

The Islamic State vs. the Saudi State

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In June 2014, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced the establishment of the Islamic caliphate, declaring it to be the true home of Islam and demanding that every Muslim move there. Both the Islamic State and al-Baghdadi portray themselves as the authentic heirs of Muslim leadership. This, an explicit challenge to Saudi Arabia and its kings, who claim to be the custodians of Islam's holy sites, prompted the Saudi grand mufti, the highest religious authority in the kingdom, to engage in the battle and declare the ideas of the Islamic State as a distortion of Islam and its largest threat.¹

The threat posed by the Islamic State to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states is essentially one of competitive ideology. Seeking to replace the existing political order with an "authentic" Islamic caliphate, the Islamic State views the Gulf monarchies as heretical, having veered off the true path of Islam, and as entities that therefore must be toppled. The Islamic State directs its challenge primarily at reactionary Sunni Islam, Wahhabism, represented by Saudi Arabia. The ideological enmity is manifest in the call by Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to topple the Saudi kingdom. This call to arms closely resembles the call made by Bin Laden in the previous decade.

The first public threat issued by the Islamic State to Saudi Arabia came in the form of a video released in November 2014, in which al-Baghdadi invoked his followers to attack Shiites, foreigners, and the royal household, while announcing the expansion of the Islamic State into the Najd Province of the Arabian Peninsula.² He did not refer to Saudi Arabia by name, lest by doing so he acknowledge the legitimacy of the rule of the House of Saud. Around the same time, the Islamic State proclaimed in its online magazine *Dabiq* that it would "raise the flag of the caliphate over Mecca and Medina...despite the wishes of the hypocrites and apostates." In the

same issue, al-Baghdadi asked Saudis to remain in the kingdom and fight for the establishment of the caliphate from within, rather than leave for distant arenas of conflict.³

The Objective: Increasing Inter-Ethnic Tension

The Islamic State flourishes in areas where the Sunni-Shiite fault lines are deepest. Shiites comprise a significant portion of the population in the Gulf monarchies (15 percent of Saudi Arabia, 30 percent of Kuwait, 70 percent of Bahrain), and thereby constitute a regional soft underbelly. In November 2014, during the Shiite Ashura festival, the Islamic State conducted its first suicide attacks in the eastern province of Saudi Arabia, where the state's Shiites are concentrated. According to the Saudi Ministry of the Interior, the terrorist cell responsible for this attack, which killed nine Shiites at prayer, was dismantled.⁴ Six months later, however, in May 2015, the Najd Province of the Islamic State claimed responsibility for the deadliest onslaught on Saudi soil in over a decade: two attacks in Shiite mosques in one week killed 25 civilians and injured dozens more.⁵ A month later, in honor of the first anniversary of the caliphate, an Islamic State terrorist of Saudi origin blew himself up inside a crowded Shiite mosque in the capital of Kuwait, killing 26. In August 2015, the organization also took credit for an explosion that claimed 15 lives in a mosque serving Saudi security forces near the border of Yemen. The Islamic State has also tried to penetrate Saudi Arabian territory, as it did north of Arar in January 2015, and has fired rockets from Iraq onto the kingdom's territory.⁶

The Islamic State is doing its best to drive a wedge between the Shiite minority and the Sunni majority, hoping that any violent Shiite response will provoke a countermove by the regime and initiate a vicious cycle. Al-Baghdadi hopes that by attacking Shiites he can exploit Sunni hostility toward them and recruit fresh blood while weakening the legitimacy and stability of the royal household. The success and ideology of the Islamic State attracts many young Sunnis who might conceivably channel their fury at the Shiite population or at the royal household, should it be deemed conciliatory to the Shiites. Although the Shiites are viewed by many in Saudi Arabia as an Iranian fifth column, they have never challenged the regime; opponents of the regime have consistently been radical Sunnis. Moreover, the royal household bears some responsibility for the tension generated by its own anti-Shiite rhetoric, which it uses to enhance support for its objectives as its

struggles against Iran and Iranian proxies in the region. A decision by Shiites to respond to attacks on them could play into the hands of the Islamic State, which would then be perceived as a defender of the Sunnis.

Close to two thirds of the Saudi population is below the age of thirty. Much of the country's youth is unemployed, ready to channel their frustrations to the virtual reality of social media, where many express support for the ideas of the Islamic State. As a result, the Saudi regime has stepped up its monitoring of the internet and the rhetoric from the mosques, and increased the sums it allocates to the housing, employment, and education for this sector.⁷ In the past two years the Saudi security establishment has also killed or arrested hundreds of members (mostly Saudi) of the Islamic State who, according to authorities, were involved in recruitment, fundraising, and/or the planning of attacks and assassinations within the kingdom.⁸

Lessons from the War on al-Qaeda

In previous years, members of al-Qaeda returning from Afghanistan operated in the kingdom and carried out a series of showcase attacks. After a long struggle, the Saudis managed to curb al-Qaeda activity and arrest many of the organization's leaders, while others fled to Yemen. Yet despite that relative success, which occurred more than a decade ago, the challenge posed by the Islamic State today is likely to prove tougher. The return of "alumni" to Saudi Arabia from the battlefields of Syria and Iraq may test the relative efficacy of Saudi security forces in their war against terrorism. The wave of attacks that gripped the kingdom in the middle of the first decade of this century was halted in part through a means whose success rate is questionable, namely, terrorist rehabilitation. The Saudis now intend to open new rehabilitation centers in addition to the one already operating in Riyadh. The fact that the Saudis as well as other Gulf states are taking active measures indicates the seriousness of the threat both to these regimes and to Western interests.

