



# MIDDLE EAST INSIGHTS

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## RELUCTANT ENEMIES: SAUDI ARABIA AND TERRORISM

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There have been more than six terrorist attacks in 2015-16 on Saudi soil. The Islamic State (IS) claimed responsibility for all of them. This new wave of terrorism has mainly targeted the Shia minority in the oil rich Eastern province with only a couple of minor attacks on Saudi security forces in Asir, the south-western region, on the borders with Yemen. The majority of victims have so far been Shia worshippers, attacked in their own mosques during Friday prayers. In order to understand the current crisis of terrorism in Saudi Arabia, it is important to distinguish between the early al-Qaida episode and the current IS surge in sectarian killing. This distinction is important to assess how the Saudi regime reacts to the present threat and the contentious relationship between Saudi Arabia and terrorism.

This new wave of terrorism has no doubt a sectarian undertone different from a previous deadly round of attacks in 2003-2008, when al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula suicide bombers claimed the lives of hundreds of foreigners, including Westerners and Arabs, in addition to Saudis. The targets were residential compounds where foreign residents lived, in addition to government offices. In addition to shootouts in the various main cities, the American consulate in Jeddah was on one occasion a target of this episode. Under the slogan “remove the infidels from the Arabian Peninsula”, al-Qaida’s main aim at the time was to attack foreign, mainly American, interests in Saudi Arabia following the deadly attacks on 9/11 in New York and in retaliation for the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. al-Qaida’s launched attacks on what it called the far enemy, the US, and combined this with attacks on regimes, dubbed as near enemies, allied with the US such as Saudi Arabia. Hence many deadly attacks on Saudi security forces and buildings were carried out at the time. By 2008, the Saudi Ministry of Interior, together with other policing agencies managed to kill many terrorist operatives, arrest their ideologues, and push the rest of them to Yemen where they took refuge and announced the establishment of their new branch headquarters named as al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula.

Subsequently, Saudi Arabia enjoyed a short-lived peaceful time until the rise of the Islamic State first in Iraq and later in Syria. In June 2014, the Islamic State in Iraq announced from the main mosque in Mosul, Iraq, its Caliphate, a supra-national polity governed by Sharia. The Caliphate appointed Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as its first Caliph. The Caliphate called upon all Muslims, including those in Saudi Arabia, to pledge allegiance to the Caliph al-Baghdadi. IS had its origins in the turmoil that followed the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent rise of Jihadi movements, mainly al-Qaida at the time under the leadership of Jordanian Abu Musaab al-Zarqawi. Later IS fused Islamism with the remnants of Iraqi Baathists, who had lost power in Iraq after the American invasion in 2003. The demise of the Sunni communities of Iraq following the invasion and the rise of Shia power for the first time in the country’s modern history led to Jihad increasingly becoming sectarian, targeting the Shia not only in Iraq but also

beyond its borders. Many of those Sunni Jihadis began to target the Shia believed to be responsible for the demise of Sunnis across the Levant from Baghdad to Beirut, passing by Damascus. The new Caliph promised that the true centre of the Caliphate will be the land of the Two Holy Mosques, namely Saudi Arabia, where the holy cities of Mecca and Madina are found, thus sending shocking and alarming messages to Riyadh.

The new wave of Jihadi terrorism associated with IS has two interrelated dimensions. First, it quickly became global in its deadly operations, arriving at the shores of the Arab Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia and far beyond on the streets of Paris and other Western cities. By 2015, the Shia in both Kuwait and Saudi Arabia became its primary target. The new wave has so far not spread to Oman, the United Arab Emirates, or Qatar. Bahrain where, with Saudi support, the Sunni al-Khalifa rulers successfully suppressed a Shia uprising, has not been primary target.

Second, the global IS operation spaces are supplemented by global recruits and operatives. IS terrorism is carried out by a transnational community of Jihadis who invoke their global Muslim identity and pledge to liberate Muslims from their imagined oppressors, a large group of Arab leaders, the West, and above all the new enemy, namely the Shia and their Iranian backers. These Jihadis come from the Muslim world, and among Muslims in non-Muslim majority countries.

