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ARTICLE



## The international politics of tolerance in the Persian Gulf

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### ABSTRACT

Since the early 2000s, wide-ranging initiatives geared towards the promotion of tolerance, moderation and interfaith dialogue have proliferated throughout the Persian Gulf, culminating most recently in the establishment of the world's first Ministry of Tolerance in the UAE. For more than a decade, Qatar has hosted annual interfaith conferences on themes such as 'Steps Towards Tolerance'. Oman and Bahrain have been prominent advocates, pursuing their respective tolerance agendas through academic publications, travelling delegations, exhibitions and international conferences. Even Saudi Arabia, notorious for its intolerance at home, has been a prominent advocate on the world stage. Talk of tolerance, it seems, is everywhere, but what is behind this regional trend? This article situates the emergent political discourse of tolerance in the broader post-9/11 geopolitical context, wherein the ideal of tolerance has been embraced by both the West and the Muslim world as an antidote to the global problem of terrorism. I suggest that Gulf tolerance initiatives are best understood in terms of a broader politics of representation that coheres around the promotion of 'moderate Islam', and that in the context of what has been described as the Western 'civilisational discourse' of tolerance, Muslim-majority countries are responding with a civilisational discourse of their own.

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## Introduction

In January 2017, I joined 30 or so Christian clergy from around the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) on a state-sponsored visit to Sir Bani Yas Island.<sup>1</sup> An otherwise unremarkable island off the coast of Abu Dhabi, Sir Bani Yas is home to the only known pre-Islamic Christian ruins in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The visit was arranged by the newly formed Ministry of Tolerance, and brought together the region's most senior Christian leaders, including bishops and archbishops from the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican Church and the Coptic Orthodox Church, to name but a few. Hosted by the then Minister of State for Tolerance, Sheikha Lubna Khalid Al Qasimi, the day's programme centred on a tour of the ruins, followed by a presentation on the recently launched National Programme of Tolerance.

After being flown out to Sir Bani Yas by chartered jet from the VIP airport terminal in Abu Dhabi, we were transported by bus along with several journalists and photographers to the Christian ruins. Here, we were met by a British archaeologist who talked us through various

features of the site. What was once a Christian monastic complex included the remains of a church surrounded by several small dwellings. Stucco cross and pottery fragments discovered during the excavations were also brought along especially for the occasion. Like similar Christian sites discovered in the region – in Jubail (Saudi Arabia) and the islands of Kharg (Iran), al-Qusur and 'Akkaz (Kuwait) – the site at Sir Bani Yas was a Nestorian settlement (of the Church of the East). At the time, according to textual sources, the area was part of a region known as Bet Qatraye, where there had been a Christian presence since as early as the fourth century (Carter 2008, 71). Despite the rapid spread of Islam in the seventh century, Christianity seems to have persisted in the area into the Islamic era (*ibid.*). Originally dated to the sixth and seventh centuries (Elders 2001; King 1997), the settlement at Sir Bani Yas has more recently been dated somewhere between the second half of the seventh century to the mid-eighth century (Carter 2008). This is not insignificant, as the timeline suggests a history of peaceful coexistence between Muslims and Christians; a history that serves to explain the purpose behind the ecumenical gathering I had found myself a part of.

Over the course of the day, it was emphasised several times that the settlement at Sir Bani Yas was most probably abandoned as the Christian presence in the region diminished. More importantly, we were told, it was unlikely that it was overrun by the spread of Islam. This aspect of the site's story has been prominent in media coverage of Sir Bani Yas. Interviewed at the time of the public opening, its archaeological director Joseph Elders noted, 'that the monastery continued for at least a century after the arrival of Islam shows [the] tolerance of the Muslims quite close to their heartland [...] We know that there are stories of everyone living in harmony' (Thomas 2010). Although not the only such Christian archaeological site in the Persian Gulf, the settlement at Sir Bani Yas stands out for both historical and political reasons. With respect to the former, Sir Bani Yas was a significant discovery in terms of the history of Christianity in the region; a history that scholars often must rely on textual sources to reconstruct. With respect to the latter, the ruins at Sir Bani Yas represent a powerful symbol in the state's broader tolerance agenda. The UAE, however, is not alone in its enthusiasm for tolerance.

Since the early 2000s, a wide range of initiatives geared towards the promotion of tolerance, moderation and interfaith dialogue have proliferated throughout the Persian Gulf. Novelty aside, the UAE's Ministry of Tolerance is the culmination rather than the catalyst of this trend. For more than a decade, Qatar has hosted annual interfaith conferences on themes such as 'Steps Towards Tolerance'. Oman and Bahrain have been prominent advocates, pursuing their respective tolerance agendas through academic publications, travelling delegations, exhibitions and international conferences. Kuwait hosts an International Centre for Moderation, as indeed do several other Gulf states. Even Saudi Arabia, notorious for its intolerance at home, funds the Vienna-based King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID), amongst several other high-profile initiatives. Talk of tolerance, it seems, is everywhere, but what is behind the emergent political discourse of tolerance in the Gulf? Why are Gulf states investing in its promotion? How is liberalism's most cherished virtue being mobilised and politicised in the region, and to what ends?

