



TERRORIST CHALLENGES TO SAUDI ARABIAN INTERNAL SECURITY

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Saudi Arabia has faced a full-fledged Islamic insurgency since May 2003. In combating this insurgency, the kingdom is hampered by the lack of loyal security forces, which seem to be penetrated by al-Qa'ida. In the beginning the regime tried the old methods of co-optation, including a generous amnesty to bring in the insurgents. However, it has recently discovered that it must go on a determined offensive, and it is this strategy that has brought several recent successes. Crushing this insurgency is Riyadh's top priority, and it should be Washington's as well--far ahead of reform or democracy.

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Since May 2003, Saudi Arabia has been threatened by a terrorist insurgency inspired by Usama bin Ladin.¹ This is not to suggest that Saudi Arabia was not plagued by violent internal opposition in the past. One could actually start an examination of this insurgency with the 1979 attack on the Grand Mosque in Mecca, or the attack on the U.S. Office of the Program Manager/Saudi Arabian National Guard (OPM/SANG) in 1995, but compared to the rate and nature of the current wave of attacks, those were isolated incidents. An examination of incidents since the year 2000, however, reveals that there were a series of under-reported incidents that predate 9/11--a small bomb here, the killing of an officer there.

Since May 2003, hardly a week goes by without some kind of attack or confrontation. According to Saudi officials speaking at a counter-terrorism conference in February 2005, over the past two years a total of 221 people, including 92 terrorists were killed in terror attacks and clashes.² In December 2004 alone there were three significant attacks: the December 6 assault on the U.S. Consulate in the Red Sea port of Jeddah, the December 29 car bomb attacks at key security installations in Riyadh, and another attack in which the Ministry of Interior was hit by a remote-control car bomb, following which the bomber engaged in a gun battle with police. Later that evening two suicide bombers drove into the Special Forces Training Building.³

These attacks demonstrated that al-Qa'ida was still alive and kicking despite several key Saudi successes in killing or capturing al-Qa'ida leaders.⁴

Saudi Arabia is not the only Gulf country beset by these ills. Since January 2005, Kuwait has been witness to a series of terrorist incidents, some involving Saudis sympathetic to Usama bin Ladin. Al-Qa'ida sympathizers in the Kuwait armed forces have been arrested and accused of plotting to kill U.S. soldiers during joint maneuvers. Kuwait houses nearly 37,500 U.S. troops and military contract personnel supporting operations in Iraq. Large arms caches and plans have been discovered, although the cells in Kuwait seem to be less "articulated," meaning that they have not achieved the level of terrorist operation specialization in areas such as finance, bomb making, etc.⁵

Even other Gulf countries are not immune. In January 2005, reportedly hundreds of Islamists were arrested in Oman in unclear circumstances relating to what Omani officials termed "endangering the national order," that involved intercepted arms and an apparent plan to sabotage a cultural event in Muscat.⁶ In Qatar as well, a suicide bomber killed one Briton and injured several other people watching a performance of the mostly British Doha Players Theater in March. In April, explosive devices were found in a residential compound.⁷

Needless to say, these countries are oil producers whose stability is key to the world economy. Their location on the edge of the Persian Gulf sets them astride a major oil artery and across the Gulf from Iran, an adversary of the US and a country assured of becoming armed with nuclear weapons within the next few of years.

Saudi Arabia is beset by many acute problems, such as the need for economic and

political reform, corruption, unemployment, and a burgeoning population. These are concerns of a strategic nature, and they need to be addressed, even if they are close to insurmountable, since Saudi legitimacy is based on an ideology of religious extremism, and a new vision of a tolerant Islam is too slow in the making. Reform will not immediately stop the insurgency, nor will it rob the insurgents of support. Indeed, Kuwait is an example of a country seemingly on the road to democracy (it has an elected legislature), yet it has also suffered from terrorist attacks. But in Saudi Arabia, it is unclear how ready the current leadership is for serious change, despite the restricted municipal elections of early 2005, and a succession struggle is looming.

