

# The Broader Threat from Sunni Islamists in the Gulf

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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## Brief Analysis

On July 14, 2004, Bahraini security forces arrested seven suspected terrorists accused of planning "to carry out bombings on some government, economic, and tourist facilities to spread chaos and fear and harm the national economy and foreign investments." The arrests targeted a group of Sunni radicals of the extremist Salafi sect who had received their religious training in Saudi Arabia. This development marks an important geographical expansion of the terrorist threat in the Persian Gulf. It also highlights the potential for an emerging nexus between radical Islamist overspill from Saudi Arabia and a growing sense of Sunni disenfranchisement and traditionalist backlash in the modernizing smaller Gulf states.

## Background

In contrast to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, the smaller Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states -- Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) -- have seen a low incidence of transnational terrorism over the past decade. Instead, the key internal threats facing these states have traditionally been sectarian or geographic separatism (e.g., Bahrain's Shi'i population or Oman's Dhofari region), palace coups, or organized crime. The disruption of a Sunni terrorist cell in Bahrain points to an evolving threat -- that of homegrown dissent from within the predominant Sunni ruling communities in certain Gulf states, particularly Bahrain and Qatar. Both countries are vital to U.S. efforts to encourage democratic reform in the Middle East. In Bahrain, King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa's reform program saw the country become a kingdom in February 2002, beginning its transition toward a form of constitutional monarchy. Yet, that process faces opposition from Sunni hardliners and elite security figures such as the king's uncle, Prime Minister Shaykh Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa. Qatar, the most pro-American state in the Gulf, promotes democratic reforms and a Western-oriented educational system while simultaneously hosting a wide range of Islamic fundamentalists and the al-Jazeera television network.

## Bahrain's Salafist Threat

Six of the seven suspects detained on July 14 had previously been arrested on June 22, but were released within two days in accordance with Bahrain's new criminal justice procedures. Between July 1 and 4, the U.S. State and Defense Departments alerted American citizens to avoid unnecessary travel to Bahrain and withdrew approximately 900

nonessential personnel and their families. The stated reason for these actions was that the United States had "received information that extremists are planning attacks against U.S. and other Western interests in the Kingdom of Bahrain"; specifically, "credible information indicates that extremists remain at large and are planning attacks in Bahrain." The twenty-day gap between the June 22 and July 14 arrests likely resulted from two factors. First, the Bahraini government has attempted to improve domestic and international perceptions of its human rights practices, as seen in the new National Assembly's active focus on political freedoms and the government's keenness to bring boycotting social groups into the political process. Indeed, on May 22, King Hamad replaced his interior minister, Shaykh Muhammad bin Khalifa bin Hamad al-Khalifa, after Public Security Force personnel broke up a predominantly Shi'i protest against coalition operations in Shi'i areas of Iraq. Second, the Bahraini internal political scene is characterized by a split in the Sunni royal family between King Hamad's reform agenda and more conservative elements grouped under Prime Minister Shaykh Khalifa. The latter camp remains more focused on the threat of Shi'i political activism than on the growing threat of Salafist radicalism within an increasingly threatened Sunni minority.

King Hamad's reform process promises to foster a more inclusive era in which Shi'is and some expatriates enjoy equal status with the Sunnis that make up the current government and security elite. At the same time, this process is already nurturing a growing sense of Sunni disenfranchisement in the government and among merchants. These sentiments are in turn merging with the traditionalist current in Bahrain's Sunni community. The July 14 arrests show that Salafists trained in Saudi Arabia continue to pose a threat as they return to their native communities elsewhere in the Gulf, where they may exploit growing sectarian or economic grievances developing within local Sunni communities. As early as 1996, the Bahraini government established its Islamic High Council in large part to regulate the sermons and activities of Sunni mosques suspected of inciting vigilantism against video stores and other purported sources of Western corruption. Currently, seven Salafists hold seats in Bahrain's forty-member elected National Assembly. The Bahraini Security and Intelligence Service (SIS) maintains a small watch list of Salafists in the ruling Sunni community, including individuals who trained at seminaries in Saudi Arabia or who fought in Afghanistan or other jihadist causes. Three of the men arrested on July 14 had previously been arrested in February 2003 and held for four months during an investigation into an alleged plot to bomb the U.S. Fifth Fleet headquarters in Manama. A fourth man, detained after he made phone calls to other men on the SIS watch list, had previously been arrested in Saudi Arabia in July 2003 and held for nine months.

#### The Wahhabi Clique in Qatar

Qatar, Bahrain's neighbor, represents the most extreme dichotomy of any of America's Gulf allies. On the one hand, the country's hosting of U.S. command-and-control and airbase facilities makes it a critical U.S. military ally. On the other hand, the Qatari government sponsors the al-Jazeera television network and holds close ties to Wahhabi extremists. These links were forged under the reign of Emir Shaykh Khalifa bin Hamad al-Thani in the 1980s, when Qatar sheltered radical Wahhabi clerics exiled from Saudi Arabia after the Muslim Brotherhood's seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979. These clerics included Shaykh Abdullah bin Zaid al-Mahmod, a Wahhabi from Najd whom Emir Khalifa appointed as Qatar's senior cleric. Similarly, Interior Minister Shaykh Abdullah bin Khalifa al-Thani and his father before him were appointed from the Wahhabi clique within the Qatari establishment. This Wahhabi clique is still in charge and seeded the security establishment with personnel of their choosing. Qatar's willingness to give refuge to exiled Islamist terrorists and insurgents is well known -- most recently, it harbored the assassin of Chechen leader Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev who was killed in Doha on February 13, 2004. Both al-Qaeda planner Khalid Shaykh Mohammed and al-Qaeda affiliate Abu Musab al-Zarqawi transited Qatar in the 1990s. Indeed, current ruler Emir Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani's second eldest son, Shaykh Fahd bin Hamad al-Thani, effectively eliminated himself from contention for the throne due to his habit of surrounding himself with jihadists from the mujahedin resistance against the Soviet presence in Afghanistan during the 1980s. The Qatari

government's role in providing a safe haven for Islamic militants may explain why there has been only one reported incident of anti-Western terrorism on Qatari soil (the apparently spontaneous November 2001 shooting of two U.S. contractors at al-Udeid airbase). The hardline Wahhabi character of Qatar's security establishment has probably played a role in restraining terrorist operations within the country. If divisions were to emerge over the pace of reform, however, Qatar could be faced with the same scenario as Saudi Arabia -- a security apparatus that is slow or unwilling to deal with the threat from Sunni radicals in its midst.

### Policy Implications

The security establishments of Gulf nations are slowly realigning to the risks posed by radical segments of ruling Sunni communities. Currently, the stabilization of Iraq necessarily consumes most of the attention of U.S. military planners, and the high-profile terrorist threat in Saudi Arabia dominates the counterterrorism picture. Yet, the maintenance and expansion of U.S. military assistance and intelligence support to the smaller Gulf states is an essential part of any long-term strategy to safeguard U.S. personnel and interests in the Gulf. Terrorism migrates to countries that offer the least dangerous operating locations and the largest number of Western targets, both of which are present in the smaller Gulf states. The most critical trend is not the hundreds of jihadists retuning from Iraq to Saudi Arabia, but rather the thousands of radicalized Sunnis retuning from Saudi Arabia to their home countries. Political and economic reform and the effects of globalization are likely to unsettle many religious and traditionalist Sunni communities in the Gulf, creating favorable climates for expanded terrorist operations and the rise of radical Sunni political groups.

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