

# Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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p.1

*Alexander Sehmer*

**BRIEFS**

p.3

*Goktug Sonmez*

**A Scorecard for Turkey's Operation Euphrates Shield**

p.5

*Sunguta West*

**Al-Shabaab Plays on Aid Distribution Role to Win Over Desperate Somalis**

p.7

*Niamh McBurney*

**'Wilayat Haramayn': Confronting Islamic State in Saudi Arabia**

## BURKINA FASO: FEARS GROW OVER DOMESTIC MILITANT THREAT

*Alexander Sehmer*

A series of attacks in rural Burkina Faso have raised concerns over an increasingly active homegrown jihadist militant group operating in the West African country's remote north.

A fire at a primary school in Baraboule, in northern Burkina Faso's Soum province, on March 14, prompted reports of a suspected jihadist attack. Some claimed that armed men had abducted students, while others said the fire had simply been started accidentally ([MaliActu](#), March 15). Locals are jittery following a series of reported incidents in schools closer to the border with Mali, where armed men have insisted teachers conduct lessons in Arabic rather than French ([Burkina Online](#), January 31).

It is unclear who is menacing the schools, but local jihadist outfit Ansarul Islam, headed by radical preacher Ibrahim Malaam Dicko, is considered the most likely contender. The group is also thought to have been behind attacks on two Soum police stations on February 27

([Africa News](#), February 28). It claimed an attack in December of last year on a military base in Nassoumbou that killed 12 soldiers. Likewise, it claimed involvement in the attack on the Splendid Hotel in Ouagadougou, the Burkinabe capital, in January 2016, in which 29 people were killed — the attack was originally attributed to militants across the border in Mali ([Burkina Online](#), December 28, 2016; [al-Jazeera](#), January 18, 2016).

A native of Soum province, Dicko began preaching on local radio in Djibo town in 2012. He travelled to Mali in 2013, where he was arrested by French troops and held by Malian authorities for two years before being released. He founded Ansarul Islam upon his return. Dicko has been closely linked to Amadou Koufa, the Malian founder of the Macina Liberation Front, with strong ties to Ansar Dine. According to some reports, he was briefly detained in Mali again in 2015, following a meeting with Koufa ([Intellivoire](#), January 4).

The emergence of Dicko's group has prompted Burkina Faso to step up its counter-terrorism efforts. President Roch Marc Christian Kabore replaced his military chief, Pingrenoma Zagre, in December last year, and announced plans for the deployment of more troops near the Mali border ([Le Faso](#), December 28, 2016).

A public outcry following the Nassoumbou attack appears to have made Zagre's position untenable. His replacement, Oumarou Sadou, hails from Djibo, possibly making him more familiar with the remote area where Dicko's group is based. Already, the security forces have hit back — on March 23, an army raid on an Ansarul Islam base killed one of the group's leaders, but was unable to locate Dicko himself ([Sahel Intelligence](#), March 24).

Despite the Nassoumbou attack and the reported incidents at schools in Soum, the main jihadist threat to Burkina Faso likely continues to come from across the border in Mali. But Ansarul Islam's capacity remains unclear and it is too early to tell how effective Sadou will be at stamping out Burkina Faso's own militant Islamists.

## **BANGLADESH: SECURITY FORCES RAID ISLAMIST BASES**

*Alexander Sehmer*

Bangladesh's paramilitary Rapid Action Battalion have mounted a series of raids on the hideouts of suspected terrorists, but amid the high-profile crackdown there are suggestions the country's Islamist militants may be growing more sophisticated.

Security forces stormed a building in Moulvibazar town on March 31, bringing a three-day siege to an end ([BDNews24](#), April 1). The bodies of three suspected militants were found inside. Police said the group had blown themselves up rather than surrender. A day earlier, a raid on a building in nearby neighborhood uncovered eight bodies, possibly including that of a child ([Star Online](#), March 30). Both buildings were owned by the same person — a UK citizen of Bangladeshi origin, according to media reports ([BDNews24](#), March 30).

The Moulvibazar raids have arguably been the security forces' most successful raids in recent months. During a previous raid in Comilla, about 50 miles from the capital Dhaka, the suspected militants escaped, while the siege of an alleged militant hideout in Sylhet city saw at least six people killed and several others injured when bombs went off outside the police cordon ([BDNews24](#), March 28). The alleged militants had also reportedly attempted to secure explosives to a refrigerator that had been used to block the building's doorway ([Daily Star](#) [Bangladesh], March 25).