THE FAILURE OF TRIED AND TRUE METHODS

Today the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia faces a full-scale Islamic-based insurgency. This is an immediate and present danger to the regime, or, as military analyst Anthony Cordesman has written, "The Kingdom's most urgent security threat..."⁸ The regime can ill-afford a long-drawn out insurgency that would cripple its economy, from the oil-industry to the pilgrimage. Putting down this insurgency must therefore be the regime's first priority, as well as Washington's.

The insurgents have been compared to the *Ikhwan* tribal forces of the early twentieth century who helped Ibn Sa'ud conquer most of the Arabian Peninsula, but who eventually rebelled when they objected to the Saudi leader's contacts with Christians and his limitations on their cross-border raiding.⁹ But today's threat is much greater, not the least because the methods used to quell the *Ikhwan* rebellion in the 1920's are not working this time around, and, more importantly, the

loyalty and efficacy of the Saudi security forces are in doubt.

The Saudis are historically adept at co-opting their opposition. Usually marriages with families of rebellious shaykhs, jobs, and financial rewards have sufficed to calm even the most determined rebels. But these methods, although they are being employed once again, do not seem adequate to quell the present and immediate challenge.

The Saudi ambassador to Washington, Bandar bin Sultan, has held up Ibn Sa'ud's treatment of the *Ikhwan* as a paradigm for how to deal with the threat. In an article in his uncle Khalid Al Faysal's newspaper, *al-Watan*, Bandar called for "war" against the insurgents, just as Ibn Sa'ud fought the *Ikhwan*, and he mentions their defeat at the "Battle of Sabila" on March 30, 1929.¹⁰ But to learn what really happened with the *Ikhwan*, Bandar should take a look at scholar John Habib's classic study of that movement.

Following the defeat of the *Ikhwan* at Sabila (it was really just a short-lived skirmish), Ibn Sa'ud did not pursue the rebels and kill them. Instead he created alliances and so isolated the leadership. When he finally caught up with them, he demonstrated magnanimity and let them live out their lives in prison, which, given the circumstances of the rebellion, Habib judged to be relatively lenient. Others were pardoned and received high positions, such as Majid bin Khuthayla, who was made responsible for Ibn Sa'ud's camels. It was Bin Khuthayla who was authorized to form repentant or loyal units of the *Ikhwan* into what would later become the Saudi Arabian National Guard.¹¹ Ibn Sa'ud's handling of his enemies is summarized by Habib:

Ibn Sa'ud's ability to consolidate his hold over the country, after the rebellion, was due in no small part to his ability to rise above small and petty rivalries and sometimes over major clashes, to forgive his enemies and to give them a share and vested interest in the regime.¹²

In other words, Ibn Sa'ud removed the wind from the movement's sails by co-optation, not by war, as Bandar suggests.

But the tried and true methods of co-optation do not seem to be working this time around, even as Ministry of Interior Na'if bin 'Abd al-'Aziz meets with tribal leaders in an attempt to enlist their support.¹³

Even if Bandar's historical analogy is wrong, his prescription may be right on. In *al-Watan* he states that his call for war against the terrorists "does not mean delicacy, but brutality." He concluded his article with a call to kill them all.¹⁴ Co-optation, as with the *Ikhwan*, does not seem to be the solution for this insurgency. Indeed, in the month-long amnesty offered by the regime in June 2004, only six terrorists gave themselves up.

In both Egypt and Algeria, governments have successfully put down Islamic insurgencies (more successfully in the former than in the latter). This was due to a determined government and a concerted effort, what Israeli scholar Emmanuel Sivan terms "the stiff and increasingly effective resistance of existing governments."¹⁵

The Egyptians have definitely crushed their Islamic insurgency. One method used in 1992 was to enter the Cairo suburb of Imbaba, which was an Islamist stronghold, and attack

the Islamists. The Egyptians moved later to crush the Islamists entirely. It was not a nice affair, but it did turn public opinion against the terrorists. The Mubarak regime is still in power, and terrorism has nearly ended.¹⁶ Algeria seems well on the way to ending its Islamic terrorist nightmare. Apparently, nothing succeeds like suppression.

ARE THE SAUDI SECURITY SERVICES UP TO THE TASK?

