led international coalition. However, they are becoming more concerned about the consequences of their participation in these operations. For example, the execution of the Jordanian Mo’az al-Kassasba made them, and especially the UAE, concerned about the destiny of any of their pilots if he/she is captured by ISIS. Due to the limited efficiency of the American rescue system, the UAE decided to put its participation in these operations on hold after al-Kassasba’s execution (Cooper 2015).

On the national level, the GCC countries are countering three patterns of threats posed by ISIS in Syria that include the recruitment of their citizens to join the conflict in Syria, the local replica of ISIS that has recently been targeting Shiite mosques in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and private donations channelled to the armed groups in Syria. These threats are examined in detail in the first section of this paper as they represent different aspects of ISIS’ influence and appeal in the Gulf societies. In order to avoid any generalizations, the analysis and discussion in this paper are based on the examination of the profiles of a sample of 15 Gulf fighters recruited by ISIS during the period 2014–2015 originating from Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Kuwait.

This paper also examines the policies adopted at the national level in the GCC countries to curb ISIS’ influence and appeal, and identifies the main challenges encountered by these countries in countering ISIS.
Mapping the threats: types of Gulf ‘fighters’

The continuation of the armed conflict in Syria is inciting many Gulf civilians to take part in the conflict against al-Assad by joining ISIS, contributing to the flow of ‘foreign fighters’ travelling to Syria who are either self-recruited, or being recruited by others. By examining a sample of 15 Gulf fighters who joined ISIS in Syria during the period 2014–2015 originating from Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Kuwait, we see that they are younger in comparison to those who practised violence locally and younger than the terrorists recruited by al-Qaida in the post–September 2001 attacks. The current wave of Gulf fighters are between 18 and 40 years old; the local fighters are between 18 and 24 years old, while the al-Qaeda terrorists in the post-2001 attacks were between 26 and 39 years old (Ragab 2015a).

The ICSR estimated the total number of Gulf fighters till December 2013 at 1127 and until January 2015 at 2600. According to ICSR data, the number of Gulf fighters originating from Saudi Arabia was between 1500–2500, while 12 originated in Bahrain, 70 in Kuwait, 15 in Qatar and 15 in the UAE. Another figure was published by Enigmains 2014; it estimated that there were 5500 Gulf fighters, of which 4000 were from Saudi Arabia (Unnikrishnan 2015). According to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, of the 1100 foreign fighters killed in Syria up to the end of 2013, 267 originated from al-Qaseem, Riyadh and Baridah in Saudi Arabia (Zelin 2013).

In addition, the Syrian Committee for Human Rights estimated the number of Kuwaiti fighters until February 2015 at approximately 400 (Al-Watan 2015). The majority of these fighters, according to the ICSR, joined either ISIS or Jabhat al-Nusra seeking martyrdom or, in the case of female fighters, to practise the jihad of marriage, Jihad al-Nikah (Zelin 2013).

It is worth mentioning that from time to time the Saudi Ministry of the Interior announces estimations of the number of Saudis joining the conflict in Syria. Approximately 2284 Saudis fighters left for Syria between 2011 and March 2015, and in May 2016 this number jumped to more than 3000 (Assakina 2016).

Another finding reached by examining the profiles of Gulf fighters is that their qualities are different from those coming from other countries. On the one hand, some of them belong to the religiously educated youth bulge and are employed with good salaries; this challenges the dominant argument in literature on terrorism that poverty and unemployment are the two main two drivers leading to terrorism, and underscores the importance of relative deprivation and the aspiration for playing an influential role in public life as the main motivation for joining the ‘young ISIS state’. For example, the Bahraini cleric Turki al-BinAli (Unnikrishnan 2015) was 30 years old when he left Bahrain for Syria in February 2014. He received a religious education in the UAE, Bahrain and Lebanon. He worked as a teacher and as an Imam in one of the mosques in Bahrain before leaving for Syria (Al-Sohaimy 2015). Another example is the Saudi religious leader Osman al-Nazeh al Asiri, who had a master’s degree in Islamic Jurisprudence from King Khaled University in Abha (Al-Akbar 2015).

Furthermore, Gulf fighters are not only recruited as combatants but they also act as religious leaders of ISIS. For example, al-Bin Ali (Unnikrishnan 2015) is one of ISIS’ religious leaders in charge of recruiting other religious leaders from North African countries (Hexpress 2015); he is playing a leading role in training junior religious preachers in ISIS camps and in developing the religious ideology of the organization. He also acted as the head of
ISIS’ Sharia’a Board until June 2016, when he was accused of apostasy (Al-Sakkina 2016). Al-Asiri also acted as the Mufti of ISIS and was responsible for recruiting Saudi youth (Al-Hayat 2014). Another example is the Kuwaiti Ali Mohamed Omar, who was studying petroleum engineering in the UK, and decided to join ISIS after the killing of his brother in Syria. According to the Kuwait Ministry of the Interior he was responsible for developing the gas and oil fields that were under the control of ISIS in Al-Riqa (Skynews 2016).

However, this type of Gulf fighter is but one result of the increasing ISIS influence in GCC countries. ‘Local fighters’ is another; here, nationals inspired by ISIS practise violence in their home countries in order to show rejection and dissatisfaction with the ruling regime. Saudi Arabia is the Gulf country which suffers most from local reflections of ISIS. According to the Ministry of the Interior’s official statistics, on average, the country witnessed one attack every 12 days during the period May 2015–May 2016 (Assakina 2016).

