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Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula: A New Constellation of Militants

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THE raid on the United States consulate in Jeddah on December 6, 2004 shattered the feeling of security that had temporarily descended upon the kingdom after a year and a half of weekly violence. A group of five militants, claiming to belong to the so-called Al-Qaeda Organization in the Arabian Peninsula, set off a car bomb and then stormed the building, killing nine consulate employees and wounding fourteen others. Although no Americans were killed and Saudi security forces were quick to regain control, this successful terrorist attempt against a heavily fortified Western target raises important questions about the strength, structure, and trajectory of the latest generation of militants operating in Saudi Arabia. The December 29 suicide bombings against the Interior Ministry and a military training centre in Riyadh only confirm the lethality of this outfit, which most security analysts have written off as dead.

Who is Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula?

Perhaps the most coordinated, resilient, and inventive terrorist formation that has emerged since 9/11, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is a loosely knit network of independent armed cells, comprising about 10-15 individuals. Its existence was first announced on May 6, 2003, when Saudi police raided a house in Riyadh, capturing large amounts of explosives, machine guns, and ammunition and chasing a group of 19 militants. A week later, suicide bombings were carried out on May 12 against three residential compounds in Riyadh. Three of the nine perpetrators were announced to belong to the original group of 19 suspects. Many more raids on suspected militant hideouts followed, disrupting terrorist plots at their last stages of preparation, and capturing large quantities of munitions and communication and computer equipment.

In the period June-November 2003, regular shootouts between Saudi police and suspected Al-Qaeda militants became a trademark feature of the open confrontation raging between Saudi authorities and the group. On November 9 members of the Al-Qaeda network disguised as security guards forced their way into the Al-Muhaya residential compound in Riyadh and set off a suicide car bomb, killing 17 people and wounding over a hundred. Sixteen days later, Saudi security forces foiled a similar car bomb plot in Northeastern Riyadh.

In December 2003, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula changed its tactics and started targeting Saudi security officials. A top Saudi counter-terrorism officer was wounded and a number of bombs were discovered in the immediate vicinity of various security and intelligence offices. This pattern of attacks culminated with the attempted suicide car

bombing against the General Security building in Riyadh on April 21, 2004, killing five people. Once again, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula claimed responsibility.

The months of May and June 2004 marked a temporary escalation in the group's bloody campaign. Apart from the spree of hostage-taking incidents and targeted killings of expatriate oil industry workers in Yanbu and Khobar, a number of other shootings occurred against foreign contractors and visitors. Among them were BBC cameraman Simon Cumbers, who was shot dead, and BBC correspondent Frank Gardner, who was wounded. In addition, ritual videos of the murders of Robert Jacobs, an American employee of the Vinell Corporation, and Paul Marshall Johnson, an engineer for Lockheed Martin, surfaced on radical websites. In the period May-September 2004, a German, an Irish, a British, two American, and a French national were also killed.

This chronology of successful terrorist attacks speaks volumes about the capability, motivation, and deadly potential of the group. Despite the heavy clampdown on the part of the Saudi security forces, resulting in numerous arrests and shootings of militants; the removal of at least four successive leaders of the network; the large amounts of captured arms, explosives, and pieces of equipment; and the special one-month amnesty extended to the militants on June 23, 2004 by Saudi Interior Minister Prince Nayef, the overall impact on the group calling itself Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is far from certain.

A New Generation of Militants

Three things stand out in this respect. First, the relative youth of the perpetrators, who in their majority are not participants of the Soviet-Afghan war and therefore do not fall under the category of the much feared 'Arab Afghans.' Rather, as young Saudis in their mid-twenties and early thirties, these men belong to a second and third generation of Al-Qaeda trained militants who have been radicalized by experiences in the 'lands of jihad'. From training in camps in Afghanistan to periods of volunteer fighting in Bosnia, Chechnya, Tajikistan, Somalia, and Iraq, this new constellation of Al-Qaeda operatives are already indoctrinated in the spirit of global jihad and have returned to their homeland to serve its purposes.