The Saudi security forces are notoriously unreliable, incompetent, or, worse, both. Since the 1950's, not a decade has gone by without arrests carried out within the ranks of the security forces.¹⁷ It is worth going into some detail on sympathy for the terrorists within the security forces, because if the Saudis are to be able to crush this insurgency, they must have the military tools to do so.

It appears that the regime continues to identify supporters of Bin Ladin in the armed forces. In September 2003, it was reported by two Bin Ladin websites that forty workers at Saudi Arabia's Dhahran airbase had been arrested on suspicion of ties to al-Qa'ida and for expounding on the necessity of *jihad*. Alleged detainees included the commander of a helicopter wing, Lieutenant Colonel Salih 'Abd al-Hadi al-Qahtani, and two others with the rank of major.¹⁸

The ability of terrorists to escape once being surrounded by security forces, points again to extreme incompetence, collaborators, or both. On May 6, 2003, 19 terrorists, after escaping following a shootout with Saudi security forces, participated in the massive attack that followed a week later. Weapons found at the site of the attack were traced to Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG) stockpiles. It is clear that the May 12, 2003 nearly simultaneous bombings of three compounds needed significant cooperation from the SANG men guarding them. Several terrorists wore SANG uniforms. At the compound of the Virginia-based Vinnell Corporation, which has a contract to train the SANG, the bombers detonated their bomb inside the compound, just outside the main housing block, which they reached in less

than a minute. It was clear that they knew where the switches were to operate the gates, and where the most densely inhabited housing complex was located. They drove directly to it with their 200-kilogram bomb.¹⁹

Several injured Vinnell employees have asserted that the attackers were assisted by SANG members. They allege that SANG members knew about the bombing in advance and gave inside help to the terrorists. On that day security was especially lax, despite repeated security warnings. An "exercise" organized by SANG removed dozens of security staff, the compound was left wide open, machine guns were unloaded, and guards unarmed.²⁰

During the attack of November 8 on a residential compound in Riyadh, there were gun battles between terrorists and security forces. All of the terrorists got away. They had arrived in a car with the markings of the Special Security Forces, one of the main units of the security apparatus engaged in hunting down al-Qa'ida. It seems clear that the use of a Special Security Forces car meant that this was an "inside job," and that al-Qa'ida has infiltrated parts of the security forces.²¹

On May 1, 2004, in an attack in the Hijazi coastal city of Yanbu', it took nearly an hour for security forces to confront the terrorists, who succeeded in wounding more than 30 members of the security forces before being killed themselves.²²

The late May 2004 attacks in al-Khobar in the Eastern Province were blatant and seemingly easy to carry out. The attackers took their time, separating Muslims from non-Muslims, killing 22 people, conversing and eating breakfast with Muslims in the complex, and then – again – slipping easily away, two and a half hours before the assault

on the complex by Saudi forces, according to *Arab News*. They found shelter in a nearby mosque, where the imam, Mazin al-Tamimi, was alleged to have given them aid. A few hours later, they skirmished with security forces before escaping once again.²³

On June 6, BBC cameraman Simon Cumbers was killed and reporter Frank Gardner seriously wounded while filming in the Riyadh neighborhood of al-Suwaydi. Authorities considered the neighborhood to be filled with al-Qa'ida sympathizers, and residents included 15 of the country's 26 most wanted terrorists. Its most famous resident was the leader of al-Qa'ida in Saudi Arabia, 'Abd al-Aziz al-Muqrin. Its clerics preached a virulent anti-western message, no doubt fanning the popularity of Bin Ladin.²⁴ Many of the residents were recently urbanized nomadic bedouins. Residents of the neighborhood were not afraid to identify themselves to journalists as they expressed their hatred of Americans and their support for al-Muqrin and al-Qa'ida. "These (kidnappers) are holy warriors, heroes, who never waver," said one Mizahen al-Etbi to a reporter.²⁵ This is not surprising in a country where over half of 15,000 Saudis polled said that they supported Bin Ladin.²⁶