This type of fighter also includes those who believe that they can practise ‘ISIS’ jihad’ by being active recruiters in their home countries, especially through social media platforms. For example, Mohamed Al-Arify, a Saudi religious leader, was accused of recruiting youth to travel to Syria using Twitter and other social media platforms (Daily Mail 2014). In general, online recruiters are not easily traced by security institutions. According to Lombardi, despite Twitter’s decision to suspend many accounts used by ISIS, it continues to be active through accounts located in Canada and Australia (Lombardi 2015).

There is a third result of the increasing appeal of ISIS in these societies, and this is local fundraisers. They usually organize charity campaigns in mosques to help the Syrian people, or raise money through online platforms. As Boghardt (2014b) argues, most of the funding comes from private donors or individuals in Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait. For example, in 2014 the Islamic movement in Kuwait launched an initiative entitled ‘Islamic Campaign for Supporting Syrian People’; it was supervised by Nabil al-Awedhy and Shafy al-Ajamy, Nida’a Agel Project, Ehia’a al-Turath Association, Liyan Campaign and the Global Islamic Charity Organization.

There are no accurate statistics on the exact amount of private donations going out of Gulf countries to Syria, nor its percentage of the total funding of the organization. A 2013 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees report estimated the total flow of cash from private donors from GCC countries to Syria at US$ 229 million (UNHCR 2014, 16). However, through this type of recruitment, ISIS managed to create its own network of finance that enabled it to have approximately 60,000 members on its annual payroll, each with an estimated monthly salary that amounts to US$ 600 (Zelin 2013). Qatar and Kuwait are important sources of private donations to ISIS that were used, according to Levitt, first as start-up money for the organization and then to cover its expenses (Levitt 2014).

The life cycle of Gulf fighters, especially those who have travelled to Syria, may include a phase of reverse movement, when they return back to their country. These people are usually arrested and sentenced according to national laws, or deradicalized through national programmes or turned into local fighters. The cases of terrorists arrested in Saudi Arabia and who had a history of practising terrorism is remarkable. For example, Tareq al-Maimoony, Kahled al-Anzy, Abdullah al-Sarhan and Marwan al-Dhefr are Saudi nationals detained for taking part in the attack on the Shiite mosque at al-Dalohon 3 November 2014. Al-Maimoony had fought in Syria and the three others...
are graduates from the *al-Monasaha* programme, the national prison-based deradicalization programme in Saudi Arabia. Marwan al-Dhefr is a returning fighter from Iraq who was arrested by Iraqi forces and, after being released in 2008, he returned to Saudi Arabia. It has also been noted that some Gulf fighters are moving from Syria to other conflict zones, such as Libya and Yemen and vice versa. That means they are practising violence in more than one conflict. For example, the Saudi female fighter Reem al-Jereesh left for Yemen with her son in March 2014, and then moved to Syria to join ISIS. The same route was taken by Wafa’a al-Yehia as she left Saudi Arabia for Yemen with her two sons in 2012 and then continued on to Syria (*Russia Today* 2015). Despite the absence of exact numbers of fighters moving from one conflict to another, the known cases indicate that there is a network among foreign fighters in the active conflict zones in the region that is developing along the way. This network is creating a new challenge for countering this pattern of terrorism.

**Online vs. offline recruitment**

One of the questions usually raised when the issue of ISIS fighters is discussed is: where are these fighters radicalized and recruited? Many researchers and analysts argue that ISIS increasingly relies on the Internet as a tool for reaching out to new communities of recruits in the Arab countries as well as in Europe. Despite not having an official website of its own, its publication ‘The Black Flag’, released in January 2015, lists a number of accounts belonging to female and male fighters who are very active on *Twitter*. Thus, ISIS relies on a variety of accounts with names that might not be linked to it directly in order to avoid being suspended. According to @xrsone, there are some 26,000 extremely active accounts that tweet news about ISIS and belong to ISIS members or supporters (*The New York Times* 2015).

ISIS also uses pages on *Twitter*, *Facebook*, *Instagram*, customized cell phone applications and interactive forums to disseminate its high-quality, well-segregated videos produced by its media company Al-Hayat Media Center, as well as disseminating its English-language magazine *Dabique*. On *Facebook*, according to the ICSR, the most popular pages are Shaykh Ahmad Musa Jibril, Wake Up Oumma, Musa Cerantonio II, Shaam al-Ghareeba, Black Flags, Islamic News, We are all Islamic State of Iraq and Shaam – ISIS, Sheikh Sulaymaan bin Naasir al-Ulwan, The Victorious Party in the Land of Ash-Sham-10 and DawlaIslamiya Média (Carter, Maher, and Neumann 2014).

The GCC countries are affected by this development. According to a study published by the Brookings Institute in January 2015 regarding the geographic locations of ISIS supporters on social media, 28% of the 20,000 accounts analyzed for demographic information during the period from October to 27 November 2014 were based in Iraq and Syria and 27% in Saudi Arabia. For the set of users which indicated their location, 866 claimed to be based in Saudi Arabia and 300 in Kuwait (Berger and Morgan 2015).