The raids are a continuation of the crackdown initiated in the wake of last year's devastating attack on a popular Dhaka restaurant, in which militants kill 20 hostages. They also follow two suicide attacks close to Dhaka's Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport ([Dhaka Tribune](#), March 25).

Bangladeshi officials insist the attacks are the work of domestic jihadist group Jamayetul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), which the government — for its own political ends — likes to link to opposition parties such as the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Jamaat-e-Islami. The recent raids appear to have targeted a new group, referred to in local media reports as "Neo-JMB." Whether this is an admission of a developing jihadist threat is unclear. However, the increasing use of explo-

sives could be an indication that this is the case. Previous jihadist attacks in Bangladesh have been brutal, though relatively unsophisticated.

The suicide attacks near the airport and the incidents during the recent raids could indicate a better-resourced and better-trained group of militants is emerging in Bangladesh. Following the Sylhet city raid, security forces recovered four bodies, some apparently still rigged with explosives that appear to have taken experts several days to safely defuse ([Click Ittefaq](#), April 4).

## A Scorecard for Turkey's Operation Euphrates Shield

*Goktug Sonmez*

Turkey's National Security Council announced the end of Operation Euphrates Shield on March 27, an unexpected move considering the many official statements that it was to be extended to Turkey's next target, the People's Protection Units (YPG)-held Syrian city of Manbij ([CNTürk](#), March 27).

The Operation, which began in August 2016, had two main goals — clearing the Turkish border of Islamic State (IS) and preventing the merger of cantons controlled by the YPG in the same area. The latter had a further goal, which was to push YPG forces to the west of the Euphrates River and in so doing clear Manbij of the Kurdish militia.

Rapidly changing dynamics on the ground in Syria hastened the decision to bring Operation Euphrates Shield to an end. But with the operation now officially over, observers are asking to what extent it was a success for Turkey and how it changed the political landscape of the Syrian conflict.

### **Achievements and Challenges**

The first declared goal of the operation was achieved relatively quickly considering the operation began on August 24, 2016. The Azaz-Jarabulus line was cleared of IS militants by September 5, 2016 ([Sabah](#), September 5, 2016). Regardless of the military demands, this part of the operation, along with the more recent al-Bab stage, was politically and diplomatically easier for Turkey to conduct. Ankara had little problem securing the consent of the key actors in the field — in contrast to the planned future offensives on Manbij and Raqqa — but such acquiescence did not mean any military support from the anti-IS coalition was provided, despite Turkey's requests.

Once Turkey achieved its primary goal, and had added a further layer of security to its Syrian border with the al-Bab offensive, Turkish officials renewed their statements of Turkey's goals vis-a-vis YPG-controlled areas. Two key points were repeatedly mentioned: Turkey's intention to make Manbij the next destination for Operation Eu-

phrates Shield, and its insistence that no YPG presence west of the Euphrates River would be tolerated ([Sabah](#), December 15, 2016; [DW Türkçe](#), February 28).

Turkish officials repeatedly stated that the United States had made promises regarding YPG withdrawal ([al-Jazeera Turk](#), June 7, 2016). Nevertheless, similar to Turkey's unanswered calls for its coalition partners' assistance with the operation, some of the assurances about YPG withdrawal highlighted the division between Turkey and its key anti-IS coalition partners.

### Questions Over Manbij

Several developments have confirmed Turkey's perception that the "YPG issue" will only grow more complicated over time. The emergence of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the backbone of which is still the YPG, is seen by Turkey as a move to disguise YPG involvement. The establishment of the SDF has given the YPG and its allies the opportunity to present the YPG as part of a broader democratic, multi-ethnic group. That sits in contrast to allegations of reported human right abuses by the YPG, its links with the PKK and accusations of ideological indoctrination in the regions it governs in northern Syria. [1]

Following the end of the al-Bab offensive, U.S. and Russian deployments in Manbij were an irritant for Turkey. That was followed by the publication of images of U.S. forces with YPG badges and Russian forces with both SDF and YPG badges, including a photo of a Russian general sporting a YPG badge at a Nowruz celebration. For their part, the YPG started to use both U.S. and Russian flags on a number of buildings and vehicles to provide them with a certain amount of protection ([NTV](#), March 10; [T24](#), March 23, 2017; [Milliyet](#), March 5; [CNTurk](#), September 15, 2016).

