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Saudi amnesty: A new approach to counter-terrorism?

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Saudi Arabia has been accused of harbouring jihadist terrorists ever since 15 of the 19 persons involved in the 9-11 attacks on America were found to be Saudis and the leader of the al Qaeda network was identified as Saudi-born Osama bin Laden. Initially the Saudi government had all but ignored the existence of al Qaeda networks in the kingdom and deemed any attacks there as unthinkable.

However when targets in the Saudi kingdom itself came under terrorist attack in May 2003 the Riyadh rulers were forced to admit not only that the terrorists were present but also that its very legitimacy as custodian of the two holy mosques was under threat. The Saudi authorities embarked on an intensive manhunt and released two lists of militants wanted for terrorist acts, numbering 26, and offered big rewards for their capture, ranging from USD 270,000 to USD 2 million for stopping terror attacks.

The Saudi offer only provoked Al Qaeda to step up its charge that the Americans were pushing the Saudis to fight terrorism and that the government was cooperating with the crusaders against good Muslims. Al Qaeda stepped up its campaign against the Saudi government, which it accused of being non-Muslim. Al Qaeda continued recruiting and canvassing support from Saudis through websites and forums, spreading information on weapons use, tactics of kidnapping and attacking, for all to follow. Al Qaeda also aimed to spur an exodus of oil industry experts from the country so as to cripple the economy and undermine the Saudi regime. Al Qaeda then issued calls to foreigners to leave the kingdom while attacking foreign residential compounds and businesses in Khobar and Yanbu in May 2004, in which 28 persons were killed.

Saudi authorities scored some successes in counter-attacking terrorist groups. However, in a surprise move on 23 June 04 Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Abdullah announced an amnesty for Saudi al Qaeda members involved in terrorist acts in the kingdom. The amnesty period was for one month and offered individuals the chance to return to the Islamic fold and engage in soul-searching. Those who spurned it would be struck with the full force of the kingdom.

While sceptics tried to discredit this Saudi way of fighting terrorism the Saudi government claimed that it was successful. One month after the amnesty period ended, Crown Prince Abdullah declared that security in Saudi Arabia was very strong and the hold of terrorism was over. Only mopping up operations were going on.

Understanding the amnesty

The Saudi initiative needs to be considered in the context of Islamic teaching. The concept and practice of amnesty is a crucial component of Islam. Muslims are encouraged to forgive their enemies. Indeed, they are rewarded for such behavior. The current amnesty has many precedents. Each year, during Ramadhan and the Prophet's birthday celebration, Muslim leaders grant many amnesties to individuals convicted of different crimes. Historically amnesty has always symbolized the power, sagacity, and honour of the ruler.

Al Qaeda has always accused the Saudi regime of being not Islamic since it did not implement the Shari'a Law and it cooperated with the infidels in fighting the Mujahideen for the sake of the United States. The rise of the number of Saudi al Qaeda members, sympathizers, and collaborators has supported such accusations. The amnesty was an opportunity for the regime to counter those accusations.

The speech announcing the amnesty included a chapter from the Quran where the act of amnesty is highlighted. The intended message was to demonstrate that the kingdom is ruled by God's law. Those who sought amnesty would be secured and treated in accordance with Sha'ria law, the source of justice in the kingdom. The objective of the amnesty was to demonstrate the kingdom's power and decisiveness in fighting terrorism.

Psychological effect

The approach of the Saudi government had a big psychological effect not only on the militants, but on Saudi society and the international Muslim community as well. It highlighted the fact that while Al Qaeda is threatening the Saudi regime and carrying out attacks against both Saudi and foreign citizens, the regime, on the other hand, was giving amnesty to the perpetrators. For example, when Osman Hadi Al Maqboul Al Omary, one of the 26 on the wanted list, gave himself up on June 28, 2004, he was released and allowed to go free. On top of that a member of the Saudi royal family ordered that he be given USD 45,000 to settle his debts, another USD10,000 US dollars as allowance for the family, and salaries of USD 500 and USD800 respectively for him and his children.

Clearly the regime is using all resources at its disposal to defeat al Qaeda members. Families of the wanted individuals have been sending advice to their relatives through the local media, asking them to surrender and return. The main message in this process was to show that the wanted individuals were still welcomed in society and loved by their families, as long as they gave up fighting the government.

In addition, religious leaders have participated in spreading and explaining the government's initiative on different occasions. Friday sermons were used as opportunities for religious leaders to talk and advise citizens about what they have to do according to the Shari'a law. Indeed, some of them such as Safar al Hawali were facilitating negotiations and communication between the government and the militants. Since al Qaeda has used fatwas to justify its view and behaviors, the government did not hesitate to use the same medium. The Saudi Mufti-General issued a *Fatwa* calling on "Citizens and residents to inform about each and every one who plans or prepares for committing destructive actions so as to protect the people and the country".

After July 23, 2004, the date for the end of the Amnesty, the following results were noted: 12

persons from the list of the 26 names were still on the run; another 12 had been killed and 2 had surrendered. Thirty wanted persons not included in the list have surrendered in the Kingdom, while another 27 have surrendered in other countries. Some Saudi scholars have requested an extension of the amnesty period, but the government has rejected the proposal and suggested instead the registration of the names of those willing to negotiate their surrender. The names would be included regardless of the time needed to conclude the negotiation.

Safar al Hawali, who is communicating with the wanted persons, said that “ it takes time to convince them,” and added that 15 to 20 persons were willing to surrender. Analysts believe the amnesty has served well those with secondary roles in al Qaeda, such as carrying out logistical duties and providing accommodation and food to al Qaeda’s militants. However, it would be very difficult for those involved directly in preparing or carrying out operations that killed civilians, to accept the amnesty as they have to be convicted according to the Islamic Law. Therefore, ideological and political leaders among the wanted men are unlikely to surrender, and neither are the military commanders.

Conclusion

The Saudi initiative provides a new approach in fighting terrorism. It has successfully engaged the Saudi society in such a campaign. Contrary to what one may expect, the regime did not suffer any damage to its sovereignty or legitimacy; instead, it has come across as a true Islamic regime. This type of imaging is very much needed today where many innocent people are killed and many areas in the world have the potential for bloody confrontations. On August 7, 2004, interim Iraqi Prime Minister Ayad Allawi offered a similar amnesty to persuade Iraqi militants to stop their violence. It recognized the effectiveness of the Saudi experience and offered another alternative to military methods.

Although some see the Saudi amnesty as an unnecessary move because it only benefited the local regime rather than stopping the violence or getting all Saudi al Qaeda members to surrender, it is instructive to note that the way terror has been fought for the last three years has resulted in impressive military operations but which have had small political or social effect.

Today, more than ever, voices are increasingly calling upon Muslims to put their own houses in order. Yet those quarters need to bear in mind that, in order to carry out this responsibility, Muslims need to be trusted, respected and credited. Their traditions, histories, and ways of doing things form an essential part of this process. Seen from this perspective, the Saudi amnesty should be understood for what it is: an attempt on the part of the Saudi government to muster and use all of its strong social and political resources to fight the scourge of terrorism.

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