For ISIS, being ‘online’ has enabled it to reach out to a diverse community of Muslims in the GCC countries and to do so at a low cost in comparison to traditional recruitment strategies. Each GCC country hosts a large number of migrant workers, the majority of which originate from Asia. The total number of foreign workers in Saudi Arabia is 9 million, in UAE 7.8 million, (Malit and Youha 2013) in Kuwait 2 million, in Qatar 1.6 million, in Bahrain 700,000 and in Oman 1 million (UN Department of Economic and
Recruiting Asian workers fosters the identity of ISIS as being the organization unifying the ‘Omma’, irrespective of the countries the fighters originate from. However, the effectiveness of ISIS’ online strategy is confined to the most active Internet users in GCC countries, i.e. the young, globalized generation which has appeared given the rapid modernization of these countries since the 2000s. According to Internet World Statistics (2016), Internet usage in the Middle East is 48.3% (it does not give a similar percentage for Arab countries only); this is above the world average which is estimated at 42.3%. The greatest consumers are Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar and Kuwait. According to the 2015 Arab Youth Survey, 91% of youth aged between 18 and 24 years in the GCC countries use social media at least once a week, and 53% use it once a day (ASDA’A Burson-Marsteller 2015). The most widely used social media platform in the GCC countries is Facebook, followed by Twitter. In Saudi Arabia there are 8,400,000 Facebook users and 2,414,000 active Twitter users (Mohamed Bin Rashid School of Government 2015). However, the Twitter usage rate ranks Kuwait first as 11.4% of its population uses it actively, followed by Saudi Arabia, UAE then Qatar.

In addition, despite the overwhelming conviction among academics and policy makers that the Internet is the main tool used by ISIS, it is not the only means of recruitment. The sample of Gulf fighters examined in this paper underscores the importance of closed circles of friends, acquaintances and relatives as avenues for recruitment. Trust in these circles plays a very important role in passing on radical ideas to vulnerable members of the circle. The case of the aforementioned Bahraini cleric al-Bin Ali is very important in this regard. After his decision to leave for Syria, most of his young followers and students followed his steps and left Bahrain to join either ISIS or Jabhat al-Nosra.

Another example of the importance of influence is the Saudi female fighter Nada al-Qahtany. In 2013, one year after her brother Abdelhadi ‘Jalbeeb al-Mohajer’ joined ISIS at the age of 18, she announced on Twitter that she was leaving for Syria and that she had adopted the nickname ‘Sister of Jalbeeb’. The following year, her husband and father also left for Syria to join ISIS. The history of the family reveals that her husband was detained by the Saudi government for his radical ideas, and for publishing a book praising ISIS ideas.

The case of Hissa Abdullah Mohamed, a Kuwaiti, is another example of a mother recruiting her sons. She was 52 years old when, along with her son Abdullah, she travelled to al-Riqa in Syria to join ISIS. She acted as a preacher for ISIS female combatants. After her son was killed in Iraq, she recruited her second son Ali who was studying petroleum engineering in the UK. He left college as aforementioned and travelled to Syria to join his mother (Skynews 2016).

In most cases, self-radicalization is usually done by being a member of a closed network in the social media platforms – especially Twitter – that dispatch the same radical ideas. Usually these networks are built around a main cause. This type of recruitment as aforementioned is not easily traced by security institutions.

In addition, becoming radicalized in conflict zones abroad such as Libya, Iraq and Syria is another place where fighters who have been to Syria get recruited. The two Saudi female fighters Reem al-Jereesh and Wafa’a al-Yehia, as aforementioned, went to Yemen and then to Syria (Russia Today 2015). There are also many Gulf citizens who have travelled to Syria as members of humanitarian aid campaigns being organized by their countries and then decided to stay there, such as al-Bin Ali, or return back later to join the conflict.
Finally, another means for radicalization and recruitment as revealed by a number of cases examined during research for this paper is the informal education circles at mosques, informal gatherings and funerals. The local recruiters use stories derived from the Islamic history of Mujahedeen and teach the audience correct practices, for example, of shrouding the dead according to Islam and say that what they knew about these practices is incorrect. In other words, the gap of knowledge of Islamic Sharia’a is being manipulated by ISIS’ local agents. However, religious recruitment is not the only strategy used by ISIS. A sample of 46,313 text and video messages and images being used on the Internet was analyzed by the Future Center in Abu Dhabi; it concluded that 59.7% of the arguments used were political, 21.4% were religious and 18.6% were social (Future Center 2016).

These findings are very important as it proves on the one hand that the main drivers motivating young Gulf citizens to practise violence in general are not only religious, as religion is usually used as a cover to other political and social drivers. In the case of al-Bin Ali, his desire to play a leading religious role after experiencing a religious education as a young adult is important. Born in 1984, in 2010 he graduated from the Bahrain Institute of Forensic Sciences. In between, according to the Bahraini Ministry of the Interior, due to his radical ideas, he was arrested by the Emeriti authorities in 2005 when he was a student in the Dubai College of Islamic and Arab Studies. He then went to Lebanon and joined al-Imam al-Awza’y College in Beirut. In 2007 he was detained for six months in Bahrain for taking part in one of the cells and was then released.13 This experience could be a driver for adopting radical views towards those having different opinions. For example, he considered his teacher Abo Mohamed al-Maqdesy as an infidel as he criticized ISIS after the killing of the American hostage Peter Kassig and the Jordanian Mo’az al-Kassasba.14

Following the messages disseminated by Nada al Qahtany regarding how to travel to Syria alone without being accompanied by a close relative (muhrim), she became a model for Saudi women seeking freedom from men going to jihad in Syria.15 In response to her tweets, many Saudi women praised her and issued a statement entitled Al-Jinan Friends ’Rafeqat AL-Jenan’16 and called other women to follow in her steps.