A trilateral meeting in early March that brought together Turkish Chief of the General Staff Hulusi Akar, Russian Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov, and U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Joseph Dunford made little headway in resolving issues on the ground.

The United States gave direct support to the SDF's offensive on the Tabqah Dam ([al-Jazeera](#), March 28). Meanwhile, there was a widely held belief that the Raqqa offensive would be carried out by the YPG with the direct support of the United States, something that

would provide the group with both further political power portraying itself as a key anti-IS ally, as well as give the YPG control over a broader geographical area and so empower its claims for an autonomous region. In another development, there were rumors — later dismissed by Russia — about a Russian move to establish a joint military base in Afrin with the YPG ([NTV](#), March 20).

Taken together, these issues left Turkey with little choice. It was clear that, for the time being, the YPG dimension of Operation Euphrates Shield was unattainable without a diplomatic breakthrough between the concerned parties or a dramatic political or military shift on the ground.

### Successes on Balance

Overall, Operation Euphrates Shield has been at least a partial success. Turkey successfully cleared its border of IS, a move that was achieved in quite a short period of time. Al-Bab, with its important transport links and strategic importance on the broader Syrian chessboard, followed soon afterwards.

With respect to the YPG, Turkey's goal of preventing the merger of YPG-controlled cantons in Syria, which would form a unified de facto Kurdish autonomous region with links to the PKK, was also achieved. Moreover, Turkey secured itself a seat at the negotiating table over Syria's future, demonstrated at the Astana talks and the Iran-Russia-Turkey negotiations over the evacuation of civilians from Aleppo.

The operation succeeded in establishing a more direct link, both politically and militarily, with the Free Syrian Army (FSA), along with the provision of a limited safe zone for the group itself. However, the goals of pushing the YPG to the west of the Euphrates and carrying out an offensive on Manbij became unachievable after the YPG, in the uniform of the SDF, reinforced its position, bolstered by arms and direct military support from several key actors in the field. For the time being, the group seems to be the United States' preferred ally in the upcoming Raqqa operation, much to Turkey's irritation.

Nevertheless, it is clear that diplomatic and military machinations in Syria are far from over. On one hand, Turkey-FSA links are stronger than ever, with the FSA controlling a defined geographic area. On the other, the YPG has reinforced its position with a clear intention to

establish a unified geographical area under its control in northern Syria, an area it will push hard to have recognized in any new constitution for Syria.

Making the situation more complicated U.S., European and Russian attitudes toward the YPG occasionally threaten diplomatic relations with Turkey and jeopardize the future of the anti-IS coalition and talks on the future of Syria. The political puzzle in Syria is still far from being solved.

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#### **NOTES:**

[1] Allegations of human rights abuses by YPG forces have been highlighted by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International ([HRW](#), June 18, 2014; Amnesty, October 13, 2015). See also: [Breitbart](#), January 20, 2016; [Middle East Eye](#), February 19, 2015; [Wall Street Journal](#), July 24, 2015, [Daily Sabah](#), January 8, 2017; [VOA](#), October 13, 2015.

## **Al-Shabaab Plays on Aid Distribution Role to Win Over Desperate Somalis**

*Sunguta West*

With a severe drought unfolding across Somalia, al-Shabaab militants have turned to distributing food aid in the country's southern battlegrounds in a new strategy aimed at bringing locals on side.

Two consecutive seasons of poor rainfall has led to livestock deaths and crop failure, forcing people to sell their assets and borrow food and money to survive ([Africanews](#), February 3). An estimated six million people are in need of humanitarian aid in Somalia; following the failed rains that have brought on the drought, there is the growing threat of famine.

As the crisis unfolds, in a rare move, al-Shabaab released images showing its gunmen, AK47s slung on their shoulders, handing out food aid to women and children. The photographs, set in a rural location, appear to show neatly arranged rice sacks and jerrycans of oil. In one of the images, an al-Shabaab flag can be seen. Other photographs show Somalis transporting the items, and in one video, a man is seen thanking al-Shabaab for the aid. The images and video were allegedly taken in Somalia's Lower Shabelle region ([Radioandalus24](#), March 20).

### **Change in Tactics**

The militants claim to have distributed aid in several regions: Bay, Bakol, Mudug, Hiraan and Galguduung. Al-Shabaab has launched drought committees in these regions to coordinate relief, and the group has dug canals to help farmers to access water for irrigation. Reports suggest the group is seeking international recognition for the work and has made public a schedule for further aid distribution ([Tuko](#), March 23). While it is unclear what form the group imagines this recognition would take, al-Shabaab likes to boast that the international media is sympathetically reporting the mujahedeen's distribution efforts in central Somalia ([SomaliMEMO](#), March 28, 2017).

