

JTIC Briefing:

Jeddah Attack Underscores Fall in Capabilities of Saudi Militants

by [Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](#)

Michael Knights is the Jill and Jay Bernstein Fellow of The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, and the Persian Gulf states. He is a co-founder of the Militia Spotlight platform, which offers in-depth analysis of developments related to the Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria.



Articles & Testimony

The 6 December 2004 assault on the US consulate in Jeddah ended six months of relative calm in the Kingdom and provided an unwelcome reminder that the Al-Qaeda movement is down but not out in the region. Michael Knights analyses whether the attack was an unsuccessful anomaly or the leading edge of a new resurgence of terrorism in Saudi Arabia.

The audacious attack on the US consulate in Jeddah -- one of the most heavily protected facilities in Saudi Arabia -- seemed to fly in the face of prevailing trends concerning the growing amateurism of Saudi terrorists and their migration to soft targets. If the attack represents the first of a series of carefully planned attacks on hardened facilities, it is also a trend break and signals a serious increase in the risk of political violence facing diplomatic, government and oil industry targets in the Kingdom. If, on the other hand, it was a relatively ineffective one-of-a-kind spectacular, it can be treated as further evidence of declining terrorist capabilities in Saudi Arabia. A detailed analysis of the Jeddah attack yields important pointers concerning the evolving intentions and capabilities of terrorists in the Kingdom.

Reconstructing the attack

The attack began at approximately 11:15 on a Monday morning. The five-man terrorist group was travelling in a single car, following a US consulate vehicle through heavy midday traffic. At the time of the attack, both gates of the US consulate were directly accessible from the main roads surrounding the compound, with moving and stationary traffic passing within three metres of the entrance. As the US consulate vehicle passed over the depressed "delta barriers" (rising anti-vehicle bollards) and the consulate gate opened, the assailants swerved out of the traffic lane into the vehicle entrance. As the delta barriers automatically raised behind the consulate vehicle, the terrorists were forced to leave their car and enter the compound on foot through the slowly closing vehicle gate. The attackers threw pipe bombs at the Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG) armoured car and machine-gun post outside the gate, stunning the defenders and allowing the attackers to enter the consulate grounds. Once inside the gate, the terrorists were immediately engaged by an armed Saudi security guard employed by the embassy, who shot and killed one

terrorist before being immediately killed by small-arms fire himself. The delay created by the delta barriers and the gatehouse guard stations proved vital in alerting the US Marine security detachment, which rapidly withdrew its personnel from the prefabricated Marine house and secured all US staff in safe rooms within the Chancery. While SANG guards secured the consulate gates, Saudi Arabian Ministry of Interior special forces were dispatched to the compound.

Once inside the consulate grounds, the terrorists do not appear to have had a detailed plan of attack or even a sophisticated understanding of the interior layout of the compound. In an episode reminiscent of the 29 May 2004 rampage in Khobar, the attackers were forced to ask local consulate staff about the location of US citizens within the compound. Sources involved in the post-attack inquiry told Jane's that a number of terrorists were carrying machetes and video cameras, indicating that they were seeking out US citizens with the intent of decapitating one or more of their captives, either immediately or as part of a hostage-taking scenario. At this point, approximately 20 minutes into the attack, almost all US citizens had been secured within the defended 'hard line' of the Chancery building. The only exception was Vice Consul Monica Lemieux, who was travelling in the car that the terrorists had followed into the compound. After receiving a light gunshot wound making her escape, Lemieux was hidden by non-US consulate staff and remained outside the 'hard line' and in touch with consulate staff on her mobile phone throughout the attack. The first location visited by the terrorists was the empty Marine house, which was set ablaze with pipe bombs, creating the pall of smoke visible throughout central Jeddah. At the same time, the US flag was lowered and partially burned. Thereafter, the terrorists sought to breach the armoured main entrance of the Chancery, known as Post One. When small-arms failed to damage the locked and bullet-proofed doors, the terrorists started shooting out the upper-story windows of the Chancery, wounding one US citizen and spreading panic within the building.