The Saudi terrorists continued to play with the authorities. The three escapees from the al-Khobar attack went looking for their wounded comrade, Nimr al-Biqami, in the Riyadh hospital where he was under police guard. Dressed as women, they waltzed through the Ministry of Interior medical complex, shouting Biqami's name. When they could not locate him, they fled--once again--unharmless.²⁷

The Saudis eventually tracked down al-Muqrin and three accomplices, killing them in a shootout in mid-June. Al-Qa'ida soon announced that Salih al-'Awfi would assume

command in the Arabian Peninsula. Al-'Awfi reportedly trained with the Saudi military, and later reached the rank of sergeant in the prison service, overseen by the Ministry of Interior, which supervises internal security in the kingdom.²⁸ It would not be surprising if al-'Awfi still maintained connections with internal security organizations.

The terrorists also boasted that during the mid-June 2004 kidnapping of Paul M. Johnson, an American defense contractor they later beheaded, they used uniforms and vehicles supplied by sympathizers in the security forces, and were able to set up a fake checkpoint. If true, particularly the latter claim, it is an indication of a total lack of coordination between the security forces--a definite possibility--or, even worse, the existence of collaborators at a very high level.²⁹ Saudis themselves seem to have a poor view of their army, although apparently their view of the security forces is much better.³⁰

It was recently made public in an official US military publication that in 2004 a Saudi military official with ties to al-Qa'ida was apprehended by the FBI and the US Air Force Office of Special Investigations after completing a course at an Air Force technical school. The officer allegedly had knowledge of al-Qa'ida plans and safe houses in the kingdom.³¹

For the security services to be up to the task, al-Qa'ida sympathizers need to be rooted out from within, as happened in the Egyptian and Algerian armies. Moreover, the authorities have to conduct house-to-house searches, confrontationally, if necessary, in neighborhoods like al-Suwaydi, just as the Egyptians did in Imbaba. The successful anti-insurgency campaigns of the Egyptian and Algerian governments were not hearts and minds campaigns. The Saudis' feeble

attempts at an amnesty for the terrorists yielded few takers.

But there are indications that the Saudis are finally getting the message. They have been more aggressive in searching out terrorists and forcing them into confrontations. In early April, security forces surrounded a group of terrorists in the Qasim regions' city of al-Rass, around 300 kilometers northwest of Riyadh. The confrontation went on nearly 48 hours before 14 terrorists were killed.³²

The insurgents seem to have suffered a blow, but continue to carry out attacks on a weekly and sometimes daily basis. Two terrorists and two security officials were killed in a clash in late April in Mecca, and similar incidents occurred in April and June.³³

Returnees from the *jihad* in Iraq are a major concern. Western intelligence estimates that there are several hundred Saudi nationals now amongst the insurgents; other estimates are in the thousands. According to one analysis, Saudi citizens represented 61 percent of the 154 foreign Arabs killed in Iraq. Said one official, "They are coming back with security experience, ranging from skills in how to lose people who are trailing them, as well as having the qualities of guerilla fighters. They also know how to do surveillance."³⁴

FRAGMENTATION OF RELIGIOUS AND MONARCHICAL AUTHORITY

The legitimacy of the Al Sa'ud rested to a great extent, for many years, on the approbation of the establishment clerics. But since the death of the Wahhabi *éminence grise*, General Mufti 'Abd al-'Aziz bin Baz in 1999, the prestige of these clerics has

dropped. The government has thus turned to two formerly imprisoned clerics, Salman bin Fahd al-'Awda and Safar bin 'Abd al-Rahman al-Hawali-known as the "Awakening Shaykhs" for their leadership of the Saudi Islamic "awakening" (*sahwa*) in the 1990's--to support them in its efforts against terrorism.³⁵ This fragmentation of religious authority makes the efforts of the Al Sa'ud to combat extremism all the more difficult. This difficulty is compounded when establishment clerics continue to rail against Jews and Christians, despite apparent government efforts to rein in these types of statements.

