

The Kingdom and the Caliphate: Saudi Arabia's Approach towards the Islamic State



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Summary

Abstract: Saudi Arabia has joined the war against the IS and it supports more boots on the ground to tackle this challenge. It has joined the military coalition against the IS, has been at the forefront of the political campaign against the IS and has committed, along with other countries, to fund anti-IS operations. Despite all this, Saudi Arabia cannot insulate itself from attacks by the IS as long as the two holy places of Islam – Mecca and Medina – remain targets of the caliphate. Although the capture of Mecca and Medina seems too remote a possibility for the IS keeping in view the Saudi military might, the very fact that it is on the agenda of the IS does not allow Saudi Arabia to relax unless these elements are crushed and uprooted. As the worsening political and security situation in Syria and Iraq offers safe haven to IS terrorists, it looks highly unlikely that these elements can be completely eliminated in the near future, though they may be weakened by ongoing air strikes and joint military operations. Thus, the conflict between the IS and Saudi Arabia is likely to continue in the near future. Though Saudi Arabia is employing all the options available to it, the success of anti-IS operations depends to a significant extent on the ground situation in Syria and Iraq. A worsening situation in these two countries may make these operations ineffective and Iraq and Syria may become conducive for the terrorists to survive and operate from.

The rise of the Islamic State (IS) and its declaration of a Caliphate in Iraq in June 2014 came as a surprise and a challenge for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The growing cadre strength of the IS, its control over parts of Iraq and Syria, running of a parallel economy within Iraq, activities in Syria, and continuous killing of the people have all been causes of concern for the House of Saud. The fact that all these developments are taking place in its neighbourhood, over which it has little or no control, has added to Saudi frustration with the IS. During the initial days of the establishment of the IS, it was alleged that the Kingdom was providing funds and ideological support for the IS in order to raise an internal challenge to Nouri Al Maliki's government in Iraq which was being supported by Iran. But no concrete material evidence has emerged so far to prove Saudi involvement and support for the IS, although some believe that some private Saudi citizens both inside and outside the Kingdom have made financial contributions to the IS. Much to Saudi consternation, the IS has launched terrorist attacks inside the Kingdom. The IS has also proclaimed the goal of capturing the two holy places of Islam – Mecca and Medina. The Saudi political and religious leadership has condemned the activities of the IS and have urged citizens to stay away from these radical elements. Against this backdrop, this Issue Brief analyses the IS threat to the Kingdom and the Saudi strategy of dealing with this growing menace.

IS terror threat to Saudi Arabia

The IS presents a genuine physical threat to Saudi Arabia. Though the group is located in northern Iraq and away from the region bordering Saudi Arabia, Riyadh believes that due to the fragile security situation in Iraq it is possible for the IS to cross the border and enter the Kingdom. In recent months Saudi Arabia has already faced IS terror attacks on several occasions. On Muharram day, November 4, 2014, IS militants targeted a gathering of Shias in the Kingdom's Eastern Province. IS militants also attacked a Shiite shrine in Dalwah in Al-Ahsa province in November 2014, killing seven Saudi citizens. November 2014 also saw an IS attack on a Danish national in Riyadh. Further, in January 2015, Saudi border guards killed four IS terrorists trying to infiltrate from Iraq; two Saudi border guards were also killed in this incident. Thus, IS terror activities in the Kingdom have now become a harsh reality. Further, IS calls for attacks on Saudi Shias has also raised the fear of sectarian tension within the Kingdom.

Concern over home grown terror

In many of the attacks launched by the IS in the Kingdom, it has been confirmed that the terrorists were actually Saudi nationals. The terrorists who attacked the Danish national in Riyadh have been identified to be Saudi nationals. Similarly, the attack on the border guards was also carried out by Saudi nationals. These incidents indicate that supporters and sympathisers of the IS are present inside the Kingdom. At the same time, they also indicate the ongoing radicalization of Saudi youth and their attraction towards the extremist ideology of the IS. This represents a long term internal security threat to the country. Saudi

rulers now face the dual challenge of tackling the IS threat from outside the Kingdom and preventing the radicalization of youth within.

Ideological challenge

The rise of IS certainly poses an ideological challenge for Saudi Arabia. Islam has been the most dominant factor in Saudi foreign policy. Saudi Arabia claims itself to be the leader of the Muslim world. The location of the two holy places in its territory has helped Saudi Arabia maintain its dominance and influence in the Islamic world. The IS follows the Salafist ideology, which has been supported and promoted by Saudi Arabia. Thus, the announcement of a 'caliphate' by the IS challenges Saudi ideological dominance in the region. Further, Saudi youth being inspired by the IS's ideology and joining the organization will not only undermine internal security but also challenge the legitimacy of the House of Saud which practises a puritanical form of Islam in running the affairs of the state. Such a challenge threatens the ideological legitimacy of the Saudi royal family.