**Policy discussion: countering the violent actions or the drivers?**

The GCC countries are adopting three sets of policies at the national level to counter the increasing influence of ISIS in their societies. The first set relates to measures aiming at reducing the number of Gulf citizens travelling to Syria to join it, they are adopting a policy of deglamorizing the organization. The label Dai’sh is widely used in local media outlets in reference to ISIS instead of the term ‘Islamic State’. As narrated by an editor of a leading Emeriti newspaper, as of September 2014 the Emeriti government called all publishing houses and media outlets in the country to use the former instead of the latter.17

Saudi Arabia and UAE have developed national lists of terrorist organizations to delegitimize them among the public. Since March 2014 Saudi Arabia has designated ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, along with other seven entities, as terrorist.18 Since November 2014, the UAE announced its list of 83 terrorist organizations which includes ISIS (The National 2014b). On 11 April 2016, Bahrain designated 63 organizations as terrorist and it includes
ISIS in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Nigeria, along with Jabhat al-Nusra (Bahrain News Agency 2016).

In the case of Kuwait, despite the absence of such official lists, the Ministry of the Interior is using the labels ‘local terrorism’ and ‘external terrorism’ in reference to the local replica of ISIS and to the violence practised by Kuwaiti citizens in Syria and Iraq, respectively (Skynews 2016). In the case of Saudi Arabia, the official discourse of the Ministry of the Interior is using the clause ‘the misled group’(al-Fia’ al-Dhala) in reference to those practising terrorism and violence against the security forces and Shiite mosques.

In the case of Qatar and Oman no similar designation has been adopted. Qatar agreed only on designating the Syrian Kurdish group YPG as a terrorist organization, and refused to consider any armed group taking part in the conflict against al-Assad as a terrorist organization (Sputniknews 2015).

In accordance with the UN Security Council resolution 2178 that calls for preventing the “recruiting, organizing, transporting or equipping of individuals who travel for the purpose of the perpetration, planning of, or participation in terrorist acts, associated with ISIL, Al Nusra Front (ANL) and other affiliates or splinter groups of Al Qaida”, these countries – to varying degrees – have adopted policies banning travel to areas under the control of ISIS. For example, following the March 2014 general ban on travel to any conflict zone abroad, the Saudi government announced in April 2015 that Saudis are prevented from travelling to Syria (Al-Sharq al-Awsat 2015). In the case of Bahrain, there is no ban on travel, but the authorities have the right to strip citizenship from those taking part in conflicts that threaten national security. This was applied in the case of al-Bin Ali (al-Wasat 5 February 2015). Similarly, Kuwait stripped its citizenship from the religious leader Nabil al-Awady. Although the issue of drafting a law that would punish anyone taking part in conflicts abroad is still being debated in Kuwait (Al-Bawaba news 2014), it is working closely with the Iraqi government and the US-led coalition against ISIS in Syria in order to bring back Kuwaiti nationals who joined ISIS (Skynews Arabia 2016).

The second set of policies aims at dealing with the local replica of ISIS terrorism. These policies include monitoring suspicious activities inside the country that could escalate into a complete terrorist attack following the ISIS model of terrorism, arresting terrorists by maintaining a level of policing, collecting intelligence and bringing them to justice. Since mid-2014, Saudi security institutions have thwarted many plots planned by small and medium-size cells targeting security institutions and religious leaders supporting the regime in its fight against ISIS (Boghardt 2015). For example, in April 2015, the authorities announced the capture of 15 Saudi members of a cell entitled Jond Bilad al Harameen (Al-Riyadh 29 April 2015).

Since May 2015, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have witnessed a wave of local attacks inspired by ISIS that is targeting religious institutions and especially Shiite mosques. The first attack of this type in Kuwait targeted the al-Imam al-Sadiq mosque at al-Sawabber on 28 June 2015 (Skynews Arabia 2015). In the case of Saudi Arabia, the first ISIS attack against a Shiite mosque was against the al-Imam Ali mosque in al-Qadeeh in the Eastern province on 22 May 2015. These attacks were followed by the increased physical presence of security forces in the streets, especially around potential targets that include Shiite mosques and Shia halls (hussainia), the installation of surveillance
systems and allowing mosques to contract with private security companies to get the security protection they need (The Huffington Post 2016).

Security agencies are monitoring social media platforms to prevent the dissemination of ISIS messages and the online recruitment of fighters. For example, on 11 April 2015 the Saudi authorities announced that it had arrested a Saudi citizen self-trained in ISIS tactics of terrorism and who planned to target security officers. It listed Twitter accounts used by him to recruit combatants: @ABOS ALEH-15, @abib 2007, @abib 2015, @abib 2001, @abib 2008 and @abib 2009 (Al-Riyadh 29 April 2015). In addition, it arrested nine citizens who, via nine accounts on Twitter, were convicted of recruiting youth online and of disseminating ISIS messages, attacking religious leaders in the country and threatening to explode housing complexes.20

In the UAE, the Sawab Center – launched jointly with the US in July 2015 – has reported thousands of ISIS accounts, and created videos on how to report similar accounts on various platforms (Emirates News Agency 2016).

