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King Salman and Saudi Arabia have been named as new targets by the Islamic State.

KURDISH, IRAQI OFFENSIVES PUT THE SQUEEZE ON THE ISLAMIC STATE’S STRATEGIC LINES OF COMMUNICATIONS BETWEEN RAQQA AND MOSUL

James Brandon

Following the Islamic State’s defeat by mainly Kurdish ground forces, backed by U.S.-led airstrikes, in the Syrian town of Kobane in late January, the militant group has continued to suffer territorial losses both in Syria and Iraq. Most of these gains against the Islamic State have been achieved by Kurdish militants, although the Iraqi Army’s offensive against the group is also starting to gather steam in Iraq’s Sunni heartlands.

In Syria, Kurdish fighters claimed another important victory in late February when they captured Tel Hamis, a strategically-located town close to the Syrian-Iraqi border south of the town of Qamishli, which remains theoretically held by Bashar al-Assad’s forces but in practice is largely Kurdish-controlled (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, February 28). The Kurdish Yekineyên Parastina Gel (YPG—People’s Protection Units) militias, which carried out the bulk of the fighting in the Tel Hamis area, on February 27, also announced the capture of numerous villages in the vicinity, strengthening their grip in the area (YPG, February 27). An important result of these gains is that Kurdish groups are now able to severely squeeze the Islamic State’s lines of communications between Raqqa in Syria and Mosul in Iraq, the group’s two main cities. In effect, if Kurdish forces continue to expand their control over surrounding areas while also continuing to keep Islamic State fighters out of the areas to the north around Hasakah, then the Islamic State self-declared caliphate will come close to being effectively split in two. This will be an important military and psychological blow against the organization. In addition, Kurdish forces have continued to push Islamic State fighters out of areas surrounding Kobane, capturing the key Jebel al-Faraj checkpoint west of the city on February 20, and

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areas south of the city (ARA News, February 21). This success reduces the chance of an effective Islamic State counter-attack in the area, a fact underlined by Iraqi Kurdistan's rotation of a fresh 150 peshmerga fighters into Kobane (NRT, February 28).

In Iraq, Kurdish gains against the Islamic State have been more gradual. Causes include the continuing weakness of the Iraqi Army and the fact that the Islamic State-held territory is largely populated by Sunni Arabs, who are often hostile to both the Shi'a-dominated Iraqi military and Kurdish forces. In addition, Kurdish troops may be less willing to fight for Arab-majority areas as opposed to defending Kurd-inhabited areas. For instance, the veteran Iraq Kurdish fighter, Muhammad Haji Mamoud, recently told Kurdish media: "We consider the Arabic region as foreign land and we do not sacrifice our lives for it" (Rudaw, February 25). Underlining continuing ethnic tensions in and around Kirkuk, Kurdish police in the city on February 24 announced the arrest of three suspected Islamic State infiltrators, all local Arabs (Rudaw, February 24).

Meanwhile, the Iraqi federal military and around 5,000 mainly-Shi'a volunteers launched a widely-heralded offensive against Islamic State-held Tikrit on March 2, having earlier surrounded the city (al-Arabiya, March 1; March 2). Ahead of the offensive, the Islamic State had preemptively kidnapped around 100 local Sunni Arab tribesmen from Rubaidha, around 20 miles north of Tikrit, in an attempt to prevent them aiding the national army (*The National*, February 25; Fars News, February 26). Early reports from pro-government forces, including statements issued by the People's Mobilization Forces (a Shi'a militia), suggested that Islamic State forces had withdrawn from roads around the city (Rudaw, March 4). However, evicting the Islamic State from urban areas in the center of the city is likely to take time.

One result of the above developments, including the ongoing offensive against the Islamic State by diverse enemies in both Iraq and Syria, is that recruitment for the group has reportedly slowed. For instance, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that between January 21 and February 19, only an estimated 54 new recruits had joined the Islamic State, a marked decrease from previous months (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, February 23). This suggests that, just as recruitment to the Islamic State accelerated when the group's territories were expanding, so the flow of would-be jihadists may start to tail off as the group finds itself increasingly on the retreat.