While there is a vast body of literature on the politics of tolerance in the liberal West, little attention has been paid to how political discourses of tolerance have been

appropriated and mobilised in non-liberal contexts, and how these discourses figure into international relations. This article looks at the international politics of religious tolerance in the Gulf. I focus on state-funded initiatives geared towards the promotion of tolerance in particular, but I also look at the closely related proliferation of centres for moderation, counterterrorism and interfaith dialogue. While the ideal of tolerance has long since underpinned western liberal claims to moral superiority (Brown 2008, 2006), I describe in this article how Muslim states have also come to privilege tolerance as an index by which they might distinguish themselves from the extremists who claim to act in the name of Islam. I suggest that the talk of tolerance that has become so salient in the Gulf in recent years is not, as Gulf states might like to present it, a benevolent response to the challenge of religious diversity at home, but is conceived rather in terms of a complex politics of representation that coheres around discourses of what is referred to as 'moderate Islam' on the world stage. While importantly recognising that tolerance is not an inherently, nor an exclusively western ideal, I argue that the prominence of the political discourse of tolerance in the region today represents a concerted effort on the part of Gulf states to appease the international community, and the US in particular.

This article is based on fieldwork carried out between 2016 and 2018, during which I was based in Doha. As part of a broader project that looked comparatively at interfaith initiatives in Delhi, Doha and London, I also travelled to Bahrain, Oman and the UAE (Dubai and Abu Dhabi), to get a sense of the challenge of managing religious diversity in the Gulf. I visited mosques, churches, Hindu temples and other non-Muslim places of worship, and conducted over 50 semi-structured interviews with a wide variety of religious leaders and interfaith practitioners in the region. I also worked closely with the Doha International Centre for Interfaith Dialogue, and met with state officials at both the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Qatar and the Ministry of Tolerance in the UAE so as to better understand the specific national priorities behind each Gulf state's tolerance agenda. In what follows, I elaborate on the case of the UAE and the recently established Ministry of Tolerance, which although somewhat unique, embody many of the characteristics of recent Gulf tolerance initiatives. I then turn to the broader post-9/11 geopolitical climate between the West and the Muslim world,<sup>2</sup> within which tolerance has come to occupy a privileged place. In the second half of the article, I assess the wider tolerance trend in the Gulf, and suggest that in the context of what Wendy Brown has described as the Western 'civilisational discourse' of tolerance, Muslim-majority countries are responding with a civilisational discourse of their own.

## **A ministry of tolerance**

After offering a prayer for the Christians who once inhabited the Sir Bani Yas settlement, and for the UAE government who had played a part in its discovery and conservation, we gathered for a presentation on the UAE's National Programme of Tolerance, given by Sheikha Lubna. As is common at interfaith events in the region, Sheikha Lubna began by referring to the global problem of terrorism, which she ascribed to the rise of intolerance around the world. What was needed to combat terrorism, she insisted, was tolerance. Not simply tolerance, however, but the institutionalisation of tolerance, the creation of what she called a 'value-driven Ministry'. Sheikha Lubna spoke at length about the importance of interfaith and intercultural dialogue, and reminded those gathered that the UAE

subscribes to what was described as 'moderate Islam'. It was emphasised that the Ministry's priority was the UAE itself, although Sheikha Lubna was also keen to underline her hope that their tolerance programme could be adopted elsewhere. The UAE was presented throughout as a pioneer and a model of tolerance for the world to emulate.

The Ministry of Tolerance was formed in 2016, along with other new ministries, such as the Ministry of Happiness. (Indeed, the two are interrelated, as the back of the programme booklet made clear: 'Tolerance is happiness'.) Inside the booklet, some introductory remarks noted that, 'Tolerance is one of the core values of the UAE society which derives from the "middleness" [*wasatiyyah*] of Islam, from the noble Arabian traditions and heritage and also from the wisdom and legacy of the late founding father, Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan'. The themes of the UAE's heritage, the legacy of Sheikh Zayed and the foundational role of Islam were encapsulated in what the Ministry referred to as 'pillars of tolerance'. Seven in total, the pillars were listed as follows: Islam, the UAE Constitution, Zayed's legacy: UAE Ethics, International Conventions, Archaeology and History, Human Nature and Common Values. Inside the booklet, and in keeping with the emphasis on international conventions, was printed an abbreviated definition of tolerance from UNESCO's 1995 'Declaration of Principles on Tolerance': 'Tolerance is respect, acceptance and appreciation of the endless richness of our world's cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human [...] Tolerance is harmony in difference. It is not only a moral duty, it is also a political and legal obligation [...] Tolerance is the virtue that makes peace possible and contributes to the replacement of the culture of war by a culture of peace'.<sup>3</sup>

Sheikha Lubna elsewhere described the importance of tolerance in the UAE (Khalid Al Qasimi 2017, 6–7):

The UAE is a young and a multicultural society. It is home to over 200 nationalities, exceeding in comparison, even the United Nations, which currently has 193 countries as its members. The pluralism prevalent in a country where foreigners are over 85% of the population requires strong cohesion in its society and is dependent on tolerance [...] The UAE government promotes harmony and peace, and a cosmopolitan diverse society [...] The UAE reaches beyond her national borders to support the region and the world. Through this value of tolerance we are able to promote social cohesion, inclusion and moderation. This quality is not new to the region. The greatest dynasties of the Arab Culture, whether you look at Baghdad, Damascus or Cordoba, Andalusia, were all open to other civilisations, cultures [...]

Here, Sheikha Lubna presents an almost utopian picture of a modern multicultural state that prizes inclusion, moderation, diversity, and above all, tolerance. This idea that the UAE represents an ideal model of coexistence was emphasised on several occasions over the course of the state visit to Sir Bani Yas and in subsequent interviews I conducted with those involved in the Ministry for Tolerance. Not only is the UAE a model of coexistence, but it 'reaches beyond its borders' to spread the values it has cultivated. This proselytising aspect of the tolerance agenda is taken seriously. In 2016, Sheikha Lubna led a delegation that included Anglican priest and long-time UAE resident, Reverend Andy Thompson, to European capitals such as Copenhagen and Rome, where they were granted a private audience with Pope Francis. Reverend Thompson had addressed British members of Parliament at Westminster the previous year, where he spoke at length about the UAE's approach to tolerance.

