



Institute for Islamic Strategic Affairs

A study of Saudi Arabia's vulnerabilities to an Islamic State campaign



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Abstract

The Islamic State represents a different threat to different actors. For Iraq it is destroying the very foundations of the state; for Syrian rebels it is tarnishing and blunting a righteous cause; for the Syrian regime it is a marauding foe; for the Kurds and minority groups it is an existential threat and so on. However, the Islamic State poses a unique threat to the al-Saud Kingdom – one that reaches in to the heart of Saudi society as well as the very legitimacy on which the Royal family stands on.

Introduction:

The so-called 'Islamic state' (IS) appears to be pursuing a strategy that is irritating the weak spots of Saudi society. Unlike previous al-Qaeda orchestrated attacks in the Kingdom, which targeted US interests, Saudi state/military assets and crucial oil infrastructure; the Islamic state is targeting the politically and financially disenfranchised Shia community. A trend that holds a wide range of unsettling consequences for the Monarchy; IS have already killed dozens in two separate attacks in the Shia majority cities of Dammam and Qatif, with plenty more being threatened.

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Traditional insurgency doctrine holds that the insurgent harasses the belligerent state in to a (over)reaction; essentially it wants the state to devote resources and manpower into a battle that the insurgent hopes would drain the state and feed the movement (Polk, 2007, pp. xviii-xxiv). *Society*, rather than the *battlefield*, is the true theatre of conflict. IS's current strategy follows the same *modus operandi*, however, in an unorthodox approach with different strategic outcomes catered to cut the sensitive bonds precariously held together by the second generation Monarchy. Between the Salafi Scholars

Council, the Shia minority, the general populace, and of course the royal family itself - is a pluralism the Kingdom has had to reconcile since its founding; despite obvious contradictions. This war that the Islamic State seeks in Saudi Arabia is one where it need not dedicate much resources but stands to gain so much in return; unless the al-Saud leadership can learn new tricks and adapt to the domestic and regional changes that the Islamic State appears to be capitalising on. This study aims to analyse the Islamic State's strategic objective in the Kingdom, by reviewing the nature of its recent attacks, and the vulnerabilities of the Kingdom.

The Saudi Social Contract and IS's leverage

In order to understand the nature of the IS threat, and the means by which the group appears to be realising its objectives; one must first understand the complexities of the Saudi social contract and the advantages the Islamic State maintain. The al Saud Kingdom known for its ideological leanings and contradictory foreign policy, finds its routes in a *Realpolitik* pursuit of power. The al Saud tribe consolidated its control through deals with both the British for military and financial aid and the

followers of Ibn Abdul-Wahhab who propagated the Salafist doctrine; crucially - an ideology shared with IS (Tulloch, 2009, p. 129). These relationships have shaped modern Saudi domestic and foreign policy; entrenching Salafi religious doctrine in to law – through an independent 'Board of Senior Ulama' (*Hay'at Kibar al-Ulama*). Whilst simultaneously appeasing a rapidly growing middle class who have reaped the benefits of the world's largest oil development, and almost in totality, rely on a rentier state to supply well-paying jobs and a grandiose welfare system. The House of Saud, through these measures have managed to maintain relative stability and longevity even during periods of high turnover in successions. Moreover, a maintenance of tribal ties and a wide base of multi-tiered Princes (*Emirs*; numbering almost 20,000) manning important roles in civil and military institutions have facilitated a degree of security from possible attempts at overthrowing the al-Saud dynasty – albeit with a measure of caution that has fragmented the Saudi security institutions under multiple jurisdictions of various Princes. Hence, the reliance of the Kingdom on the Western Powers for security – initially from the British; more recently from the United States.

This precarious balance has satisfied most stakeholders involved, however, have left the Kingdom's sizable Shia minority (approx. 12 per cent of Saudi Population) at a disadvantage. The combination of anti-Shia sentiment espoused by influential Scholars and an institutionalised paranoia of Iran, have led the Kingdom to deal with the Shia minority with extra caution; ensuring no meaningful positions of power would be appointed to Shias – even civilian positions within provinces that they maintain a majority in. Moreover, a Rentier state system in which the state is the main employer and distributor of wealth has led to a form of structural violence, in which the Shia have not been able to reap equal benefits from oil riches that their Sunni compatriots have. All the more disconcerting as the bulk of the nation's oil wealth is located in the Shia majority Eastern provinces.

