

Saudi Arabia: Terror threat reduced – for time being

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EVENT: Security forces yesterday killed five militants who were involved in last week's failed terrorist attack on the Abqaiq oil processing plant.

SIGNIFICANCE: Although the details are not yet entirely clear, these events seem to provide further confirmation that Al-Qaida on the Arabian Peninsula (QAP) is a much weakened organisation. Although the systematic violence against Westerners of 2003 and 2004 raised questions over the regime's ability to protect expatriate workers and vital oil installations, much has changed since then. However, there is still concern that returnees from Iraq will destabilise Saudi Arabia in the future.

CONCLUSION: The threat of terrorism is low and will remain so for some time, because QAP is severely weakened and new recruits are mostly going to Iraq instead of joining the local campaign. Oil-related targets are the most likely focus for any further attacks. However, violence may resurge if arrested militants are released too quickly or if Saudi Iraq veterans start coming home in large numbers.

ANALYSIS: Since May 2003, Islamist militants have waged a terrorist campaign against Westerners and local security forces in Saudi Arabia (see OADB, September 16, 2005, III.). Al-Qaida on the Arabian Peninsula (QAP) has carried out a series of car bombings, shooting sprees and individual assassinations. There have also been regular shootouts between police and militants. A total of almost 300 people -- 90 civilians (of whom 21 were Westerners), 40 police and 150 militants --- have been killed so far.

Key assumptions

-- QAP was never a large insurgent group -- approximately 500 militants started the campaign. It is now losing operatives faster than it is recruiting new ones.

-- QAP's operational and planning capability seems to be

decreasing, as evidenced by the ambitious but unrealistic nature of its last two attacks, on Abqaiq and the Interior Ministry (in December 2004).

-- The last two attacks also suggest that QAP has grown fearful of causing extensive civilian casualties, having quickly antagonised both the general population and the Islamist community at the start of its campaign.

-- Saudi counter-terrorism capabilities have greatly improved since 2003, although there are still shortcomings.

-- The lure of jihad in Iraq has affected QAP recruitment for the time being, but could pose a separate threat in future if Saudi militants return in numbers.

Return from Afghanistan. Between 1998 and 2001, several thousand Saudis went to al-Qaida's training camps in Afghanistan. After the US-led invasion in late 2001, 500-1,000 militants were forced to return to their native Saudi Arabia. Osama bin Laden instructed key returnees to make preparations for a local terrorist campaign:

-- In 2002, senior militants collected weapons, rented safe houses, established training camps and recruited members. Most recruits had already been to Afghanistan.

-- In late 2002, the prospect of a war in Iraq combined with the government crackdown on local militants further radicalised the jihadists.

-- In early 2003, the central al-Qaida leadership ordered its Saudi branch to launch jihad on the Arabian Peninsula.

Organisational structure. In May, 2003, Yusuf al-Ayiri was the undisputed leader of the QAP. He headed a cadre of 5-10 senior militants each of whom was responsible for a cluster of cells, whose structures were often shaped by old social networks or friendships forged in Afghan training camps.

Al-Ayiri ensured a degree of central coordination and maintained contact with bin Laden. However, he and several key commanders were killed in the first few months of the campaign. From mid-2003 onwards, the QAP had no central leadership and no regular contact with bin Laden. Remaining senior commanders continued to lead their respective cell clusters. The only central point in

the network was the well-protected media committee. It ran a massive internet-based PR campaign and created the impression of a large and coherent organisation.

Global jihadist ideology. The QAP sees itself as the Saudi branch of a global jihadist movement led by bin Laden. The primary aim of the QAP is to "cleanse the Arabian Peninsula of Crusaders and Zionists", rather than to topple the regime. Militants attack police targets because the latter are seen as protecting the Westerners. It considers the deployment of US troops in Saudi Arabia in 1990 as an occupation and a sacrilege. The use of these military bases in the recent wars on Afghanistan and Iraq added insult to injury.