Saudi Arabia is surely represented by a cohort of around 2500 Jihadis who fled the country to participate in the new wave of Jihad in Syria. While it is difficult to find an accurate estimate of their numbers, Saudis are believed to be well-represented among those fighting in Syria and Iraq. The eagerness of Saudis to make the migratory Jihadi journey to the Levant is an embarrassment to the Saudi regime.

As an embarrassment, both the international community and lately Iran accuse the Saudi regime of sponsoring rebel groups in Syria with radical and sectarian Jihadi agenda, a fact that is denied by the authorities who insist that their support is for moderate Syrian rebels. While the line between radical and moderate rebels may not be so clear in a civil war like the one raging in Syria for several years, Saudi Arabia's established religious outlook, mainly the sectarian Wahhabi tradition share common characteristics with those Jihadis fighting in Syria. They both regard the Shia as heretic Muslims. They both share a literal interpretation of Islamic texts, applying severe Islamic punishments, and social conservatism when it comes to gender and application of Sharia. They both have zero tolerance for pluralism and religious diversity, and they despise the Shia and other minorities in Islam. Needless to say, they both do not believe in democracy.

The only difference between IS and Saudi Wahhabism is centred on the theological position a Muslim should adopt vis-a-vis an unjust Muslim ruler. The Saudi Wahhabis insist that Muslims should not carry arms against such a ruler in Saudi Arabia while such an armed rebellion is justified outside it, for example in Iraq, Syria and other locations, for example Afghanistan under Soviet occupation in the 1980s when the Saudi clerics and the regime had sponsored Saudis to go and fight there.

Today, it seems that both the Saudi regime and IS share a common enemy, mainly Iran and its backed militia. Both Caliph al-Baghdadi and Saudi King Salman loathe Iran and have pledged to defend Sunni Muslims around the globe, hence Saudi support for the Syrian rebels.

While the congruence of the shared ideology of sectarianism between Saudi Arabia and IS is an embarrassment for the regime in Riyadh, this makes Saudi pledges to fight IS problematic. At best, the international community does not seem to take these pledges seriously and at worst, commentators see them as half-hearted responses to international pressure and criticism that amounts in some instances to accusing the Saudis of sponsoring terrorism. On several occasions, Saudi Arabia rejected Iranian accusations that it sponsored terrorism.

In response to international pressure, Saudi Arabia joined the US led international anti-IS coalition in September 2014, after the rise of the Islamic State. However, it seems that joining the coalition was a symbolic gesture that was hardly making any difference at the level of fighting IS. The regime may have launched a limited number of joint airstrikes under an American umbrella but when it started the war in Yemen to fight the Iranian backed Houthi rebels in March 2015, its priorities shifted and its airstrikes on IS subsided. This war in Yemen was justified as a necessary step to curb Iranian backed Shia militia from threatening the southern borders of Saudi Arabia. However, King Salman may have also wanted to establish the credentials of his young son, minister of defence and deputy crown prince Muhammad bin Salman as the new face of Saudi military might. Currently, the credentials of the young prince are being tested in this difficult and perhaps almost impossible new war to win in Yemen. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia increasingly faced a crisis as a result of being seen as powerless when it came to dealing with the Iranian threat and the Shia hegemony in the Levant. After several years of supporting rebels in Syria, there is no success story that Saudi Arabia can claim as its backed rebels failed to topple the Assad regime or achieve even limited victory apart from claiming control of territories that are always in a state of flux and dispute between various rebel groups. In addition, the Saudi king could not tolerate the competition from IS when the latter is increasingly seen as the defender of Sunnis in Iraq and Syria. So the Saudi war on Yemen boosted King Salman's popularity at the domestic level and proved that the new Saudi leadership has abandoned the inertia associated with the late years of King Abdullah's reign.