Less than half an hour into the attack, the terrorists abandoned their primary objective of seizing or killing US victims and turned on the non-US consulate staff. Seventeen hostages were seized, including Saudi visa applicants and non-US consulate staff from the visa applications department and motor pool. At least one hostage, the Yemeni driver of Consul General Gina Abercrombie-Winstanley, was immediately shot dead. Using the guardroom phone, the terrorists used the threat to hostages to hold off an assault by Saudi security forces. The attackers then confiscated all mobile phones held by the hostages and gathered or disconnected all other phones in the outbuildings they planned to defend. Helicopter reconnaissance preceded the arrival of Saudi Arabian special forces, which were heavily delayed by midday traffic and began their rapid assault approximately an hour and 20 minutes after the terrorists entered the compound. According to a senior source within the consulate, surviving non-US staff recounted being used as human shields during the ensuing fire fight, with the terrorists firing over the shoulders of their captives. Two of the terrorists were killed in the fight, with a third dying later in hospital and the fourth being captured alive. Four Saudi special forces were wounded, four hostages were killed and a further 10 wounded in the crossfire. Following the fire fight, Saudi special forces undertook a methodical clearance of the compound.

Mismatched terrorist intentions and capabilities

The Jeddah attack shows that Al-Qaeda recognises the propaganda value of attacking high-value targets in the Arabian peninsula, such as US diplomatic installations, but it does not follow that terrorist cells in Saudi Arabia will regularly favour hardened targets. When the Jeddah attack is situated within a longer-term pattern of terrorist activity at the regional and local levels, it looks less like an audacious and well-planned attack, and more like a desperate and rushed publicity stunt. The Al-Qaeda has been under intense pressure to execute a successful high-profile attack on a US target following a trying year of aggressive Saudi counterterrorist efforts, repeated leadership losses and internal divisions over targeting strategy. In the interim between the 29 May 2004 rampage in Khobar and the 6 December Jeddah attack, the organisation lapsed into an operational coma, unable to centrally direct attacks

and instead relying on its scattered cells to launch opportunistic attacks against soft targets in response to its online communiques. The Jeddah attack sought to demonstrate that Al-Qaeda retained the capability to undertake centrally planned missions against hard targets in the Arabian peninsula, with the intention of killing non-Muslim foreigners rather than Saudi citizens or other Muslims. In a communique posted in online publications such as Sawt al-Jihad (Voice of Jihad) and Mu'askar al-Battar (Al-Battar Training Camp), Al-Qaeda hinted at the symbolic nature of the attack, stating: "Know that the Mujahideen are determined to continue on their path, and they will not be weakened by what has happened to them."

In fact, a detailed analysis of the Jeddah attack suggests just the opposite. Although Al-Qaeda has demonstrated its ability to task a local cell in the Arabian peninsula with a symbolic attack on a hard target, the execution of the Jeddah attack contains further indicators of declining terrorist capabilities in the Kingdom. According to a US Department of State official involved in post-attack analysis, a review of the consulate's gate camera footage showed that the terrorists undertook "days rather than weeks" of reconnaissance, failing to correctly understand how the delta barriers worked, or to gain any deeper insight into the internal layout of the compound or the security measures barring entry to the Chancery. The poor positioning of the consulate on a heavy traffic road allowed hundreds of cars to loiter close to the vehicles gates on a given day, precluding any meaningful countersurveillance effort against the simple surveillance effort of the assailants. The attack plan was both flawed and under-resourced. Although the small terrorist group successfully surprised the SANG outposts at the gate, there was neither the opportunity nor any apparent intent to open the "delta barriers" to bring a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (IED) or ramming vehicle within the compound to breach the Chancery. The small-arms used were insufficient to break through even a single armoured glass door and no improvisation or search for other entrances was attempted once the attackers failed to breach Post One. While the terrorists had envisioned and carefully prepared for the initial penetration and the final hostage-taking parts of the attack, they had no workable plan to find US staff members or penetrate the Chancery.