EXPOSURE OF UK ISLAMIC STATE FIGHTER HIGHLIGHTS UNIVERSITY RADICALIZATION

James Brandon

"Jihadi John," one of the Islamic State's most notorious executioners, was revealed on February 26 by the *Washington Post* to be a British citizen of Kuwaiti origin, Mohammed Emwazi (*Washington Post*, February 26). The revelation reignited debate over the extent of Islamist radicalization in the UK. Emwazi is believed to have been involved in the killing of the U.S. journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff, U.S. aid worker Peter Kassig, British aid workers Alan Henning and David Haines and a group of captured Syrian soldiers (BBC, February 26). Emwazi remains free and apparently active in Syria, although following his naming, UK Prime Minister David Cameron promised "to find these people and put them out of action," a reference to both Emwazi and other British jihadists abroad (*Guardian*, February 27). The revelations have refocused attention on whether some British universities are acting as incubators for Islamist extremism.

In 2006, Emwazi enrolled at the University of Westminster, in central London, to study a three-year information and business degree. The university, which has a significant population of both British and foreign Muslims, has previously been associated with various issues around radicalization; for instance, it is home to significant numbers of supporters of the pro-caliphate Hizb ut-Tahrir organization, some of whom were elected to various student posts at the university (*Telegraph*, April 20, 2011; *Evening Standard*, April 12, 2011). The university also attracted high profile radical speakers, including Anwar al-Awlaki, later a leading al-Qaeda preacher, who addressed students at the university in 2006 (Huffington Post, February 27). Although the effect of this environment on Emwazi himself remains unclear, one former Westminster student has alleged that "extreme religious views were prevalent within the institution" and recalled that student union presidents had shared online videos such as a rap entitled "Khilafah's Coming Back," which he linked to Emwazi's ultimate radicalization (*Washington Post*, February 27). Indeed, in the very week that Emwazi's identity was revealed, Westminster was already embroiled in a high-profile controversy over the upcoming visit by one of the UK's most hardline Salafist preachers, Haitham al-Haddad, who had been invited by the university's student Islamic Society (Independent, March 23). A university spokesman claimed that "we are shocked and sickened by the news" of the Emwazi connection, and said "we are working to implement the Government's Prevent strategy to tackle extremism" (*Evening Standard*, February 26).

The case of the University of Westminster is part of a broader and well-documented trend of graduates of a range of British universities becoming involved in Islamist terrorism, often against a background of considerable Islamist activism on campuses. Other jihadists linked to universities include Umar al-Faruq Abd al-Mutalib, a former student at University College London, who attempted to blow up a transatlantic airliner on Christmas Day in 2009 (BBC, October 12, 2013). Likewise, Michael Adebolajo, who killed and beheaded a British soldier in East London in May 2013, had previously converted to a radical form of Islam while studying at London's University of Greenwich (BBC, December 19, 2013). Yassin Nassari, another former Westminster University student, was jailed in 2007 for possessing blueprints of how to make primitive rockets (*Guardian*, February 27). At the same time, however, resistance within British academia to tackle Islamist radicalization remains strong. For instance, recent government proposals to tackle "hate-preaching" at universities have been attacked by a coalition of academics as "both unnecessary and ill-conceived" (*Guardian*, February 2). Likewise, the same proposals have been partly resisted by the Liberal Democrats, the junior partners in the UK's governing coalition, which wants only preachers who directly incite violence to be banned from universities; Conservatives meanwhile favor banning preachers who promote a broader range of extremist ideals, potentially including ideas such as recreating the caliphate or applying Shari'a law (BBC, March 1). In this context, despite the public outing of Emwazi, UK universities are likely to remain an important breeding ground for jihadists for the foreseeable future.

Egypt Struggles with Jihadist Challenge in Sinai

Muhammad Mansour

A series of attacks by the Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (ABM) jihadist group against military checkpoints and facilities in northeast Sinai on January 29 killed at least 32 Egyptian soldiers and policemen, making this among the deadliest attacks in Egypt in decades (*al-Ahram*, January 30). The attack followed an earlier assault on October 24, 2014, when militants launched two attacks on Egyptian army positions in Sinai, killing at least 33 security personnel (*al-Hayat*, October 24, 2014). The attacks are the most deadly since the military's overthrow of Muhammad Mursi, the former president who is a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, in July 2013, and dramatically illustrate that the Egyptian government is still struggling to contain or counter an 18-month insurgency by ABM, which swore allegiance to the Islamic State on November 10, 2014. Northeastern Sinai has been the site of extremist attacks for several years, but violence rose markedly following the ousting of Mursi in July 2013, whose Islamist administration appeared to have prompted militants to temporarily scale back their level of attacks.

