

The al-Qaeda Challenge to Saudi Arabia

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Brief Analysis

As a result of the 2001 U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, the al-Qaeda network now consists of small, local, and autonomous affiliate groups that attack domestic and Western targets alike. Ties between affiliate groups and the former al-Qaeda core is largely informal. For example, recent attacks have been claimed by affiliates such as Salafiya Jihadiya in Morocco and Ansar al-Islam and the Abu Musab al-Zarqawi network in Iraq.

A relatively new affiliate group calling itself "al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula" (hereinafter AQAP) has recently emerged in Saudi Arabia. The group has launched attacks against both the regime and Westerners in the kingdom, culminating in the grisly beheading of American Paul Johnson in June. Although the group has only a few hundred fighters, it appears to maintain a large support base among Saudis. Most Saudis abhor the grisly violence, but the combination of anger over the Iraq war and the dangerous Saudi wahhabi culture could ensure the group's survival.

Until recently, the leader of AQAP was Abdel Aziz al-Muqrin; Saudi security forces killed him in late June. Al-Muqrin was associated with al-Qaeda activities in Bosnia and, later, in Algeria, where he was captured and sent to Saudi Arabia to serve four years in prison. He was released early for good behavior and for memorizing the Qur'an. (Interestingly, other terrorists have been released from prison under similar circumstances; Jordan released Zarqawi from prison under a general amnesty in 1999, and Cairo released Egyptian Islamic Jihad leader Ayman al-Zawahri in the early 1980s). Upon his release, he went to Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, but he was forced back into Saudi Arabia after the U.S. invasion. Like other jihadis returning from Afghanistan to their respective host countries, al-Muqrin helped form an al-Qaeda affiliate group that posed challenges to the local regime.

Saleh al-Oufi, a former Saudi prison officer, has emerged as the new leader of AQAP. He sees attacks against the Saudi regime as more important than the concurrent jihad in Iraq. He rejects the government's amnesty to militants, declaring it a sign of weakness. Indeed, Riyadh would be well advised to look at Algeria's attempts to use amnesties as a means of halting violence by al-Qaeda affiliates. Some five years after that country's amnesty deadline, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat and the Armed Islamic Group continue to kill hundreds of people. Therefore, although an amnesty may spur a short-term drop in attacks in Saudi Arabia, the kingdom should expect more

propaganda and violence from AQAP in the future.

THOMAS LIPPMAN

Reform in Saudi Arabia

The Saudi government faces a long list of impending difficulties, including uncontrolled population growth, economic stagnation, uncertainties about leadership, continued dependence on petroleum exports, and an inadequate education system that produces xenophobic minds ill prepared to participate in the global economy. Despite these long-term difficulties, short-term indicators suggest that Riyadh is permitting reform in various sectors. Internet cafes are immensely popular in Saudi cities, especially among the younger generation. Although some Saudi youths concentrate on Islamist websites, they nevertheless have access to outside news and other information. Riyadh is also permitting open discussion of social problems such as the once-taboo subjects of spousal and child abuse. Modest political liberalization is also emerging; the Majlis al-Shura (Consultative Assembly) now initiates legislation rather than simply responding to initiatives from the king and cabinet.

Yet, many of these reforms, considered progressive for the kingdom, are the very policies that drive militant opposition. Although the fraction of Saudis who support or participate in violence is quite small, discontent is widespread. So far, the kingdom's violent extremists have offered neither a political program nor viable political alternatives, and have therefore gained only limited traction. Nevertheless, the regime faces a significant challenge from elements claiming to represent a form of purer Islam. The government's leading role in the global oil market and dependence on foreign labor, particularly non-Muslim contractors, are used by extremist factions as justifications for violence. The Iraq crisis has played into the hands of such factions as well, providing terrorist groups with the opportunity to reiterate their claim that a hostile Western alliance is attacking the Muslim world.

Saudi security forces have responded relatively strongly to recent violence. Indeed, the regime's June 2004 amnesty offer should be viewed as an ultimatum; in the short term, the regime will not compromise with al-Qaeda affiliates or any other group that resorts to violence. At the same time, the kingdom has not seen the end of such violence, and, despite initial reforms, the government has not yet responded adequately to societal demands.

SIMON HENDERSON

The Saudi Political Crisis

Although the Saudi regime has survived political crises in the past (e.g., the 1975 assassination of King Faisal and the 1979 seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca), the current leadership is characterized by a substantially older and less productive group of decisionmakers. The regime survived the crises of the 1970s because a cadre of senior princes knew what had to be done and took control of volatile situations. The problem today stems from the old age of these same leaders, who were once more competent -- King Fahd is eighty-three years old, Crown Prince Abdullah is eighty-one, and Prince Sultan is eighty. The traditional consensus-style decisionmaking in the kingdom, which is traditionally slow, is now even slower and less effective. The regime is thus in a state of relative uncertainty. The impending death of key figures has resulted in intensified palace politics, with rival nephews battling one another for future positions.

Saudi Arabia's current crisis centers on the regime's Islamic legitimacy. The royal family uses its version of Islam and the fatwas (decrees) of the Grand Mufti to argue that Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda network are religiously illegitimate. Recent fatwas issued by Saudi clerics claim that terrorism (and the provision of aid thereof) are un-Islamic. The state also uses political rhetoric against opposition forces. After a May 2004 attack on the Yanbu refining complex, Crown Prince Abdullah alleged that Zionists were "probably responsible." In a sense, this is perhaps the harshest insult that can be aimed at bin Laden -- it insinuates that he shares similar intentions with Zionists.

For their part, bin Laden and al-Qaeda regard the royal family as financially and religiously corrupt, and therefore as inappropriate custodians of Mecca and Medina. It is difficult to understand why, if al-Qaeda's stated purpose is to remove the royal family from power, it has not yet mounted a single attack on a prince. Perhaps there is a tacit understanding that such attacks would be entirely unacceptable to the Saudi population at large, who are relatively tolerant of attacks against expatriates working in the kingdom.

In any case, the current Saudi reforms are, at most, a sideshow. If the regime truly pushes for reform, it will inspire al-Qaeda and its sympathizers to increase attacks. Small, mostly insubstantial reforms serve to placate both the United States and the minority reformist element in Saudi Arabia. Official statements advocating elections, democracy, and liberalization are also aimed at appeasing these factions. In order to preserve its authority, the regime will continue to use extended family and tribal techniques to neutralize potential opponents.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Todd Orenstein, a Dr. Marcia Robbins-Wilf scholar at The Washington Institute.

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