It is also worth noting here that Sheikha Lubna aligns the UAE with what she describes as ‘the greatest dynasties of the Arab Culture’, listing Baghdad, Damascus and Cordoba in particular. Indeed, Cordoba and the broader medieval *Convivencia* in the Iberian Peninsula are particularly popular examples in Muslim interfaith circles, and are often enlisted as evidence of the inherent tolerance of what is referred to as ‘Islamic civilisation’. These themes are pervasive not only in the UAE’s national agenda, but as I will outline below, across wider Gulf efforts to promote tolerance.

The state visit to Sir Bani Yas was a somewhat unique but not isolated gesture. In fact, the creation of the Ministry of Tolerance is one of the latest in a series of initiatives the UAE has undertaken in recent years to counter extremism and promote the values of tolerance and moderation. In 2012, a centre for countering radicalisation, *Hedayah* (‘guidance’), was founded. Based in Abu Dhabi, *Hedayah* is conceived as an international hub, and frequently partners with foreign governments and the United Nations. In 2015, the UAE co-founded an online engagement initiative with the US, the *Sawab Centre* (*sawab* meaning ‘the right and spiritual path’). Also, a counterterrorism initiative, the centre ‘seeks to give a voice to the millions of Muslims and others around the world who stand united against terrorism and the religious misinterpretations that are being propagated by them’ (UAE Government 2017). An anti-discrimination law was passed in 2015 ‘to provide a solid legislative ground for the environment of tolerance, co-existence and acceptance’ (ibid.). Even more recently, in June 2017 an International Institute for Tolerance was founded.

While arguably the most visible, the establishment of a Ministry of Tolerance in 2016 is in fact just the latest in a long line of tolerance initiatives to emerge from both the UAE and the wider region. The Gulf is today home to several international counterterrorism centres and also boasts a range of high-profile institutions that focus on the promotion of tolerance, moderation and interfaith dialogue. Gulf states have also been busy spreading the word, and have been sending interfaith delegations to capital cities around the world, not only to champion the ideal of tolerance, but to promote themselves as ideal models of coexistence. The promotion of tolerance often goes hand in hand with the presentation of what is referred to as ‘true’ or ‘moderate’ Islam, and is typically juxtaposed with, and conceived as an antidote to, the global problem of terrorism. Gulf tolerance initiatives then cannot be disentangled from a broader politics of representation that speaks to the post-9/11 geopolitical climate between the West and the Muslim world. Before returning to the wider tolerance trend in the Gulf in the second half of this article, I firstly want to situate the ideal of tolerance in this broader geopolitical context.

### **‘Good Muslims’, ‘bad Muslims’ and the politics of representation**

When President Donald Trump gave a speech at the Arab Islamic American Summit in Riyadh in May 2017, the theme of terrorism was, maybe unsurprisingly, at the top of his agenda. Trump paid particular attention to the role of Muslim nations in combatting terrorism: militarily, financially and ideologically. In his words, ‘Muslim nations must be willing to take on the burden, if we are going to defeat terrorism and send its wicked ideology into oblivion’ (Trump 2017). Trump painted a picture of a global problem while at the same time indicating the need for a set of local solutions. ‘Terrorism has spread

across the world', he noted, 'but the path to peace begins right here, on this ancient soil, in this sacred land'. The region's leaders were enjoined to step up their efforts in the fight against extremism, and the counterterrorism initiatives of Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, amongst others, were praised. Trump announced the establishment of the Terrorist Financing Targeting Center, a joint US–Saudi initiative to combat terrorist financing in the region.

In addition to such practical steps, Trump also hinted throughout his speech at a moral antidote to the problem of terrorism; tolerance. Echoing Barack Obama's 2009 landmark address in Cairo, Trump asserted that, 'We must practice tolerance and respect for each other once again, and make this region a place where every man and woman, no matter their faith or ethnicity, can enjoy a life of dignity and hope.' Like his predecessor, who lauded the inherent tolerance of the Islamic faith, Trump's was not so much a call for discovery, but rather a plea for recovery; the recovery of a rich tradition of religious pluralism wherein, he noted, 'for many centuries the Middle East has been home to Christians, Muslims and Jews living side-by-side'.

Maybe unbeknownst to Trump, in offering tolerance as a solution to the problem of terrorism, he was perpetuating a pervasive trope that has characterised post-9/11 relations between the US and the Muslim world. Within this trope, there are those Muslims who espouse terror and those who embrace tolerance. Tolerance is not just a defining moral virtue in this equation, but serves to distinguish between so-called 'moderate' Muslims and 'radical' Muslims; those the West can work with and those it must fight against. This 'good Muslim-bad Muslim' trope has featured prominently in political responses to the global problem of terrorism (Maira 2009; Mamdani 2004). Addressing Congress in the days following the 9/11 attacks, President Bush spoke of the 'war on terror': 'This is not [...] just America's fight [...] This is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom' (Bush 2001a) In December of that same year, giving his Eid al-Fitr message, Bush again equated terrorism with intolerance, framing both in terms of a broader civilisational struggle: 'Through our combined efforts, we can end terrorism and rid our civilisation of the damaging effects of hatred and intolerance, ultimately achieving a brighter future for all' (Bush 2001b)

