

Education Systems and Islamic Radicalism in the Arabian Gulf

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POLICY BRIEF

Since September 11, 2001, scholars and policymakers have worked vigorously to identify the causes of radical Islamic terrorism. Political repression, economic stagnation, the “clash of civilizations,” and foreign occupation by non-Muslim troops have been the favorite culprits for explaining this terrorism. However, very little attention has been given to the role of states’ education systems in religious radicalization. This brief argues that the nature of a state’s education system plays a significant role in the religious radicalization process, as seen in the cases of Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Kuwait.

The Saudi Education System: Radical Religious Content and Bifurcated Structure

Apart from the Mecca mosque uprising in 1979, Saudi Arabia has experienced relatively little religious violence until the 1990s, when religious terrorism first hit home. The 1990s saw the opening of a new chapter in Saudi Arabia’s history: sporadic domestic terrorism; high Saudi participation in *jihad* movements in Afghanistan, Chechnya and Bosnia; and high Saudi involvement in terrorist attacks against American targets around the world. Domestic terrorism targeted foreigners, and particularly Western institutes, exclusively. Saudi nationals were the largest source of fighters for the anti-Soviet *jihad* in Afghanistan during that time period.¹ Terrorism in the Kingdom escalated to unprecedented levels in 2003, the same year that the United States withdrew its military forces. The spate of violent attacks continued into 2004 until Saudi security forces were able to effectively dismantle the terrorist network in 2007. However, Saudis continue to participate in *jihadi* movements abroad in high numbers, particularly in neighboring Iraq, where recent estimates attributed 40% of foreign fighters to Saudi Arabia.²

The content and structure of the Saudi education system is a major contributor to the high levels of religious terrorism that are originating from and have occurred within the Kingdom.

Radical Content: The Kingdom’s education system contains religious material that endows students with violent anti-Western sentiments. Saudi textbooks have been found to propagate hatred for Christians and Jews, and non-Wahhabi Muslims. They border on *takfir* by declaring these non-Wahhabi Muslims, such as Shia’s and Sufis, as well as Muslims who work and live among non-believers to be “unbelievers” and “enemies.”³

Additionally, Saudi textbooks call on students to engage in “defensive” jihad to drive out corrupting foreign influences from Saudi soil.

Bifurcated Structure: During high school, students are divided into the literary, religious track, or the technical, vocational track, depending on their academic performance. Poorly performing students are forced into the literary track, which is largely devoted to religious studies. This bifurcated education system causes the literary track students to receive a 20% higher concentration of religious instruction that prepares them poorly for the job market, while the rest of the student population receives a less religious education through the technical track, which endows them with practical skills and prepares them to succeed in the job market.⁴ Upon graduating, students concentrating in religious studies or coming from the literary track of education face much greater difficulty securing employment. They are then likely to become involved in religious terrorism, having been taught that *jihad* against corrupting foreign influences was the most meaningful pursuit in life.

Evidence for the relationship between Saudi Arabia’s education system and participation in religious terrorism can be found in the profiles of domestic terrorists and Saudi foreign fighters. The domestic terror group, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, primarily consisted of young men in their late 20s and early 30s from the middle and lower-middle classes. Many of these militants were students or unemployed individuals with degrees in religious studies. There was a notable absence of militants who had been trained or employed in the hard or natural sciences such as engineering, medicine, and economics.⁵ Recent data on Saudi foreign fighters in Afghanistan and Iraq also shows that a majority of militants are students and/or unemployed.⁶

The Education System in Yemen: Inadequacy and Limited Accessibility

Yemen has been both a source and staging ground for terrorism in the past few decades. Thousands of Yemeni volunteers traveled to Afghanistan in the 1980s to participate in *jihad* against Soviet forces. These Yemenis, along with the other “Afghan Arabs” returned to Yemen in the 1990s, bringing with them their radical Salafi-*jihadi* ideology. In 1992, Yemen became the staging ground for al-Qaeda’s first attack, targeting U.S. soldiers on their way to Somalia during Operation Restore Hope. Local terrorist groups affiliated with al-Qaeda carried out a number of other attacks in the 1990s and early 2000s, which the Yemeni government was able to effectively dismantle by 2003. Yemenis continued to travel to fight abroad throughout this time period, and became a large source of foreign fighters in Iraq after the U.S. invasion in 2003. A new terrorist group was formed in 2006, al-Qaeda in Yemen, and has been carrying out violent attacks against Western targets since then, including attacks on the U.S. embassy, Spanish tourists, and a Western residential complex.