A closer look at the attackers and their operational learning environment explains their lack of sophistication and is emblematic of the increasing amateurism of terrorist operatives in Saudi Arabia. The group's leader, Fayez ibn Awwad Al-Jeheni, a former member of Saudi religious police (the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice), and two other members identified by the Saudi authorities were all young men in their twenties, residents of Jeddah's Al-Jamia suburb and other slums on Saudi Arabia's increasingly urbanised west coast. None of the men had formal military training in the Saudi security forces, nor does it appear that they received extensive training in foreign jihads in Iraq or elsewhere. Indeed, Saudi sources claim that Al-Jeheni was kept under surveillance by the Muhabith (General Security Service intelligence directorate) for 11 of the 14 months since his release from detention in October 2003. These features make the Jeddah group an excellent example of the so-called third generation of Islamist terrorists associated with the Al-Qaeda cause, who are typically men in their twenties, most of whom have never taken up arms before and were too young to join the first generation in the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan or the second generation in subsequent struggles in the Caucasus, the Balkans and elsewhere.

Such third generation recruits are highly reliant on their connection with local first or second generation facilitators, yet these linkmen have been repeatedly killed in fire fights with government security forces, preventing the establishment of stable cells, the centralised targeting of attacks, or the development of articulated terrorist activities, such as the supply of improved explosive devices made in specialised bomb-making shops. Following the killing of four senior terrorists from Saudi Arabia's most wanted list in Jeddah on 24 April 2004, local cells undertook haphazard and failure-prone minor operations throughout the following months. An unsuccessful shooting attack on a US Marine visiting the Saudi American Bank was followed by a failed attempt to simultaneously explode car bombs at Saudi American Bank and Saudi British Bank branches in Jeddah to commemorate the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the US, which was derailed when one of the very small IED prematurely exploded and the other

failed to damage its target. When intelligence indicators later pointed to a forthcoming attack on a foreign compound (believed to be a residential compound in Obhor), Saudi security forces once again disrupted local terrorist facilitators. On 9 November, the security forces killed Sultan Al-Otaibi, a terrorist from the most wanted list, and captured three others. On 27 November a further member of the most wanted list, Issam Qassem Mubarak, was also captured in Jeddah. Thereafter, although the Al-Qaeda had the ability to centrally direct a local cell in the Arabian peninsula to attack a specified hard target, preventative activity by the security forces denied the Al-Qaeda affiliate the local capability to properly train the assailants or to equip them with a workable plan or effective armament.

Outlook

The Jeddah attack shows that protective security will not always deter terrorists from striking hard targets, even if the attack is highly unlikely to succeed. Although a tactical and operational failure, the attack succeeded in attracting attention to the activities of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian peninsula and casting a shadow over a successful government counterterrorist effort in the latter half of 2004. At the same time, the attack showed that effective protective security can greatly reduce or even fully negate the impact of such attacks, which are likely to be repeated on a sporadic basis. The key lesson, however, is that, despite its 18 December 2004 communique calling on cell members to target oil installations, Al-Qaeda has been seriously disrupted and continues to lack the capability to carry out effective attacks against hard targets. The majority of terrorist attacks in Saudi Arabia are likely to continue to affect the kinds of soft targets that are accessible to dispersed groups of young men who receive their inspiration from the internet communique issued by global and regional terrorist leaders, have little or no contact with regional facilitators, and therefore make their own calculations about what kinds of targets they can engage with the limited means at their disposal. While local third-generation attackers display the motive but neither the means nor the opportunity to strike serious blows, instances of anti-Western kidnappings, shootings, knifings, deliberate vehicle ramming and physical or verbal assaults are likely to rise. Such terrorists will continue to focus their attacks on foreign expatriates in transit, occasionally attacking expatriate gathering places when security is lax, making the Jeddah attack an anomaly rather than the shape of things to come.

Michael Knights is the Mendelow Defence Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

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