The royal family itself is plagued by a succession crisis that probably does not contribute to unified decision making. King Fahd is about 83 years old and is incapacitated since suffering a stroke in 1995 (as of this writing, he has been hospitalized for nearly three weeks, reportedly with pneumonia), and Crown Prince 'Abdallah is 81 years old. Even if 'Abdallah were to live long enough to succeed Fahd, one wonders if he will have time enough in office to really crack down on extremists and carry out reforms. To complicate matters further, the decision as to who will be 'Abdallah's crown prince remains to be settled. The most likely candidate, Minister of Defense Sultan, is about 80 years old.

Nevertheless, the Al Sa'ud have weathered crises before. When the family is threatened, the princes pull together, and one hopes that this current threat will overcome internal disagreements. Saudi Arabia is not Iran. Iran has a long tradition of mass political activity. Saudi Arabia does not, and therefore it is reasonable to assume that barring mass deprivation, it is unlikely that the kingdom faces a popular revolt.

Moreover, the possibility of a military coup of the type that used to plague Arab countries for much of the twentieth century is an unlikely one. The armed forces are quite large and dispersed, each headed by rival members of the royal family, and it is difficult to see anyone or any group with the capabilities to organize over such a large area and amongst such great numbers. The government does seem to have its priorities straight. During the latest oil boom, the royal family made sure to distribute a two-month salary bonus to the security forces.³⁶

Saudi Arabia is not in the midst of a civil war. It is suffering a severe security crisis, something, say, on the level of the troubles in Northern Ireland, perhaps even less so.³⁷

While real reform and a new-found legitimacy are necessary for the monarchy's survival in the long term, the current insurgency needs to be crushed quickly, and different and stronger methods need to be applied. It otherwise will undermine the country's economy and wreak havoc with the world oil market. In Usama Bin Laden's recorded statement in mid-December 2004, he gave encouragement to the terrorists, encouraged them to attack oil installations, and said that oil should be at \$100 a barrel. A recent report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies notes that al-Qa'ida in Saudi Arabia has been eroded over the years, but it still remains a threat which is unlikely to disappear for years to come.³⁸ In December 2004, Crown Prince 'Abdallah spoke of fighting the enemy for twenty, thirty, or forty years.³⁹ A long-term insurgency does not bode well for the Saudi economy, or for that of the west. Crushing this insurgency must therefore be the top priority, ahead of issues of reform. U.S. policymakers need to take this into account.

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NOTES

¹ In two long messages, Usama Bin Ladin has expounded on the importance of armed activity against the Saudi regime. See the English translations of his statements of August 22, 1996, and December 16, 2004, at www.jihadunspun.com.

² *Arab News*, February 6, 2005.

³ Raid Qusti, "Two Explosions Hit Riyadh," *Arab News*, December 30, 2004; "Car Bombers Target Saudi Security Units," *Washington Post*, December 30, 2004.

⁴ JE Peters on, "Security and Political Challenges in Saudi Arabia," December 12, 2004 (<http://www.jepeterson.net/id12.htm>).

⁵ *Financial Times*, January 11, February 3, 2005; *Daily Star*, January 17, 19, 31, February 2, 2005; Reuters, January 30, 31, February 1, 5, 2005; Michael Knights, "Backing Kuwait's Stand against Terrorism," *PolicyWatch*, No. 955, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 11, 2005.

⁶ AP, January 26, 2005; Reuters, January 30, 2005. Thirty-one were eventually put on trial in April for trying to reestablish the Ibadhi Imamate through an armed organization. They were convicted in May, but pardoned in April. *Gulf News*, March, 27, April 19, 20, 2005; AFP, May 2, 2005; *Oman Observer*,

May 3, 2005; BBCNEWS, June 10, 2005. For more on this incident, see JE Peterson, "Oman: Omanis, Ibadis, and Islamism," February 28, 2005 (<http://www.jepeterson.net/id12.htm>). In March, an Omani was sentenced to life imprisonment for attempting to kill two Britons. *Gulf News*, March 22, 2005.

⁷ Tony Thompson, "Qatar Blast Kills Britain," *The Observer*, March 20, 2005; *Gulf News*, April 20, 2005.