The limited accessibility and poor quality of public education in certain areas of Yemen is causing students to enroll in alternative forms of education provided by religious institutes. The abundance of radical religious schools in the absence of accessible or adequate public education is a major contributing factor to Yemen’s position as producer, staging ground and target for radical Islamic terrorism.

Limited Accessibility & Poor Quality: Yemen is the most impoverished country in the Middle East and, according to the United Nations, ranked 153 out of 177 countries on the Human Development Index in 2005.⁷ Furthermore, over 75% of Yemen's population is under the age of 25.⁸ These statistics illustrate the enormous difficulties the Yemeni government faces in establishing and maintaining an adequate public education system. As a result, the public school system in Yemen suffers from limited accessibility, poor attendance levels, high dropout rates, and large disparities between education levels for rural and urban, as well as rich and poor, Yemenis. Even when students have access to education and are able to attend public schools, the quality of schooling is very poor. The existing public education system is weak, and plagued by corruption, unqualified teaching staff, and overcrowded and understaffed classrooms.

Radical Religious Schooling: Religious schooling is prevalent in impoverished rural and tribal areas, and particularly in the north, where geographic isolation often results in limited government reach and societal mistrust of centralized, secular government. It is important to note that independent religious schools in Yemen are affiliated with a variety of sects, and are not wholly involved in propagating extremism and religious violence. Mosque schools had long been the only source of education in Yemen before the development of the modern education system, and many continue to operate with the aim of simply providing basic education and religious teaching, without any ulterior political motives.⁹ This brief is primarily concerned with religious schools that are established to incite hatred and intolerance of others and are used for radical political aims, the majority of which adopt a Salafi-*jihadi* ideology and are either Saudi-funded or financed by returning *mujahideen*. These schools focus on rote memorization and equip their students with radical religious ideologies rather than marketable skills. Failing to gain employment, many of these students turn to radical Islamic terrorism.

Evidence for the relationship between Islamic radicalization and the abundance of radical religious schools (in the absence of accessible or adequate public education) can be found in data on terrorists and foreign fighters originating from Yemen. The thousands of Yemeni volunteers for the anti-Soviet *jihad* in the 1980s came overwhelmingly from North Yemen, where Saudi-backed Salafi-*jihadi* schools had been established in large numbers in the 1970s. The Yemeni government's success in temporarily halting radical Islamic terrorism in 2003 was partially dependent on its closure of these radical schools. Furthermore, the Iman University, established by Salafi-*jihadi* 'Abd al-Majid al-Zindani, and the Dar al-Hadith schools have been singled out as known sources of al-Qaeda militants, foreign fighters in Iraq and domestic terrorists responsible for attacks on Western targets. On numerous occasions, the Yemeni government and other varied Yemeni sources have specifically noted the major contributing role of the continued existence of these radical religious institutions to the most recent wave of domestic terrorism.

