The Saudi Arabia and Kuwait "Outposts Project": Al-Qaeda and Its Affiliates

Udi Dekel and Orit Perlov

Background

Since the start of the "Arab Spring," there have been many changes in the balance of power among the regional players, and various alliances – such as between political Islam and the Muslim Brotherhood's "Nahda Project," funded and promoted by Turkey and Qatar under the slogan "Islam Is the solution" – have failed. In addition, Iran has acted aggressively throughout the Arab world, defending and strengthening the Shiite axis. It has recruited Iraqi President Malaki and mobilized its proxies from the Iranian Quds Force through Assad's own Shabiha to the Lebanese Hizbollah, in order to help the Assad regime and neutralize and push back both the insurgents and the various Sunni Islamists groups that took control over the Syrian opposition.

Discourse on the social networks suggests that the challenge to regional stability, be it by the revolutionaries operating against the national state structure or by civil wars dominated by the ethnic conflicts between Sunnis and Shiites, along with a deep mistrust regarding United States willingness to support its regional allies in a crisis, has pushed the Gulf states into a corner in terms of their ability to maneuver. Consequently, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have opted for the policy of supporting Islamist opposition groups fighting Assad, Malaki, and Nasrallah. Gradually, the Saudis have come to the conclusion that they must develop their own proxies in order to influence the regional dynamics for their own benefit. The logic is that destructive forces, rather than constructive forces, have an increasingly significant role in shaping the future of the Middle East and in establishing a radical Sunni axis to counter and ultimately break the Shiite axis.

The Saudi Royal Family: "The Bandar Plan"

Bandar bin Sultan, the head of Saudi intelligence and formerly the long-time Saudi ambassador to the United States, is currently behind the kingdom's policy and strategy on Iran. Saudi Arabia, which views Iran and the Shiite axis as an existential threat, is acting on various levels and through different channels to stop or at least limit Iran's capabilities for regional hegemony. A year after the outbreak of the revolution in Syria and its deterioration into civil war, a strategic decision was made that the kingdom must use all

means to prevent a victory by Assad and Iran. Therefore, it formulated a working plan known on the social media as the Bandar Plan, comprising three elements: (a) establishment of opposition movements, brigades, and rebel groups originating in Saudi Arabia. In other words, alliances, brigades, and battalions were founded, financed, and equipped by Saudi Arabia (the Free Syrian Army was replaced by the Islamic Front and Salim Idris was replaced by Zaharan Aloush, a Saudi Arabian leader); (b) infiltration of existing al-Qaeda affiliated groups (such as the Abdullah Azzam Brigades, affiliated with al-Qaeda's Lebanese branch, headed by Majid bin Muhammad al-Majid, a Saudi jihadist) by Saudi Arabian agents and fighters; (c) influencing of jihadist groups that have not yet been infiltrated by using new media and internet forums. Two training and coordination command centers – one in Irbid, Jordan, and the other in Taif in Saudi Arabia – were established to coordinate action and transfer money and weapons from the Gulf states to the various rebel organizations in Syria. Two years since the inception of the Bandar Plan, the Saudi assessment is that given the stalemate between the two sides, the plan's objective of helping the rebel groups in Syria has not been achieved.

The Wahhabi and Salafist Clerics and the Private Donors Mechanism
In tandem with the Bandar Plan, which has so far failed to consolidate the power of Syrian rebel groups and ensure a Sunni victory over the Shiite axis, the Wahhabi and Salafist clerics, as well as private donors in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, began to recruit and finance extremist jihadist fighters for the battles in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq. The results are already apparent in the form of the emergence of al-Qaeda and affiliated headquarters along the entire so-called Shiite crescent: ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham) and the al-Nusra front, which – in addition to its bases in Syria – have also built headquarters in Tripoli and Sidon in Lebanon and Anbar Province (Ramadi and Fallujah) in Iraq. While the fighters come from many Arab and non-Arab countries, virtually all of the financial aid, religious guidance, and training come from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

Based on the discourse in the social media, a very close connection is evident between al-Qaeda and its affiliates and the various jihadist-Salafist movements and the Wahhabi and Salafist religious clerics such as Dr. Jamaan al-Herbesh (Kuwait), Dr. Shafi al-Ajami (Kuwait), Salman al-Ouda (Saudi Arabia), Ahmad al- Shugairi (Saudi Arabia), Dr. Awad al-Qarni (Saudi Arabia), Adnan al-Arour (Saudi Arabia) and Dr. Muhammad al-Arifi (Saudi Arabia). In their sermons on YouTube, these clerics call for a war of jihad against Shiite movements and leaders, whom they call *Takfiris* (heretics). Hizbollah earns the title of "Hizb al-Shaytan"; Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki is called "the heretic"; the Alawis are called *Safavids* (a Salafist pejorative for Shiite); and Assad is said to deserve to die for heresy. The clerics mobilize their followers (each one has between one to seven million followers on Twitter and Facebook) for jihad. They also run evening gatherings called *Diwaniyas* where they solicit donations. The competition for funds sparked what

one Syrian called "the YouTube phase" of the war, in which each brigade produced videos to publicize its importance and its manpower, many of which included words of praise and thanks for individual benefactors.

Even if the Saudi royal family doesn't directly support the Wahhabi clerics and rebel groups, it does turn a blind eye to these activities for the short term gain in the war against the Shiite axis. It also seeks to make clear both to the world at large and the immediate region – though without saying so explicitly – that it has the ability to generate negative processes that might, in the future, take a heavy toll of all the players involved.

Ramifications for Israel
In early 2014, Israel faces a rising new challenge. Because of the weakening of the nation states, non-state organizations and jihadist and Salafist groups have set up headquarters in the countries on its borders (Islamic Jihad in the Gaza Strip, Ansar Beit al-Maqdas in the Sinai Peninsula and active also in Cairo and the Canal cities, the Salafist Front and the command center of the Syrian Islamic Front in Jordan, ISIS and the al-Nusra Front in Syria, the Abdullah Azzam Brigades, the al-Nusra command, and the Salafist movement in Lebanon). These groups' ideological frameworks can be divided into three stages: (a) fighting against the Shiite axis to topple the Assad regime; (b) ridding the region of the secular Sunni leaders and establishing an Islamic caliphate; (c) confronting the West and Israel.

Over the years, the State of Israel has witnessed the growth of global jihadist movements, including al-Qaeda. Given that Israel was not at the center of attention of these elements (except for a few sporadic attacks in Israel proper) and that they did not represent an existential threat, Israel preferred to watch events from afar, strengthen its defense mechanisms, and allow others – primarily the United States – to tackle al-Qaeda's cells head-on. In addition, the sense was that the internal strife in Syria and Lebanon driven by those affiliated groups was "doing the work" on Israel's behalf and weakening the Iran-led Shiite axis.

Nonetheless, the threat against Israel, in all its aspects, must be reassessed, given the increasing weakness of the regional states and the erosion of their governance power, as well as the emergence of jihadist and al-Qaeda affiliated groups into the power vacuum and the construction of headquarters near Israel's borders, threatening the stability and sovereignty of Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and the Palestinian Authority. The key question is whether Israel's current restraint policy encourages consolidation of global jihadist movements and al-Qaeda affiliated groups near its borders and the creation of a substantive future threat to the State of Israel. If Israel is interested in stability and maintaining its peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan, it must question whether its passivity, lack of intervention in regional processes, and refraining from action against al-

Qaeda headquarters – which until now was sound policy – must change in order to prevent the negative consequences of widened circles of chaos in the region, which have compounded effects on Israel.