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On the Road to Mecca? The Islamic State Threat to the Gulf

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In a recent reception for foreign ambassadors, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia warned that if not immediately dealt with, the Islamic State (IS) organization (formerly known as ISIS, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) was likely to attack the West. "If we ignore them," the King was quoted by the Saudi news agency, "I am sure they will reach Europe in one month and America one month later." Yet despite the great interest in the threat posed by Islamic State to the West, perhaps the group poses the greatest threat to Iraq's neighbors, among them, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. Indeed, the day after the King's warning, the Gulf Cooperation Council's foreign ministers convened an emergency meeting on the measures to be taken to contend with what they regard as the "unprecedented threats" posed by radical Islam.

On a fundamental level, IS may come to pose a challenge to the religious legitimacy of the house of Saud and its expression of puritan Sunni Islam, namely, Wahhabism. In June 2014, Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced the establishment of the Islamic caliphate, declaring it the true home of Islam and encouraged Muslims to immigrate to it. The group, including al-Baghdadi himself, views itself as the authentic heir to leadership in the Muslim world. This explicit challenge to Saudi Arabia's kings, who regard themselves as the "guardians of the holy places" of Islam, has sparked the King and the Mufti of Saudi Arabia, the highest religious authority in the Kingdom, to proclaim the organization's ideas as an Islamic aberration and "the number one threat to Islam."

The Kingdom is concerned by the support for the organization from the Saudi younger generation. An unofficial survey published recently on the social media indicates that 92 percent of Saudis believe the group's ideology to be "consistent with the values of Islam and the *sharia*." In the past year, Saudi security forces have arrested Islamic State activists who were allegedly recruiting and smuggling activists, donations, and weapons, and planning attacks throughout the Kingdom. Last week, a Saudi court sentenced 17 people to prison terms of up to 26 years on charges of having joined and raised funds for the organization. Also last week, the Saudi Interior Ministry announced the arrest of 88

additional suspects (half of whom were arrested in the past) on suspicions of attempting to carry out IS attacks both inside the Kingdom and abroad.

Almost two-thirds of the Saudi population is under the age of 30, and many are unemployed. Until now, a large number have vented their frustration and expressed their support for the organization's ideas on social networks. In response, the Saudi royal family has intensified its control over preachers and the internet and has increased funding for this sector in the realm of housing, employment, and higher education. This, however, may be too little too late. According to a deserter interviewed by the Lebanese newspaper *as-Safir*, Islamic State already boasts many Saudi members and has already established cells in a number of major cities in the Kingdom. Recent months have witnessed the release of videos showing Saudi IS fighters tearing up their passports and vowing to liberate Mecca and Medina.

The return of young IS fighters to Saudi Arabia is also likely to pose a threat to the relative stability of the Kingdom. According to the Saudi Interior Ministry, more than one thousand young Saudis have joined the group, despite a royal decree imposing severe punishments on anyone joining, funding, or identifying with the organization. The return of these young Saudis, who constitute one of the organization's largest groups of fighters, could create a significant security problem for the Kingdom. Following their support for the opposition to Assad and al-Maliki, a number of Gulf states may now have to contend with the results of their own actions. There is concern that radical elements may link up with existing opposition groups or establish subversive groups in the Arabian Peninsula, and enhance the danger of attacks on senior figures and oil facilities. For the first time since 2006, an attempt was reportedly made last week to attack a gas pipeline in the Kingdom, although it is still not clear who was responsible.

Some Gulf states have a particularly problematic history with regard to financing terrorism, having in the past turned a blind eye or taken unsatisfactory action to stop the transfer of funds by businessmen and charitable groups. The American pressure exerted in the aftermath of the 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States and the series of attacks in Saudi Arabia between 2003-2006 caused the Kingdom to take more resolute action against this phenomenon, if only to prevent terrorism against itself. The campaign currently conducted by the Kingdom against Islamic State ideology, aired in television programs and media articles, is meant not only to damage the organization's efforts underway at home but also to respond to the allegations that the Kingdom has supported these groups in the past. As part of this campaign, Saudi Arabia recently donated \$100 million to the UN Counter-Terrorism Centre.

Given the sparsely populated areas along the Iraq-Saudi border, there is little danger of masses of Iraqi refugees streaming across the Saudi border. However, Islamic State's "movement southward" could prompt many Iraqis to flee toward the Saudi or Kuwaiti

border (Kuwait is also being targeted by Islamic State, which regards it as part of Iraq, but benefits from the existence of the Shiite barrier between it and the territory currently held by the organization). Another potential threat is posed by the heightened inter-ethnic tensions in a number of the Gulf states that have a substantial Shiite population, such as Saudi Arabia (20 percent), Kuwait (30 percent), and Bahrain (70 percent), as the organization attracts many young Sunnis (indicated by IS graffiti and flags, and the large numbers of Tweets originating from citizens of these countries) who may take out their anger on the Shiite population.

Moreover, the organization's seizure of vast areas not far from the Saudi border may pose a military threat to the Saudis. In recent years, Saudi Arabia has invested billions in the construction of an advanced barrier along its border, with the aim of preventing infiltrating the border to and from Iraq. Since June, the Kingdom has raised its level of alertness and significantly bolstered its forces along its border with Iraq (850 km in length) with forces from the well-trained and loyal National Guard. According to some reports (though denied by the countries involved), Egyptian and Pakistani troops have reinforced the Saudi forces. Until now, the only offensive action initiated from within Iraq has been the launching of Grad rockets into Saudi territory, most likely in an effort to elicit a Saudi response. Additional evidence of Saudi concern regarding the infiltration of hostile elements from Iraq appeared over the weekend in a statement by King Abdullah regarding an ambitious plan to fortify the border using additional means and forces.

The Gulf states are following the territorial entrenchment of the extremist organization, which rejects the existing borders and the religious legitimacy of these regimes. As long as Islamic State was operating against the al-Maliki regime and Iran was stretching its resources thin to fight it, the situation served Saudi interests. Now, with Islamic State knocking on its door and with increasing Iranian involvement in Iraq, in coordination and possibly cooperation with the United States, the situation has changed. To Saudi consternation, Islamic State's hold on Iraq has already resulted in intensified Iranian involvement in the country,

Riyadh has substantial influence on cross-border Sunni tribes in Iraq, whose recruitment to the struggle against the group is a key to its success. In addition, Saudi Arabia is now attempting to improve its relations with different parts of the political system in Iraq that it had boycotted. Just before Haider al-Abadi was charged with the task of forming the government in Iraq, Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal said that this was the best news he had heard recently, bearing testimony to the bad blood between Saudi Arabia and al-Maliki's Iraq, and possibly of renewed efforts on the part of the Kingdom to rehabilitate its influence in Baghdad.

The Saudi royal family seeks to accelerate the establishment of an international coalition capable of contending effectively with the threat that Islamic State now poses to it and its allies Kuwait and Jordan, which to a great extent serve as a strategic buffer between Saudi Arabia and Iraq. For its part, Islamic State has promised to "take care of" the Arab regimes in the Gulf that have deviated from the path of Islam. In a Frankenstein-like scenario, the opposition to the Iraqi and Syrian regimes is now perceived as a real and immediate threat to states that once supported the opposition.

Islamic State's road to Mecca, however, is primarily ideological. It is a struggle for the fundamental beliefs of Sunni Islam. Yet while Islamic State has created rifts in the royal Sunni camp (due to Qatar's support of Islamic extremists), it may also create mutual interests between external rival elements. From the Saudis' perspective, the threat is serious, and in this context, the possibility of ad hoc cooperation with Iran, their primary regional rival, cannot be ruled out.

