



INSS Insight No. 554, May 28, 2014

The (Bloody) Return Home:

“Syrian Alumni” and the Stability of the Arabian Peninsula

Yoel Guzansky, Yoram Schweitzer, Noa Katzir, and Elad Hochman

The presence of foreign fighters in Syria and the danger posed by their return to their countries of origin could create a security problem for many countries inside and outside the region, if only because of the large number of combatants and the many different countries from which they come. For Saudi Arabia, this problem is not new. Saudis were involved in fighting in foreign countries as long ago as the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Later, they constituted a large proportion of the second generation of fighters who have trained in Afghanistan since the 1990s and today constitute one of the largest groups of foreign fighters in Syria.

The battle in Syria between the Assad regime and its allies on the one hand, and the various rebel groups, including Salafist jihadis directly and indirectly connected to al-Qaeda on the other, has prompted a stream of foreign volunteers seeking to support the warring parties. While Assad’s Iranian patrons and Hizbollah in Lebanon have been mobilized to support regime forces, volunteers from the Middle East, North Africa, Asia, and even Europe and North America have been mobilized for the opposition. With aid and funding from charitable organizations and donors from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, the different opposition factions have entrenched themselves in Syria as independent fighting forces.

While the factions are fighting the regime and each other, the trend of foreign volunteers coming to Syria – particularly from Turkey but also from Lebanon and Jordan – to fight against the Assad regime continues. These several thousand volunteers now constitute a significant security problem, and could well pose a serious threat to the stability and security of their countries of origin, just as the Afghan alumni of the 1990s were a destabilizing factor when they returned to the Arabian Peninsula. These activists, who fought alongside the Taliban against the Soviets, assembled a broad cadre of recruits, built social ties, gained a great deal of operational experience, and created a basis for supra-regional cooperation that evolved into a threat to the “moderate” regimes in the Middle East.

There is already evidence of “Syrian alumni” becoming involved in terrorist activity in their countries of origin and in combat zones in the Middle East that host global jihadi groups that

have earned combat experience in Syria. Thus, for example, Syrian alumni in Egypt have reportedly joined Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, which operates in Sinai against Egyptian military targets on the border with Israel and attacks government, security, and economic targets in Egypt proper. The return of the volunteers from Syria has also contributed to the sectarian violence in Lebanon between Shiite supporters of the regime and Sunni supporters of the opposition.

Western security agencies have warned of the danger posed by the return of Muslim Syrian alumni to their countries with greater experience, training, and connections. As yet terrorist acts in the West by those who returned from Syria have not been identified. However, it is clear that the fear of such operations is a high priority for Western security services.

Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states are in a more sensitive position. Having given moral, economic, and organizational support, formal and informal, to the opposition in Syria, these countries are now coping with the results of their actions and fear a Frankenstein-like scenario. In the past, al-Qaeda members were among the Afghan alumni who returned to the kingdom and carried out a series of showcase attacks. After a lengthy struggle, the Saudi authorities succeeded in stopping their operations and arrested many of their leaders. A few of these operatives managed to escape and joined with members of the local branch of al-Qaeda in Yemen to establish al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, which the West considers to be the most dangerous of al-Qaeda’s affiliates.

This organization has carried out many terrorist attacks, mostly in Yemen, including multi-casualty suicide attacks, and it targets Yemeni government and military officials. A recent report claimed that a terrorist group was exposed in Saudi Arabia that had contact with al-Qaeda in Yemen and in Syria and was planning a series of attacks against government targets, government officials, and foreign representatives in Saudi Arabia. This trend may also be behind the revocation by authorities of firm support for opposition forces in Riyadh, and a royal decree prohibiting Saudi citizens from supporting, organizing, or participating in the battle in Syria or elsewhere.¹

This ban is especially significant given the Saudi royal house’s initial support for the volunteers. While the Saudis fear increasing Iranian involvement in Syria, they are no less disturbed that domestic radical Islamic opposition to the government has been strengthened by the return of young Saudis to the kingdom. The government’s considerable investment in propaganda against participation in the battle in Syria, its enforcement and prevention efforts aimed at the volunteers, and its construction of physical barriers to prevent activists from leaving the kingdom reinforce this assumption. In early February 2014, the government issued a royal decree stating that any Saudi citizen who fought in conflicts outside the

¹ “Country Reports on Terrorism 2013,” United States Department of State, April 2014, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/225050.pdf>.

country would face a long prison sentence. A month later, several of these said organizations were named as terrorist organizations. Still, the earlier support of authorities in Riyadh and the large number of activists who have left the kingdom (some 1,000, of whom over 200 have been killed in battle) could work against the government.²

Because of the extensive support for radical opposition factions by Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, there is concern that radical elements will join the existing opposition organizations or establish new subversive organizations in these states. Since there are police and security forces personnel among the volunteers who went to fight in Syria, there is a danger that extremist elements will penetrate the government and security apparatuses and become a fifth column in the struggle against the existing radical Islamic opposition.

The anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s may constitute the first modern example of foreign fighters in the Arab Sunni context. Significantly, most of the Arab volunteers between 1979 and 1992 came from Saudi Arabia. This phenomenon continued in the 1990s in Chechnya, and later, in Bosnia and Iraq, where the Saudis were the largest foreign group fighting alongside the locals. This is also true in regard to Syria today, and according to estimates, Saudi Arabia is the foreign country with the largest number of casualties among the volunteers.

The return of the Syrian alumni to Saudi Arabia could test the relative efficiency exhibited by Saudi security officials in their fight against terror. This is especially true given what appear to be repeated attempts to attack officials and strategic installations in the kingdom. The wave of terror in the kingdom some ten years ago was contained in part through a process – of questionable success – of “rehabilitation” of terrorist operatives. The Saudis now intend to open additional rehabilitation centers, joining the center in Riyadh. The fact that Saudi Arabia, along with other Gulf states, is taking active steps on this issue indicates the severity of the threat to the regimes and to Western interests in these countries.

The threat posed by the return of the Syrian alumni to their home countries in general, and to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states in particular, is reinforced by the strategic importance of these countries. This requires cooperation among states, alertness, and political and intelligence supervision. “Importation” to the Arabian Peninsula of a militant, well-trained, experienced, and radical opposition could have grave regional, international, economic, and geopolitical consequences, and hence the close monitoring required of the United States, Israel, and other regional and international actors.

² “The Phenomenon of Foreign Volunteers from the Arab World Fighting against the Syrian Regime,” Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, May 2014.