

Rise of IS elicits soul searching in Arab Gulf, a source of funds and fighters

by [Elizabeth Dickinson](#)

October 13, 2014

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Across the Arab monarchies of the Gulf, the rise of the self-declared Islamic State has kicked off a wave of finger pointing and soul searching to try to divine how a group so brutal could emerge so close by.

Op-eds and dinner conversations revolve around potential culprits, from President Bashar al-Assad in Syria to President Barack Obama in Washington to local Kuwaiti sheikhs raising funds for the Sunni jihadist group.

A few times a week, Hamad Albloshi's phone buzzes with a message from relatives or friends that IS militants have attacked another Shi'ite shrine.

Albloshi, a professor of political science at Kuwait University, is part of Kuwait's Shi'ite community, which has watched the rapid IS advance in Iraq and Syria with alarm. The Sunni group views Shi'ites as heretics and has executed scores of them as it has captured territory in recent months.

Close-knit Shi'ite families here share news about IS on WhatsApp and Twitter out of sheer alarm. But it's also to make a point to their Sunni neighbors here in Kuwait, many whom rallied around the rebel groups fighting President Assad, whose repressive regime is supported by a minority Shi'ite sect, the Alawites, and is allied with Shi'ite Iran.

Throughout 2012 and 2013, during which Syrian opposition groups received mostly rhetorical, rather than material, support from the United States and Western nations, Sunni politicians and clerics in the Arab Gulf raised millions for the rebellion, turning Kuwait into a regional hub for private donations.

Now that the Syrian opposition is dominated by radicals, the Shi'ites don't miss a chance to rub it in, Albloshi said. "They want to say 'this is who you supported,' " he says. "The Shiites [point to IS and] say 'this is what we were talking about.' "

Understanding how the IS grew so quickly may also be one of the keys to stopping it, as its ideology is luring new recruits daily.

Thousands of Gulf citizens are believed to be fighting in Syria and Iraq, including with IS. Last spring, the Saudi Interior Ministry estimated 1,200 citizens had joined the conflict, but since June, the Central Intelligence Agency has said, the group may have tripled in size. Dozens of Kuwaitis, Emiratis, Qataris, and Bahrainis are also reported to have traveled to Iraq and Syria.

“The question is . . . what is IS and where it has emerged from?” a letter to Saudi paper *Arab News* recently asked, summing up the mood. “It needs serious investigation and I hope the Muslim leadership will give priority to such a probe, because it concerns everybody.”

U.S. is widely blamed

In the Gulf, the U.S. may be the most widely blamed culprit for the rise of extremists in Syria and Iraq—an impression that its airstrikes against IS haven’t been able to shatter.

The argument goes one of two ways: Washington gave either too little, or too much, support to the Syrian rebels.

Many Sunnis say Washington’s reluctance to arm and support moderate rebels allowed other groups to thrive in opposition to the astounding brutality of the Assad regime.

“Since more than a year, the Gulf states, France, and Britain warned [Washington] about the risk of leaving Syria for terrorist organizations,” argued Abdulrahman al Rashed, editor of the influential Saudi daily *Asharq AlAwsat*, in an October 6 editorial. “The passive American attitude weakened the opposition Syrian Free Army, the moderates, and encouraged terrorist groups to enter the arena.”

Many Gulf-based Shi’ites see the opposite effect. The little assistance Washington sent was too much, they say, empowering a rebellion that was destined to move to religious extremes.

Introspection in Kuwait

But more uncomfortable and introspective conversations are also taking place about how local dynamics promote extremism.

Kuwait is an epicenter of such introspection because so many people here were directly involved in supporting the Syrian opposition.

Dozens of clerics and opposition politicians have held fundraisers and gatherings to raise money for the rebels, including al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra. At the height of their efforts in 2012, everyone from housewives to schoolchildren was pitching in.

“There isn’t a bomb that explodes anywhere without some of its material financed by Kuwait,” argued Nabeel al-Fadhel, a liberal member of parliament whose campaign slogan was “Loyalty to Kuwait, Animosity to *Ikhwan*,” a term for the Muslim Brotherhood. “These poor, simple people think they are getting closer to God by giving this money, but it is going to places never dreamt up.”

He wants to see the education system cleansed of Islamic ideology and would like any Kuwaitis who have gone off to fight for extremist groups stripped of their citizenship.

Across town from his law office, former parliamentarian Mohammed al-Dallal sees a different effect. As a member of the Muslim Brotherhood’s political wing, the Islamic Constitutional Movement, he worries that the fall of moderate Islamists from power in Cairo and their repression elsewhere sent the message that violence was the only way to affect change.

“What conservative people are saying in their [homes] and mosques is that the West or Arab regimes don’t respect you unless you have a weapon,” he says. “The role of moderates is going down and the role the weapons and radicals is increasing.”

If the source of ISIS, as the Islamic State is also known, is disputed, its brutality is almost universally acknowledged. All the countries of the Gulf have signed onto the anti-ISIS coalition, and Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates have participated in bombing rounds.

“Everyone supports the bombing of ISIS, even if the devil himself is willing to fly planes and bomb these people,” said Sulaiman al-Jassem, an opposition activist here in Kuwait.

Cracking down on support

Governments are turning up their efforts internally. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have both detained dozens of individuals allegedly planning to travel to Iraq and Syria and recruit others to join them. Fifteen men are now on trial in Abu Dhabi, for example, accused of attempting to join Jabhat al-Nusra.

The UAE is also pushing for greater regional action against funding and media propaganda.

“Now is the time for other governments in the region to get serious about illicit financing,” the UAE ambassador to Washington, Yousef al-Otaiba, told an audience at Harvard University on October 3. “Funding is the extremists’ oxygen, and we need to cut it off.”

Albloshi, the Kuwaiti Shi’ite, says such questions are urgent.

“The issue is that there are people here who can be influenced by them. We have a history with extremism in Kuwait,” he said.

“Syria and Iraq have opened the door for some to go and get trained, and I am afraid they might come back.”