This situation has provided the Islamic State with the means to exploit an already unstable situation; targeting the weak rather than the strong bonds of the Saudi social contract. With these recent attacks IS is leveraging several interwoven factors. Firstly, the recent attacks comes as Saudi Arabia is dealing with a rise in tensions with its Shia minority, arresting and sentencing to death, a prominent Shia leader – Shiekh Nimr Al-Nimr, who

maintains a wide following (BBC Middle East, 2014). Immediately following the two IS attacks, wide scale protests erupted, re-kindling the not too distant memory of 2011 Shia led protests in Qatif (Ghosh, 2011). Moreover, self-defence committees have been set up by Shia communities to address the blatant lack of security being provided by the central government (Donaghy, 2015). These reactionary moves by the Shia, are clearly a deliberate

outcome of the Islamic State strategy, leading to the second leverage – how will the Saudi regime react? For decades the Saudi

government, supported by state sponsored Wahhabi rhetoric have embedded deep anxiety towards the country's Shia and a conspiracy linking them to Iran. However, any overt moves to quell protests or disrupt Shia community organisation could further antagonise the community. Equally a lack of action may seem to contradict the long held Saudi doctrine of quietening any open protests from the Shia, likely irritating many influential Saudi scholars in the process. This clearly leave's IS in a win-win situation, exposing the Saudi regime to uncomfortable choices.

The final leverage sees IS as evading Saudis traditional tools of confronting threats to its power and control.

Domestically the Saudi regime have been quite at ease in quashing a spectrum of outside ideologies, from the Muslim Brotherhood to Atheist thought – with new 'anti-terrorism' laws to superficially legitimise politically motivated clamp downs (Withnall, 2014). However, confronting IS ideology in a land where it

is near enough already institutionalised is a task beyond any other. Consider Chairman Moa's maxim in which he compares the insurgent to a fish and the population - the water in which it

swims (Tse-Tung, 1950, pp. 92-93). An insurgency whose ideology resonates with the population in which it operates, is very likely to be successful. Hence, without a radical shift in almost every aspect of Saudi governance, the necessary tools required to counter insurgency become obsolete when considering these constraints. Rather than providing an antithesis to the IS ideology and hoping to win the hearts and minds through such means - as most Counter Insurgency doctrine would hold (Galula, 1964) – the Al Sauds, instead, may find themselves actually competing for the same

Rather than providing an antithesis to the IS ideology and hoping to win the hearts and minds through such means - as most Counter Insurgency doctrine would hold – the Al Sauds, instead, may find themselves actually competing for the same ideological constituency

ideological constituency. With the additional handicaps of the historic contradictions that have upheld Al Saud dynasty. On the other hand, the Islamic State have a major ideological advantage – utilising decades of existing anti-Shia rhetoric and Wahhabi doctrine emanating from the Kingdom. Even considering a less prominent line of Salafi thought (*Madkhali*), which strongly emphasises unquestioning loyalty to the ruler – there is reason to believe that with Al-Baghdadi's self-declaration as Khalifa (Caliph) of the Muslims, IS may be better poised to challenge the legitimacy of the Saudi Monarchy.

Although, IS is yet to launch a full blown insurgency in Saudi Arabia, and is still only employing terror tactics, the following section outlines why it may indeed be necessary to make mountains out of mole hills.

IS's Force projection

Beyond the reasons laid out above, which make Saudi Arabia an easy target for a prolonged IS campaign, there is clearly the capability for the Islamic State to project its force in an effective and sustained way. For a long time Saudi's have been among the most numerous of recruits in international Jihadist movements – Bosnia, Afghanistan, Chechnya and Iraq to name a

few. Today, Saudi's make up the bulk of foreign fighters within IS's cadres in Syria and Iraq (Neumann, 2015). It comes as no surprise that IS see's the kingdom as a viable target, with many trained and battle hardened Saudi's able to slip back in to the country as well as an unemployed youth bulge in which to draw support and recruits. Moreover, the weapons, experience, resources and global networks it has built through its campaigns in Iraq and Syria make it a very capable foe. One that is able to operate across the region, sending resources where and when needed more fluidly than a mechanised military.