Second, the relative sophistication and abundance of weapons, explosives, and communication and computer equipment discovered during police raids on numerous militant safe-houses shows that the group is well-funded, well-procured, and well-trained. The scale and scope of the terrorist attacks they have attempted indicate good surveillance techniques, organizational and operational planning, and command and control coordination. In contrast to some of the disparate mass-casualty and anti-Western attacks that have taken place since 9/11 – often resulting in the demise of the very 'sleeper cell' that has launched them – the better organised and better coordinated militants of Al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia have managed to withstand the pressure and continue their bloody campaign.

Finally, an unprecedented level of synchronisation seems to exist between the military and political branches of the network. A cohesive organisational core has emerged that successfully exploits the propaganda laurels of each attack, publishing videotapes of the attack's planning and preparation stages, as well as the recorded 'last wills' of the attack perpetrators. Treatises explaining the strategic value of these terrorist acts for the overall campaign of the group appear shortly thereafter, together with the biographies and interviews of various militants. Although such public relations initiatives do not necessarily translate into active public endorsements, the intensity and strategic coherence of the propaganda machine behind this militant outfit is truly noteworthy. It is in the public eye that new leaders

replace killed or captured field commanders and new operations are planned, prepared, and launched.

What Is On Their Agenda?

As in many places around the world, the 9/11 events served as a watershed that brought home a jihadist campaign and contextualized its battleground within domestic politics. In contrast to the 1995 and 1996 bombings – the two most notorious pre-9/11 terrorist attacks, which struck against the U.S. military headquarters in Riyadh and the foreign military housing complex in Dhahran – the new insurgency is different. It is characterised by open hostility towards government, military, economic, and civilian targets simultaneously. Apart from the stated desire to destabilise the Saudi state and chase away Western influence, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula now purports to fight against members of the Saudi royal family, the Saudi security forces, and the Saudi clerical establishment. Its definition of enemy targets has come to encapsulate both foreign and local civilians and foreign and local economic infrastructure. This is a stark departure from the 1990s campaign.

In the year and a half since the violence started, at least 170 people have been killed and hundreds of others have been injured. The targeted assassinations of foreign oil company workers resulted in immediate increases in oil prices worldwide. Despite the fact that some of these attacks were perpetrated by individuals loosely affiliated with the Al-Qaeda network, there does seem to be a strategic pattern and an organisational framework within which such acts of violence are inscribed.

In the majority of cases, militants serve the dual function as attack perpetrators and attack instigators. Due to the mass-media packaging that their campaign has received, they are able to channel the deadly course of domestically-perpetrated violence and to transform it into global political statements. Issues on the agenda range from the best operational guidelines on how to destroy the ‘Crusaders’ and their domestic regime ‘puppets’ to the ‘deceitful promises’ of democracy as manifested by developments in Algeria, Turkey, Jordan, and Yemen. The divisive topic of whether to travel to Iraq and engage U.S. troops directly, or to stay at home and banish Western presence there is another pervasive theme. Finally, the issue of how to mobilise domestic populations and mould them into a de-territorialised movement of pan-Islamist unity through low-scale violence is also discussed.

This is exactly what the Saudi campaign of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula hopes to achieve. By targeting, on the one hand, the symbols, institutions, and interests of the Saudi regime and inscribing, on the other hand, their domestic agenda under the auspices of a global jihad movement fighting Western domination, the organisation is reaping the benefits of both local opposition to the Saudi ruling elite and growing anti-American sentiment in the Middle East. In a recent audiotape, Osama bin Laden encouraged more attacks against the Saudi government and economy – which according to him provided the most important port of entry for the ‘Crusaders’ into Muslim lands. His message did not fall on deaf ears. The new constellation of militants operating under Al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia possesses not only the motivation, but also the capability to bring this lethal edict to life.

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