Regional context

In the wake of the emergence of the IS and the possibility of the group's ideology and militants entering the Kingdom, Riyadh is undoubtedly apprehensive about its manoeuvring space in troubled Iraq being further squeezed. As it is, with the appointment of Maliki as the Prime Minister of Iraq, Saudi Arabia had lost a significant degree of influence in Iraq, with the Iraqi opposition, consisting primarily of Sunni groups, pushed to the corner. The coming to power of Maliki also meant Iran's growing influence in Iraq. Further, Saudi Arabia believes that the Maliki government failed to effectively control the menace of terrorism and it accused Maliki of adopting sectarian policies, thus squarely placing the blame on him for the situation in Iraq. Maliki, in turn, accused Saudi Arabia of supporting the IS. As a result, political and diplomatic relations between Iraq and Saudi Arabia suffered.

In September 2014, Maliki was removed and Haider Al Abadi was appointed as the Prime Minister of Iraq. With this change in leadership, there are hopes in Riyadh of reviving ties with Iraq. Recently there have been some exchanges of visits from both the sides and Saudi Arabia has decided to open its embassy in Baghdad in a few months time.¹ Improved relations with Iraq will give Saudi Arabia an advantage to fight against the IS terrorists.

Uncontrolled IS activities in Syria also pose challenges for Saudi Arabia. Taking advantage of the chaotic political and security situation in the country, the IS has increased its activities in Syria. Saudi Arabia faces the dual challenge of dealing with Bashar Al Assad and the IS

¹ "Saudi embassy in Baghdad to reopen in two months: Iraq deputy PM," *Asharq Al Awsat*, January 11, 2015, at <http://www.aawsat.net/2015/01/article55340315>

in Syria. It has been at the forefront of opposition to the Assad regime and has severely criticised the atrocities perpetrated by Assad. It has also expressed its discontent over the lack of unified action against Assad by the US and international community. On top of all this, the IS terror operations from Syrian territory has come to pose an additional challenge for Saudi Arabia. In Syria, Saudi Arabia has limited influence and that flows from its support for and financing of the Salafists in their fight against the Assad regime. But it has no lever over the IS. Riyadh believes that just like the removal of Maliki has led to the improvement of ties with Iraq and the consequent strengthening of the joint fight against the IS, the removal of Assad from power in Syria would bring the necessary unity and strength to fight against the IS in Syria.² But since the removal of Assad looks difficult at present Saudi Arabia is in search of a strategy in Syria.

Iran, on the other hand, is seen as a major player with significant influence in both Syria and Iraq. And this has emerged as a major concern for Saudi Arabia in its neighbourhood. Iran's relationship with Iraq after the execution of Saddam Hussain has undergone a sea change with the coming to power of Maliki and its influence continues to remain even today. The rise of IS has been another factor which has contributed to further strengthening cooperation between Iran and Iraq. Reports have come out alleging Iranian involvement in air strikes against the IS in Iraq. The fact that Iran has chosen to strike at the IS without joining hands with the US reflects a deft Iranian strategy in Iraq and the region. This would mean that Iran would go ahead to strike against the IS targets but at the same time would not compromise its strategic independence by cleverly avoiding any regional military coalition with the US against the IS. In the case of tackling the IS, Iran has clearly shown that though the objective of both the US and Iran are one and the same, Iran, by going it alone, has asserted its strategic independence and regional leadership and dominance. Such a situation becomes even more challenging for Saudi Arabia where it finds the influence of both the IS and Iran rising in neighbouring Iraq even as it feels helpless and challenged by these developments taking place in the region.

Saudi strategy for tackling the IS

Ideological delegitimisation of the IS: Saudi Arabia is trying to delegitimize the IS on the basis of the same ideology with which the IS has established itself. Thus, Saudi Arabia has appealed to the people to denounce this malicious ideology which is detrimental to the religion and society. The Saudi political and religious leaderships have been trying to convince people that the ideology promoted by the IS only leads to hatred whereas the ideology adopted by the state is pure and true. Appealing to the leaders of the Arab and Islamic countries, King Abdullah stated on August 1, 2014 that the terrorists are "trying to