While tolerance has become deeply embedded in international political discourses around Islam and Muslims in recent years (Emon 2012; Friedmann 2003), the ideal itself did not emerge solely in response to so-called 'radical Islam' and the events of 9/11. Religion in general, and conceptions of religious freedom and tolerance in particular, have long since held a prominent place in US foreign policy (Inboden 2008). As far back as the 1950s, the US established relations with Buddhist religious leaders throughout South East Asia in an effort to halt the spread of communism in the region (Hurd 2015, 66). During the Cold War, the US promoted what it referred to as 'global spiritual health', again using the category of religion to oppose the communist USSR (ibid.). While the Department of State has included a section on religious rights in its human rights reports since the early 1970s, it was not until after the Cold War ended that values such as religious freedom and tolerance were officially integrated into US foreign policy. In 1998, the US formalised its mandate to promote religious freedom by passing the US International Religious Freedom Act. Under the Bush administration, what is broadly labelled 'faith-based diplomacy' was championed as part of wider efforts to combat terrorism (Johnston 2003; Mandaville and Silvestri 2015). Aside from its various military

campaigns in the Middle East, the ‘war on terror’ also included the identification and empowerment of ‘moderate Muslim networks’. In a report entitled ‘Building Moderate Muslim Networks’ (Rabasa 2007), for example, tolerance appears alongside moderation, pluralism, compassion, equity and human rights, and is juxtaposed with intolerance, fanaticism, extremism, hatred and bloodshed. This commitment to engaging so-called ‘moderate Muslims’ also underpinned the Obama administration’s approach to tackling terrorism. Immediately following Obama’s landmark Cairo speech, a role was created for a Special Representative to Muslim Communities and in 2013, then Secretary of State, John Kerry announced the establishment of the Office of Religion and Global Affairs at the State Department (see Toft, Philpott, and Shah 2011).

Wendy Brown has highlighted the centrality of tolerance in what she calls ‘civilisational discourse’, within which the ideal of tolerance appears not only as the foundation of, but is often simply conflated with, (western) civilisation (Brown 2008, 2006). In the West, Brown argues, ‘a liberal discourse of tolerance distinguishes “free” societies from “fundamentalist” ones, the “civilised” from the “barbaric”’ (Brown 2008, 407). She continues, ‘That which is inside civilisation is tolerable *and* tolerant; that which is outside is neither’ (Brown 2008, 412, original emphasis). This has important implications for international relations, and in particular for the liberal West’s relationship with the non-liberal other, wherein civilisational discourses of tolerance represent not only a claim to moral authority, but also a claim to power. As Brown argues, ‘the discourse of tolerance recentres the West as the standard for civilisation [...] tolerance operates simultaneously as a token of Western supremacy and a legitimating cloak for Western domination’ (Brown 2008, 412). Of course, while the West, and the US in particular, has been investing heavily in promoting the liberal values of religious freedom, tolerance and moderation on the world stage, Muslim actors have not just been passively standing by, but have responded with their own ‘civilisational discourse’.

For the most part, the Muslim world has enthusiastically embraced western attempts to promote ‘moderate Islam’. Discourses of tolerance, moderation and coexistence have underpinned several Muslim-led initiatives, both before and after 9/11. The UN’s Dialogue among Civilisations, backed by former Iranian president Mohammad Khatami in the late 1990s is one example. A direct riposte to Samuel Huntington’s ‘clash of civilisations’ thesis (Huntington 1996), the Dialogue among Civilisations later evolved into the United Nations Alliance of Civilisations (founded in 2005), which was jointly spearheaded by Turkey and Spain (Haynes 2016). In this same year, working closely with the UN, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), embarked on a decade-long programme of action that sought to ‘protect and defend the true image of Islam, to combat defamation of Islam and encourage dialogue among civilisations and religions’ (Organisation of Islamic Cooperation 2018). In an attempt to tackle the problems of both terrorism and Islamophobia, the OIC’s Makkah Declaration (in 2005) underlined that ‘Islamic civilisation is an integral part of human civilisation, based on the ideals of dialogue, moderation, justice, righteousness, and tolerance as noble human values that counteract bigotry, isolationism, tyranny, and exclusion. It is therefore of paramount importance to celebrate and consecrate these magnanimous values in our Muslim discourse inside and outside our societies’.<sup>4</sup> This declaration neatly captures the cooperative but at the same time defiant call-to-action that underpins the political discourse of tolerance in the Muslim world. As we will see, the widely-held assertion that ‘Islamic



civilisation' is a reservoir of 'noble human values' such as moderation, justice and tolerance represents a concerted counter-narrative to the West's secular civilisational discourse.

Aside from these high-profile transnational initiatives, there are dozens of national organisations and initiatives across the Muslim world whose agendas cohere around the promotion of tolerance and moderation (Kamali 2015). Of course, while western attempts to promote the liberal value of tolerance have traditionally been conceived in terms of the secular tradition in which they are embedded, Muslim efforts are explicitly framed in terms of what is presented as 'Islamic civilisation'. The tolerance initiatives that have emerged from the Muslim world could be broadly characterised as promoting a positive image of Islam, on one hand, and dispelling common misconceptions about Islam, on the other. In this respect, Jordan has long been a pioneer. Jordan is home to several centres such as The Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies (founded in 1994) and The Jordanian Interfaith Coexistence Research Center (established in 2003). It also hosts the Global Forum for Moderation (founded in 2004), the Assembly for Moderate Islamic Thought and Culture (2004) and the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, with which King Abdullah II worked to produce the widely acclaimed Amman Message.