More than 2,000 young Saudis have joined the Islamic State fighters in Syria and Iraq despite a royal decree imposing stiff penalties on anyone joining, funding, or supporting the Islamic State, or even identifying with its ideology.⁹ The return of many of these young people (several hundred by September 2015), who constitute one of the largest groups of Islamic State fighters, could grow into a serious security problem for the Saudi kingdom. For this reason the royal household is concentrating its efforts

on upsetting the local financing of the Islamic State, stopping the flow of young Saudis exiting and entering the kingdom, and disrupting the Islamic State's propaganda with the help of the religious establishment, the media, and the kingdom's law enforcement and judiciary system.

The Saudis worry that domestic Islamic opposition will increase with the return of more young Saudis to the kingdom and the territorial conquests of the Islamic State, which denies the integrity of the kingdom's political borders as well as its religious validity. The House of Saud believes that it has the tools to cope with the challenges posed by the Islamic State. However, it cannot as easily contend with the incitement by the Wahhabi establishment against the Shiites, as this would target its own support base. Furthermore, the kingdom's security today is worse than it was in 2002-2006 due to the number of Saudis who have left to fight for the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq as well as the fact that the arenas of operation are more geographically varied, spanning the entire kingdom.

Saudi Arabia's neighbors have also begun responding to the challenge. In Kuwait, some 200 preachers, who according to authorities were harboring radical ideas, were fired.¹⁰ In addition, all 1.5 million residents and 3 million foreigners in the country were ordered by law to submit DNA samples, a measure that the kingdom claims will help track down terrorist suspects.¹¹ Like Saudi Arabia, the UAE has established a media staff to monitor social media and challenge the Islamic State narrative while providing a forum for moderate voices.¹² In Bahrain, however, the situation is somewhat different. Bahrain serves as a target of Islamic State activity due to inter-ethnic tensions in the country, which have been surfaced more since the spring of 2011. Yet because the royal household views Shiites as the most dangerous threat and aspires to preserve Sunni unity, it has turned a blind eye to Salafist Sunni activity.

Targeted assassinations of al-Qaeda's senior personnel and deserters from its ranks have helped the Islamic State draw recruits from the poorest and most populated country in the Arabian Peninsula, Yemen. The organization began its activities there in March 2015 with a dramatic double attack on Shiite mosques in Sana'a that killed 145 and wounded 357, exploiting the country's chaos and al-Qaeda's seemingly weakened status in the Arabian Peninsula after the US assassination of Nasser al-Wuhayshi,¹³ al-Qaeda's former leader. Many of the Islamic State's attacks are directed at concentrations of Houthi forces and strategic locations, especially in the capital of Sana'a,

controlled by the Houthis. As of the writing of this essay, the latest attack occurred in July 2015, when the Islamic State detonated a car bomb near the capital's hospital.¹⁴ Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State seem to be competing over which group will strike hardest against the Houthis, who have made significant territorial gains. Yet it is not inconceivable that in the future al-Qaeda and the Islamic State will turn on each other and conduct attacks on Saudi Arabian targets.

The Islamic State's struggle in Saudi Arabia and its neighbors is primarily ideological. It presents a not insignificant challenge to the royal households, first and foremost, the House of Saud, even though initial surveys indicate that the number of Saudis embracing Islamic State ideology is relatively small.¹⁵ One of the reasons for Riyadh's resolve to fight against the Islamic State both within Saudi borders and beyond may be the entity's ideological resemblance to the Wahhabi ideal and the challenge posed by the caliphate to the kingdom's pan-Islamic vision. Consequently, Saudi Arabia and its neighbors have invested many resources, particularly through its powerful religious establishment, in the effort to counter the Islamic State narrative.

Ricochets

The threat of the Islamic State will likely hang over Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states in the upcoming years. Although they joined the US aerial campaign against the Islamic State in September 2014,¹⁶ the Gulf states did so mainly for political/diplomatic reasons and in order to polish their image; they gradually stopped almost all participation in the campaign since March-April 2015. In their perspective, the true danger lies at home. So far, the Islamic State has attacked Shiites in order to stir up inter-religious tensions and destabilize the Gulf states. It has already declared that its goal is to destroy the regimes, which in practice would mean targeting their production of oil as well as their refineries. In addition, Saudi youths who have thus far eluded security services may act as lone wolves, either on their own initiative or with guidance from abroad.

