

Saudi Arabia's Shifting War on Terror

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Brief Analysis

The Saudi government is expanding its counterterrorism work to confront the ISIS threat.

On August 13, Saudi Arabia donated \$100 million to the UN Counter-Terrorism Centre in New York. The gift reflects Riyadh's anxiety about the terrorist threat from Sunni militants inside the kingdom and on its northern and southern borders. To confront this threat, the government is expanding efforts to dilute public support for Sunni militancy at home and abroad.

A MIXED RECORD

Riyadh's counterterrorism record has been mixed since fifteen Saudi and four other al-Qaeda hijackers struck the United States in 2001. From 2003 to 2006, a chain of dramatic al-Qaeda attacks killed hundreds in the kingdom, spurring the government to work more vigorously to pursue terrorists at home and prevent further domestic plots.

Riyadh has also taken important measures to discourage terrorism financing abroad, clamp down on incendiary sermons by religious leaders, and detain and rehabilitate militants. Yet over the years, Washington has complained - for good reason -- that some of these latter endeavors were significantly constrained by the kingdom's political interests and counterterrorism capabilities.

EXPANDED CAMPAIGN

Earlier this year, Riyadh began a pronounced campaign to discourage citizen support for terrorist organizations and other groups that were unpalatable to the government. A central element of this campaign was a new law decreed by King Abdullah in February criminalizing various forms of support to certain groups. In March, a list was released naming these groups, including two jihadist organizations -- the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS, which has since begun calling itself "the Islamic State") and Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate. The campaign was attributed in part to charges that Saudi Arabia had been turning a blind eye to its citizens joining the war in Syria. It may also have been linked to Riyadh's uncovering of terrorist plots against the kingdom by Saudis at

home colluding with Saudi ISIS members abroad.

The campaign continued to deepen as ISIS made significant territorial gains in countries north of Saudi Arabia and threatened the kingdom itself. Militant, financial, and ideological support for terrorism have since been discouraged with new vigor. During the month of Ramadan alone, which ended on July 28, Riyadh said that it was investigating seventeen clerics whose sermons failed to denounce a July 4 al-Qaeda attack in the south; it also warned against charitable giving via social networking tools because donations could fall into the hands of terrorists and announced prison sentences for four Saudi nationals who had planned to join the fighting in Iraq.

The government also announced nascent institutional changes this summer. In July, the chief of the controversial religious police told personnel that eradicating extremist ideas and confronting those who promote terrorist principles would now be among their most significant duties. "Your mission is no longer confined to monitoring shops that remain open during prayer times or instructing women to adhere to modest dress codes," he said. And earlier this month, the Interior Ministry declared that new security screenings would be required for preachers; this would presumably include screening them for support of militant ideology. Meanwhile, the kingdom's highest religious body, the Council of Senior Scholars, announced it was establishing an interactive platform in which religious leaders will engage citizens to combat terrorist rhetoric aimed at luring youths into fighting abroad. The announcement came days after King Abdullah issued a rare public rebuke of the council for not doing enough to counter extremism.

Complementing these specific initiatives has been a sharpened focus on the dangers of supporting terrorists in recent speeches by the king and religious leaders, opinion columns in the government-sanctioned press, and television programs on state-supported channels. Lately, the ISIS threat has been identified specifically.

SECURITY TROUBLES

Many of these policy changes were apparently triggered by new concerns about the security implications of citizen support for terrorist groups abroad as well as basic border security. In May, Riyadh announced that it had uncovered terrorist plots to assassinate government officials and attack national and foreign interests in the country. Sixty-two suspects were reportedly arrested, almost all Saudi nationals. According to the Interior Ministry, some of them had been encouraged by Saudi ISIS members in Syria to carry out assassinations. Other suspects were believed to be supporting the Yemen-based affiliate al-Qaeda in the Arabia Peninsula (AQAP) in fundraising and logistics. As of May, Riyadh said it was still hunting for forty-four more suspects in the plots.

The case recalled the kingdom's harrowing experience with domestic terrorism in the mid-2000s, when Saudis who had joined al-Qaeda in Afghanistan brought the jihad home after escaping the U.S. war there. More recently, Saudis have been highly represented in ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra -- hundreds are believed to have flocked to each group, perhaps more than a thousand to ISIS alone.

The lightning-fast ISIS conquest of parts of Iraq in June, coupled with the group's gains in Syria, have aggravated the threat. Riyadh boosted security along its border with Iraq in June, while ISIS showed its determination to penetrate other countries when it seized a Lebanese border town earlier this month.

Meanwhile, to the south, half a dozen AQAP members (all Saudi nationals) attacked a checkpoint from the Yemeni side of the border on July 4, killing several Saudi security officers and one Yemeni officer. Two terrorists made their way past the border and blew themselves up inside a Saudi government building several dozen miles north. This was AQAP's first incursion into the kingdom since its 2009 assassination attempt on Prince Muhammad bin Nayef al-Saud, the assistant interior minister at the time.

To make matters worse, Riyadh has discovered that some of the suspects arrested in May, and most of the assailants in July, graduated from the country's well-regarded rehabilitation program for terrorists. Last month, the Interior

Ministry reportedly indicated that 10 percent of those who attend the program return to extremism. And in 2010, the kingdom noted that the figure was 20 percent for former Guantanamo Bay detainees who attended the program. Non-Saudi estimates may be higher, but even Riyadh's figures are significant given that thousands have passed through the correctional center.

PUBLIC SUPPORT?

Riyadh is concerned about the extent of public support for ISIS. Recently, an informal poll released on social networking sites indicated that Saudis overwhelmingly believe ISIS "conforms to the values of Islam and Islamic law." In response, the government plans to survey citizen positions on the "caliphate" that ISIS declared in Iraq and Syria in June. Surveys on political topics are a rarity in the kingdom, but a 2009 poll conducted there found that 20 percent expressed a "somewhat favorable" or "favorable" view of al-Qaeda.

U.S. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Washington should work with Saudi Arabia on its recent initiatives to diminish support for terrorism so that Riyadh's measures have maximum influence abroad, especially in Iraq and Syria. This entails doubling down on intelligence sharing and fine-tuning any coordination of information operations and other activities against ISIS and similar groups, with the goal of rolling back terrorist gains and thwarting terrorist agendas in these countries. The terrorist challenge in Iraq and Syria carries major implications for U.S. interests abroad and at home, and Saudi Arabia holds special influence in these countries through tribal and other linkages. This influence is particularly important at a time when many Sunni populations are afraid to participate in anti-ISIS action.

At the same time, Washington must also continue to be mindful of Riyadh's failure to distinguish militancy from peaceful political expression in defining terrorism, and its antipathy to democratic agendas in neighboring countries. U.S. officials must ensure that enhanced intelligence capabilities are not employed against nonviolent political activists, including those whose calls for political reform Washington supports.

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