² Nawaf Obaid and Saud al-Sarhan, "A Saudi view on the Islamic State," European Council on Foreign Relations, October 2, 2014, at http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_saudi_arabia331

hijack Islam and present it to the world as a religion of extremism, hatred, and terrorism” and are trying to “tarnish the pure image of Islam.”³ In order to appeal to the masses, the Saudi Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdulaziz Al-As-Shaikh stated that, “The ideas of extremism, radicalism and terrorism do not belong to Islam in any way, but are the first enemy of Islam, and Muslims are their first victims.”⁴ Similarly, Tawfeeq Al Sediry, Saudi Arabia’s deputy minister of Islamic affairs, said “We are also educating the Imams to tell people that what ISIS is saying is against Islam,” and added that “They (IS) represent violence. We represent the real Islam.”⁵ Such statements from the king as well as the senior most religious leader condemning the activities of the IS are intended to delegitimize the IS and its ideology. They are also intended to persuade people to stay away from the pernicious ideology of the IS or any other terrorist organisation. Further, these statements challenge the very ideology on which the IS is based and attracts people to its fold.

Keeping the GCC united: Saudi Arabia has sought cooperation from GCC member states to deal with the increasing activities of the IS. During the recent past, an intra-GCC conflict came out in the open when Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain withdrew their envoys from Qatar alleging that the latter did not implement an agreement which calls upon members not to interfere in each other’s internal affairs. The reference was to an agreement signed in November 2013, which calls upon members not to support “anyone threatening the security and stability of the GCC whether as groups or individuals-via direct security work or through political influence, and not to support hostile media.”⁶ These three countries felt that Qatar has failed to abide by the agreement and it was therefore necessary on their part to withdraw their ambassadors in order to “protect their security and stability”.⁷ This led to a diplomatic row in the GCC. It seems that now in the face of the threat from the IS, Saudi Arabia has come to realise the importance of GCC unity. Saudi Arabia has not only mended its ties with Qatar but it has also been facilitating the Qatar-Egypt relationship, which got strained in the aftermath of the removal of Mohamed Morsi from power. Besides, the Saudi-Qatari spat over the Qatari support for Muslim Brotherhood in Syria has also been another intra-GCC issue threatening unity. But with the IS emerging as a common threat to all of them, GCC states have condemned the IS and are standing together against the group.

³ “Saudi King Abdullah’s counter-terrorism comments praised,” *Asharq Al Awsat*, August 2, 2014, at <http://www.aawsat.net/2014/08/article55334988>

⁴ “‘ISIS is enemy No. 1 of Islam,’ says Saudi grand mufti,” *Al Arabiya*, August 19, 2014, at <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/08/19/Saudi-mufti-ISIS-is-enemy-No-1-of-Islam.html>

⁵ “New Saudi king ascends the throne as terrorism threat grows,” *Washington Post*, January 25, 2015, at http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/new-saudi-king-ascends-to-the-throne-as-terrorism-threat-grows/2015/01/25/34c1eb60-9c3b-11e4-86a3-1b56f64925f6_story.html

⁶ “KSA, Bahrain, UAE recall ambassadors from Qatar,” *Arab News*, March 5, 2014, available at <http://www.arabnews.com/news/535101>

⁷ Ibid.

Joining the military campaign against IS: Saudi Arabia has participated in the military strikes against IS targets in Syria.⁸ It also supports stronger military action against the IS and has appealed to world leaders to take cognizance of the IS threat. King Abdullah had stated that, if not confronted, the IS can spread to Europe and the US; further, terrorism should be fought with force, reason and speed.⁹ Speaking at the meeting of the anti-IS coalition members, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al Faisal stated that it is necessary to deploy ground forces to counter the IS.¹⁰ In September 2014, representatives from Saudi Arabia along with other Arab countries such as Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, the UAE, Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon and Iraq met with John Kerry and agreed to join a coordinated military campaign against the IS.¹¹ At the meeting, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al Faisal called for a “comprehensive approach” against terrorism as a number of countries in the region such as Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Syria and Yemen are affected by this challenge.¹²

Strengthening border security: In July 2014, in the wake of the growing activities of the IS in Iraq, Saudi Arabia deployed 30,000 troops along its border with Iraq. The Saudi border with Iraq lies on the desert of Rub al Khali and border infiltration has been a concern for Saudi Arabia. Amidst reports of the IS taking over cities in Iraq, Saudi Arabia is sending additional forces to the border to strengthen its border security. With the activities of the IS growing in Iraq and Saudi Arabia having received threats from the IS, Saudi rulers are not taking any chances with border security. After the January 5, 2015 attack on the border guards, Saudi Arabia has decided to build a fence along its border with Iraq in order to prevent the terrorists from breaching it. According to reports, the 900 kilometre long fence along the northern frontier will have 40 surveillance towers, 85 surveillance posts, 50 day-and-night surveillance cameras, 10 monitoring and surveillance vehicles, and a 1.4-million meter fibre optic network.¹³ Further, shoot at sight orders have been issued to the border guards, and these orders do not provide for any warning or negotiation with the terrorists trying to infiltrate into the kingdom.