The third set of policies concerns monitoring the flow of private donations to ISIS. The six GCC countries are members of the MENATFATF created in Bahrain on 30 November 2004. However, their compliance with the regulations of this mechanism in monitoring money laundering and terrorism finance varies.21 In the case of the conflict in Syria, the GCC countries adopted policies that regulate the official flow of donations to Syria, but not private donations (Boghardt 2014b). Qatar and Kuwait are still an important source of private donations to ISIS. In December 2013 the US treasury classified the Qatari Abdelrahman al Noaimy as one of the important sources of finance to ISIS. Due to the increasing Western pressure on Qatar, it passed a law to organize the monitoring of charitable organizations. Kuwait’s financial system has weak regulations that have turned it into a hub for collecting private donations from other GCC countries which are transferred to Syria through the informal money transfer system Hewala, exchange companies, or via cargo shipments either directly or through a third country such as Turkey, Lebanon or Jordan. These donations are collected by Kuwaiti nationals, as well as Syrian workers in Kuwait, and directed not only to Sunni militant groups fighting against the al-Assad regime but also to Shiite militias supporting the regime. However, most of the monitoring of the private donations is confined to the Sunni militia groups and not the Shiites (Dickinson 2013).

In addition, in Kuwait many informal campaigns are being organized by politicians affiliated to the Salafi groups or the Muslim Brotherhood and they collect donations under the cover of humanitarian aid for the people of Syria and then channel it to armed organizations. According to the US Treasury under-secretary for terrorism, Kuwait is the “epicenter for funding for terrorist groups in Syria”. Accordingly, as of 2013, Kuwait is on the Financial Action Task Force (FATF)’s list of countries which are monitored to assess their progress in implementing FATF regulations regarding the finance of terrorism (FATF 2013). Due to Western pressure, Kuwait passed a law in 2013 that criminalizes financing terrorism and created a financial intelligence unit (Boghardt 2014a). The government also regulates donation campaigns by designating the Kuwaiti Red Crescent, the Kuwaiti Relief Organization and the International Islamic Charity Organization as solely authorized to collect donations (Al-Khaleej Affairs 2015). Due to these efforts, Kuwait was removed in 2015 from FATF’s blacklist.
Both Saudi Arabia and UAE are cooperating closely with the US Treasury in curbing the finance of ISIS. As mentioned above, in July 2015 the US and UAE formed a joint task force, the Sawab Center (The National 2014a). With regard to Oman, it has the “lowest risk for terrorism financing or money laundering of any of the GCC countries” (Katzman 2016, 17).

The effectiveness of these policies can be analyzed on two levels. The first level concerns the influence of ISIS in the GCC societies and whether these policies have managed to decrease it. The total number of Gulf fighters recruited by ISIS is still significant, and this reveals the limited effectiveness of these policies. For example, ICSR points to an increase in the flow of fighters from the six GCC countries in January 2015 in comparison to the flow in December 2013, which was 2612 and 1128, respectively. Saudi Arabia is the main source of the largest number of the fighters; these reached 2500 in 2015 and over 3000 in May 2016, while there were 1016 in 2013 (ICSR 2014). As aforementioned, the al-Monasaha programme, the only one of its kind in the Gulf, has many shortcomings that make it difficult to ensure that those subjected to it will not practice violence again.

Most of these policies are designed to prevent citizens from travelling abroad or from returning home, and not much attention is paid to foreign workers who are new targets for ISIS recruitment strategies (Al Sumariya News 2014). This is a concern that needs more analysis, as most of the academic work done by think tanks on foreign fighters categorizes them by nationality and not by the country they were recruited in (see, for example, the work of the ICSR). For example, some Indian media outlets posted a story about a girl named Ayesha who lived in Dubai and in 2014 started to develop contacts with ISIS fighters in order to recruit young Asians willing to fight for the cause of the ‘Islamic state’ (The Times of India 2015). Months later, Saudi and Kuwaiti authorities managed to uncover the recruitment of Asian workers by ISIS. For example, on 29 April 2015 the Saudi authorities announced that a cell of 65 persons including Saudis and foreigners were arrested as they planned to target many security institutions in the country (Ministry of the Interior 2015). On 4 July 2016 Kuwait uncovered a local ISIS cell formed by two Kuwaiti nationals and an Asian worker (Skynews 2016).

Another alarming development is the increasing number of local attacks inspired by ISIS against religious targets in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait that indicate the limited effectiveness of the adopted policies in diminishing the appeal of ISIS in these societies. In addition, the continual flow of money from individual donors, namely from Qatar and Kuwait and which is hard to accurately estimate, is another indicator of the shortcomings of the adopted policies on the national level.

There are also shortcomings in the policies designed to control aggressions against Shiite mosques especially in Saudi Arabia, which is unprecedented in comparison to the wave of terrorism the country suffered from following the September 2001 attacks. For example, in June 2015 the Saudi Shoura Council failed to adopt the national unity bill proposed by a number of its members after the deadly attacks on the Shiite mosques in Qateef on 22 and 29 May 2015. There were 74 members who voted against, 47 with and 11 abstained. Those who voted against said that “the Kingdom’s constitution already emphasizes the importance of achieving national unity and criminalizes sectarianism, thus there is no need to pass a new law” (CNN Arabic web portal 2016). Meanwhile, the UAE and Kuwait managed to pass similar laws that criminalize hate speeches, the defamation of religion and discrimination (Al-Itihad 22 July 2015).
The second level is concerned with tackling the drivers of terrorism. This paper argues that all of these policies are focusing on the physical aspects of terrorism in general, and not on the main drivers or motivations of practising terrorism either locally or in Syria. Countering ISIS’ radical ideas used for attracting Gulf citizens is not gaining the attention it needs at the national level in these countries in a way that reflects the new characteristics of ISIS radical ideas. This is the case in Saudi Arabia, where ISIS radicalism is countered using the same policies used to counter al-Qaeda following the 2001 attacks. The main national de-radicalization programme, al-Monasaha, is carried out by the Prince Mohamed Bin Nayef Counseling and Care Center; it is a prison-based rehabilitation programme established following the September 2001 attacks. According to the Ministry of the Interior, the Saudi fighters returning from Syria are estimated at 760 until May 2016, and all subject to this programme (Assakina web portal 2016). Many of them are actually former graduates of this programme.

