

## The Current State of Al-Qa`ida in Saudi Arabia

By Michael Knights

ON MAY 12, 2003, the al-Qa`ida Organization in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) launched three simultaneous car bombing attacks on Western compounds in Riyadh, killing 35 civilians and short-circuiting the initiation of a long-planned terrorist campaign within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The Saudi government responded quickly and fought a tough counter-terrorism campaign throughout 2003 and 2004, reducing violence to a residual level from 2005 onwards. Five years after the 2003 bombings and seven years after the September 11 attacks, the state of AQAP is difficult to judge. On the one hand, the number of major terrorist-initiated attacks in Saudi Arabia has dropped from 30 in 2004 to a combined total of just six in the years since.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, there is a constant trickle of disconcerting indicators from Saudi Arabia. The Ministry of Interior, for example, announced 701 terrorist-related arrests on June 25, 2008, the sequel to other announcements of mass arrests. Various Saudi ministries release a busy stream of alerts to other government departments and major Western businesses in the country, and the diplomatic security community regularly amends its security advice.<sup>2</sup>

What is the true state of AQAP five years after the May 2003 attacks? To scratch the surface of this query, this article draws upon a range of sources within the corporate security community in Saudi Arabia, within the Interior Ministry itself, and within the growing academic community focused on radicalization in the kingdom. These findings suggest that at present Saudi-based AQAP cells appear to be almost exclusively sympathizers, internet propagandists, recruiters and fundraisers focused on foreign jihad.

1 Also of note is that compared to 38 expatriate deaths in terrorist attacks in 2004, there have been four since.

2 The most recent of which occurred in August 2007, when both the Australian and UK Embassies issued warnings about a raised threat during Ramadan and with the U.S. State Department issuing a remarkably detailed alert about a threat to Westerners in downtown Riyadh in the "14-17 August 2008" period.

Saudi Arabia does, however, face a potential threat from terrorists outside the kingdom, primarily from Yemen.

### Recovery of Capability?

Since the collapse of high tempo terrorist activity in Saudi Arabia by the end of 2004, the government has sought to maintain public vigilance and prevent the onset of complacency about the terrorist threat. This has been achieved by developing a series of strong themes in its public communications. The first of these themes is the assertion that AQAP is constantly attempting to recover capability, reconstitute networks and plan and undertake attacks within the kingdom.

One or two major planned attacks have been foiled in Saudi Arabia each year since 2005. The most recent operation to have reached an advanced stage of preparation was the November 2007 plot to undertake an attack on an Eastern Province oil facility by employing an assault team working in concert with a tactical rocket attack using weapons smuggled in from Yemen. The plot was foiled on November 25, 2007, just days before an execution date of November 27-28. The assault group involved seven Saudis and one Iraqi, who the Ministry of Interior stated was the group's leader.<sup>3</sup>

Other major plots exposed in Saudi Arabia since 2005 have demonstrated serious intent but have lacked capability. In April 2007, videos released by the Ministry of Interior after a series of arrests showed small quantities of light weapons instead of the well-stocked caches of AK-47s from 2005 and before. No grenades or pipe bombs were recovered from any of the cells raided in 2007, and explosives in general—homemade or military—have become rare. Ministry of Interior spokesman Major-General Mansur al-Turki admitted that such groups tend to be unrealistic in their targeting intentions and haphazard in their collection of weapons.<sup>4</sup>

3 This information is drawn from personal interviews with government and corporate security analysts working in Saudi Arabia, as well as Saudi Ministry of Interior contacts.

4 "Saudi Counter-Terrorist Arrests," Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Center briefing, May 1, 2007.

The cascading series of mass arrests seen in the kingdom and the extreme rarity of terrorist sieges and "last stands" indicates that support operatives rather than true militants make up most of the suspects being detained. This category entails Saudi sympathizers who visit *takfiri* websites and perhaps propagate such materials to friends and relatives. More serious support elements may assist with the production of jihadist videos or provide shelter and succor

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to militants. Recruitment pipelines for Iraq and other theaters of jihad and fundraising cells also fall into this category. These elements are rarely armed and do not fight to the death when cornered, and their hard drives and phone address books typically implicate many other sympathizers.<sup>6</sup>

These kinds of leaderless, isolated and fragile support networks cannot compare to the long-prepared system of large arms caches and safe houses developed by the first head of AQAP, Yusuf al-Uyayri, in the 1990s. Although it is always possible that such support cells will morph into attack cells, experience since 2004 has shown that such large networks of inexperienced junior militants tend to be detected and disrupted easily. Post-2003 Saudi

5 The term *takfiri* in this article refers to Sunni insurgent groups that justify violence against some Muslims and all non-Muslims because their religious beliefs are not compatible with the group. AQAP has become a shorthand way of referring to *takfiri* cells in Saudi Arabia (and Yemen).