In the beginning, QAP ideologues explicitly said they were not fighting the government. However, they would fight anyone who stood between them and the enemy. As the campaign evolved, the QAP became entrenched in a bitter struggle with the Saudi security forces. From December, 2003 onwards, it launched several attacks against police targets to avenge killed and captured comrades.

Afghan experience. Nearly all QAP members had been to Afghanistan. The senior leaders were in their 30s and had experience from the 1980s Afghan war, Bosnia or Chechnya. Several of them knew each other from the 'Airport camp' near Kandahar in Afghanistan, where they had trained in the late 1990s. However, most members were in their early 20s and had travelled to Afghanistan between 1999 and 2001. There were some new recruits without foreign jihad experience, but they had mainly logistical roles.

The prominence of Afghan Arabs is key to understanding both the rise and fall of the organisation, since their exile and their radicalisation made them an alien element on the local Islamist scene. The vast majority were lower middle class, and very few had completed their studies. Recruits were from all regions and all major tribes. The vast majority were Saudis, though some were foreigners (Yemenis, Moroccans, Chadians).

Strategic advantages. During the campaign, the QAP had three main strategic advantages:

-- It had a long time to prepare. The militants had been collecting weapons since the 1990s. In 2002 they established safe houses in virtually every part of the country.

-- Saudi Arabia is difficult to police. The territory is vast. Desert zones have tens of thousands of so-called 'rest houses' where militants could hide. Practically all citizens wear the same clothes. Searching and detaining women is culturally sensitive.

-- Police and security forces were untrained and unprepared. On several occasions, incompetent special forces increased casualties and facilitated the militants' escape.

Disadvantages. The militants also had two fundamental disadvantages:

-- The state has unlimited material resources and access to US technical assistance.

-- It is difficult to attack Western targets without killing Saudis and other Muslims. This made it easy for the state to harness public opinion against the militants.

The QAP has been in gradual decline since the beginning of the campaign, unable to make up for devastating losses of personnel and resources as the security forces over the following two years eliminated key leaders and dismantled safe houses and weapons caches.

Current status. There are three main reasons to believe that the organisation is currently in disarray (see OADB, December 15, 2005, I.):

-- Virtually all senior leaders have been eliminated. Police have killed or arrested everyone on the list of 19 suspects issued in May 2003 and all except one on the list of 26 from December 2003. Most of the people on the most recent list of 15 (issued in June 2005) have since been killed or arrested, including several in the last few days.

-- Militants have launched only one attack since the December 29, 2004 attempt to storm the Interior Ministry. Both that and last week's Abqaiq attack seem to have been complete failures, even allowing for the authorities' interest in playing down attacks on oil facilities. Most violent incidents in 2005 were initiated by the police.

-- The militants no longer have a presence on the internet.

Between October 2003 and November 2004, the QAP regularly published magazines, statements and films about their activities. Now there is virtually nothing.

Down but not out. Although the organisation is weak, there are still militants on the loose, as the Abqaiq attack shows. The frequency of shootouts has decreased, but still occur at the rate of about one per month. Weapons caches are still being discovered.

Reasons for failure. There are several reasons why the QAP terrorist campaign has largely failed:

-- The leadership structure was seriously disrupted in the first three months of the campaign. This forced remaining leaders to improvise their subsequent strategy.

-- The militants had no popular support. The early bombings shocked the Saudi public who were unaccustomed to internal violence. Influential Islamist clerics condemned it. The militants were easy to criticise, because the operations killed more Saudis and Muslims than Westerners. The public hostility to the terrorists also constituted a significant intelligence advantage for the police, as citizens were keen to report suspicious activity.

-- The government handled the terrorism problem well. The authorities have led an excellent campaign for hearts and minds. They have relied on targeted arrests rather than mass crackdowns. They have made effective use of the stick-and-carrot approach to the militants. The intelligence services and special forces have improved their capabilities, though much remains to be done (see OADB, November 30, 2004, II.).

