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Pensacola Shooting: Missing Piece in Saudis' Social Reforms

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SYNOPSIS

FBI investigations into the recent Pensacola Navy Air Station shooting by a Saudi Air Force lieutenant have presumed an act of terror. Ideas, more than institutional affiliation, matter and it is this aspect that is missing from Saudi Arabia's socio-religious reform.

COMMENTARY

ON 8 DECEMBER 2019, the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) announced that its joint terrorism task force and counterterrorism division were working on the presumption that the shooting was an act of terrorism. The FBI identified revenge as a possible motive given that the shooter, Saudi Air Force lieutenant Mohammed Alshamrani, had filed a formal complaint after being tagged with a derogatory nickname by one of his instructors.

However, given that the SITE Intelligence Group had flagged a Twitter account believed to be connected to Alshamrani that was critical of the US and its support of Israel, ideology could not be ruled out from the possible cocktail of motives that might have pushed Alshamrani to violence.

Ideological Response To the West

The common assumption is that terror acts by Saudis were committed by those who are influenced by ideologies belonging to Al Qaeda or Muslim Brotherhood, or even conservative religious movements such as Salafism. It should be noted that acts of violence can also be committed by Saudis who may not be directly linked to those organisations or religious movements but are still tuned into extant violent Islamist discourse.

The religious discourse in Saudi Arabia is heavily influenced by Salafi/Wahhabi thought, which has been characterised by scholars as apolitical or quietist. This is because the discourse, spread by state-sanctioned institutions such as mosque sermons and public universities, are pro-state, anti-political and condemn acts of terror. Quietist Salafis reject association with political movements and parties and view them as divisive, morally corrupting and leading to fanaticism and terrorism.

Quietist Salafis have not always held a hegemonic grip on Islamic discourse in Saudi Arabia. In response to the popular Pan-Arabist and nationalist movements, Gulf countries, particularly Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, welcomed Muslim Brotherhood members, viewing their Islamist ideas as a strong ideological opposition and a means to secure the lifespan of the Gulf monarchies.

Brotherhood members occupied influential middle-class professions as engineers, teachers and even university professors. Some even played advisory roles to the political elites.

Rise of The Sahwa: Islamic Awakening

From 1991 to 1992, in reaction to a state-sanctioned fatwa allowing US troop presence in Saudi Arabia during the First Gulf War, a group of scholars and university professors formed what became a growing movement opposing the Kingdom's foreign policy. The movement, which became known as the *Sahwa* (Islamic Awakening), was a cocktail of primarily Muslim Brotherhood members and affiliates as well as Salafis and Traditionalist scholars who were also against the fatwa and mixed their religious views with political activism.

By 1995, the Kingdom decimated the *Sahwa* Movement by arresting prominent leaders and placed the blame fully upon the Brotherhood. This episode not only marked the shift in the Kingdom's stance towards the Brotherhood, but also strengthened the political importance of its pro-state Salafi scholars and their prominence in religious discourse.

However, the period of Brotherhood presence in Saudi Arabia, from 1960s to 1990s, was significant enough to have left a deep mark on popular religious discourse. This manifested itself in latent religious exclusivism in the form of hatred towards the West, anti-Semitism and negative perceptions of non-Muslims.

This, in turn, has fuelled the popularity of the sort of politico-religious views that have driven Saudi nationals to join, support or fund terror organisations in the Middle East even if they were not linked to the Brotherhood. This was the form of Islamism that Alshamrani was alleged to have been influenced by.

The Missing Piece

As in the 1990s, Saudi policy to combat Islamist ideas today continues to use religion as a tool of political consolidation by solely promoting scholars who satisfy a single very important criterion – that they espouse the doctrine of *ta'at al amir* (absolute obedience to the ruler). This doctrine, while aiding the ruling family to consolidate power, is not the anti-thesis and counter-argument to religious exclusivism.

Even Saudi Arabia's liberal social reforms – such as allowing women to drive and travel independently or the opening up of the Kingdom to foreign entertainment and investment – does not help all Saudis to embrace Western and non-Muslim involvement and contribution to the Saudi economy and society.

The core impediment remains the engrained religious exclusivism that views foreign influence as a slippery slope to a moral crisis, and to some extent, a Western conspiracy to undermine Islam in the land of the two Holy Mosques. These reforms would continue to be vehemently opposed, not just by the ultra-conservative lot.

Need for Inclusive Discourse

According to reports, Alshamrani's radicalisation pathway allegedly began in late-2015, after he followed influential Salafi figures from the Gulf such as Kuwaiti-born Jordanian Eyad Qunaibi, Kuwaiti-born Saudi Abdul Aziz Al Turaifi, Kuwaiti Hakim Al Mutairi and Saudi Ibrahim Al Sakran. These Salafi ideologues mixed religious views with political activism, which the Saudi government disdains.

Al Turaifi and Al Sakran were both arrested for opposition views. These scholars, among others, gained a following by occupying the rhetorical space for religious exclusivism that attracted the curiosity of many Gulf Muslims. Hence, it would not be accurate to say that Alshamrani was misled by these scholars, because they were the only scholars who addressed Alshamrani's personal questions on how to view the West and non-Muslims.

While the Kingdom has arrested and clamped down on opposition voices among the religious elite, Saudi Arabia has been lacking in the promotion of an Islamic discourse that is convincingly inclusive, with a strong religious grounding. The Kingdom needs scholars who are not just loyal to the state, defending any domestic and foreign policy. These scholars also need to engender a society that does not view the West and non-Muslims as enemies who are continually plotting against them and worthy of bloodshed.

They have been missing from the religious scene in Saudi Arabia, with the unbending priority placed on domestic political consolidation. Such scholars are sorely needed to fill the vacuum left behind by so-called radical preachers after their arrests and death sentences. Without them, the exclusivist worldview permeating Saudi society will continue to create violent Saudi extremists, domestic and abroad.

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