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Al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia (Part I) The beginnings

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For a long time, the Saudi leadership dismissed the existence of Al Qaeda networks on Saudi soil. Attacks by such groups in the kingdom were therefore deemed as unthinkable. Since Saudi Arabia is the land of the *Haramain* (the two Holy Shrines) and the birthplace of the Prophet, it was most unlikely that anyone would challenge its legitimacy or tarnish its prestige by acts of violence. Saudi Arabia's status as the guardian of the religion, it was believed, would make it safe and secure. Unfortunately, this has not been the case.

On 20 November 1979, a group of Saudi citizens seized the Grand Mosque in Makkah, claiming that the Saudi regime had lost its legitimacy due to the leadership's "moral bankruptcy, corruption and close ties with the Western world". This incident however was soon forgotten as it was seen as a domestic affair and therefore did not attract international attention. Two further incidents however put Saudi Arabia on the global map: the bombing of the Al Uliyya US military base on 31 May 1995 and the Al Khobar Tower attack on 25 June 1996.

These incidents marked a crucial turning point in world perceptions of Saudi Arabia. The Saudis, its government and citizens alike, were shocked to discover that those who committed the acts were not foreign mercenary forces, but one of their own.

Then, on May 6, 2003, in the Eshbiliah Quarter, east of the city of Riyadh, Saudi security forces seized a large number of weapons, explosives and ammunition which were meant for terrorist operations. On December 12, 2003, terrorists attacked three residential complexes in Riyadh. The attack left 35 dead and 200 wounded.

Why al Qaeda is targeting Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is not just another Arab state; apart from its special place in the Muslim world, its pioneering role as the first oil producer revolutionised its economy and brought with it much economic development. Its emergence as an economic power in the Gulf opened up the country through strong diplomatic relations with other states and world powers, especially the United States. However, the Saudis' excellent relations with the US did not always work to the kingdom's advantage.

Hailing from a prominent Saudi family, Osama bin Laden did not openly oppose the Saudi government until after the defeat of Iraq in the first Gulf War in February 1991. He opposed the decision to allow US troops deployed in Saudi Arabia after the Iraqi occupation of

Kuwait to remain in the kingdom.

In 1997, Osama wrote a book entitled: “The call for the fight against the Americans occupying the Land of the Two Shrines”. In the book he wrote: “The Saudi regime brought the crusaders to protect itself, it cannot survive without their support. By doing so, the regime brought the crusaders to the Arabian peninsular and went against the Prophet’s teaching.” Osama argued that the next stage was critical and that appropriate ways of fighting the enemy must be employed. Such a strategy would inevitably involve “fast and quick forces”.

The turning point

The Riyadh attack on May 6 was a turning point for the Saudi authorities. They arrested more than 200 people in connection with the bombings. On December 6, 2003, a new list of the most wanted terrorists was released. After the publication of the first list of 19 terrorists, 11 of them were killed and two were either arrested or surrendered. The remainder were included in the new list, which had 26 names. Financial rewards were offered to persuade citizens to take part in the fight against terrorism.

Al Qaeda criticised the release of the lists and pointed to a strong connection between the presence of the United States forces and events shaping up in the kingdom. The Americans, they said, were insisting and pushing the Saudis to fight terrorism. It concluded that the public would soon discover who the real enemy was.

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