Kuwait's Religiously Moderate, Well-Developed and Highly-Accessible Education System

While thousands of Yemenis and Saudis traveled to Afghanistan for *jihad* and hundreds of them have traveled to Iraq as foreign fighters, the number of Kuwaitis involved in either of these endeavors has only amounted to the dozens. Kuwaiti volunteers for *jihad* abroad in Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Iraq have been limited and only make up a small minority of religious foreign fighters abroad. Furthermore, despite the substantial and consistent presence of U.S. military forces stationed in Kuwait, domestic terrorism in Kuwait has remained very limited. Even as the numbers of U.S. troops stationed in Kuwait increased in the years following the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, no terror attacks have been carried out against these forces since then. Domestic terror groups in Kuwait have remained largely unorganized and isolated, representing a very small minority of the Kuwaiti population. This minority has been unable to carry out any serious terrorist attacks and has been largely prevented from connecting with the wider *jihadi* network and the broader al-Qaeda network or even with one another because of the tight surveillance by Kuwait security.¹⁰ The height of domestic terrorism in Kuwait since the 1980s occurred in late 2002 and early 2003 when there was a series of shootings against U.S. military targets. Since then, Kuwaiti security forces have uncovered many plans to attack government and Western targets and facilities, but none of these plans, despite their increasing level of maturity, have reached fruition.

The low levels of Kuwaiti participation in religious terrorism can be partially attributed to the well-developed and accessible education system in the emirate, which allows a large percentage of youth in Kuwait to receive an adequately modern education, relative to the rest of the region.

Accessible and Well-Developed: A study conducted by the World Bank from 2004 to 2008 ranked Kuwait first among the Arab countries in human resource development.¹¹ Kuwait has a well-developed and highly accessible education system, free and compulsory for children aged 6 through 14. The state even goes as far as to provide school meals, books, uniforms, transportation and medical attention in addition to covering enrollment costs. In 2008, Kuwait was ranked 33 out of 177 countries on the Human Development Education Index, in comparison to Saudi Arabia, ranked 61, and Yemen, ranked 153 out of 177.¹² Kuwaiti graduates face high employment opportunities upon graduation (from 1993-2004 unemployment in Kuwait ranged between 1-2%),¹³ which increase as their level of schooling increases.

Moderate Religious Content: The religious content of Kuwaiti education is not radical in nature, although it does espouse very conservative social values. Mainstream Islamists, a vast majority of which have denounced religious violence and terrorism, have exercised a considerable amount of influence over the education system, but their major concerns have focused on conservative societal values, such as gender segregation in school, rather than radical political campaigns to engage in violence. As a result, only a small percentage of students who major in religious studies and lack the skills for secular jobs are left unemployed, and of these youth, a majority of them channel their dissatisfaction with their situation into support for Islamists who espouse socially conservative values that demand gender segregation in particular.

Policy Recommendations for the Arabian Peninsula and Beyond

While the content, structure and accessibility of education systems in Saudi Arabia and Yemen are major contributors to Islamic radicalization within these states, the implications of these two cases are not limited to the Arabian Peninsula. In the 1990s, the Saudi government launched campaigns to establish Salafi schools in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bosnia, Nigeria, Indonesia and the Philippines.¹⁴ These schools were likely to have incorporated the same radical ideology as found in Saudi Arabia's domestic school system and deserve further investigation. Private Islamic schools in Pakistan, particularly the Saudi-funded institutes, have gained much attention over recent years for their role in militant recruitment. However, Pakistan's public schooling and higher education system has been accused of providing up to 40% of extremist militants, while only 15 to 20% of *madrassahs* are estimated to provide military training.¹⁵

This information on education's role in Islamic radicalization and its wider implications highlights a weakness in the United States' present foreign policy. Currently, the U.S.-led War on Terror is wasting valuable resources by investing heavily in military counterterrorism operations and military assistance because these military measures are responding to the symptoms of Islamic radicalization rather than its causes. So what can the United States do to undermine the causes of Islamic radicalism?

The most important policy implication for these findings on the role of state education systems in Islamic radicalization is education reform. Education reform should address the following general areas:

- 1) Curricula Content: Not only do radical religious teachings need to be revised or removed when necessary, but curricula also need to adjust to the needs of the job market and teach students subjects that are appropriate for future employment opportunities.
- 2) Accessibility: The public education system needs to be either extended into areas with limited accessibility, or supplemented alternatively by non-radical local schools.
- 3) Structure: The structure of state education systems also needs to be reformed so that students are not divided into tracks that increases one group's employability and fails to provide the other group with job-relevant skills. This reform applies to Saudi Arabia and its bifurcated system in particular.