6 In 2003-2005, contacts in Saudi Arabia frequently reported gunfire at police checkpoints, and major arrest operations tended to involve gunfire and seizure of major weapons caches. Since 2005, announcements of arrests have not coincided with increased security force presence or movements, and practically no armed stand-offs or weapons seizures have occurred. The last major firefight was the April 6, 2007 raid on the Jidda hiding place of 22-year-old Walid Mutlaq al-Radadi, listed 12 of the 15 Saudi-based terrorist suspects on the 36-strong most wanted list issued by the Saudi government in June 2005.

Arabia is generally a harder place to build and maintain covert networks.

### The Threat from Outside?

The potential for an “expeditionary” threat projected inside Saudi Arabia by militants based outside the kingdom is a second theme being developed by the Ministry of Interior. Although there is some fear of an attack sponsored by al-Qa`ida’s core leadership, such an attack would require a local militant community to act as a launch pad. The possibility of “blowback” or “bleed out” from Iraq looms large in this regard. Attacks by Saudi returnees from Iraq—either self-guided or commissioned by some broader network—are considered plausible by Saudi “securocrats” for a number of reasons. First, the Sinjar Records show that Saudis compose the largest single national contingent among al-Qa`ida in Iraq fighters (41% of 606 profiled fighters). Second, the same records also hint that the number of Saudis who traveled to Iraq to be suicide bombers was lower than initially thought (50.3% of the 151 Saudis covered by captured records, which was less than the 56% average across the sample).<sup>7</sup> This means that a larger pool might survive to return.

Perhaps the key driver for this fear is the experience suffered by Saudi Arabia in the aftermath of the collapse of Taliban control in Afghanistan in 2002. The exodus of around 1,000 Saudi militants back to the kingdom transformed the militant threat in a short period of time, witnessing hundreds of hardened Arab-Afghan fighters falling into al-`Uyayri’s terrorist infrastructure as attack or support personnel. Saudi Arabia’s experience in 2002-2004 has probably been formative on the views of Western as well as Saudi counter-terrorism thinking, creating the image of an exodus from Iraq to mirror that of the exodus from Afghanistan. In reality, the rotation of militants between Saudi Arabia and Iraq has been constant, multidirectional and has not had a significant negative effect on security in the kingdom. The majority of Saudi recruits appear to be “mainstream classical jihadists” focused on the “legitimate defensive jihad” against

a perceived U.S. occupier. Were Iraq to decisively collapse as a jihadist theater, it is questionable whether such Saudi recruits—even after in-theater radicalization—would choose to fight in their homeland rather than another iconic theater such as the Afghanistan-Pakistan conflict zone.<sup>8</sup>

Yemen-based militants, on the other hand, present a significant threat to Saudi Arabia. Saudi-born fighters of mixed Yemeni descent have played key roles in al-Qa`ida since the mid-1990s. Usama bin Ladin, whose ancestral homeland is Yemen, recruited extensively from the mixed demographic to boost the representation of Saudi and Yemeni foot soldiers in al-Qa`ida’s ranks. Saudis of Yemeni descent filled all but one of the positions as “muscle” hijackers in the 9/11 attacks and have been highly active on the Arabian Peninsula, using Yemen as a base.<sup>9</sup>

The prospect of establishing bases in Yemen has been mentioned prominently in militant communiqués and in Saudi government statements since 2006. The emergence of the al-Qa`ida-linked Jund al-Yaman Brigades saw Saudi-born militants such as Fawaz al-Rubay`i, Hamza al-Q`uyati and Nayif bin Muhammad al-Qahtani become cell leaders. Literature in *Sada al-Malabim*, a jihadist publication in Yemen, claims the group’s mission is to “expel polytheists out of the Arab Peninsula,” further pointer to the group’s potential focus beyond Yemen. In the March 2008 edition of *Sada al-Malabim*, al-Qahtani explained his reasons for fighting in the Arabian Peninsula rather than Iraq or Afghanistan, calling for Saudi fighters

8 Opinion polling in Saudi Arabia has frequently shown fairly strong opposition to the Iraq war alongside very strong opposition to AQAP activities in Saudi Arabia. As analyst Thomas Hegghammer has outlined, Saudis are relatively resistant to any militant movement with a “social revolutionary” grudge against the establishment in the kingdom itself. See “Jihad, Yes, but not Revolution: Explaining the Extraversion of Islamist Violence in Saudi Arabia,” speech given at the conference “The Jihadist Phenomenon: A Social Sciences Perspective” in Menton, France, October 26-28, 2007.