To demonstrate its commitment to fighting IS terrorism after it struck in Saudi Arabia itself, in December 2015 the regime launched its own anti-terror coalition. This was dubbed as a new Muslim anti-IS coalition and the regime invited other Muslim countries to join. This new coalition remains ambiguous as a strategy and may be interpreted as yet another attempt by the Saudi regime to isolate Iran and seek Islamic backing against it rather than a real effort to fight IS terrorism. So far, the new coalition remains a kind of test for Saudi status in the Muslim world. The regime seems to be desperate to continuously reach out to Muslim countries, mainly Egypt, Pakistan and others in Asia for support and backing against Iran. Even in its war in Yemen, the regime struggled to assemble an Arab coalition willing to send ground troops to Yemen and seemed unwilling to go to war in Yemen alone. The Saudis counted on Gulf Cooperation Council members, and only a handful of willing countries outside the GCC promised support. Saudis seem to have failed to convince major Arab countries such as Egypt to actively participate in any ground offensive in Yemen. Similarly Pakistan was reluctant to join the Saudi war efforts for its own domestic reasons. So Saudi Arabia ended up fighting this war with the help of the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and other remote countries in Africa. It must be said that the main strategy of this war remains airstrikes rather than ground offensives, perhaps because of fear of serious casualties among Saudi troops should they be heavily deployed on the ground. Without substantial ground troops, the war in Yemen is still far from achieving its declared objectives, mainly the return of the exiled Yemeni government to Sanaa and the end of the Iranian backed Houthi rebellion. Instead, the war has led to serious Yemeni civilian deaths and the near total destruction of the poor Yemeni infrastructure. More importantly, it seems that only al-Qaida and other Jihadi groups, possibly IS, has benefitted from the Saudi airstrikes in Yemen as they consolidated their position in areas where the Saudi coalition achieved some kind of success, for example in Aden. Once again, the puzzle of Saudi pledges to fight terrorism resurfaces here in Yemen given that its airstrikes have in fact consolidated al-Qaida and other Jihadi groups rather than eliminated terrorism or defeated the Houthis.

As Saudi pledges to fight IS are often received with suspicion even among Saudi allies like the US for the reasons explained above, the regime wanted to reassert its commitment to the task when it announced in February 2016 that it is now ready to send ground troops to Syria

under the US umbrella to fight IS. On 6 February 2016? Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Jubeir made the announcement after a meeting with US Foreign Secretary John Kerry: "There is a discussion with regard to a ground force contingent, or a special forces contingent, to operate in Syria [under the] international US-led coalition against [IS]. ... The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has expressed its readiness to provide special forces to such operations should they occur."

There is also skepticism among Western diplomats. One such diplomat described the plan as lacking credibility. The Financial Times quoted one anonymous Western diplomat saying that the plan to send ground troops to Syria is that of Defense Minister and Deputy Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman and as such we should expect a new level of unpredictability and erratic behaviour.

But the harshest criticism came from Saudi Arabia's regional rival, Iran. Iran was expectedly the first country to doubt Saudi capabilities when it comes to fighting on the ground in Syria. Iranian officials described the Saudi announcement as "fatal and suicidal". As the balance of power shifted in favour of the Assad regime only months after the beginning of Russian airstrikes in support of the regime, Saudi Arabia and its supported rebel groups seem to be under tremendous pressure. Perhaps to salvage its reputation both domestically and internationally, the Saudi regime feels compelled to make an announcement to fight IS with ground troops but in fact if ever it sends these ground troops, they will certainly be there to strengthen the rebels against the Syrian regime rather than fight IS, as claimed by Saudi officials.

Needless to say that the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran does not only fuel sectarian terrorism but threatens to divide the Muslim world as neither country is willing to negotiate its sphere of influence and reach a modus vivendi with the other. Only accommodation between the two countries can seriously bring some of the regional conflicts in the Arab world closer to being contained and may one day get resolved. Neither an Islamic coalition nor confrontation in proxy wars between the two countries in the hot regions of the Arab world from Sanaa to Damascus promise an imminent resolution. Conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Yemen have become hostage to this Saudi-Iranian regional rivalry, with an increasing potential for more serious conflicts erupting beyond containment.

Saudi Arabia has proved its capabilities when it comes to fighting terrorism as it successfully eliminated the danger of al-Qaida on its own soil by 2008. Whether it will succeed in its declared war against IS terrorism will remain to be seen. So far, this terrorism has not targeted state institutions in a big way despite some minor attacks on Saudi security forces inside the country since 2015.

As long as this new wave of sectarian terrorism remains confined to Shia areas inside Saudi Arabia and does not spill over to reach mainstream society or state institutions, it seems the Saudi regime is willing to live with such low intensity warfare that is only felt among the Shia minority. Of course such attacks undermine the regime's credibility and its ability to protect its own minorities but the regime may be willing to live with this reality as long as it remains safe. This prompts us to think of Saudi Arabia and terrorism as reluctant enemies.

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