PolicyWatch 2370

Saudi Arabia's Old al-Qaeda Terrorists Form New Threat

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Also available in العربية

February 11, 2015

New allegations by an al-Qaeda prisoner in the United States have revived questions about official Saudi support for 9/11, while at home the kingdom has been re-arresting former al-Qaeda convicts in a new war on terror.

Last week saw the public release of a former al-Qaeda operative's controversial testimony that high-ranking members of Saudi Arabia's royal family were major donors to al-Qaeda in the late 1990s. Reports of the accusations have spurred some to raise old questions about Saudi government support for the 9/11 attacks, but any such assumption from these unsubstantiated allegations is too big a leap to make. What remains clear today is that the kingdom is engaged in its own war on terrorism at home.

The January 30 shooting of two Americans in Saudi Arabia is the latest reminder of Riyadh's terrorism challenge and the direct threat to U.S. citizens and interests. The gunman has since fled the country and joined the "Islamic State"/ISIS in Iraq, according to a Saudi-owned newspaper. This is the fourth time that Saudi nationals have attacked Westerners inside the kingdom in recent months. The incident also follows an early January border assault by Saudi militants from Iraq, and a November attack on Saudi Shiite worshippers in the kingdom's eastern al-Ahsa governorate. Riyadh has linked these two incidents to ISIS as well.

Individuals previously arrested on terrorism charges represent a significant percentage of those detained for terrorist activity over the past year. Accordingly, Washington should support Riyadh in more closely monitoring such individuals in order to protect American and Saudi interests in the kingdom and abroad.

OLD AND NEW THREATS

Between 2003 and 2007, al-Qaeda conducted bombings, shootings, and kidnappings in Saudi Arabia in an effort to derail the U.S.-allied monarchy. Many of the perpetrators had fought wars in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq. Back in the kingdom, terrorists often targeted Americans and other foreigners. The U.S. citizens shot there two weeks ago worked for the same American company, Vinnell, whose employee residential compound was bombed by al-Qaeda in 2003.

Saudi authorities responded to the spike in attacks with massive security sweeps. By 2008, they had detained approximately 9,000 individuals on suspicion of terrorism, according to Saudi figures at the time. By 2011, the number had reached approximately 11,500. Since then, some detainees have been released, and some have been tried and convicted in the Specialized Criminal Court established in 2008 for this purpose. Several thousand have participated in prison-based militant rehabilitation programs, and several thousand more have spent time in the kingdom's terrorist rehabilitation center.

OLD TERRORISTS IN NEW PLOTS

The ISIS threat to Saudi Arabia has grown over the past year as a result of the group's successes in Syria and Iraq, as well as Riyadh's decision to join the international coalition against ISIS last summer. The kingdom also faces continued threats from al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), a group formed in Yemen in 2009 that includes Saudi escapees and Yemeni al-Qaeda members. The Saudi Interior Ministry spokesman has called the current terrorist threat "a wave that is dirtier than the previous one." In recent months, the ministry has arrested hundreds of suspects in connection with various plots and attacks.

Riyadh announced the first major discovery of an ISIS-linked terrorist network inside the kingdom in May 2014. At the time, some suspects were accused of colluding with Saudi members of ISIS in plotting assassinations and other attacks in the country. Others were believed to be supporting AQAP in fundraising and logistics. Sixty-two individuals were arrested, including 59 Saudis. Thirty-five of the suspects (56%) had been previously convicted on terrorism-related charges, and some were graduates of the kingdom's militant rehabilitation programs, according to Saudi officials. One suspect, an ISIS cell leader, was a Saudi who had previously been tried on al-Qaeda-related charges, according to a Saudi-owned newspaper.

In July 2014, AQAP made its first incursion into the kingdom since a 2009 assassination attempt on Prince Muhammad bin Nayef, then the assistant interior minister and now deputy crown prince. Six of the group's members attacked a southern border checkpoint from Yemen, killing several Saudi security officers and one Yemeni officer. All of the attackers were Saudi nationals, and four of them had previously been jailed.

In September, Saudi Arabia arrested 88 individuals, including 84 Saudis, for terrorist recruiting and plotting attacks inside the kingdom and abroad. The suspects belonged to terrorist groups based outside the country, according to Saudi officials. Fifty-nine of them (67%) had been previously detained on charges relating to the "deviant" group, a term typically used for al-Qaeda and its affiliates.

In November, four assailants attacked Saudi Shiite worshippers in the oil-rich al-Ahsa region, leaving eight dead. Three of the four had been previously jailed for al-Qaeda links, according to Saudi officials. Within weeks, a total of 77 had been arrested in connection with the attack, 32 of whom had been previously jailed on terrorism charges. Fifteen more were facing trial for earlier terrorism charges. In all, 61% of the detainees had been previously jailed or were awaiting trial.

Similarly, one of the four Saudi militants who attacked the kingdom's border from Iraq in January had been previously arrested for al-Qaeda ties. He was eventually released on bail, according to Saudi authorities.

Riyadh has not provided recidivism information about suspects detained in two roundups announced in December. One involved 135 suspects arrested for terrorist activity; the other involved three suspects arrested in connection with the November shooting of a Danish citizen in Riyadh, an incident linked to ISIS.

CONVICTION AND RECIDIVISM RATES

It is important to note that some of the individuals detained on suspicion of terrorist activity in recent months might not be tried and convicted in the kingdom's Specialized Criminal Court. In the past, however, many of those initially arrested as terrorism suspects by Saudi authorities have eventually been convicted of terrorist activity.

As for the kingdom's terrorist recidivism rate, it is difficult to make an independent assessment because reliable data on the number of individuals detained, tried, convicted, and rehabilitated in various programs over the years is hard to come by. At the very least, the surge in old militants being arrested for new terrorist activity suggests that recidivism is on the rise. According to a recent Saudi report, the recidivism rate for individuals who participated in government-run terrorist rehabilitation programs is 12%. Yet even that rate would mean that hundreds of previously convicted suspects are known to have returned to terrorist activity.

U.S. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Government agencies across the globe continue to wrestle with the challenge of tracking all individuals with past militant links. The tragic *Charlie Hebdo* attack in France last month showcased this problem. One of the assailants had been convicted on terrorist recruitment charges in 2008; the other had traveled to Yemen to train with AQAP in 2011.

The challenge is especially formidable in Saudi Arabia because thousands were linked to al-Qaeda attacks a decade ago and have since been released. Helping Riyadh better monitor previously detained terrorists is therefore crucial. The kingdom's terrorist rehabilitation approach may also require a comprehensive review. The Saudis have been refining their rehabilitation programs since establishing them more than a decade ago, but the challenging politics surrounding any major reassessment of their effectiveness should not be underestimated. Riyadh and Washington have hailed the kingdom's rehabilitation techniques as a success story, and they have influenced many other deradicalization programs around the world.

Yet Riyadh's fundamental interest in foiling terrorist plots would likely supersede any political challenges that arise from reassessing and reforming the programs. The recent promotion of Prince Muhammad bin Nayef -- the man behind Saudi Arabia's largely successful domestic war against al-Qaeda in the previous decade -- indicates the importance that the new king and his government have ascribed to the battle against terrorists. At the same time, close counterterrorism cooperation should not diminish the importance of addressing with Riyadh the appalling treatment of peaceful human rights defenders.

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