9 More recently, 11 of the 23 militants who escaped from a Yemeni Political Security Organization prison in February 2006 were Saudis of Yemeni descent who were either expelled from Saudi Arabia in the early 1990s or extradited to Yemen from the kingdom after their return from Afghanistan in 2002.

to shelter in Yemen and asserting that the “liberation” of the land of the two holy places “starts from here.”<sup>10</sup>

There are signs that operational coordination between Yemeni- and Saudi-based cells has periodically been achieved, notably the case of the November 2007 attack cell. In that instance, a Yemeni militant associated with Hamza al-Q`uyati used Yemeni smugglers to move rockets into Saudi Arabia.<sup>11</sup> Al-Q`uyati’s group thereafter undertook rocket attacks on an oil facility in Wadi Hadramawt in Yemen on March 29, 2008 as well as a Yemeni Central Security Force base in Sayyun on April 22, 2008. Before his death in an August 11, 2008 raid in Tarim, al-Q`uyati was planning to undertake an attack on a Western expatriate target in Riyadh—the cause of the subsequent August 13, 2008 U.S. State Department warning in Saudi Arabia. Four individuals arrested in Hadramawt were extradited to Saudi Arabia in the days after the rolling up of the al-Q`uyati network.<sup>12</sup>

A final category of potential outsiders to threaten Saudi Arabia in the emerging narrative is the Third Country National (TCN) worker community and Muslims traveling to Saudi Arabia on the annual hajj and minor pilgrimages. On June 25, 2008, the Ministry of Interior highlighted the role of South Asians such as Pakistanis, Afghan Waziris and African economic migrants in recent arrests. Maj. Gen. Mansur described a cell largely composed of Mauritians in their mid-30s studying for religious qualifications whose “concern was to get close to people working in the oil sector in order to find work in oil installations.”<sup>13</sup> Although there is a theoretical threat from TCN communities, Ministry of Interior insiders are candid that many of the foreigners described as “deviants” (terrorists) by the Saudi government in recent years have been economic

10 *Sada al-Malabim*, March 3, 2008.

11 Personal interview, Saudi Ministry of Interior contact, March 2008.

12 Other indicators included the May 12, 2008 alert on the Saudi-Yemeni border, when around a dozen suspected militants were sought related to a potential plot to strike a west coast Saudi target on the fifth anniversary of the May 2003 attacks.

13 Samir al-Saadi, “Terrorist Groups Destabilizing Saudi Arabia,” *Arab News*, June 26, 2008.

7 Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, *Al-Qa`ida’s Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2008).

migrants with tangential connections to forging, people-smuggling and drugs or weapons-trafficking networks that are also utilized by terrorists.

#### Target: The House of Saud?

A third theme being developed by the Interior Ministry is that the Saudi ruling family and government organizations such as the oil and security sectors are increasingly being targeted by militants. In terms of AQAP targeting strategy, this might be characterized as a transition from the focus on the “far enemy” (Western presence in the country) to the “near enemy” (the “House of Saud” and its religious, security and economic underpinnings). Additionally, by attacking the oil and gas sectors, it allows AQAP to target “far enemy” interests while at the same time striking the “near enemy,” allowing al-Qa`ida to recognize success in both spheres.

In the hydrocarbons sector, Saudi oil continues to be prominently discussed as a target.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, actual plots have been thin on the ground since the February 2006 car bombing attack on the Abqaiq oil processing facility. The June 25, 2008 Interior Ministry announcement noted that the aforementioned African-led Eastern Province cell planned to attack “an oil site and a security target with car bombs.”<sup>15</sup> Yet, the ministry did not adduce any evidence that the cell had actually developed any real capability and there were no indications that any cells captured in 2008 held weapons, let alone explosives. Indeed, while every Saudi Interior Ministry announcement or alert takes care to stress the threat to the oil and gas sector, the only real credible plot since February 2006 was the aforementioned November 2007 rocket and breach plot. Expressing interest in a target is quite different from developing a workable plan and executing it.

A second target highlighted by the Ministry of Interior is the security forces and moderate clerics who are accused of supporting the government’s counter-

radicalization program. Ministry officers have been sporadically targeted for the last decade, with deep-seated feuds developing between security forces and citizens in some areas, such as in ultra-conservative Burayda. More recently, leading jihadist ideologue Abu Yahya al-Libi has been more aggressive in criticizing Saudi Arabia’s security establishment for betraying various Islamist causes, describing the Saudi services as “the villainous troops of the tyrants of al-Sauds.”<sup>16</sup> The Saudi government’s active use of clerics to undermine jihadist recruitment in Saudi Arabia has also drawn the scorn of jihadist ideologues, and appears to have prompted plans to intimidate or liquidate pro-government clerics. In April 2007, for instance, the Ministry of Interior announced the arrests of 22 individuals involved in plotting the assassination of pro-government clerics and senior security force officers.<sup>17</sup>

Likewise, in the June 2008 announcement, the Interior Ministry alluded to a “plot” to target security forces, which related to a planned attack on the Khafji Muhabith (General Security Service) offices.<sup>18</sup> All these activities are energetically publicized by the government, which derives useful propaganda from the portrayal of AQAP fighters as anti-establishment “social revolutionaries.”