Allegiance to the Caliph

The latest attack by the group came after the ABM swearing *bay'ah* (an oath of allegiance) to the self-proclaimed Islamic State in November (Reuters Arabic, November 3, 2014; *al-Hayat*, November 11, 2014). It also raised fears about the extent of any support that ABM receives from Islamic State's main headquarters in Syria and Iraq as well as from the Islamic State's franchises in neighboring Libya and over the potential flow of arms and militants through Egypt's vast and porous Libyan and Sudanese borders. The attack also came soon after the Egyptian military announced that it had destroyed tunnels stretching from the Egyptian border town of Rafah to Hamas-controlled Gaza. Following the January attack, the Egyptian authorities designated Hamas as a terrorist organization, claiming it had supported insurgents who have staged attacks in the Sinai Peninsula (*al-Ahram*, February 28).

Since swearing allegiance to the Islamic State in November, ABM supporters have described themselves as *Wilayat Sinai* (Province of Sinai), indicating their loyalty to Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's self-declared caliphate. The destructive nature of the January attack, which involved the use of multiple suicide attackers against well-defended targets, coming so soon after the group's pledge to the

Islamic State, suggests that the group may be now actively accessing Islamic State expertise. In particular, both attacks employed RPGs, Grad rockets and mortars, while the group is also reported to possess man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADS) (*al-Watan*, January 31). Additionally, since pledging allegiance to the Islamic State, there has been a dramatic advance in ABM's media capabilities, as well as an overall rebranding, that further underline the group's strengthening ideological, and perhaps actual, ties to the Islamic State. That said, ABM has not yet employed the Islamic State's advanced video production techniques, at present mainly posting propaganda photos showcasing their operations against security personnel as well as photos of their social activism; these are aimed at winning local residents to their side. They have also distributed leaflets threatening local residents with decapitation if they collaborate with the army (*al-Arabiya*, March 1). [1]

Differences however remain between the Islamic State and ABM. For instance, the Islamic State regularly conducts brutal execution-style murders, including beheadings and immolations, against individuals whom the group's scholars consider as infidels and/or alleged criminals. Sinai militants, on the other hand, generally prioritize targeting the Egyptian security forces, including both soldiers and policemen, on the grounds that these are guilty of greater infidelity than ordinary citizens because they support a "tyrant" ruler whom ABM regards as "un-Islamic," and because they do not apply Shari'a in the country (*al-Jazeera*, May 28, 2014). That said, these different approaches also reflect that the Islamic State has full control over territory in Syria and Iraq, which makes it easy for them to enforce their rule, while as ABM is still operating as a guerrilla or insurgent organization, leading to it focusing on fighting the government rather than on applying their interpretation of Islamic laws.

Al-Sisi Steps Up

The apparently increased capabilities of ABM have prompted Egypt's military and government to step up efforts against the group. In the aftermath of the deadly January attacks, al-Sisi formed what he called "the unified command of the east of the canal," under which both the Second and Third Field Armies will participate in the anti-terrorism mission in Sinai, instead of the Second Army alone (*al-Arabiya*, January 31). Al-Sisi also allocated ten billion Egyptian pounds (\$1.3 billion) to counter-terrorism missions in Sinai (*al-Ahram*, February 2).

These moves follow earlier government initiatives in the Sinai region. Almost a month before the group pledged allegiance to Islamic State, and following the October deadly

assault, al-Sisi called for a security meeting. As a result of this, a three-month state of emergency and curfew were imposed in North Sinai. Additionally, the Rafah border crossing with Gaza was closed, a buffer zone between Gaza and Egypt was initiated and a Hamas delegation was refused entry into Egypt (Reuters Arabic, October 21, 2014). The latest escalation of government efforts should therefore be seen as a tacit acknowledgement that these earlier steps had not proven sufficiently effective.

Following the latest initiatives, the Egyptian government has claimed several successes. For instance, the army's spokesperson announced on his Facebook page on March 1 (the army began using social media after the 2011 revolution to announce official statements) that the Egyptian Army killed 172 militants in February 2015 (*al-Shorouk*, March 1). Brigadier General Mohamed Samir Abdel Aziz Ghonim also said that jihadists had been killed in February in the North Sinai cities of al-Arish, Shaykh Zuweid and Rafah. Another 229 suspected militants were arrested in these operations, while 85 militant hideouts were destroyed (*al-Ahram*, March 1).