In practice, the programme focuses on the individuals’ violent actions and aims to facilitate their integration in society after being released, but it lacks well-designed programmes aiming at tackling the radical ideas they have regarding different aspects of social life in the society. This shortcoming is echoed in the official terms used to label those who are subject to the programme. The official website considers them as ‘detainees’ and ‘extremists’. It also articulates the main mission of the centre as tackling the deviated ideas of the detainees and spreading the moderate ideas according to Qura’an and Sunna, without defining what the deviated or the moderate ideas are. These labels reflect to a great extent the type of marginalization these individuals could suffer in their society. Using neutral terms leads to limited criminalization of these individuals and does not prevent sympathizing with them. This type of shortfall accounts for the relapse of many of the graduates of the programme, which the percentage of relapses concerning the 2800 terrorists who went through the programme is officially estimated at approximately 13%.

The Saudi Ministry of the Interior announced that a significant number of Saudis who have undergone the al-Monasaha programme are actively involved in recruiting a new, young generation of fighters or are engaged in terrorism. The aforementioned cases of Khaled al-Anzy, Abdullah al-Sarhan and Marwan al-Dhefr are examples of the limited effectiveness of this programme. Another remarkable example is the case of Eqab al-Otaiby. He is a Saudi national and was arrested by the Saudi authorities because he took part in the attack on the Shiite mosque at al-Dalooh, on the mosques in Aseer on 6 August 2015, and assassinated a number of security officers. He was detained in 2008 after attempting to travel to Iraq to join militant groups there, and was subject to the al-Monasaha programme for four years. He was then released and worked as an Imam in a mosque in Aseef. In 2012 he managed to travel to Kuwait and from there via Turkey to Syria, and returned back to Saudi Arabia without being recognized as a returning fighter by the Saudi security officers. The limited effectiveness of this programme is becoming an issue of discussion among many Saudi opinion leaders. For example, the Saudi presenter Dawood al-Sherian, in his weekly programme broadcasted on the Saudi satellite channel MBC, discussed the need for developing this programme.

Saudi Arabia is also relying on Assakina, an online campaign launched under the supervision of the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs in 2003. Its main goal is to engage with ‘deviant’ thoughts disseminated over the Internet and to refute these ideas through one-to-one interactions. Through this mechanism, within 10 years – according to the

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**References:**

3. *Saudi Arabia*.
4. *Assakina*.
statistics published on its website – it managed to engage with 3250 individuals, 50% of whom were from the Gulf region. In addition, 25% of the total number of these individuals were deradicalized, of whom 40% were totally deradicalized and 60% were partially deradicalized.\textsuperscript{25} No similar statistics are published regarding the effectiveness of this initiative in dealing with ISIS radical messages or returning fighters from Syria.

Furthermore, in July 2015, the Ministry of Education launched a programme called \textit{Faten} designed to engage with school students in order to raise awareness of 'behavioural and ideational deviations' and its negative impacts. This programme is carried out in cooperation with the Ministries of the Interior, Social Solidarity, Islamic Affairs and universities (Werdany 2016).

In the case of Kuwait, after the \textit{al-Sawaber} attack, the government announced the formation of a permanent cabinet committee tasked to coordinate counter-terrorism and radicalism policies, to increase the awareness of its negative impacts and to spread moderate Islamic ideas. The Ministry of Awqaf reviewed the religious textbooks being used at public schools and added sections on the relationship with the Ruling family and on issues relevant to the practice of excommunication called \textit{al-Takfeir}.

The UAE, as mentioned above, has launched the Sawab Center which aims to combat radical ISIS messages on \textit{Facebook}, \textit{Twitter}, \textit{Instagram} and \textit{Youtube} by highlighting the unacceptable practices of ISIS with women, children and minorities. It also highlights the issue of foreign fighters, and has reported thousands of ISIS accounts (Emirates News Agency 2016).

\textbf{Conclusion: challenges ahead}

The GCC countries encounter four main challenges in their efforts to counter the threats posed by ISIS on the national level. The legitimacy question could be the most important one. Countering religious terrorism in conservative religious societies is a challenge to the legitimacy of the ruling regimes. Showing respect to Islamic Sharia’a and norms has been a pillar of legitimacy with varying degrees to GCC countries, which limits their ability to counter the arguments of religious terrorist organizations. These countries fear retaliation by these groups, especially by returning fighters who could launch media campaigns that frame the ruling regime as an infidel, or take control of small villages and announce that they are part of ISIS. This explains the limited anti-terrorism discourse adopted by the governments on the local level.

The case of Mariam al-Mansoury, the Emirati F16 squadron commander who took part in the operations against ISIS, is worthy of note (Al-Arabiya net 2015). Her participation in these operations, which was praised by the Emirati government, was highly criticized by many Islamic groups in the Gulf: she was taking part in a ‘conflict against Islam’ according to them (Al-Khaleej Affairs 2014). Since then, not much information has been released by the government in order to avoid similar campaigns that could be used by the political Islamic opposition groups to delegitimize the regime.

