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Battling ISIS and Beyond in the Gulf

by [Lori Plotkin Boghardt](#)

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Brief Analysis

Saudi Arabia's concern about Sunni terrorists at home suggests its toleration of al-Qaeda in Yemen and Syria is an unsavory, tactical move against Iran and its allies there.

When Secretary of State John Kerry met with his Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) counterparts in Qatar on August 3, Iran was not the only item on their agenda. They also discussed the fight against the so-called "Islamic State"/ISIS. The meeting came on the heels of recent ISIS-related roundups in three GCC countries: the United Arab Emirates revealed it was bringing 41 people to trial for trying to establish an ISIS-style "caliphate" in the country; Kuwait disclosed it had arrested four members of an ISIS cell; and Saudi Arabia announced it had detained 431 ISIS-linked individuals.

Following the most deadly terrorist attack in Kuwait's history on June 26 and a string of deadly bombings and shootings in Saudi Arabia since last autumn, preventing ISIS attacks has become a top priority for many Gulf leaders. Local investigations are yielding detailed information about the scope of the threat. As Washington considers how best to work with its Gulf partners against radicalized Sunni militants, it should bear in mind how Gulf perceptions of the manageable but provocative domestic threat are evolving.

A RISING CHALLENGE

Saudi Arabia has been a principal target for ISIS, and the kingdom views the group's sophisticated terrorist planning and recruitment strategies as a mounting challenge. Many detainees apparently worked in specialized

cells with discrete functions, including surveillance, explosives making, and suicide bomber preparation. And the highly developed social media strategies used to recruit such operatives are a particular concern.

The number of terrorism-related arrests in Saudi Arabia over the past year-and-a-half may be close to 900, with a majority linked to ISIS. This figure is likely to multiply -- in the wake of major al-Qaeda attacks in the kingdom beginning in 2003, Riyadh detained more than 11,000 terrorist suspects over the next several years. Individuals arrested on terrorism charges in the past have been well represented among the more recent detainees. For example, more than half of the individuals arrested during major roundups announced in May, September, and November 2014 had previously been detained (and sometimes tried, convicted, and jailed) on terrorism-related charges.

Major Announcements of Terrorism-Related Arrests in Saudi Arabia since May 2014

DATE	NUMBER	NATIONALITY	CHARGES	ASSOCIATIONS
05-06-14	62	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 59 Saudis • 1 Palestinian • 1 Yemeni • 1 Pakistani 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plotting assassinations • Targeting government installations and foreign interests • Creating fundraising and logistical support cells for AQAP 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ISIS • Nusra • AQAP
08-27-14	8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 8 Saudis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruiting for ISIS and other extremist groups, probably Nusra 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ISIS • Probably Nusra
09-02-14	88	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 84 Saudis • 3 Yemenis • 1 unidentified 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning attacks, including assassinations, in Saudi Arabia and abroad 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ISIS • Nusra • AQAP
11-24-14	77	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 73 Saudis • 1 Syrian • 1 Jordanian • 1 Turk • 1 unidentified 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shooting in al-Dalwah 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ISIS
12-03-14	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 Saudis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shooting in Riyadh 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ISIS
12-07-14	135*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 109 Saudis • 16 Syrians • 3 Yemenis • 1 stateless • 1 Egyptian • 1 Lebanese • 1 Afghan • 1 Ethiopian • 1 Bahraini • 1 Iraqi 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 40 for joining extremist groups abroad • 54 for supporting extremist groups through financing, recruitment, bombmaking, and spreading propaganda • 17 for violence in Al-Awamiyah • 3 for terrorist recruitment • 21 for attempted weapons smuggling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ISIS • Other unidentified terrorist groups abroad • Probably Saudi Shiite protestors
01-09-15	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 Saudis • 4 Syrians 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gun attack and suicide bombing near Arar 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ISIS
04-28-15	93	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At least 77 Saudis • Others were Syrian, Palestinian, Yemeni, or stateless 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plots to attack U.S. embassy, housing compounds, and security officials • Recruitment, fundraising, establishing training camps 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ISIS
07-18-15	431*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mostly Saudis • Others from Yemen, Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Algeria, Nigeria, Chad • Others unknown 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Smuggling explosives, target surveillance, bombmaking, logistical support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ISIS