#### Outlook for AQAP in Saudi Arabia

There is no doubt that the Saudi government now publicly exaggerates the scale of the known militant problem in Saudi Arabia to stave off a return of complacency. This is a stark contrast to the 2003-2006 period, when the government was still actively trying to downplay the extent of the threat as it rooted out truly dangerous networks.

16 Michael Scheuer, “Abu Yahya al-Libi: Al-Qaeda’s Theoretical Enforcer – Part One,” *Terrorism Focus* 4:27 (2007).

17 These individuals were detained in a range of Saudi cities, including Riyadh, the Eastern Province tri-city area and Jidda.

18 Personal interview, Saudi Ministry of Interior contact, July 2008. The June 2008 statement also claimed that multiple disrupted cells may have been influenced by Abu Bakr Naji’s book, *The Management of Savagery*, which recommends the weakening of target states through attacks on economic infrastructure and government forces to create failed states or even failed cities or provinces that al-Qa`ida affiliates can more easily dominate.

The number of counter-terrorist arrests is frequently massaged; for instance, the 701 arrests announced in June 2008 included arrests previously announced by the Ministry of Interior in November 2007 and March 2008. The number of arrests in the first half of 2008 was approximately 450, with a proportion released. Likewise, the ministry occasionally repackages old “most wanted” lists from 2005 to give the impression that they are new lists of Iraq returnees active in the kingdom.<sup>19</sup> Support cells that have undertaken any form of target identification, however rudimentary, are often portrayed as attack cells, despite a lack of weaponry and a lack of resistance when called to surrender. The ministry is erring on the side of caution, perhaps understandably so.

In reality, it would appear unlikely that a strong AQAP network will emerge again to rival the infrastructure laid down by Yusuf al-Uyayri in the 1990s. Saudi-based cells are isolated, and the little communication existing between cells—chat room discussions or the sharing of documents and videos—represents a critical vulnerability and the frequent cause of cascading patterns of arrests. The overwhelming impression of AQAP remains that of a destitute movement, as conveyed in the April 2007 issue of *Sawt al-Jihad*, where the editor notes: “None of the jihadi fronts were deserted as much as the jihadi front in the Arabian Peninsula.”<sup>20</sup> Saudi-based cells appear to be almost exclusively sympathizers, internet propagandists, recruiters and fundraisers focused on foreign jihad.

Of the various narratives put forward by the Saudi government, the most convincing is the assertion that Saudi Arabia faces a credible terrorist threat from outside the kingdom, albeit probably from Yemen rather than from Iraq or Afghanistan. The latter two theaters of jihad attract a certain type of Saudi militant, a volunteer who chose to fight outside Saudi Arabia rather than at home, and there are strong reasons to believe that such militants will continue to patronize iconic theaters of foreign

14 Discussions occurred in Abeer al-Bassam’s “Bin Laden and the Oil Weapon” (in the February 8, 2007 issue of *Sawt al-Jihad*) to new discussions in the January and March 2008 issues of *Sada al-Malahim*.

15 Al-Saadi, “Terrorist Groups Destabilizing Saudi Arabia.”

19 These figures and views were derived from close scrutiny of Saudi government announcements and access to translated Interior Ministry warning statements in 2008.

20 *Sawt al-Jihad*, April 2007.

jihad in the future. The Yemeni-based militants are another matter; they have chosen to fight in the Arabian Peninsula in preference to other theaters and they frequently have a historic connection to Saudi Arabia.

Indeed, Saudi and Yemeni terrorist cells already share a strong co-dynamic relationship; it is notable that the attack on Abqaiq in February 2006 was mimicked closely by the September 2006 car bombings on Yemeni oil facilities; the Saudi shooting of four Frenchmen outside Medina in February 2007 was likewise mirrored by remote shootings of expatriates in Yemen in January 2008; and indirect fire attacks attempted in Saudi Arabia in November 2007 have become a staple of Yemeni terrorist cells in 2008. The two theaters are thus loosely coupled but the flow may be slowly changing direction. Yemen is already beginning to serve as a launch pad for attacks into Saudi Arabia. Although the gradual whittling down of Yemen's al-Qa`ida leadership, particularly older Saudi-born militants, will significantly reduce the prospect of future attacks, the possibility exists of attacks on iconic Saudi oil targets or exposed expatriates.

*Dr. Michael Knights is the Gulf security research associate at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. He has written extensively on Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) security issues and maintains a broad range of security contacts in the Gulf region.*