The Amman Message (in 2004) was an attempt to bring together a couple of hundred of the most senior *ulama* (Islamic scholars) to agree on 'what Islam is and what it is not, and what actions represent it and what actions do not'.<sup>5</sup> In other words, its goal was to reaffirm Islamic unity and values, such as tolerance and moderation, while delegitimising, in both political and theological terms, terrorists who claim to be representing Islam. The widely-endorsed Amman Message inspired a further initiative in 2007, also spearheaded by Jordan, 'A Common Word Between Us and You' (Christiansen 2008; Haddad and Smith 2009). This was an open letter to Christian leaders around the world, signed by 138 prominent Islamic scholars and represents the culmination of decades of interfaith engagement by the Jordanian royal family. Jordan's apparent success lies in its ability to cast itself in the role not only of a broker of consensus amongst members of the *ummah* (the worldwide Muslim community), but also as mediator in the global conversation between the West and 'moderate Islam'. In 2009, resolutions were passed in both the US House of Representatives and the Senate, citing the Amman Message and praising Jordan as an 'instrumental partner in the fight against Al-Qaeda', and King Abdullah II as a leading voice in 'trying to reaffirm the true path of Islam' (Kayaoglu 2015, 254).

Although efforts to promote tolerance and moderate Islam in the Middle East have been widely praised, they have also received their fair share of criticism. Writing about the Amman Message, for example, Michaëlle Browers has argued that 'While the main message of the document is one of unity and moderation, further analysis reveals that the Message encompasses many messages, directed toward domestic, regional and international audiences, and usually very much tied up with state interests and policies' (Browers 2011, 948). Browers continues, '[...] the values it espouses (moderation, tolerance), and rejects (extremism, intolerance) are artefacts of strategic political processes constructed in the context of US hegemony and discourses emanating from the Bush administration' (Browers 2011, 954). Browers concludes that the Amman message 'works better as a justification of the war on terror and an identification of which side the "good guys" are on than as a propagator of moderate Islamic values' (Browers 2011, 955).

Stacey Gutkowski (2016) has made a similar argument, labelling Jordan's efforts to promote moderate Islam as a 'nation-branding' strategy.

Criticism has not been restricted to Jordan. In a *Washington Post* article about what is described as 'the murky politics surrounding regimes' strategic use of 'moderate' Islam', Anelle Sheline (2017) argues that the political discourse of moderate Islam throughout the Muslim world is defined by, and conceived in terms of, US interests. For many governments involved in the promotion of moderate Islam, Sheline argues, focusing on moderation is a regime survival tactic designed to 'enhance international standing and ensure foreign support'. Turan Kayaoglu reaches the same conclusion; 'Islamic actors initiate interfaith dialogue to signal their moderate stance to powerful others who are concerned with Islamic radicalisation and violence' (Kayaoglu 2015, 236).

It is not just onlookers that are critical of state-led efforts to promote tolerance and moderation in the Muslim world. In response to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's recent announcement that he would return Saudi Arabia to moderate Islam (more on which below), Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan rejected the concept outright as a western political tool; 'The term "moderate Islam" is being lathered up again. The patent of moderate Islam belongs to the West. There is no moderate or immoderate Islam; Islam is one. The aim of using such terms is to weaken Islam' (Bulut 2017). Pointing to the apparent hypocrisy of Saudi Arabia's championing of moderation, he continued, 'They say we will return to moderate Islam, but they still don't give women the right to drive. Is there such a thing in Islam?' Erdoğan's claim that the narrative of 'moderate Islam' is a western political tool designed to undermine Muslim unity might seem far-fetched, but it is not an uncommon sentiment. Furthermore, Erdoğan's critique of the term itself speaks to important aspects of the political discourse surrounding the promotion of tolerance on the world stage; namely, that it is for the benefit of a western audience, and that it deliberately pays little attention to meaningful reform at home.

### **The institutionalisation of tolerance in the gulf**

With this broader international political discourse of tolerance in mind, I now turn back to assess the recent tolerance initiatives in Qatar, Oman, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. As this section explores, Gulf tolerance initiatives follow a familiar pattern that, as in the UAE and elsewhere, typically includes international conferences, travelling delegations and high-profile centres geared towards the promotion of tolerance, moderation, interfaith dialogue and counterterrorism.<sup>6</sup> For the most part, these initiatives focus on relations between the Abrahamic faiths, and Christian-Muslim relations in particular. As a consequence, they often involve collaboration with western (and Christian) actors. While these initiatives appear ostensibly to be promoting tolerance at home, however, as will become clear, Gulf states are less worried about the challenge of managing religious diversity within their own borders, and more concerned with both promoting themselves and defending Islam on the world stage.

In November 2002, Qatar became one of only a handful of Middle Eastern countries to establish diplomatic relations with the Holy See. A few months later, in April 2003, it hosted the 'Building Bridges' interfaith seminar, gathering Muslim and Christian scholars from around the world. Qatar soon began hosting larger scale Muslim-Christian (and later Muslim-Christian-Jewish) dialogue events in 2004, which would lead to the establishment

of the Doha International Centre for Interfaith Dialogue (DICID) in 2007 (Fahy [Forthcoming](#)). To date, DICID has hosted 13 high-profile international interfaith gatherings on themes such as tolerance and religious freedom. Around the same time Qatar embarked on its interfaith efforts, it also took steps towards accommodating non-Muslim minorities within its borders, enshrining religious freedom in the constitution (in 2003) and leasing land for the construction of several Christian churches (Fahy 2018). Qatar has also been a key partner in the high-profile US–Islamic World Forum. Not to be outdone, however, Qatar has faced some competition from its Gulf neighbours.