It is unclear where the militants would obtain large amounts of food aid. The group does not grow food for this purpose. Instead, some analysts suggest the aid has been collected as *zakat* (a form of alms giving treated in Islam as a religious obligation) from Muslim businesses in the region. The group also has a network of sponsors who donate money and food. Sources also suggest al-Shabaab may have raided aid agencies supplies, something they have been known to do in the past. There have been reports of such a raid in the city of Baidoa, on March 28, in which heavily armed militants ambushed a Somalia National Army (SNA) convoy and stole food items that were being transported to drought hit areas ([Intelligence Brief](#), March 28).

Regardless of the provenance, if the aid distributions are effective, the move will be a welcome one for locals. The move would be a positive “public relations” exercise, demonstrating something of a “softer side” to Somalis who have in other cases been subject to the group’s radical interpretation of sharia that includes amputations for petty crimes, the public flogging of women and the execution of those accused of being traitors or spies. These have made the group extremely unpopular. Al-Shabaab leader Sheikh Ahmed Omar Abu Ubaidah may now be attempting to win back public confidence and support.

### **Aid Deliveries**

Reports of al-Shabaab’s food aid deliveries come as the United Nations (UN) and the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), monitoring developments within the terror group, are considering holding talks with the group. The idea of talks is considered critical in regard to tackling the increasingly dire humanitarian situation; the group still controls large swathes of southern Somalia, areas the international community needs to access if it is to deliver humanitarian aid. The hope is that, in the longer term, al-Shabaab could be persuaded to covert from a terror movement into a political movement ([Daily Nation](#), January 25).

No direct contact in order to initiate talks has yet been made. At the same time, some officials say hardliners may resist the talks, but admit the possibility of a chance of success with more moderate leaders ([Daily Nation](#), January 25).

The group has been here before, however. Shekih Ahmed Godane, the late al-Shabaab emir who was killed in an airstrike in 2014, took the group through a similar phase, attempting to capitalize on relief aid distribution. The strategy failed after the UN accused the militants of blocking aid deliveries, burning some of the items and killing aid workers. Al-Shabaab fighters had also attempted to intercept moving populations with a view to stopping them from reaching Kenya’s Dadaab refugee camp, where aid was being distributed.

### **Attacks in Mogadishu**

Al-Shabaab’s aid deliveries also form part of an altered strategy for the group, brought on by the success of AMISOM troops in forcing the militants out of strategic ports and cities. Instead, al-Shabaab has moved its focus to the control of smaller towns and villages in rural areas.

While some observers view the militant’s distribution of food aid as simply propaganda, a wider view is that the tactic is critical for the group because it has been forced to retreat into the rural areas.

With AMISOM troops remaining in towns and ports, al-Shabaab is believed to be re-grouping in these rural areas to launch attacks, coordinated from its base in Jilib ([Standard Digital](#), January 30). Al-Shabaab has already stepped up attacks in the capital Mogadishu and the surrounding areas, putting pressure on the administration of Somalia’s new president, Mohammed Abdullah Mohammed (a.k.a. Farmajo).

A car bomb blast at a checkpoint near the presidential palace in Mogadishu killed at least four people on March 21. A suicide bomber rammed a car into the checkpoint, detonating his explosives and killing people in a nearby theater ([Garowe Online](#), March 21). In the previous month, two children were killed and their parents injured in attacks near the palace. Meanwhile, in January, the militant group took responsibility for an attack on Nasa Hablood Hotel in the capital. At least 28 people were killed and more than 20 injured ([News24](#), January 25). A suicide bomber exploded a Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Device at the entrance of the hotel before gunmen fought their way inside.

Al-Shabaab has made clear that it opposes the new president. In February, [Sheikh Hassan Yakub Ali](#), the al-

Shabaab governor for Galmudung region, warned of sustained attacks over the course of Farmajo's four-year term. In a strongly worded speech on an al-Shabaab media, the hardliner described the new president as an American, rather than a Somali patriot. Labelling Farmajo as worse than any other Somalia President, he warned that any individual or clan who collaborated with him would be severely punished (see [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), April 5; [Kismayo24](#), February 19).