Continuing Challenges

Despite the government's recent steps and notwithstanding its claimed successes, Egypt is likely to continue to struggle to contain the challenge of ABM in Sinai. Not only does ABM have advanced weaponry, but it also receives moral, and perhaps material, support from various elements of the Islamic State. This may include veterans of Islamic State operations in Iraq, Syria and Libya (*al-Arabiya*, February 5). In addition, ABM is likely to continue to draw support from former Mursi supporters, who are aggrieved by the government's heavy-handed crackdown during the last few years, as well as local people alienated by the government's security-led measures in Sinai. It is also not clear if the military has sufficiently accurate information about militant groups' strategy, numbers and locations, or whether it is capable of mobilizing religious institutions like al-Azhar to combat the ideological challenge posed by the Islamic State and ABM. The government is also inclined to respond to ABM attacks with conspiracy theories, for instance, blaming Muslim Brotherhood or foreign countries for attacks, even after ABM has claimed responsibility. One government security source told the Egyptian media in late January that a prominent Muslim Brotherhood member was leading and coordinating the terrorist operations in Sinai (Dot Msr, January 31).

It is also unclear if the al-Sisi government has a strategy to work with Bedouins in Sinai or to address their grievances,

which typically include claims that northern Sinai has been ignored by the government, that they have not benefited from tourism in southern Sinai and that they are subject to arbitrary arrest by government troops. Further underlining the government's challenges are questions over the army's ability to fight a counter-insurgency campaign. For instance, one recent media report quoted an officer who allegedly participated in the recent military operations in Sinai as saying that the government's recent failures were due to the Egyptian Army's overdependence on traditional and routine strategies, which were unsuitable in a fight against a militant group that is highly familiar with Sinai (al-Monitor, February 11). In light of the above, ABM's 18-month insurgency can be expected to continue, increasing galvanized by the rise of the Islamic State group elsewhere.

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Note

1. The group formerly used the Twitter account @Ansar_B_Almqds, but this has since been shut down.

Following the Peshawar School Attack, Pakistan Moves Against Domestic Terrorism

Brian M. Perkins

The attack by Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) on the Army Public School in Peshawar on December 16 was a watershed moment in the country's fight against terrorism. The death of 132 children transcended preconceived boundaries between civil and military or Sunni and Shi'a, creating space for concerted action against terrorism and Islamic extremism (*Dawn* [Karachi], December 16, 2014). In its aftermath, the Pakistani government immediately stepped up its war against terrorism through both military and legislative action. The reinstatement of the death penalty and a move to establish military anti-terrorism courts are at the forefront of its 20-point National Action Plan (NAP) (*Express Tribune* [Karachi], December 25, 2014). The military meanwhile intensified Operations Zarb-e-Azb and Khyber-I against the TTP in the country's volatile Federally Administered Tribal Area, with increased air and ground operations (*Express Tribune* [Karachi], February 5). Meanwhile, Pakistan's civil society demonstrated a level of unity unusual in a country divided along ethnic and religious lines. Although implementing the NAP, and maintaining public support of it, is essential to sustaining its momentum, events nonetheless suggest that the attacks created a new willingness in Pakistan to tackle terrorism.

Implementation

One day after the Peshawar attack, on December 17, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif lifted the six-year death penalty moratorium, announcing that 500 death row inmates would face execution (*Dawn* [Karachi], December 27, 2014). In a matter of weeks, 24 prisoners were executed at various prisons across Pakistan. The executions sparked a series of reprisal attacks that claimed the lives of 86 individuals. Sunni militant group Jundullah also claimed responsibility for two separate attacks on Shi'a mosques; the first occurred in the Shikarpur district of Sindh Province on January 30, killing 60 people, and the second in Peshawar, on February 13, killed 20. On February 17, TTP splinter group Jamaat ul-Ahrar claimed responsibility for an attack on a Lahore police headquarters that claimed the lives of eight people (*Express Tribune* [Karachi], February 17). Representatives from both groups said the attacks were in retaliation for the execution of militant prisoners, hoping to pressure the government into halting further executions.

