

# The Islamic State's Saudi Chess Match

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Brief Analysis

**By attacking Shiite targets in Yemen and Saudi Arabia and potentially drawing Iran into the fray, the group is playing a complicated game aimed at delegitimizing the royal family and destabilizing the kingdom.**

Over the past two weeks, the so-called "Islamic State" (IS) has claimed two attacks on Shiite mosques in Saudi Arabia's Shiite-majority Eastern Province, one in Dammam and the other in Qatif. While the incidents might not have an immediate impact on the kingdom's overall security, they are relevant to long-term IS strategy of weakening the Saudi government by exposing its alleged hypocrisy. They also illustrate how IS has choreographed its actions in phases for its Arabian Peninsula theater. For example, when IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced new wilayat (provinces) for the so-called caliphate in Saudi Arabia and Yemen last November, he told supporters that Shiites should be targeted first. And in remarks made last month, he zeroed in on the Saudi state and what he described as its failed Yemen war. The latest attacks are therefore harbingers of a wider IS threat to Saudi Islamic legitimacy.

## THE ISLAMIC STATE'S CALCULUS

By attacking the Eastern Province, IS seeks to place Riyadh in the position of defending or appeasing Shiites, at the expense of a Saudi Wahhabist state ideology that does not tread too far from that of IS (e.g., Saudi schools teach students that Shiites are unbelievers and not Muslims). In that sense, the group likely considers Riyadh's actions following the first attack a victory.

In response to the May 22 suicide bombing in Qatif, Saudi Interior Ministry spokesman Maj. Gen. Mansour al-Turki stated that the goal of IS was to spread sectarianism, while Crown Prince Muhammad bin Nayef visited the town and gave condolences to the victims and their family members. Moreover, Grand Mufti Abdul Aziz ibn Abdullah al-

Sheikh condemned the "criminal plot." From the Islamic State's perspective, such actions highlight Riyadh's rank hypocrisy, showing "true" believers in the "land of the two holy places" how the Saudi state is contravening both God and its own founding standards. By casting themselves as the true bearers of Islam, IS leaders hope to draw more recruits and supporters.

## **HISTORICAL SUPPORT BASE FOR JIHADISTS**

**B**eyond the potential for gaining new supporters, IS knows that Saudi Arabia has been a hotbed for foreign fighter and jihadist activism since the 1980s. In all of the major foreign fighter mobilizations over the past three decades (Afghanistan, Chechnya, Bosnia, Iraq, and Syria), Saudis have been the leading nationality to join up. Most important, Saudis composed the largest bulk of foreign IS members last decade when the group was calling itself al-Qaeda in Iraq, and once again in Syria and Iraq over the past couple years.

Since IS joined the Syrian jihad in April 2013, it has pushed anti-Saudi messaging through various means, including an official nashid (religiously sanctioned a cappella music), public announcements issued from its Syrian "provinces" in Raqqa (twice) and Deir al-Zour, and pictures showing words of support from inside Saudi Arabia. IS supporters also claimed responsibility for an attempted assassination of a Danish executive on a Riyadh highway last November, showing footage of the incident online.

Some may argue that IS will not succeed in shaking the monarchy, similar to the failed jihad in Saudi Arabia from 2002 to 2006. Although this scenario is definitely possible, local conditions are also quite different today. For one thing, many more Saudis are now involved with IS than there were with al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia in the early to mid-2000s. In addition, the group has wide bases of training and operations on both sides of the kingdom's border with Iraq, and to a lesser extent in Yemen. It also has a small yet important support base in Bahrain, in part because leading IS ideologue Turki al-Binali is Bahraini, but also because Manama has turned a blind eye to IS supporters and radical Sunnis in general -- no surprise given that the island's Sunni rulers are more worried about the Shiite majority threat to their power. Taken together, these bases could provide IS with strategic depth while also widening its war against Shiites in the region.

## **PROVOKING A SHIITE REACTION OVER TIME**

**H**istorically, the Shiite populations of the Persian Gulf -- Saudis and Bahrainis in particular -- have not been receptive to Iranian overtures in the same way as Lebanon. Yet just as Iran is now playing a larger role in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, so too does IS hope for a similar scenario to play out in the Gulf monarchies, if only as a means of making the Saudi state look weak and convincing the Sunni populace to look to IS as their natural protectors instead. Iranian proxy networks in Iraq have already shown small signs of supporting militant networks in Bahrain -- at the very least rhetorically, and perhaps materially as well. Since Riyadh deployed troops there to quash protest movements in 2011, Shiite militants on the island have been involved in a series of small-scale attacks on Bahraini state institutions, in addition to condemning the Saudi royal family and accusing it of human rights violations. They have also portrayed their familial connections with Shiites in the Eastern Province next door as an extension of their fight against the Bahraini government.

Therefore, if IS continues attacking Shiites in Saudi Arabia, it will likely hope to drive a wider wedge between them and Riyadh, spurring them to look for protection from the outside -- namely from Iran, which could quickly provide such support via Hezbollah, Iraqi Shiite militant groups, and/or similar elements in Bahrain. This would put the Saudi state in a bind, forcing it to either push back against increased Iranian influence in its neighborhood or continue trying to tamp things down -- a win-win situation from the Islamic State's vantage point. This scenario may sound a bit absurd now, but many observers likewise believed that Iranian influence in Iraqi Shiite politics would never reach its current peak, so it is important to understand the worst-case developments that IS seeks to foment in

Saudi Arabia. Some Shiites in the kingdom are already beginning to create "popular mobilization committees" (al-hashd al-shabi). While these groups are likely unrelated to the powerful Shiite militias of the same name in Iraq, that distinction will likely be lost on the many conservative Saudis who are already edgy about Iran and the potential for Shiite empowerment in the Eastern Province.

Of course, none of these scenarios are inevitable. The Islamic State is gambling on three outcomes: that it can push Saudi Shiites into the arms of militant networks and possibly Iran, that it can gain enough Sunni support for its project by laying bare Riyadh's inability to follow through on its founding ideology, and that it can foster more sympathy for itself as the "true protector" of Saudi Sunnis.

## CONCLUSION

The Islamic State believes it can shape future events to its advantage, and in some ways, its strategy for the first phase of its Arabian Peninsula campaign was a success. The Qatif attack was a bookend to its March attacks against four Houthi mosques in Sana, Yemen. Those incidents created a domino effect of sorts: they spurred the Houthis to move against Aden, which led the Saudis to launch their ongoing military campaign in Yemen, which in turn gave IS a wider opening for operations in Saudi Arabia due to the resources Riyadh is committing next door.

How this all plays out is difficult to predict, especially since so many aspects of regional and local politics in the Middle East have become extremely fluid. Many of the old rules have been rendered irrelevant since 2011, especially in the past year. At the very least, the Islamic State is vying to call checkmate against the Saudi state and bring about an even larger change that would further shake regional and global politics. The U.S. government should not take the latest attacks or related developments lightly. Otherwise it will once again be surprised by foreseeable outcomes that were ignored in places such as Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen.

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