### Islamist Threat Remains

Al-Shabaab has launched at least four major attacks on AMISOM bases in Somalia since 2016. On January 25, militants attacked a Kenyan camp in Kulbiyow. Al-Shabaab claimed it killed 68 soldiers, but the Kenya Defense Forces (KDF) said only nine soldiers were killed, with 15 others injured ([Standard](#) January 30). The attack came nearly a year after a KDF camp in El Adde was overrun by the militants. Although the government has never released an official death toll for that attack, media reports suggest that more than 100 soldiers were killed.

Al-Shabaab has also suffered major losses. On March 28, the KDF said it killed 31 al-Shabaab militants after raiding bases in Baadahade. The raids were carried out by ground forces and backed by helicopters. The KDF reportedly seized more than 10 AK-47 rifles, four improvised explosive devices, foodstuffs, uniforms, a roll of cables and hundreds rounds of ammunition in the raid ([Daily Nation](#), March 27, 2017).

Al-Shabaab remains dangerously adaptable, retreating into the countryside and promoting its efforts — whether genuine or not — at aid distribution. It also remains stubbornly resistant, continuing to pose a significant threat to ordinary Somalis and the Somali government, as well as further afield.

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## 'Wilayat Haramayn': Confronting Islamic State in Saudi Arabia

Niamh McBurney

The threat of Islamist militancy to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been nearly continuous, in various manifestations, since the mid-1990s, with Islamic State (IS) only the latest iteration of this threat. The group's Saudi Arabian affiliates are formed by regional and domestic networks made up of former members of al-Qaeda and since bolstered by new recruits.

Their goals, however, have shifted away from those of their predecessor, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). They arguably present a greater threat to the country's rulers and may hope to appeal to a Saudi citizenry growing increasingly dissatisfied with their economic condition.

### 'Wilayat Haramayn' Established

The presence of IS in Saudi Arabia was formally acknowledged by IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on November 13, 2014, in his response to an audio message, released three days earlier, by a group calling themselves "the Mujahidin of the Arabian Peninsula" ([Arabia21](#), November 10, 2014).

This led to the formation of delineated operational areas, or *wilayat* (provinces), for groups wishing to ally themselves with IS: Najd, Hijaz and Bahrain, with the latter including Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province in addition to the eponymous archipelago across from the city of al-Khubar. Taken as a whole, these constitute the "Wilayat Haramayn," or the provinces of the two Holy Sanctuaries.

Al-Baghdadi's acknowledgement followed an announcement by Saudi authorities in May 2014 of the arrest of 62 members of a cell operating inside the country with links to what was then al-Qaeda-affiliated Islamic State in Iraq and Sham ([Arab News](#), 6 May 2014). These arrests appear to be the first public acknowledgement by the Saudi interior ministry that the group was operating inside Saudi Arabia, and the first admis-

sion of the potential threat the group posed beyond the borders of Iraq and Syria.

It was also an attempt at encouraging concern from Western countries who at that point underestimated both the group's geographic spread and its capabilities. Once al-Baghdadi's announcement came, the question was why it took so long for groups to make clear their IS-affiliation in a country that is no stranger to extremist violence. By this time, Saudi Arabia, along with several other Arab states, had committed to the Western-led anti-IS coalition conducting a campaign of airstrikes against the group.

### Existing Networks

IS appears to have activated existing networks of former al-Qaeda supporters inside Saudi Arabia that had been relatively dormant since 2006. Over time, these cells gathered new recruits, largely as a result of the propaganda around the group's successes in Syria and seizure of territory in Iraq. Its attacks carried out in Europe further bolstered IS' position. A 2014 estimate suggested 2,500 Saudis have travelled to Syria to fight with IS ([Soufan Group](#), June 2, 2014).

The style and scale of attacks, however, suggests that Saudi IS members, believed to be operating in small cells around the country, have been relatively under-resourced and under-funded. Al-Baghdadi only offered his support to groups operating inside Saudi Arabia in the name of IS when prompted to do so. The unsophisticated nature of attacks — up until an attack outside the Mosque of the Prophet Muhammad in Medina on July 4, 2016 — suggests that al-Baghdadi's recognition of groups operating in Saudi Arabia was not an indicator that affiliates would receive any greater assistance.