In 2005, Oman entered into a joint venture with The Institute for American Values, as part of a wider project entitled the ‘Islam West Engagement Project’. The exhibition comprised photographs of daily life in Oman, and was supported by the Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs. Since 2009, the Ministry has also been behind international conferences on the themes of Ibadism and religious tolerance in the UK, Russia, Italy, Greece and most recently, Japan. Between 2003 and 2014, the Ministry published a quarterly journal, *Tafahom* (‘Understanding’) that focused on promoting the values of tolerance and diversity. Between 2010 and 2014, Oman funded a travelling exhibition, entitled ‘Religious Tolerance: Islam in the Sultanate of Oman’. The exhibition included a short documentary and reached 17 countries, including UK, the US and Germany. ‘Since time immemorial’, a voiceover explained, ‘followers of the Islamic faith have lived peacefully alongside one another in Oman’. The documentary also addressed the ‘widespread negative image of Islam in the Western world’, and in particular the theme of women’s rights, noting that the veil is often the source of much unease in the West.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, these are common themes that frequently arise in open mosque tours throughout the Gulf.

Bahrain’s tolerance initiatives are almost identical to those of Oman. Since 2014, Bahrain has been sending what it refers to as a ‘religious freedom delegation’ to major cities around the world. Led by expatriates and comprising religious leaders from traditions as diverse as Islam, Christianity and Hinduism, the ‘This is Bahrain’ campaign was conceived to ‘share with the world the Bahraini Model of centuries old Religious Freedom and Peaceful Co-existence where we all live together in harmony in the spirit of mutual respect and love’. On its website, expatriate, and President, Betsy Bennett Mathieson (2017) notes:

We like to say that in the Kingdom of Bahrain, from the day you arrive, you are no longer a stranger as Bahrainis do not simply “tolerate” other Faiths, they warmly embrace them as part of our multicultural, multi- faith family where peace and love amongst all peoples of all faiths, reigns supreme in the Kingdom of Bahrain, just as it has since time immemorial.

The goal of the delegation is not simply to highlight Bahrain’s tolerant society, but also to promote the Bahraini model around the world: ‘We see it as our duty to share the humble Bahraini way of life with the world, letting our message of peace and love resonate in our quest to help illuminate the path for peace around the world’. Delegates representing ‘This is Bahrain’ have taken their travelling exhibition to major cities around the world in recent years, including London, Washington DC, New York, Paris and Rome. Of course, the choice of these particular cities is significant; for religious reasons, Rome, as the home of the Vatican, and for diplomatic reasons, Brussels and Washington DC as major centres of western power. Several initiatives have emerged from the ‘This is

Bahrain' campaign, including plans for the establishment of 'The King Hamad Global Centre for Peaceful Coexistence'. Conceived as a regional, and indeed, an international, centre for interfaith dialogue, the centre will also include a museum that showcases Bahrain's 'rich history of religious freedom and peaceful coexistence, going back many hundreds of years' (Bahrain News Agency 2018).

In recent years, tolerance has also found an unlikely champion in Saudi Arabia. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman put the theme of moderation front and centre in 2017, when he vowed to return Saudi Arabia to what he described as 'moderate Islam'. Try as he may to take credit for such a turn, however, both tolerance and moderation have long been major themes in the Kingdom. Saudi Arabia has taken steps in recent years to reorient both itself, and its Wahhabi *ulama* towards what might be described as a more moderate puritanism. Like its Gulf neighbours, Saudi Arabia has been busy establishing a range of centres. In addition to the 'Terrorist Financing Targeting Center', unveiled during President Trump's visit to Riyadh in 2017, both Trump and King Salman attended the opening of the Riyadh-based 'Global Center for Combating Extremist Ideology'. These are only the latest, however, in a long line of centres established since 9/11 that are geared towards the promotion of tolerance, moderation and interfaith dialogue. Recognising the need to dialogue with the religious 'other' (Shia within their borders and predominantly Christians without), the King 'Abd al-'Aziz Centre for National Dialogue (KACND) was established in 2003 (Thompson 2014). One of its aims, as listed on the website, is 'contributing toward the presentation of the true image of Islam inside and outside the country based on moderation through constructive dialogue' (Thompson 2014, 60). Saudi Arabia has also taken its message of moderation to the world stage. In 2012, the Saudi-funded intergovernmental organisation the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID) was founded. A collaboration between the governments of Austria, Spain, Saudi Arabia and the Vatican, KAICIID is based in Vienna (somewhat ironically, due to the lack of religious freedom within Saudi's borders). Its advisory board comprises religious leaders from a wide range of traditions (including non-Abrahamic representatives) and its work includes interfaith dialogue events, publications, training programmes and outreach around the world. KAICIID was the culmination of previous collaborations. In November 2008, for example, Saudi Arabia led a two-day UN interfaith conference on the theme of religious tolerance.

### Assessing the trend

The emphasis on tolerance, moderation and interfaith dialogue in the Gulf can clearly be traced to 9/11 and its aftermath. Many of the initiatives described above emerged in the early 2000s at the height of the 'war on terror'. Obama's Cairo speech in 2009, in which he called for a 'new beginning' in relations between Muslim world and the West, would provide a renewed impetus for dialogue. Along with Muslim-majority countries around the world, Gulf states have found in the political discourse of 'moderate Islam' an important vehicle of representation, wherein misconceptions about Islam might be dispelled, extremism disavowed and ties with the West strengthened. Ideals such as tolerance or moderation, in other words, have come to serve as important indexes, by which the West distinguishes between 'good Muslims' and 'bad Muslims', and by which Muslims themselves seek to define their religion against the terrorists who claim to act in the name of Islam. The promotion of tolerance, however, should also be

understood more broadly in terms of a concerted effort to construct a counter-narrative to western civilisational discourses.

