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Saudi Arabia: Between Radicalisation and Terrorism

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The threat of a terrorist attack inside Saudi Arabia has diminished since the government began taking measures to make the environment more hostile to terrorist networks. Instead Saudi militants are travelling to other conflict zones to fight.

RECENT SECURITY operations in Saudi Arabia have made it difficult for terrorist cells to maintain operational readiness internally. However, a large number of Saudi militants are operating in conflict zones such as Iraq and Afghanistan, reflecting the fact that extremism is still flourishing in the Kingdom and work remains to be done. These militants are choosing to perform Jihad in these zones because the cause is more justifiable for them and because it is easier to maintain their networks in failed states.

Saudi as a Strong State: Not a Land for Militants

In early March 2008, security forces arrested 28 militants in Saudi Arabia attempting to rebuild terrorist cells linked to al Qaeda in the Kingdom. Saudi officials also announced that al-Qaeda's second-in-command, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, sent a message to different Saudi cellular phones urging Saudis to help poor families in Afghanistan and Pakistan financially.

This can be looked at positively and negatively; positively because the government was able to detect a terrorist cell and disrupt it; negatively because this plot indicated a possibility of more terrorist cells ready to launch attacks. This is the second al Qaeda action in Saudi Arabia detected within three months. A plot was disrupted by the Saudi police in December 2007 during the Hajj pilgrimage. The terrorists were planning to attack a holy site in Mecca -- a barbaric act targeting Muslims during a religious festival.

These attempts reflect a continuous threat to Saudi Arabia from Islamic extremists. Yet the authorities' ability to thwart attacks also reflects the weakness of the local militant network. This fragility of the network, which calls itself al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, increased after the death of its leader in Saudi Arabia, Abdul Aziz Al-Moqrin on 18 June 2004. Other leaders might have emerged, but it was

clear that they were unable to maintain control and keep up the organization's previous strength in the face of the Kingdom's counter-terrorism efforts.

After years of denial, Saudi Arabia began to raise security standards in mid-2003 when the Saudi government realized the level of threat al Qaeda had created inside its own borders. The threat was brought home on 13 May 2003 when the terrorist group carried out simultaneous deadly bombings at a Riyadh housing compound. This was a turning point for Saudi Arabia, when it became a victim of terrorism instead of merely exporters of the fundamentalist ideology that fosters it.

Extremists have two primary grievances against the Saudi state. The first is the al-Saud regime's close ties with the United States. The second relates to the way the Kingdom is governed. Even though Saudi Arabia is ruled by Islamic law, extremists still believe it is not strict enough given the fact that Saudi Arabia maintains good relationships with many Western countries. Jihadists believe there is a need to change the monarchy into an Islamic Caliphate. However, they have experienced little success in achieving their goals of destroying US-Saudi relations or weakening the regime such that it is vulnerable to overthrow. Since the 2003 attacks, the Saudi security services have become very effective in uncovering and disrupting terrorist plots inside the Kingdom.

Why Saudi Militants Are Migrating to Conflict Zones

In December 2007, the Combating Terrorism Centre at the United States Military Academy analysed a sample of foreign fighters in Iraq and found that 41% were Saudis. Saudi nationals are believed to make up the largest group of foreign fighters in the Iraqi insurgency. This relatively large number of Saudi militants indicates how deep the roots of radicalisation run in the Kingdom.

There are many reasons why many Saudi militants have decided to flee the country to regional conflict zones. Their support base within the Kingdom is relatively small. One factor is the fact that Saudi Arabia is already ruled by Islamic Shariah, which appeases many orthodox Muslims so that only those on the extreme fringe feel the need to press for an Islamic Caliphate. This has forced Jihadists to flee to other countries that have deeper support for violent conflicts and weaker security environments. However, some of these extremists still try to implement plots in Saudi Arabia and expand the bases of support in the Kingdom to fulfil al-Qaeda's agenda.

Neither do militants find much support for their justifications of terrorism based on the US-Saudi relationship. While many generally might not agree with all US policies, they do not accept that terrorism is an effective method to coerce the US into changing these policies. Although Saudi society is quite conservative, it is not an extremist society. Families are trying to fight radical ideologies and are combating those trying to influence the younger generation to fight Jihad and become martyrs.

The youth, especially, are susceptible to extremist ideologies. The problem is perhaps compounded for Saudi youth, compared to their counterparts in other Muslim countries, because they live in an especially conservative society that gives priority to religion. This contributes to the feeling that the young and able are religiously obligated to act on behalf of fellow Muslims in conflict zones. Saudi Arabia is concerned with the possibility of Saudi extremists, backed by al Qaeda, returning to the Kingdom to ignite radicalisation of their peers.

Combating Extremism Saudi-style

Aware of this danger, the Saudi government has focused efforts on countering the extremist ideologies and promoting tolerance. Methods include regulating religious clerics in order to detect and disrupt any who might disseminate hostile ideologies towards non-Muslims. The Saudi Grand Mufti, the head religious figure, also regularly issues public statements declaring that terrorist attacks against non-Muslims are forbidden. The Saudi media also has an important role in influencing the Saudi citizens:

the militants are always described as people who have “misguided ideologies”, and are never portrayed as fighting Jihad or having legitimate grievances. The media also broadcasts repentant confessions of former members of terrorist cells describing their disillusionment with radical ideology.

The rehabilitation and counselling facilities that have been created in special prisons for extremists in Saudi Arabia have also proven to be a successful method to reform deviant ideologues and to help former militants reintegrate with society. Programmes that provide financial aid and employment assistance help the integration process and keep families afloat during rehabilitation. Saudi officials estimate that the success rate of re-educating Saudi militants is around 80%. Government security spokesman General Mansour al-Turki stated that around 700 out of the 2000 detained militants had been released after successfully completing the rehabilitation programme.

Nonetheless, the fact remains that Saudi Arabia is still churning out extremists who are now going to conflict zones where the governments are weak and where more supporters for their militant cause are available domestically and internationally. Saudi Arabia might be spared terrorist attacks, but the continuity of radicalisation under a rigid religious atmosphere has implications for regional stability.

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