The importance of this challenge is increasing as the wave of attacking Shiite mosques continues. The discussion in Saudi Arabia regarding the national unity bill is indicative in this regard. According to one of the council members who voted against it, the bill “recognizes Shiites and other sects which would require changing many things in the Kingdom, starting from assuring their presence in the Council of Senior Ulama and their right to use
the Grand Mosque in Mecca *al-Haram*, along with changing many laws. This will cause societal tensions at time of a war” (Qasem 2015).

The second challenge is related to the debatable relationship between the securitization of counter-terrorism and the eradication of radicalism. Usually, countries that suffer from high levels of insecurity due to terrorism tend to rely on security strategies as the first defense strategy against terrorist organizations. Their main goal is to reduce the number of terrorist attacks. In these cases, it is usually at a later stage that they adopt non-security strategies that tackle the causes of terrorism. The policies examined in this paper do not address the drivers motivating the Gulf citizens to practice terrorism at home or abroad. Identifying the drivers is very important in formulating the needed policies.

The sample of Gulf fighters examined in this paper leads to two findings. First, the causes or drivers that motivate a regular citizen to travel abroad and to join a militant organization are relative and are shaped by the context surrounding these individuals. Thus, motivations are relative and no general matrix can help explain why there is a high number of fighters in ISIS originating from Saudi Arabia, or a limited number from UAE. The context is very important. What is considered as a driver at a specific period of time might not be important at other periods and what causes radicalism in one society might not in another. This explains the different characteristics between the foreign fighters travelling to Syria and originating from the GCC countries and those who joined the armed groups in Iraq following 2003. For example, the average age of current fighters ranges between 18 to 40 in the case of the GCC countries, while post-2003 the average age of the detained Saudi terrorists was 26–39 years old (Ragab 2015a). The Saudi Jalbeeb who joined ISIS managed to master the attacks on the Shiite mosques in Saudi Arabia during 2015, while this pattern of attacks was absent following the wave of returnees from Iraq after 2003.

The second finding is that it is important to distinguish between three types of drivers in order to understand this phenomenon in a more comprehensive way and to help policy makers to develop effective counter policies. The first level concerns the structural or root causes that dominated the academic and policy-making circles for decades. These include education, poverty, lack of democracy and unemployment. Countering it requires a long time as it means changing the educational curriculum and providing more job opportunities, etc. The second level is the contextual drivers created by the domestic context that is surrounding the individual and by the ongoing conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen. The third level relates to triggers; this includes personal grievances, the quest for a leading role or an opportunity, and the emotional reactions to the dynamics of the conflicts abroad. I argue that these triggers interact with the structural and contextual drivers and account for the radicalization and the practise of violence.

For the Saudi female fighter who joined ISIS, the grievances created by the killings or the arrest of one of their relatives is a very important motivation. In the case of Reema al-Jereesh, her husband was arrested by the Saudi authorities for being a suspected terrorist (Russia Today 2015). The case of the Egyptian Abdullah Alsemary is another example. He was, according to his tweets, exposed to the brutality of the security forces, and this was the reason why he dreamed about having a rocket-propelled grenade, which he fulfilled by travelling to Syria. The main message he was sending through his *Twitter* account (and which had
an impact on his Saudi friend Abdullah al-Rasheed) was a call for the release of all detainees and to stand up against tyrants (the Arabic word is al-tawagheit). The same word was used in a voice message recorded by his friend al-Rasheed before he blew himself up in Ramadan at the al-Hae’r security checkpoint. He killed his uncle who had a working shift in this check point ‘for being one of the al-tawagheit’. The aforementioned case of Nada al-Qahtany is another case in point.

It is worth noting that the triggers, regardless of the place where the radicalization process is taking place, along with the isolation process that vulnerable citizens are going through, plus the lack of knowledge about religion, are key in the radicalization and recruitment process.

The preventive policies targeting Saudis sympathizing with ISIS are not accompanied by a comprehensive campaign that provides solid narratives to counter the arguments used by leaders recruiting the youth either through social media platforms or through face-to-face communication. According to many Saudi columnists, sermons given by Imams in mosques are conveying radical values and messages and are not subject to the supervision of the government. This situation does not exist in the UAE for example, where since 2005 Friday sermons are unified. In the case of other countries such as Bahrain, the efforts of the Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs to counter radicalization is taking the shape of regular workshops for Sunni and Shiite clerics, and regular reviews of schools’ Islamic studies curricula (US Department of State 2013). However, these efforts were not enough to prevent clerics licenced by the ministry and paid from its budget from becoming terrorists, as in the case of Al-Bin Ali.

The third challenge is the limited cooperation among the six GCC countries to counter the recruitment of their citizens due to the lack of consensus on the threat posed by ISIS. Due to different views and perceptions, the classification of terrorist groups is subject to political and security calculations as aforementioned. For example, Saudi Arabia and UAE officially have clear policies regarding ISIS, unlike Qatar and Kuwait. In December 2013, the US Treasury classified the Qatari national Abdelrahman al Noaimy as one of the important sources of finance to ISIS, but no action has been taken against him by the Qatari government.