-- Iraq undermined the QAP campaign. In 2004 there was open debate in jihadist circles over whether to fight at home or in Iraq. In the late summer 2004, the debate settled in favour of going to Iraq. This undermined recruitment to the QAP.

Saudis in Iraq. It is unclear how many Saudis have travelled to Iraq. Estimates by Saudi analysts vary from 500 to 4,000, but the true figure is likely to be closer to 1,000 (see OADB, August 26, 2005, II.). The patterns of Saudi recruitment to Iraq are known from biographies of militants posted on radical Islamist websites.

The typical Iraq volunteer is a lower middle-class male in his early 20s from a conservative neighbourhood in Riyadh, although recruits cover virtually all regions and social classes. Saudis in Iraq make up a more heterogeneous group than the QAP militants. The Iraq volunteers are also younger and have generally not been to Afghanistan.

Most recruits are motivated by a general frustration over US foreign policy, anger over specific events (eg Abu Ghraib scandal or the Fallujah siege), and a desire to achieve martyrdom. Social factors are also very important -- many recruits have a friend or relation who has already fought in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Recruitment. The primary recruitment arena is the local neighbourhood. Some recruits say they were inspired to go by the speeches by the imam in the local mosque. The other major recruitment ground is Mecca:

-- Recruiters target Mecca because during Ramadan and Haj, the city is full of young men who are away from their families and religiously inspired.

-- A disproportionate number of recruits go to Iraq during or immediately after the month of Ramadan (October/November).

The internet also stimulates recruitment. It provides pictures of Muslims suffering at US hands, and religious texts calling for jihad, as well as practical advice about how to get to Iraq.

Most Saudis go to Iraq via Yemen and Syria. Only those without passports (under 18s and past convicts) attempt to cross the Saudi-Iraqi border. Practically everyone travels to Iraq together with a friend or a relative.

Participation in the Iraqi jihad is not considered very controversial in Saudi Arabia. In certain neighbourhoods and families, the death of a Saudi jihadist in Iraq is widely announced and even celebrated. Phone numbers and directions for the family's house are posted on the internet.

Saudi Iraq network. The Saudi Iraq network is largely independent from the QAP network. There are few signs of contacts or cooperation. In addition to having certain ideological differences, Iraq recruiters presumably avoid the QAP network for fear of alerting the police.

A few hundred Saudis have so far returned from Iraq, mostly because they were disillusioned with the Iraqi jihad. These returnees have not joined the QAP or committed violent acts inside Saudi Arabia. Saudi authorities provide many returnees with job opportunities and financial incentives to reintegrate into society. However, the most dangerous Saudis in Iraq have probably not yet returned.

Returnees threat. Saudi officials realise the future danger posed by returnees from Iraq. However, it is politically and practically difficult to crack down on the local recruitment networks. This might antagonise the broader Islamist community, a vital ally in the regime's battle against the QAP. Moreover, intelligence resources are tied down monitoring the QAP network. They may not have the capacity to dismantle the two networks simultaneously.

The future threat posed by the returnees from Iraq depends on three variables:

- Their number. There may be fewer Saudis in Iraq than is generally thought, and many will die in Iraq.
- The pattern of return. It may be easier for the police to handle a constant trickle of returnees than a mass return.
- Ideological developments. Future Saudi jihadists may consider the launch of an internal terrorism campaign in 2003 as a strategic mistake. Alternatively, they may see it as a brave effort to be repeated.

Outlook. Overall, the regime is winning the battle against the QAP, and returnees from Iraq so far represent a manageable threat. In the near future, the biggest threat will come from QAP members or sympathisers who have been released too early from prison. The ministries of Interior and Islamic Affairs are running a joint programme to 're-educate' imprisoned jihadists, and there are plans to release large numbers of reformed prisoners in the coming year. Some of them may return to militancy.