Members of the Pakistan Peoples Party and Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz who were previously ousted by military coups watched nervously as the civil government conceded sweeping authority to the military, as it has done in the wake of previous crises. Despite latent concerns, a measure to establish military courts passed unopposed, with the country's two main Islamic parties, the Jamaat-e-Islami and Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam Fazal, abstaining (*Dawn* [Karachi], January 6). As a result, special military courts are expected to begin functioning by the end of February for a two-year period in order to expedite the trial of suspected terrorists by bypassing the already overburdened civil judiciary (*Express Tribune* [Karachi], February 9). However, members of Pakistan's judicial system have criticized the move as they feel it gives too much power to the military without improving civilian courts (*Dawn* [Karachi], January 30). The structure of these courts and the method of transferring cases from a civil to a military jurisdiction remain unclear. What is clear, however, is that they will drastically alter the requirements needed to secure convictions, as the standard of what constitutes evidence will be up to the discretion of those presiding over the case.

Around a month after the attack, thousands of schools reopened in mid-January with tightened security and improved security features, but many high-risk schools remain closed (*Express Tribune* [Karachi], February 27). The government has formulated a plan to create a new security force comprised of retired military and law enforcement officials to protect the nation's schools. However, it is unclear when it will become operational, and many schools will continue to rely on untrained and poorly armed guards or teachers. Students across the country have demonstrated unprecedented resilience and bravery, with many children openly stating they will not be deterred from returning to school (*Dawn* [Karachi], January 12). The government has, meanwhile, opened terrorism hotlines in every province (*Dawn* [Karachi], December 30, 2014). According to local sources, the hotlines have already received 253 actionable calls, highlighting the public's increased willingness to report incidents (*The Nation* [Lahore], February 25). Figures released by *Dawn News* reported that since the National Action Plan was first introduced, law enforcement officials have arrested more than 10,000 individuals on charges ranging from loudspeaker misuse to direct involvement in terror attacks (*Dawn* [Karachi], February 19). Police officials have also cracked down on hate speech and the distribution of extremist propaganda as well as the use of cellular devices with unregistered SIM cards (*Dawn* [Karachi], January 8).

Response and Outlook

The Peshawar attack has so far unified Pakistan's historically divided civil society and acted as a springboard for public activism across the country. In one notable incident, for example, Sunni and Shi'a Pakistani rallied together against Islamabad's Lal Masjid mosque and its hardline chief cleric Maulana Abdul Aziz for his refusal to publicly condemn the massacre and the militants responsible (*Dawn* [Karachi], December 19, 2014). On the second day of the rally, Aziz threatened to attack the protesters; rather than resorting to violence, the protesters registered a case against Aziz in the form of a First Information Report (FIR) (*Express Tribune* [Karachi], December 19, 2014). A FIR alone is not damning; however, it prompted the police and civilian courts to file an arrest warrant against Aziz (*Pakistan Today*, December 26, 2014). The police have done so 22 times previously without taking action, primarily due to the memory of the Musharraf regime's bloody siege of the mosque in 2007, and there is no guarantee of action taking place this time. However, the development does indicate a renewed public willingness to look again at the long-standing problem of Lal Masjid.

While the response from civil society has mostly been in favor of the NAP, civil society is also now, more than ever, critical of every previous counter-terrorism initiative enacted by the government. Repeatedly the Pakistani public has watched as the government hastily responds to a tragedy, only to lose steam after achieving meager or narrow results. Although the director general of Inter-Services Public Relations, Major General Asim Bajwa, purports that nine of the 27 individuals responsible for the Peshawar attack have been killed and 12 others arrested, a considerable segment of the public will not be satisfied until authorities show equal effort in eliminating all terrorist groups, not just the "bad Taliban" (*The Nation* [Lahore], February 13). The success of the NAP will be determined by the government and military's actions, as well as the civil society's will to stand up against terrorism and religious intolerance. The younger generation of activists, like the Pakistan Youth Alliance, is trying to push government action through peaceful demonstrations and social media, with Twitter hashtags such as #ReclaimYourMosque to encourage the public to speak out against radicalization.

