

Backing Kuwait's Stand against Terrorism

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Five firefights between Kuwaiti government forces and terrorist cells since January 10, 2005, have brought the hitherto low-profile issue of Kuwait's role in the war on terror to the fore. The incidents highlight the increased terrorist threat in a country that, in addition to attracting the normal commercial contingent of Western expatriates, plays the vital role of hosting an estimated 37,500 servicemen and military contractors supporting operations in Iraq.

Background

Since the jihad against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, Kuwait has had no shortage of militants willing to undertake violent acts in the name of Islam. After playing a part in armed resistance to Iraqi occupation, scores of young Kuwaiti militants joined the jihads in the Balkans, Caucasus, post-September 11 Afghanistan, and now Iraq. Kuwaiti militants draw on a range of motivations. The surviving 120 or so veterans of the original Soviet-era jihad in Afghanistan are under tight surveillance, but some of their sons and grandsons have sought out their own jihad experiences. Being too young to recall Palestinian support for the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, younger Kuwaitis have responded to continuous coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on Arab satellite television with increasing anger against the United States and the West. The growing tension between traditionalist tribal society and urban modernity is a further source of radicalization.

Development of the Terrorist Threat

A very small minority of Kuwaitis have consistently demonstrated the intent to engage in Islamic militancy. These elements have long lacked the capability to undertake serious terrorist activities, being cut off from the wider jihadist network as mosques and radicals alike fell under tight surveillance. As a result, younger Kuwaitis inspired to undertake violent acts by terrorist communiqués and news coverage of the Iraq and Israeli-Palestinian conflicts have lacked the ability to make contact with the broader al-Qaeda network or even with each other. Kuwaiti cells have been unable to achieve what terrorism analysts call the “articulation” of terrorist functions, referring to the development of specialist cells to undertake financing, bombmaking, planning, and attacks. Instead, the scattered and isolated groups of Kuwaitis with terrorist intentions have formed their own amateur cells and struck haphazardly at accessible targets using the weapons at hand, resulting in a rash of shooting incidents since 2002 that caused only two deaths. A number of such attacks were derailed without fatalities, including a plot that resulted in the court martial of two Kuwaiti officers arrested in late December 2004 on charges of conspiring to kill American soldiers while they undertook joint maneuvers with U.S. troops.

Lacking the specialist knowledge and materials to build effective improvised explosive devices, and without other advantages that attend the development of terrorist networks, Kuwaiti militants have traditionally constituted a manageable threat for hardened targets and even for unprotected expatriates in transit. The series of raids that took place in January, however, highlighted a qualitative increase in the level of threat, including evidence of the development of an articulated cell structure. On January 19, the Kuwaiti Security Services (KSS) discovered a bombmaking workshop in the Kuwait City suburb of Jaber al-Ali, where nine completed explosive devices were found packed into bags and ready for delivery.

Growing Salafist Involvement

The January raids also highlighted the increasing interconnectedness of Kuwaiti terrorist cells with the broader Salafist effort in the Persian Gulf. The number of Kuwaiti Salafists is currently low, comprising a radical fringe that is suppressed by the government and criticized by mainstream Islamist figures as well as urban liberals. That said, the spread of Salafist ideology would be a dangerous development in a country that plays a significant role in the Multinational Forces effort to stabilize Iraq and protect the Gulf, and that boasts a large and potentially restive Shiite minority (whom Salafists persecute as apostates). Since 2003, Kuwaiti Salafists have established a recruiting and transportation infrastructure to send jihadists to Iraq via Syria, as evidenced by the twenty-two Kuwaitis currently on trial for such activity. According to U.S. Central Command, at least eleven Kuwaitis have been killed in Iraq so far, and an additional forty to fifty are at large in the country.

Perhaps more significantly, Saudi terrorists from the so-called “Al-Qaeda Organization of the Arabian Peninsula” are entering Kuwait and assisting with the development of an articulated cell structure. The “Peninsula Lions”

group targeted by the January raids has been tentatively linked with the Saudi-based al-Haramain Brigade, a subgroup of the Al-Qaeda Organization of the Arabian Peninsula. Other reports suggest the presence of Kuwaiti cells named after Abdul Aziz al-Muqrin, the Salafist terrorist leader who ramped up the activities of Saudi terrorist groups before being killed in 2004. In addition, a January 15 raid on a terrorist hideout in Umm al-Haiman, near the Saudi border, resulted in the death of one Saudi national who was working with the cell and the capture of another, while a February 5 raid netted three Saudi and two Jordanian suspects. Alongside this circumstantial evidence, Kuwaiti National Guard commander Sheikh Salem al-Ali al-Sabah confirmed that the January raids targeted “a terrorist group that belongs to the al-Qaeda network,” adding “there is a connection with Saudi groups; borders are open and difficult to control.”

Policy Implications

Although firefights on Kuwaiti streets bring to mind the terrorist threat next door in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait faces far fewer near-term risks from terrorism if it takes effective counterterrorism action now. Unlike in Saudi Arabia, the Salafist community in Kuwait is small and can still be isolated from the broader Salafist network forming in the Gulf. Moreover, the recent disturbances in Kuwait were indicators of successful action against discovered cells, not actual terrorist attacks.

The U.S. government has a variety of counterterrorism and border security programs that offer a low-cost means of helping Kuwait develop counterterrorism capabilities of its own that do not threaten democratic reform. State Department-administered Anti-Terrorism Assistance (ATA) training emphasizes the practical elements of protecting personnel, facilities, and infrastructure from terrorist attack. It also helps states establish Memorandums of Understanding and intelligence-sharing agreements with their neighbors—an area of weakness for the Kuwaiti government, which has had difficulty coordinating border security measures with Saudi Arabia during the past year. ATA courses on crisis management could improve Kuwait's capability to defuse problems with minimum use of force, reducing damage to the country's reputation resulting from incidents such as alarming public shootouts. Kuwait could also benefit from Export Control and Related Border Assistance (EXBS) on its southern border with Saudi Arabia. Currently, Kuwait (like other Gulf Cooperation Council states) receives little assistance through such channels on the grounds that it is a wealthy country that does not require financial aid to support its counterterrorism efforts. Ongoing criticism of Kuwait's human rights record also plays a role. Although these arguments are strictly true, using them as a basis to withhold aid is short sighted, denying the United States a key avenue of influence for two critical endeavors: shaping Kuwait's counterterrorism response in a manner that balances security and human rights concerns, and improving the force protection environment for the many thousands of U.S. service personnel and civilians in Kuwait.

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