As a result, these countries have developed national policies but created limited regional mechanisms to contain any threats from a blowback from Syria and to monitor the development of networks among fighters moving from one conflict to another. An illustration of this is the free movement of persons between Saudi Arabia and Kuwait as part of the GCC which was manipulated, for example, by the ISIS cell that facilitated the movement of the Saudi citizen who planned and attacked the Shiite mosque at al-Sawaber. Kuwait has been used by Gulf fighters as a transit country from which they leave for Turkey and then Syria and Iraq. The level of intelligence sharing among Kuwait and other GCC countries needs to be developed. The Saudi-led Islamic Coalition to fight terrorism formed in February 2016 is an attempt in this regard. According to the Qatari foreign minister, Khalid bin Mohammad Attiyah: “Currently we are talking about information exchanges related to movements of people and funds. The issue of creating military forces has not been discussed yet”.

However, these countries are unilaterally cooperating with the international community in fighting ISIS. Bahrain, Kuwait, UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar are taking part in the US-led regional military operations against ISIS in Syria (but not in Iraq) that aims
to degrade and destroy ISIS, as declared by US President Barak Obama (MSNBC 2014). Oman is the only country that “has not at anytime conducted US-led airstrikes against Islamic State positions in Syria,” although it “reportedly offered the use of its air bases for the coalition” (Katzman 2016, 17).

The UAE is host to the centre for excellence Hedayah that runs many programmes for capacity building among government and non-government stakeholders in the area of countering violent extremism. The number of activities carried out since its establishment in 2012 until the end of 2015 is 14 training programmes.31 The overview report of the Center does not show if the GCC countries, other than the host country, took part in any of these programmes.

The last challenge is the gap between academic circles and policy-oriented research on radicalism and terrorism in GCC countries due to the limited number of national research programmes, and the absence of specialized centres focusing on this issue in these countries. Funding for research programmes in this area, as well as the creation of fellowships for researchers in international centres working on this issue, would be useful to increase the awareness of it, to frame public discourse, as well as provide out-of-the-box policies for policy makers.

Notes

1. See, for example: Barrett 2014.
2. For more information, see Ragab 2010.
4. For more information on the attractiveness of ISIS to the Arab youth, see Wardany 2014.
5. For more information, see Abdelsatar Hateeta’s investigative report on former member of ISIS published in Arabic in Sharq al-Awsat, 15 May 2015; Bunzel 2015.
6. For more details on ISIS’ financial network see, Okasha 2015, 486–488.
7. This effectiveness of this programme was discussed in many opinion columns in the Saudi newspapers. See, for example, Jameel al-Dhaiabi 2015; Ibraheem 2014, “Returning to Terrorism. Why be bitten from the same hole more than once?” (in Arabic), al-Watan online, 28 November. http://alwatan.com.sa/Articles/Detail.aspx?ArticleID=24049.
9. For more information on the media strategies of ISIS see, Labban, Sherif al. 2015.
10. For more details on this sample see, Ragab 2015a and 2015b.
11. See the twitter account @ Do_da_q. See also: “Jalbeeb’s Sister threatens al-Arabiya news agency in her tweets” (in Arabic), al-Arabiya.net, 5 June 2015. http://www.alarabiya.net/ar/saudi-today/2015/06/05/.
15. It was suspended as of June 2015. See: “Jalbeeb’s Sister threatens al-Arabiya news agency in her tweets” (in Arabic): Endnote 11.
16. See its Twitter account: @aljinanfriends.
17. Interview conducted by the researcher with an editor in one of the national newspapers, Abu Dhabi, September 2014.
18. See the interview of the Saudi Minister of Justice in *al-Sharq al-Awsat* where he explains the legal implications of the royal order of designating ISIS and seven other groups as terrorist organizations: *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 8 March 2014.

19. The profile of al-Awadhy was published on an online news portal on 1 September 2014, see: http://www.vetogate.com/1201207.

20. All of the nine accounts are in Arabic, and they are: "المجاهد اليمني 2014", "أبو قادة الأنصار", "أبو هادي", "كلالسة", "أبناء الجزيرة", "ناجي الحرب", "طيار السياسة", "موحد 9", "خالد", "أم عائشة".

21. For more information on the GCC compliance with these regulations, see Realuyo 2015.

22. See also the video of the discussion on the effectiveness of the *al-Monasaha* programme by the Saudi journalist Dawood al-Sherian broadcasted on MBC satellite channel in Arabic on 22 February 2015. http://www.mbc.net/ar/programs/thelama/topics/articles/.

23. See the episode of 22 May 2015, dedicated for discussing al-Monasaha program: http://www.mbc.net/ar/programs/thelama/topics/articles/.


26. See the interview conducted by Dawood al-Sherian with Khaeld al-Faraj broadcasted on MBC on 30 November 2013. He is a Saudi detained terrorist. He underscored his emotional interactions with videos showing the attacks on Muslims during the Bosnia war in the 1990s as his main driver for practising terrorism in Saudi Arabia during the 2000s: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oDuRo3cw2po.

27. See the tweet of 9 November 2013 @rgpl_1.

28. See his voice recording post on Youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ITr8umzA1_s&oref=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.youtube.com%2Fwatch%3Fv%3DITr8umzA1_s&has_verified=1.

29. For a detailed discussion of the three levels see, Eman Ragab, “The Middle East and Foreign Fighters in Syria: Cases of Egypt and the GCC Countries”, paper presented in an advanced research workshop organized by PISM and APE, 15‒18 May 2015, Moldova.

30. For more information on these challenges, see Eman Ragab 2015.


**Disclosure statement**

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