Specifically, education reform should involve:

- Modernization and a Return to Islamic Orthodoxy: Effective education reform may require a return to orthodox Islam, which teaches tolerance and moderation, rather than a move to Westernization, secularism or liberalism. Coupled with the needed modernization of education systems to adjust to the technical needs of the job market, a return to religious orthodoxy is much more likely to be received with popular approval. After touring *madrassahs*, or private religious schools, in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan,

British diplomat Alexander Evans warned Western politicians against demonizing *madrassahs*, saying instead, “They should encourage modernization but avoid insisting on secularization.”¹⁶ Further evidence for this principle can be found in the Saudi rehabilitation program for religious extremists, which relies on religious reeducation classes with Muslim clerics who work to correct militants “errant” ideologies.

- Accountability: Both Saudi Arabia and Yemen have engaged in efforts to combat radical religious education since 2001. The United States pressured Saudi Arabia to reform its education system and remove radical religious teachings in the wake of the September 11 attacks of 2001, but a study in 2006 found that Saudi textbooks were still teaching hatred for nonbelievers (particularly Christians, Jews and atheists) as well as intolerance for Shi’as and other non-Wahhabi Sunnis.¹⁷ The Yemeni government has made efforts to incorporate private religious educational institutes into the public education system in order to control their curricula since 2001, but there were still nearly 1,000 unlicensed religious schools operating outside of government monitoring in December 2008.¹⁸ As a result, the need for government accountability on education reform is evident.

U.S. foreign policy should adopt the following measures to address the role that education systems play in radicalization:

- 1) Keep U.S. Intervention Backstage: The United States, as well as any other non-Muslim actors and Western countries in particular, need to maintain public distance from education reform, restricting its interference to covert exchanges with government officials whenever possible. The perception that the United States and the West is trying to pervert Islam to suit its own need already exists in extremist rhetoric, and any public interference by Western forces in this matter would only validate these claims. Osama bin Laden has released numerous statements warning of this very attempt by the West to reform Islamic education in the Middle East.¹⁹
- 2) Pressure Friendly Governments: The United States can use its leverage on friendly governments, like those of Saudi Arabia and Yemen, to reform their education systems and to initiate systematic monitoring of school curricula. The United States should also pressure friendly governments to target religious institutions known for producing terrorists, like the Iman University in Yemen, which has previously been shielded by Yemeni President Saleh.
- 3) Offer Incentives for Reform: The United States should offer diplomatic, economic or other incentives to states needing education reform in order to ensure accountability. For countries struggling with severe economic challenges, the prospect of financial assistance could be a strong motivating force for reforming education.
- 4) Invest in Educational Development: Countries like Yemen are in desperate need of economic assistance not only to reform education, but also develop and expand the existing education system. Rather than investing in military aspects of counterterrorism, which respond only to the symptoms of Islamic radicalism, the United States should

boost its investment in human development and so deal with the causes of Islamic radicalism. A study conducted in 2008 found that foreign aid reduces terrorism produced by recipient countries, and strongly recommended that Western democracies invest in foreign aid, particularly to support education, in order to combat terrorism more effectively.²⁰

- 5) Encourage NGO, UN, and Multinational Organizations' Involvement: In countries like Yemen, where the central government has limited capacity to bring about the needed comprehensive education system reforms, the burden of reform may fall on multinational or non-governmental organizations. The United States should also encourage these organizations to play a prominent role in monitoring the religious content of curricula in these countries, particularly where governments are unable or unwilling to do so. These organizations would be particularly effective if they were religiously-affiliated with the predominant religion in areas where they would be operating. Sunni Muslim organizations would be especially successful in Saudi Arabia and a mix of Sunni and Shi'a organizations would be more effective in Yemen. Finally, U.S. encouragement of NGO and multinational organization involvement in education reform in terrorist-producing countries serves to further distance U.S. involvement in reform, giving it more popular appeal.