⁸ Anthony Cordesman and Nawaf Obaid, "Saudi Arabia Internal Security, A Risk Assessment: Terrorism and the Security Services – Challenges and Developments," Center for Strategic and International Studies (Washington, DC), May 30, 2004, online at http://www.csis.org/burke/saudi21/sis_ariskassessment.pdf.

⁹ See John Habib's classic study of the Saudi *Ikhwan*, *Ibn Sa'ud's Warriors of Islam: The Ikhwan of Najd and Their Role in the Creation of the Sa'udi Kingdom, 1910-1930* (Leiden: Brill, 1978).

¹⁰ Bandar bin Sultan, *al-Watan*, June 1, 2004, translated by MEMRI, online at <http://www.memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=countries&Area=saudiArabia&ID=SP72504>.

¹¹ Habib, *Ikhwan, Ibn Sa'ud's Warriors of Islam*, pp. 152-54.

¹² Habib, *Ikhwan, Ibn Sa'ud's Warriors of Islam*, pp. 154-55.

¹³ Simon Henderson, "Why Americans Die in Riyadh," *FrontPageMag.Com*, June 21, 2004, online at <http://www.frontpagemag.com/Articles/ReadArticle.asp?ID=13850>.

¹⁴ Bandar bin Sultan, *al-Watan*, June 1, 2004, translated by MEMRI, online at <http://www.memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=countries&Area=saudiArabia&ID=SP72504>.

¹⁵ See Emmanuel Sivan, "Why Radical Muslims Aren't Taking Over Governments," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (May 1998), pp. 9-16. Sivan points to further successes against Islamic insurgents by Saddam Husayn in Iraq (1980, 1991), and in Syria (1982).

¹⁶ Ami Ayalon, "Egypt," in Ami Ayalon (ed.), *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1992* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), p. 368; Lee Smith, "The Saudi Civil War: Who is Fighting? Who Will Win?," *Slate*, June 18, 2004, online at <http://slate.msn.com/id/2102628/>.

¹⁷ See Joshua Teitelbaum, "A Family Affair: Civil-Military Relations in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia," <http://www.iue.it/RSCAS/RestrictedPapers/conmed2003free/200303Teitelbaum12.pdf>. This paper is currently being revised.

¹⁸ Yoni Figchel, "Saudi Arabia Confronts Bin Laden Supporters," International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism, online at <http://www.ict.org.il/articles/articleDet.cfm?articleid=498>.

¹⁹ John Bradley, "Conspiracy of Silence in Riyadh?," *Daily Star*, November 22, 2003; "Terror Weapons Linked to Armed Forces," *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 19, 2003; Peter Finn, Al-Qaeda Link to Saudi National Guard," *The Age*, May 20, 2003.

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²⁶ Henry Shuster, "Poll of Saudis Shows Wide Support for Bin Laden's Views," *CNN.com*, June 9, 2004, online at <http://www.cnn.com/2004/WORLD/meast/06/08/poll.binladen/>.

²⁷ Michael Theodoulou and Daniel McGrory, "Disguised Gunmen Try to Free Terror Leader," *Times* (London), June 9, 2004.

²⁸ *Al-Quds al-'Arabi*, June 21, 2004; Brian Whitaker, "Sacked Sergeant Is New al-Qaida Chief in Saudi Arabia," *Guardian*, June 22, 2004; "New al Qaeda Cell Leader Trained with Saudi Military," *CNN.COM*, June 21, 2004, online at <http://www.cnn.com/2004/WORLD/meast/06/21/alaoofi.ap/index.html>.

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³⁰ Henry Shuster, "Poll of Saudis Shows Wide Support for Bin Laden's Views," *CNN.com*, June 9, 2004, online at <http://www.cnn.com/2004/WORLD/meast/06/08/poll.binladen/>.

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³⁷ JE Peterson, "Security and Political Challenges in Saudi Arabia," December 12, 2004 (<http://www.jepeterson.net/id12.htm>).

³⁸ Reuters, January 11, 2005.

³⁹ Simon Henderson, "Lights, Camera, Inaction? Saudi Arabia's Counterterrorism Conference," *PolicyWatch*, No. 956,