IS has targeted Saudi Arabia's minority Shia community, arguably an easy target given claims by some in the community that the government was not doing enough to protect them. The targeting of the Shia community and security services, often at security checkpoints in remote locations, underlines the difference between IS and its predecessor — al-Qaeda favored targeting foreign assets and individuals. That has become less common, reinforced by improved security for foreign nationals provided since 2006. The change also reflects the narrative of al-Baghdadi's audio messages that IS is con-

cerned with toppling the government and removing the ruling al-Saud family.

### Fears in Eastern Province

Between 2014 and mid-2016, the IS affiliate in Saudi Arabia's oil-rich Eastern Province, often referred to as Wilayah Bahrain, was the most active of the three provincial groups.

The first IS attacks targeted the country's minority Shia community, fulfilling their overwhelmingly negative rhetoric against those they call *rawafidh* (rejectionists). The first two attacks — on May 22, 2015 in the Imam Ali mosque in the village of al-Qudayh in Qatif, and on May 29, 2015, in the al-Anud mosque in Dammam — sparked concerns that a campaign of targeting the Shia community had begun. Criticism of government protection afforded to the community became more vocal, with community groups setting up their own checkpoints near local mosques and *hussainiyah* (Shia community halls used as places of prayer and for commemorating holy occasions). These proactive, defensive security measures have contributed to lower fatality rates. In the May 29, 2015 attack, just three people were killed in addition to the suicide bomber, as opposed to the more than 20 killed and scores injured in an attack just a week before ([Asharq al-Awsat](#), May 29, 2015).

Government security measures were reportedly stepped up in the wake of these attacks, though local defense groups remained active out of concern that government security forces might at times intentionally turn a blind eye to threats. Tensions between the security establishment and elements of the minority community were high at the time, with a member of the police killed in a raid targeting reported armed Shia separatists in an incident in Awamiya in April 2015.

However, this joint security effort has undoubtedly been effective, with lower fatality rates in all of the subsequent attacks against Shia targets in the Eastern Province since the first attack on May 22, 2015. The effectiveness of these increased security measures was demonstrated in the October 16, 2015 attack on a *hussainiyah* in Saihat. Local volunteers manning a checkpoint helped to slow the progress of a gunman before the police arrived, although ultimately five people were killed.

Similarly, in an attack on the al-Umran mosque in al-Qatif on July 4, 2016, security measures at the mosque, including several sets of barriers combined with security guards, were so effective that only the two suicide bombers were killed in the car park ([al-Jazeera](#), July 5, 2016). It should be noted that by the time of the attack most worshippers had already left the premises. This suggests poor local intelligence and research capabilities on the part of local cells.

### Attacks in Hijaz

Attacks in the center and west of the country, around the capital Riyadh and stretching westward toward the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, have primarily focused on the security forces. Those instances involved gunmen and vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs) deployed against relatively remote checkpoints, including in one instance on July 16, 2015, at a checkpoint at the entrance to al-Hair high-security prison, which houses a significant portion of Saudi Arabia's convicted terrorists.

By mid-2015, state authorities had arrested 431 suspected IS sympathizers who were reportedly planning to carry out simultaneous attacks against Shia affiliated locations in the Eastern Province and targeted assassinations of security forces personnel. However, the period over which these arrests were carried out is unclear ([al-Arabiya](#), July 18, 2015).

Despite the significant volume of arrests, the August, 6 2015 attack on the mosque in the Special Emergency Forces compound in Abha, located in the southern province of Jizan, was a potent reminder of the risk the group still posed to the security services, even in locations that some of the most elite security units considered safe.

The Abha attack was also a reminder of the "Yemen angle" in what many might consider to be a domestic terror threat. IS is aware of the apparent contradiction of Saudi forces fighting a Shia enemy abroad, while defending its minority Shia community at home against suspected IS attacks. This is in addition to the ongoing counter-terrorism efforts against AQAP and IS in Yemen, even as the war continues.

Although this attack was shocking for the security forces — it produced the highest number of casualties of any

attack on security forces in the country so far — its means and location remain unusual with regard to IS activities in the Saudi Arabia. Given the importance of Yemen, both as a theatre of war and a field of counter-terrorism operations for Riyadh, it is surprising that IS has not sought to highlight it to a greater extent.

The July 4, 2016 attack on the al-Umran mosque in al-Qatif coincided with two attacks in Hijaz — an early-morning attempted attack against the U.S. consulate in Jeddah, and a second in Medina that evening in which a suicide bomber killed four security personnel breaking their fast in the car park of the Mosque of the Prophet Muhammad. Although IS affiliates in the country did not claim these attacks, the modus operandi are similar to previous operations, and reveal a gradual westward shift in the location of selected targets.