Meanwhile, the country's bellicose militant groups will likely alter their tactics in an attempt to break the will of the Pakistani people. Terrorist attacks since December highlight an increased willingness to claim civilian lives and an increased propensity for conducting attacks on "soft targets." For instance, the Lahore police headquarters is the only fortified target attacked since December, but there have been a series of attacks on schools and students. For instance, on

February 17 in Wah Cantonment in Punjab (a town with a large army presence), military personnel defused an explosive device outside a school after students reported a suspicious package, potentially saving the lives of their teachers and classmates (*Dawn* [Karachi], February 17). In another incident, armed assailants kidnapped a student in Karachi on February 20, before setting him ablaze and pushing him from a moving van (*Pakistan Today*, February 20). According to local police officials, the kidnappers left a note threatening further attacks against students if military operations continued (*Dawn* [Karachi], February 20). Pakistan's children, students and minority Shi'a community will likely continue to face such terrorist threats as the government grapples with implementing the NAP. Pakistan will not win the war against terrorism without more bloodshed, but the NAP—combined with civil society's increased willingness to stand up to militants—could potentially serve as a stepping-stone towards normalcy.

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To Topple the Throne: Islamic State Sets Its Sights on Saudi Arabia

Chris Zambelis

The meteoric rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, which has since styled itself the Islamic State in an affirmation of its broader aspirations of dominion over a self-declared caliphate beyond the territories where it exercises control, has aggravated the Middle East's already treacherous geopolitical landscape. Having emerged out of conflict and instability in Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State has arguably matched or otherwise exceeded the capabilities of fellow extremist groups such as al-Qaeda, its regional affiliates and other violent Islamist organizations. Despite its recent setbacks—notably in Syria's Kurdish-majority town of Kobane (a.k.a. Ayn al-Arab), located in the northern Aleppo province—the Islamic State has demonstrated an impressive ability to capture, control and consolidate its hold on territory and sustain its insurgent and support cadres. It also operates a sophisticated information and propaganda wing that exploits social media as a force multiplier alongside its scorched earth campaign. It has also drawn support from independent sympathizers and ideological allies throughout the broader Middle East and around globe—including among locally focused extremist factions in Afghanistan, Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Pakistan and Yemen. These attributes are reminiscent of al-Qaeda's at the pinnacle of its influence. However, they also reflect the simmering competition between the Islamic State and its al-Qaeda precursor as well as the latter's regional affiliates such as Jabhat al-Nusra (*Terrorism Monitor*, February 20). The Islamic State's increasingly strident discourse and threats also illustrate its rising ambitions; in addition to confronting the incumbent regimes in Iraq and Syria and rival militants and insurgents, the Islamic State has ambitious set of goals that include challenging Saudi Arabia.

The Islamic State today represents the latest and potentially most complex set of challenges to Saudi Arabia, which had previously drawn the ire of al-Qaeda and its regional affiliate al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Due to the recent death of King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz al-Saud and the succession of King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud, the Islamic State's rise also comes amid a period of heightened domestic and regional uncertainty. This article will examine the Islamic State's escalating threats toward Saudi Arabia, which suggest, alongside other recent trends, that the Islamic State is employing a steadily more aggressive threat posture toward Saudi Arabia that is likely to foreshadow future attacks and intensifying pressures.

Mapping the Threat

The Islamic State's leader (and self-style caliph) Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi singled out Saudi Arabia in an audio statement titled "Even if the Disbelievers Despise Such," released by the group's al-Furqan Media Foundation on November 13, 2014. In his statement, al-Baghdadi extolled what he describes as the purported expansion of the Islamic State to the "lands of al-Haramain" (two holy places) in addition to Yemen, Egypt, Libya and Algeria, through its acceptance of oaths of allegiance sworn by local militants to the self-styled caliphate. Al-Baghdadi's mention of al-Haramain is notable in that it reflects the radical Islamist proclivity for avoiding any reference to Saudi Arabia by name and, by implication, any indirect recognition of the legitimacy of the Saudi royal family, instead highlighting Islam's two holiest sites at Mecca and Medina. Al-Baghdadi also proclaimed the appointment of regional governors to represent the Islamic State and called on followers in Saudi Arabia and beyond to recognize and follow their leadership. Al-Baghdadi issued a categorical call to arms: He referred to the Saudi royal family as "the serpent's head" and the "stronghold of the disease," and implored his Saudi subjects to attack the "al-Saloul" and "their soldiers." The reference to al-Saloul represents a derogatory distortion of the al-Saud family name; in Islamic tradition, the al-Saloul family guarded the then-pagan holy site of the Kaaba at Mecca during the pre-Islamic period. He also implored his followers to attack polytheists and *rafidah* (rejectionists), an inflammatory label often assigned to Shi'a Muslims by extreme Salafists and other hardline Sunni Islamists, in an apparent reference to the kingdom's substantial Shi'a minority population. Al-Baghdadi then issued an appeal for "patience" and reassured his followers in the kingdom that the "vanguards of the Islamic State are on their way" (al-Furqan Media Foundation, November 13, 2014).