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia is facing a multitude of challenges that could drain its ability to fight a prolonged counter insurgency/terrorism campaign; a campaign that would most definitely need to extend beyond its own borders. Among these challenges is the Yemen war, a self-induced oil price drop, internal power struggles, a more regionally disengaged US and an Iranian nuclear deal that could change the geopolitical dynamics of the region. With another suicide bombing on a Kuwaiti Shia mosque on 26th June by a Saudi national (Hagagy, 2015), there is no doubt that the Islamic State strongly intend to live up to its promises of more attacks. Overall, the Kingdom need to produce a counter insurgency strategy with a more

sophisticated and holistic approach at combating extremism; likely requiring economic, judicial and political reforms

rather than a simple reactionary military solution.

ABOUT THE NEO-JIHADISM PROGRAMME:

Scope & Rationale:

Jihadists represent a fraction of the larger mainstream Islamist movement, which dominates the social space in most Muslim societies. Although Jihadism is ‘lethal’, it does not possess a viable broad social base like the Muslim Brotherhood. One silver lining for Al Qaeda, however, is its affiliate organizations. In Iraq, Syria, the Maghreb, Somalia, Yemen, and Egypt, Al Qaeda has won over formidable local allies to its cause, expanding its reach, power, and numbers in the process. This string of mergers is not over. In places as diverse as the Sinai Peninsula and Nigeria, Al Qaeda-linked organizations are emerging. In retrospect; the death of Osama bin Laden, the onslaught of global war on terror, the Arab revolution and post Arab-revolution crises etc. have seriously impacted on Jihadists landscape which is constantly changing. Jihadism today is neither transnational such as Al-Qaeda central, nor national i.e. Hezbollah, but regional. It is also increasingly more sectarian. As the Jihadists’ landscape changes; the study and understanding of Jihadism must also adapt to address the developing movement of ‘Neo-Jihadism’.

“Neo-Jihadism is a diverse, syncretic form of global organisation and interaction that emerged from within Islamic Jihadism, is unique to early-twenty-first-centuries, is increasingly sectarian and through its advocacy of violent form of war and selectively literal interpretations of sacred texts, radically differentiates itself from the traditional Jihadist forces, the faith’s mainstream and constitutes a new body of thought and actions”.

Methodology & Research areas/questions:

This programme aims to conduct fact-based analyses of actual and potential uses of militancy and Jihadism as a tactic and belief and the changing concept of ‘war’ in the Muslim world; so that we may provide policy guidance to government officials and private sector decision-makers with alternative policy analyses. The key research questions are:

- How has Neo-Jihadism developed?
- Is Neo-Jihadism a new concept of war or culture?
- How Jihadism is perceived within the Islamic world and does it still carry meanings of a ‘just war’?

- How do its adherents maintain and facilitate it to transcend borders?
- Why have neo jihadi leaders been struggling to advance a coherent and effective response to the events of the Arab Spring and what trends are emerging
- Why, despite strong rhetoric of militancy, have we witnessed little action on the part of Neo-Jihadi groups that have emerged in countries that underwent regime change as a result of the Arab Spring?

Programme Deliverables:

1. Mapping the interplay between militant groups, the states and other external actors
2. A conflict and forecast analysis on current and emerging threats that might change the Jihadist landscape
3. In depth situation analyses on above issues, regional positioning and global powers interests etc.
4. Alternative policy analyses that may serve in policy making on regional and global governance levels
5. Strategic foresight for business and stakeholders that might be involved in the crisis affected regions

ABOUT THE INSTITUTE FOR ISLAMIC STRATEGIC AFFAIRS (IISA)

IISA is a think-tank and an intellectual forum for addressing the current and future dynamics of the Islamic-world and its interaction with Western civilisation. Based in London, IISA will create trans-Islamic and global reach. IISA seeks to establish a platform where Islamic-world's dynamics, trends, issue, problems or crises are analysed within the Islamic-world and by working on local models and realities and not against any external standards or perceptions. We will be one of the leading think-tank on the Islamic-world and its role in the contemporary global system. In a short span of time we have attracted great academic support and a reputation for both open and track-II dialogues. IISA is the only think tank initiative that goes beyond national and regional inclinations and addresses strategic and socio-political issues/crises of the Islamic world in its totality. For more information i.e. our mission statement, current programmes and our academic and regional expertise please visit the following links:

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