* Not specified if the figure also includes previously announced arrests (and thus "counted" twice).
 SOURCES: Saudi Ministry of Interior public statements, Saudi and other press

Meanwhile, the other GCC states view ISIS networks in Saudi Arabia as a Gulf-wide threat. The June bombing of Kuwait's Imam Sadeq Mosque, which left twenty-seven Shiite worshippers dead and more than 200 wounded, showcased the threat's transnational character. The attack was conducted by a Saudi suicide bomber who flew from the kingdom to Bahrain the day before the incident, then to Kuwait the next day. The explosives he used may have come from Bahrain -- not on the plane with the bomber, but separately by land. Local officials believe he was aided by a network that included Kuwaitis, Saudis, Pakistanis, and stateless persons. Kuwaiti authorities have since refused entry to some Saudi travelers due to security concerns.

BEYOND ISIS

The Gulf states continue to view the terrorist threat from radicalized Sunni militants as extending beyond ISIS. This includes other jihadist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra, the al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria. As with ISIS, a primary concern about Nusra has been that Gulf citizen involvement with the group abroad could result in anti-state activities at home.

Belonging to or otherwise providing support to Nusra remains illegal in Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Both countries have arrested Nusra associates, convicting some in their national security courts -- namely, the Specialized Criminal Court in Saudi Arabia and the State Security Court of the Federal Supreme Court in the UAE. Riyadh jailed several Saudi citizens for fighting with the group in September 2014. Similarly, the UAE convicted seven individuals in June 2014 on charges of supporting Nusra, and eleven others in December for supporting Nusra and another Syrian Islamist group, Ahrar al-Sham. A third trial -- this time against a single Emirati for joining Nusra in Syria -- is currently in process.

Gulf states also continue to view the Yemen-based group al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula as a terrorist threat. AQAP associates were part of Saudi roundups before and after the group's July 2014 attack on a Saudi checkpoint and border town near Yemen that killed four Saudi officers. Riyadh has said that some of the numerous suspects recently detained were coordinating with wanted elements in Yemen (presumably AQAP members) on operations and training in and around Sharurah. Previously, the group was responsible for a 2009 assassination attempt against then-assistant interior minister Muhammad bin Nayef, who has since been named crown prince.

The Saudi perception of al-Qaeda affiliates as serious domestic security threats is important to bear in mind when one considers the kingdom's evolving approach toward these groups in Syria and Yemen. Riyadh's apparent acceptance of coordination between Nusra and moderate Free Syrian Army rebel factions (whom the kingdom supports) is best understood as an unsavory provisional move to help defeat the Assad regime. Likewise, Riyadh's current tolerance of AQAP in Yemen is probably a tactical decision to help win the war against the main enemy there first: the Iranian-supported Houthis. Although some Gulf officials recognize the perils of these policies, anxiety about Iran's destabilizing activities in the Arab world is trumping other serious concerns.

CONCLUSION

Each Gulf ally is balancing its response to the Sunni militant threat at home with other domestic security calculations. In some cases, this includes continued sanctioning of loathsome sectarian agendas by teachers, clerics, and media. GCC officials worry that the Islamic State's focus on Shiite targets will stir up sectarian tensions, but allowing domestic actors to trumpet their own divisive agendas only nourishes groups like ISIS. A substantial gap remains between the soft security measures Washington believes Gulf governments should pursue and the measures that most ruling families calculate are best for their own security.

At the regional level, growing concerns about radicalized Sunni militants in the Gulf present new opportunities for cooperation between Washington and its GCC allies. The key working question should be: Given political realities in the Gulf states, how can existing cooperation be deepened to achieve shared objectives?

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