¹ Asaf Maliach, *The Global Jihad - The Yemeni Connection* (International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, March 20, 2006), <http://www.ict.org.il/Articles/tabid/66/Articlsid/207/currentpage/10/Default.aspx>.

² Karen DeYoung, "Papers Paint New Portrait of Iraq's Foreign Insurgents," *The Washington Post*, January 21, 2008, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/01/20/AR2008012002609_pf.html.

³ Eleanor Abdella Doumato, "Manning the Barricades: Islam According to Saudi Arabia's School Texts," *The Middle East Journal* 57, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 231.

⁴ Michaela Prokop, "Saudi Arabia: The Politics of Education," *International Affairs* 79, no. 1 (2003): 77-89.

⁵ Thomas Hegghammer, "Terrorist Recruitment and Radicalization in Saudi Arabia.," *Middle East Policy* 13, no. 4 (December 2006): 39-60.

⁶ Clint Watts, *Beyond Iraq and Afghanistan: What Foreign Fighters Reveal about the Future of Terrorism* (PJ Sage, Inc., March 24, 2008), <http://www.pjsage.com/products.htm>.

⁷ The Human Development Index measures life expectancy, education, and standard of living.

⁸ Navtej Dhillon, *Addressing Yemen's Twin Deficits: Human and Natural Resources* (The Brookings Institution, September 22, 2008), http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2008/0922_yemen_dhillon.aspx.

⁹ An example is the Dar al-Mustafa school, based on Sunni orthodoxy rather than Salafism, established in the small town of Tarim in the Hadhramout region of Yemen in order to provide education to youth who lack access to any other form of education. Bernhard Zand, "Of Scholars and Zealots: Are Koran Schools Hotbeds of Terrorism?" *Spiegel Online*, sec. 2007 March 20, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,472583,00.html>.

¹⁰ Michael Knights, *Backing Kuwait's Stand against Terrorism*, Policy Watch (The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 11, 2005), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2253>.

¹¹ "Kuwait First Arab Country in Human Resource Development," *Kuwait News Agency (KUNA)*, January 20, 2009, <http://www.kuna.net.kw/NewsAgenciesPublicSite/ArticleDetails.aspx?id=1969889&Language=en>.

¹² *Kuwait, 2007/2008 Human Development Report* (United Nations Development Programme), http://hdrstats.undp.org/countries/data_sheets/cty_ds_KWT.html.

¹³ *Kuwait*, World Development Indicators (The World Bank Group, 2007), <http://ddp-ext.worldbank.org/ext/DDPQQ/report.do?method=showReport>.

¹⁴ Bernhard Zand, "Of Scholars and Zealots: Are Koran Schools Hotbeds of Terrorism?," *Spiegel Online*, sec. 2007 March 20, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,472583,00.html>.

¹⁵ C. Christine Fair, "Militant Recruitment in Pakistan: Implications for al-Qaeda and Other Organizations," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 27 (2004): 489-504.

¹⁶ Bernhard Zand, "Of Scholars and Zealots: Are Koran Schools Hotbeds of Terrorism?," *Spiegel Online*, sec. 2007 March 20, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,472583,00.html>.

¹⁷ Hassan Fattah, "Don't Be Friends with Christians or Jews, Saudi Texts Say," *The New York Times*, May 24, 2006, http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/24/world/24saudi.html?_r=1.

¹⁸ "Twenty Percent of Religious Schools in Yemen Unobserved: Report," *Saba Net*, December 9, 2008), <http://armiesofliberation.com/archives/2008/12/10/religious-schools-in-yemen/>.

¹⁹ Shaun Watermann, "Bin Laden Tape Blasts Reform, Saudi Royals," *United Press International*, December 18, 2004, <http://archives.navyseals.com/community/articles/article.cfm?id=5368>.

²⁰ Jean-Paul Azam and Veronique Thelen, "The Roles of Foreign Aid and Education in the War on Terror," *Public Choice* 135, no. 3-4 (June 2008): 375-397.