The subsequent release of the fifth edition of *Dabiq*, the Islamic State's official magazine, in November 2014 by its affiliated al-Hayat Media Center, followed up al-Baghdadi's earlier de facto declaration of war against the House of Saud. The cover of the magazine is emblazoned with a photograph of the Kaaba at Mecca, while the foreword proclaims that the Islamic State's flag will "fly over Mecca and Medina." It also emphasized that Saudi militants should take up arms at home and avoid traveling to battlefields abroad. A section devoted to Saudi Arabia exalts the efforts of earlier generations of militants who resisted and attacked the monarchy, including al-Qaeda and its regional affiliate AQAP, while at the same time lamenting their failure to achieve their objectives. Equally important, the Islamic State declares its opposition to Saudi's fellow Persian Gulf monarchies in an apparent

declaration of war against Saudi Arabia's allies in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). A section of the magazine dedicated to the group's activities in Yemen emphasizes the proximity between Saudi- and Yemen-based Islamic State loyalists and their potential to cooperate in launching attacks in the Arabian Peninsula (*Dabiq*, November 2014).

An incursion by militants who had infiltrated Saudi Arabia's northeastern town of Arar, located in the Northern Borders province that sits adjacent to Iraq's southern border, on January 5 underlines the potential threat the Islamic State poses to the kingdom (al-Jazeera, January 5). While details surrounding the incident remain murky, a band of Iraq-based insurgents reportedly associated with the Islamic State is said to have penetrated Saudi territory and engaged a Saudi border police post. The attackers are reported to have employed small unit ambush tactics and a suicide bomber, who detonated his explosives-laden vest while offering to surrender to a senior Saudi security officer, killing himself and the officer. The ensuing incident left three border officers and four militants dead (Saudi Press Agency, January 5). The Northern Borders province is located alongside Iraq's Anbar province, a key locus of support for the Islamic State that is hotly contested between the Islamic State and Iraqi security forces (Reuters, February 12). The Saudi authorities have also linked the November 2014 murder of a Danish national in the capital Riyadh following the release of a video purportedly recorded by the perpetrators who claimed responsibility for the attack (*The National* [Abu Dhabi], December 2, 2014). An attack that targeted Shi'a worshippers, who had gathered to commemorate Ashura, in al-Hasa in the kingdom's Eastern province has also been attributed to the Islamic State (al-Jazeera, November 25, 2014). Saudi authorities are also reported to have disrupted numerous militant cells linked to the Islamic State (al-Arabiya [Dubai], August 28, 2014).

Geopolitics of the Palace

A consideration of Saudi Arabia's geopolitical significance is critical to appreciate the nature of the threats the Islamic State poses to the kingdom. In many respects, the factors that have compelled the Islamic State to confront Saudi Arabia echo those that had originally induced al-Qaeda to take on the monarchy. Much like other entrenched authoritarian regimes in the Middle East that have drawn al-Qaeda's fury over the years, Saudi Arabia is despised by the Islamic State for what it sees as its pervasive corruption, strategic relationship with the United States and illegitimate position as the custodian of Mecca and Medina. In this regard, the Islamic State, much like al-Qaeda, views the Saudi royal family as an agent of U.S. imperialism that is bent on the domination and subjugation of the Arab and Islamic world. Its status as the world's

largest exporter of oil, and second-largest oil producer, adds another layer of complexity that is surely not lost on the Islamic State. In this regard, al-Qaeda's earlier targeting of strategic energy infrastructure, including its February 2006 operation against the Abqaiq oil refinery—one of the world's largest—may provide valuable insights into the Islamic State's tactical calculus with respect to prospective targets inside the kingdom (al-Jazeera, February 27, 2006). The circumstances surrounding the 1979 seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by militants, led by Juhayman al-Otaibi, who were violently opposed to the Saudi monarchy, may also offer a glimpse into the Islamic State's plans for the kingdom (*al-Majalla* [London], November 2009).