As is the case with Jordan and other Muslim-majority countries that have enthusiastically subscribed to the international political discourse of moderate Islam, Gulf states' efforts to promote tolerance are best understood in the context of the post-9/11 geopolitical climate between the West and the Muslim world. Taking their cue from their Middle Eastern neighbours, Gulf efforts to promote tolerance are geared towards the mutually constitutive goals of positioning themselves as representatives of 'moderate Islam', on the one hand, and valuable allies in the West's 'war on terror', on the other. As Brown has shown with respect to the civilisational discourse of tolerance in the West, the promotion of tolerance by Muslim actors on the world stage should similarly be understood as a claim to both moral authority and power. In this section, I underline the striking similarities across approaches to promoting tolerance in the Gulf, and situate these initiatives in the broader geopolitical context.

Gulf efforts to promote tolerance cohere around a common repertoire. Depending on the financial resources the state has at its disposal, this typically involves some combination of hosting international conferences, assembling travelling interfaith delegations and establishing high-profile centres geared towards the promotion of counterterrorism, tolerance, moderation, and interfaith dialogue. While Oman and Bahrain, with relatively limited resources, have invested in modest travelling delegations, the UAE, Qatar and Saudi Arabia have been able to invest in higher profile collaborations with powerful western actors. Although some are more open to non-Abrahamic participants than others, there is an emphasis across these initiatives on Muslim-Christian relations. The prioritising of Muslim-Christian relations of course reflects the broader international context, but also reveals the political motives behind Gulf states' enthusiastic promotion of tolerance.

Unlike interfaith initiatives in the West, which typically suffer from a lack of state investment, tolerance initiatives in the Gulf are state-led and generously funded. For the most part, they fall under the remit of the respective Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs, or in the case of Qatar, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. While they depend on the (often enthusiastic) complicity of expatriate Christian participants, Gulf tolerance initiatives are almost exclusively coordinated by the state, which is invariably represented by Muslims. Non-Muslims then have the choice of subscribing to the state narrative, or not participating at all. Of course, it then comes as no surprise that these tolerance initiatives are conceived in terms of state interests that often have little to do with the rights of religious minorities within their own borders.

Another important point to underline is that while each of the Gulf states has invested much effort in high-profile collaborations, typically with western (or Christian) partners, there has been next to no collaboration between Gulf states themselves. KAICIID, for example, is a well-funded intergovernmental collaboration between Saudi Arabia, Austria, Spain and the Vatican, but no such collaboration exists, for example, between Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, or the UAE and Oman. Collaboration with other Muslim-majority countries does happen, but it is quite rare. Despite the strikingly similar approaches across the region and the proliferation of centres that share the same agenda and mission statements, each Gulf state promotes its own national initiatives, and seeks its own international collaborations. There seems to be little desire to

transcend national self-interest, and work hand-in-hand towards what are at least ostensibly common goals. The competitive as opposed to collaborative nature of these efforts reveals Gulf states' underlying political aspirations, as was perhaps most apparent in the so-called 'blockade' imposed on Qatar by Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE from June 2017. While a range of explanations have been offered to account for the motivations behind the blockade, the theme of counterterrorism has been at the centre of both the blockading countries' demands and Qatar's defiant response.

To return to the broader geopolitical context, Gulf tolerance initiatives are aimed at an international rather than a domestic audience. The choice of cities for the travelling exhibitions, the emphasis on global collaborations, the 'international' centres and the prioritising of Muslim–Christian relations reflect the broader geopolitical context within which these initiatives are conceived, and the audience towards whom they are targeted. In some instances, to be sure, Gulf initiatives have encompassed reform within their borders. In Saudi Arabia, sweeping cabinet reforms have been carried out, replacing the more hard-line Wahhabis with reform-minded moderates (Al-Atawneh 2011). In Qatar, the decision to grant land for the building of the country's first Christian churches in 2005 could very well be considered to belong to a broader interfaith agenda. As became clear in Sir Bani Yas, however, and as emerged over the course of several research trips throughout the Gulf, the problem of intolerance is not perceived to exist, nor is it situated within, Gulf borders. In fact, in the case of the UAE, Bahrain and Oman, and to a lesser extent Qatar, Gulf states are not only promoting the ideal of tolerance, but are representing themselves as ideal models of coexistence. What is striking when visiting the various Gulf states and speaking to those involved in these initiatives is the confidence with which they assert that theirs is the ideal model of a tolerant or 'open' society. As is the case with the promotion of religious freedom and tolerance in US foreign policy, then, and as was explicitly called for in the Makkah Declaration, there is an important proselytising dimension to these initiatives. Gulf efforts are typically framed as a moral obligation to share with their neighbours, and indeed the world, what is presented as their unique brand of tolerance. In the case of Saudi Arabia, and again to some extent, Qatar, however, the emphasis is less on representing themselves as ideal models, and more on casting themselves in the role of strategically invaluable partners in facilitating interfaith engagement between the West and the Muslim world.