At this point, the Islamic State's presence in the Arabian Peninsula is limited in comparison to its presence in Iraq and Syria or even the Sinai Peninsula and Libya. Nevertheless, it can potentially entrench its hold for several reasons. First, the idea of the caliphate is attractive to the already conservative societies in the Gulf, especially among the younger population. Second, the idea is especially attractive to those of a Salafi jihadist orientation

who have grown disillusioned with al-Qaeda. Third, the Saudi “reeducation program,” which combines psychological treatment, financial aid, and religious instruction is problematic and does not always bear fruit. Fourth, security coordination among the Gulf states is lacking, and it is relatively easy for citizens to cross borders within the Gulf Cooperation Council borders. Fifth, the Islamic State is highly effective in disseminating its messages through social media (the number of social media users in Saudi Arabia is among the highest in the world).¹⁷ Finally, the successes of the Islamic State are in and of themselves a selling point for many who view it as the standard bearer and frontline of Sunni Islam.

Some of the Gulf states have been involved in financing terrorism. Some have turned a blind eye or been less than zealous about checking the flow of money from private donors or Islamic charitable organizations to terrorists. The pressure exerted by the United States after 9/11 and a series of attacks in Saudi Arabia in the first half of the last decade have now prompted the kingdom to assume a more aggressive stance, if only to prevent more attacks on its soil. The campaign it spearheads today, which includes television programs and newspaper articles directed against the Islamic State and its ideology, is meant to harm domestic ties with such groups as well as to gainsay accusations that it has supported these groups in the past. Indeed, to demonstrate its sincerity, Saudi Arabia recently donated \$100 million to the UN counterterrorism center.¹⁸

The kingdom can no longer isolate itself from the wars raging all around it, especially as it itself is deeply involved in regional conflicts that also exert influence on its domestic affairs. It must therefore work that much harder to provide a suitable response to the challenges posed by the Islamic State. If the kingdom does not undertake comprehensive reforms in curricula and launch an inter-ethnic dialogue, it will not be able to face this challenge in the future. Many young people are returning to their homes in the Gulf states burning with Salafist jihadist zeal. Having gained experience on the battlefield, they will soon test the stability of the monarchies still standing in the crumbling Middle East.

Notes

- 1 “Saudi Arabia Grand Mufti Says ISIS ‘Enemy Number One of Islam,’” *al-Akhbar*, August 19, 2014.
- 2 “Islamic State Leader Urges Attacks in Saudi Arabia: Speech,” *Reuters*, November 13, 2014.
- 3 *Dabiq* 5 (November 2014): 3.
- 4 “74 Held in Saudi for Involvement in Terror Activities,” *al-Arabiya*, March 22, 2015.
- 5 “Suicide Blast Kills 21 at Mosque in Saudi Arabia,” *al-Arabiya*, May 22, 2015; “Saudi Security Foils Terrorist Attack on Dammam Mosque,” *a-Sharq al-Awsat*, May 29, 2015.
- 6 “Saudi Border Guards Killed in Attack,” *al-Jazeera*, January 5, 2015; “Rocket Landings at Saud-Iraq Border Under Probe,” *Arab News*, July 8, 2014.
- 7 “Online Imams under Scanner,” *Arab News*, November 10, 2014.
- 8 “43 Killed, 431 Held as Saudi Crushes Daesh Network,” *Khaleej Times*, July 20, 2015.
- 9 “Saudi King Issues Royal Decree Cracking Down on Terrorism,” *a-Sharq al-Awsat*, February 4, 2014.
- 10 “Kuwait Sacks 198 Preachers, Including 7 Wanted by Authorities,” *Khaleej Times*, July 8, 2015.
- 11 “Kuwait Detains 26 over ISIS Suicide Attack on Mosque: Newspaper,” *Daily Star*, July 6, 2015.
- 12 “US, UAE Launch Anti-IS Online Messaging Center in Abu Dhabi,” *Daily Star*, July 8, 2015.
- 13 “ISIS Video Claims ‘We’ve Arrived’ in Yemen,” *al-Arabiya*, April 26, 2015.
- 14 “ISIS Claims Car Bombing Near Hospital in Yemeni Capital,” *al-Arabiya*, July 29, 2015.
- 15 David Pollock, “New Poll Shows Majority of Saudis, Kuwaitis, Emiratis Reject ISIS, Back Two-State Solution with Israel,” *PolicyWatch* 2329, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 23, 2014.
- 16 See more: “Operation Inherent Resolve: Targeted Operations Against ISIL Terrorist,” US Department of Defense, http://www.defense.gov/News/Special-Reports/0814_Inherent-Resolve.
- 17 “The Social Media Stars of Saudi Arabia,” *Bloomberg*, July 31, 2015.
- 18 “Saudi Arabia Donates \$100 Million to UN Counter-Terrorism Centre,” Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia, Washington, D.C., August 7, 2013.