These attacks marked the first significant attacks in that part of the country, a step up from earlier small-scale attacks by gunmen on security forces personnel. The nationality of the perpetrator of the U.S. consulate attack — a Pakistani national — is also notable. This appears to be the first IS-related incident in the country carried out by a non-Saudi national, and it reflects increasing reports of non-Saudis involved and implicated in IS-related activity in the country increasingly since mid-2016 ([Arab News](#), July 4, 2016).

There are suggestions that former members of al-Qaeda have joined the new group, and that membership extends into organized crime networks in the country, which is unsurprising. The inclusion of foreign nationals is an attempt to bolster membership amid a dearth of willing Saudi recruits, and may offer a greater challenge to state surveillance. However, the ability of cells to disguise themselves "in plain sight" in some of the most highly securitized areas of the country is not, unfortunately, new.

Although media reporting of police raids can give a skewed impression of where IS cells are concentrated — for example, those in the Eastern Province — the greater focus over time on areas historically considered more religiously conservative, gives a clearer picture of the cells' real targets: Riyadh and a sweep westwards toward the holy cities.

Ultimately, the targeting patterns of IS cells in Saudi have mirrored the priorities laid out in al-Baghdadi's No-

vember 2014 announcement. Fighters were to target members of the Shia community first, then security personnel and other representatives of the state, then the al-Saud family and, finally, foreigners. So far, only one foreigner has ostensibly been targeted by the group — a Danish citizen killed in Riyadh in November 2014 ([The National](#), December 11, 2014).

### **Effective Security Response**

The response of the security forces in the wake of IS attacks in the country has been multi-pronged. Based on local media reports, raids by the police and other elements of the security services have become more frequent and more deadly, while the arrest rate appears to have remained relatively consistent. It is unclear, however, whether this is indicative of increased activity by the security forces, or merely increased reporting of such incidents.

Nonetheless, the security sector's response has complemented existing counter-terrorism and counter-radicalization structures in the country, manifested through multiple online platforms and established centers. Questions remain, however, over the messaging of the religious establishment and the extent to which it can support effective counter-radicalization efforts when it is unable to reign in its own more conservative elements.

The targeting of the country's Shia community is an attempt to recruit social conservatives inclined toward sectarianism from anti-Shia elements of Saudi Arabia's religious establishment. The public response in the wake of several attacks in the Eastern Province suggests this has been largely ineffective, as many Saudis self-interestedly realize that IS has no intention of limiting its attacks based on confessional lines.

In the longer term, there are questions over how the government's counter-terrorism efforts will need to change to accommodate the risks presented by IS as it morphs from the territory-hungry transnational organization at its height in 2015 to the splintered, largely insurgent movement it is likely to become toward the latter half of this year.

### **Economic Factors**

In comparison to its ideological forbearer, there are fewer "triggers" of anti-regime sentiment available to IS in

Saudi Arabia today. In the mid-1990s, Saudi Arabia was still reeling from the boom-and-bust cycle of the late 80s that had so badly impacted the standard of living of many ordinary Saudis. These considerations, and the questions they raise, are also important in light of recent changes in the Saudi economy and the citizenry's continued reliance — even as the government pursues extensive economic reforms — on the state.

The changes now underway in the country's economy, which are as important for the future of IS in Saudi Arabia as they are for Saudi society itself, includes the planned privatization of key state-owned enterprises — from a small percentage of state-owned oil company Saudi Aramco, to the country's potable water supplier, the Saline Water Conversion Corporation.

Other planned reforms include an overhaul of the provision of state welfare, with the introduction of a direct cash disbursement system, the decision to introduce a social safety net and the compulsory unemployment insurance and work-place pension schemes introduced in 2014. These are intended to offset other planned reforms, such as the planned removal of all household water and electricity subsidies by 2019. New policies such as these may contribute to a greater sense of discontent among the Saudi middle class who have taken the brunt of government cuts since 2015.

The lack of any IS-claimed attacks in the country over the last eight months is a notable success for Saudi Arabia's security services. How that will change as IS is squeezed in Syria and Iraq remains unclear for now, but Saudi Arabia is likely to continue to face a threat from the group in some form for years to come. Even if the security risks lessen over time, the battle for the hearts and minds of the citizens of Saudi Arabia, the home of the hajj, is far from over.

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