When Gulf states invest in conferences, state visits or counterterrorism centres, then, they are investing in their own self-presentation, often promoting themselves almost as a kind of interfaith utopia. They are not only, however, representing themselves, but just as importantly, they are casting themselves as representatives of Islam, or what is commonly referred to across these initiatives as 'true' or 'moderate' Islam. As we saw in the case of Sir Bani Yas, and as the pervasiveness of the phrase 'since time immemorial' attests, Gulf states have turned to history as a means of legitimating their moral claim to tolerance. This involves presenting an idealised national past within which all religious traditions have prospered. It also involves appropriating a broader Islamic past; the *Convivencia* and a rich history of religious pluralism in old centres such as Baghdad or Damascus is regularly put forward as evidence of the inherent tolerance of Islam or 'Islamic civilisation'. In mobilising historical examples of tolerance, Gulf states are constructing, and at the same time embedding themselves in, an Islamic moral lineage. Against western civilisational

discourses of tolerance that emanate from a distinctly secular (but Christian-leaning) liberal project, Muslim actors have responded in kind with their own defiant claims to moral authority. Like Jordan, Morocco and Turkey, amongst other Muslim-majority countries, however, Gulf states' attempts to cast themselves as representatives of 'moderate Islam' also speak to a complex politics of representation within the wider *umma*, which is more conducive to competition than it is collaboration.

Finally, as has been pointed out in the criticism levelled at other Muslim-majority countries invested in this political discourse, advocacy on the world stage tends to have little bearing on what happens at home. Gulf tolerance initiatives routinely obscure rather than meaningfully address religious minority rights within their own borders. This has resulted in a lot of cynicism, particularly in the case of Saudi Arabia. A prominent advocate of tolerance on the world stage, Saudi Arabia is the only Gulf country that legally bans all religions other than Islam. In response to Saudis sponsoring UN talks on religious tolerance in 2008, a Washington-based Saudi Shia, Ali Al-Ahmed, was quoted as saying 'It's like apartheid South Africa having a conference at the UN on racial harmony' (MacFarquar 2008). 'It is a public relations exercise', he continued, 'they want to shed the image that they are the kingdom of intolerance and extremism and xenophobia'. The Saudi-funded KAICIID, which is headquartered in Vienna, has also often been held up as evidence of the glaring inconsistency between Saudi Arabia's apparent international commitment to tolerance and its officially sanctioned intolerance at home. While it would be unfair to put other Gulf states in the same category, it should be noted that state-led tolerance initiatives across the Gulf generally do not provide spaces for meaningful conversations about minority rights, nor do they typically allow for anything more than superficial engagement with local concerns.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted to account for the emergent political discourse of tolerance in the Gulf. I have outlined the wide-ranging initiatives that together constitute a discernible trend that can be traced back to 9/11; a trend which is not confined to the Gulf, but reflects broader developments in the Muslim world. While the establishment of the Ministry of Tolerance in the UAE in 2016 was a particularly visible gesture, since the early 2000s each Gulf state has found ways to integrate the promotion of tolerance, along with other values such as moderation, into their broader foreign policy agendas. While the UAE, Oman and Bahrain present themselves as ideal models of a tolerant society, Saudi Arabia and to some extent Qatar, pursue a slightly different model, funding and facilitating high-level international dialogue, both at home and abroad. Across Gulf initiatives, there is a focus on Muslim-Christian relations and collaborations with the West, betraying the broader geopolitical context within which these initiatives are conceived.

The relationship between Muslim-majority countries and the West has been profoundly shaped by a post-9/11 political discourse that prescribes particular roles for Muslims in conversations about the problem of religious extremism, often confining the moral imagination to narratives of 'moderate Islam', 'radical Islam' and the 'clash of the civilisations'. Within this civilisational discourse, the ideal of tolerance has been routinely presented by international actors on all sides as an antidote to the global problem of

terrorism. While countries like Jordan have for decades invested in the field of interfaith dialogue, it was only after 9/11, and in the shadow of the West's 'war on terror', that Gulf states began to recognise the strategic value of championing tolerance. In laying claim to the moral authority inherent in the ideal of tolerance, Gulf states are not only claiming a place for themselves, but are at the same time reclaiming a place for 'true' or 'moderate' Islam in a global moral order. And in doing so, they are responding to the West's civilisational discourse of tolerance with a concerted counter-narrative, at the centre of which is Islam and 'Islamic civilisation'.

As many of the traditional centres of power in the Middle East continue to face turmoil and upheaval, Gulf states have been able to use their vast financial resources to position themselves, not only with respect to the wider *ummah*, as archetypes of 'moderate Islam', but also with respect to the West, as partners in peace. The various attempts throughout the Gulf to promote tolerance cannot be disentangled from this complex politics of representation. Beneath the surface, however, the preference in the Gulf for civilisational discourses of tolerance geared towards the world stage often obscures meaningful engagement with the messy challenge of managing religious diversity within their own borders. How or to what extent investment in international political discourses of tolerance will inform their own commitment to the ideal at home remains to be seen.

## Notes

1. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) includes Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, Kuwait and the UAE.
2. The term 'Muslim world' is not unproblematic (see Aydin 2017), but in this article refers simply to Muslim-majority countries.
3. Most of what was included in the citation was taken from Article 1.1. Noticeably absent was any reference to democracy (Article 1.3).
4. The full text of the Makkah Declaration is available online at: <https://www.dawn.com/news/169078>.
5. The Amman Message is available online at: <http://ammanmessage.com/>.
6. While Kuwait has embraced discourses of tolerance, it has been less active than its neighbours in promoting itself on the world stage, and so is not included here.
7. Details of the documentary and Oman's wide-ranging efforts to promote tolerance can be found online at: <http://www.islam-in-oman.com/en.html>.

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