For al-Qaeda, the prospect of toppling or otherwise destabilizing the throne represented the apex of achievement in its broader struggle. The often-overlooked fact that a number of al-Qaeda notables, including its late founder and leader Osama bin Laden, arose out of the domestic political opposition in Saudi Arabia, serves as a testament to the hatred the Saudi royal family has incurred within extreme Islamist circles. It is reasonable to assume that Saudi Arabia also figures prominently in the Islamic State's vision for the wider region even as it is preoccupied with its multiple front insurgent campaign in Iraq and Syria. The Islamic State's ongoing rivalry with al-Qaeda and its regional affiliates has also likely elevated the Kingdom's importance as the Islamic State may sense an opportunity to succeed where its al-Qaeda predecessor previously failed. Saudi Arabia's declared opposition to the Islamic State, its support for rival Syrian insurgent factions such as the Islamic Front and others and its participation in the U.S.-led coalition against the Islamic State have likewise elevated its stature as a target (*al-Akhbar* [Beirut], February 4, 2014; *al-Safir* [Beirut], January 7, 2014; AP, February 18).

Countermeasures

Saudi Arabia has taken numerous steps to mitigate the threat posed by the Islamic State. In the realm of ideas, it has attempted to rein in members of its religious establishment, including over the solicitation of funds for aid and relief in Syria and prohibiting outright any attempts by Saudis to join the conflict in Syria or engage in other un-sanctioned activities abroad (*al-Akhbar*, June 7, 2012). In doing so, the Kingdom leveraged the Council of Senior Scholars, the country's highest religious body. While these efforts predate the rise of the Islamic State, they demonstrate mounting concerns in the palace over events in Syria and their impact on the Saudi population.

These efforts have yielded mixed results, as some prominent clergy have deviated from the official line on how to approach the situation in Syria. More importantly, Saudi volunteers also continue to stream into Syria and other battlefields in large numbers to take up arms alongside various insurgent factions (*al-Safir*, December 8, 2013; *al-Safir*, January 20, 2012). There is a great deal of sympathy among Saudis for the plight of Syrians and a deep antipathy toward a secular Baathist regime that is viewed by many as heretical and apostate. An additional challenge is that the ultraconservative forms of Wahhabist and Salafist ideologies propagated by Saudi Arabia's religious establishment—in many respects, Saudi Arabia is the wellspring of these ideas—are hard to distinguish from the worldviews being espoused by the Islamic State. The Islamic State's dramatic expansion has nevertheless provoked the Kingdom to engage with its population in the ideological arena. Most recently, Saudi Arabia's Grand Mufti, Shaykh Abd al-Aziz al-Ashaykh, has spearheaded a campaign that aims to enlist media and educational institutions in combating the Islamic State's appeal (*Arab News*, February 22).

Meanwhile, in the realm of physical security, the kingdom has embarked on an ambitious project to construct an approximately 600-mile-long security wall on sections of its northern border with Iraq. The wall is designed to prevent militants from infiltrating Saudi territory (al-Jazeera, September 6, 2014). The kingdom has resorted to a similar strategy in an attempt to insulate itself from the expanding violence and instability that has overtaken its southern neighbor Yemen, building a an approximately 1,000-mile-long wall along its border with Yemen (Reuters, January 22; al-Arabiya, April 10, 2013). Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia's security forces have also continued to make mass arrests of suspected militants in an apparent effort to disrupt suspected domestic extremist activities associated with the Islamic State and potentially other violent Islamist organizations (*The National*, December 7, 2014).

Conclusion

In contrast to the chaos of Iraq and Syria and other conflict-ridden zones in the broader Middle East where the Islamic State has gained a foothold, Saudi Arabia, upon first glance, represents an impermissible environment for staging and launching militant activities. The Islamic State's particular brand of brutality has also galvanized opposition to its expansion and influence, including among rival militants wary of its tactics and other actions in Iraq, Syria and elsewhere. This is best illustrated by the losses it has incurred in recent months and the growing divide between its community of supporters and those of rival organizations

(*Daily Star* [Beirut], March 3; *al-Safir*, March 31, 2014). At the same time, there are no indications to suggest that these setbacks will impact its ambitions to follow in the footsteps of its al-Qaeda precursor and lead a campaign to topple the Saudi monarchy.