⁸ “Saudi Arabia confirms role in strikes against Islamic State in Syria,” *Reuters*, September 23, 2014, at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/09/23/us-syria-crisis-saudi-idUSKCN0HI1Y120140923>

⁹ “Saudi King Abdullah warns of global terror threat,” *Asharq Al Awsat*, August 30, 2014, at <http://www.aawsat.net/2014/08/article55336024>

¹⁰ “KSA: Ground forces ‘a must’ to crush IS,” *Arab News*, December 4, 2014, at <http://www.arabnews.com/featured/news/669566>

¹¹ “Alliance to curb flow of funds, fighters to Islamic State,” *Arab News*, September 11, 2014, at <http://www.arabnews.com/news/628601>

¹² “Arab states to back US in fight against IS,” *Al Jazeera*, September 12, 2014, at <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/09/arab-states-back-us-fight-against-201491211054523936.html>

¹³ “Saudi border security reinforced,” *Saudi Gazette*, January 6, 2015, at <http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/index.cfm?method=home.regcon&contentid=20140907217310>

Collaborating with the US: With the IS spreading its activities in Iraq and Syria and posing a direct threat to the kingdom, Saudi Arabia has sought the help of the United States to tackle the IS challenge. The emergence of the IS has had its impact on US-Saudi relations. In the aftermath of the protests in the Arab streets there was a feeling in Saudi Arabia that the US is retreating from the region with its 'pivot to Asia' policy. Saudi leaders seemed to believe that the US is shifting its focus towards the Asia Pacific at the cost of its presence in the region. But the increasing IS activities has brought the American focus back to the region with its involvement in operations against the IS. Recent US-Saudi interactions have focused on political and military operations against the IS. US Secretary of State John Kerry visited Saudi Arabia in September 2014 and a delegation of Senators led by John McCain, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, visited Saudi Arabia and discussed the coalition campaign against the IS.¹⁴ Senior Saudi leaders have also visited the United States to discuss the IS challenge and to strengthen bilateral cooperation. In November 2014, Saudi Minister of National Guard Prince Miteb Bin Abdullah visited USA and met President Obama and Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel. Among other issues, the leaders were reported to have discussed the strategy to tackle the threat posed by the IS.¹⁵ For the US also, Saudi Arabia is an important country in the fight against the IS because of Saudi wealth, its political influence in the region and the Sunni ideological dominance it enjoys in the region. The rise of the IS has thus contributed to the strengthening of US-Saudi relations, which was seen to be affected during the Arab Spring.

Conclusion

The rise of the IS has now become a challenge for Saudi Arabia. There is a noticeable Saudi nervousness about the growth of IS, which is reflected in the statements and responses of the Saudi leadership. Saudi Arabia views the IS as a threat major threat to its national security as well as to its interests in the region. The IS's declared goal of establishing a caliphate stands at odds with the interests of Saudi Arabia. The advances made by the IS in recent months and its exhibited resilience in the face of attacks have left Saudi Arabia worried.

Saudi Arabia has joined the war against the IS and it supports more boots on the ground to tackle this challenge. It has joined the military coalition against the IS, has been at the forefront of the political campaign against the IS and has committed, along with other countries, to fund anti-IS operations. Despite all this, Saudi Arabia cannot insulate itself from attacks by the IS as long as the two holy places of Islam – Mecca and Medina – remain

¹⁴ "Saudi-US partnership against IS bolstered," *Arab News*, January 18, 2015, at <http://www.arabnews.com/featured/news/691266>

¹⁵ "Prince Miteb says Obama appreciates Saudi Arabia's regional efforts," *Asharq Al Awsat*, November 20, 2014, <http://www.aawsat.net/2014/11/article55338735>

targets of the caliphate. Although the capture of Mecca and Medina seems too remote a possibility for the IS keeping in view the Saudi military might, the very fact that it is on the agenda of the IS does not allow Saudi Arabia to relax unless these elements are crushed and uprooted. As the worsening political and security situation in Syria and Iraq offers safe haven to IS terrorists, it looks highly unlikely that these elements can be completely eliminated in the near future, though they may be weakened by ongoing air strikes and joint military operations. Thus, the conflict between the IS and Saudi Arabia is likely to continue in the near future. Though Saudi Arabia is employing all the options available to it, the success of anti-IS operations depends to a significant extent on the ground situation in Syria and Iraq. A worsening situation in these two countries may make these operations ineffective and Iraq and Syria may become conducive for the terrorists to survive and operate from.