



Center for Strategic and International Studies

Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy

1800 K Street, N.W. • Suite 400 • Washington, DC 20006

Phone: 1 (202) 775-3270 • Fax: 1 (202) 457-8746

Email: BurkeChair@csis.org

Saudi Militants in Iraq: Assessment and Kingdom's Response

Nawaf Obaid

Adjunct Fellow

NawafObaid@aol.com

&

Anthony Cordesman

Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy

ACordesman@aol.com

Revised: September 19, 2005

Authors' Notes

This paper is a working document that will be revised and updated. Please email the authors with your comments, suggestions, and corrections. Further updates of this report and other reports can be found on the CSIS website: <http://www.csis.org>

2005 © All Rights Reserved

The Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy
Center for Strategic and International Studies
1800 K Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20006
+1 (202) 887-0200
<http://www.csis.org>

Table of Contents

FOREIGN MILITANTS IN IRAQ	4
ANATOMY OF THE INSURGENCY	5
Chart 1: Foreign Militants in Iraq	6
SAUDI MILITANTS IN IRAQ	8
OVERVIEW	8
Chart 2: Saudi Militants in Iraq as of September 2005	8
RECRUITMENT	9
MEANS OF ENTRY TO IRAQ	10
<i>Syria</i>	10
<i>Iran</i>	12
THE SAUDI RESPONSE	13
SAUDI-IRAQ BORDER	13
CUTTING THE FLOW OF MONEY AND WEAPONS	14
CRACKDOWN ON MILITANT CLERGY	15
CHALLENGES	15
CONCLUSIONS	17
APPENDIX I: CASE STUDIES	18
<i>Case Study #1</i>	18
<i>Case Study #2</i>	19
APPENDIX II: MAP OF IRAQ AND NEIGHBORS	21
ENDNOTES	22

Foreign Militants in Iraq

Since the fall of Saddam Hussein, Iraq has become a center of activity for a broad collection of terrorist groups, the most dangerous of which are neo-Salafi extremists. Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia, a branch of bin Laden's network controlled by the Jordanian-born terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, Ansar al-Islam (also known as Ansar al-Sunnah), and the Islamic Army of Iraq are the most infamous and are believed to be responsible for most of the attacks – including the most bloody suicide bombings. At least six other smaller terrorist groups are operating in Iraq.

It is not correct to see Iraq as *the* center of such activity. It is one major area of operations for a series of movements that operate in the West, in North Africa and the Levant, in the Gulf, and Central, South, and Southeast Asia. Nations as diverse as Afghanistan, Chechnya, Indonesia, Yemen, Algeria, Egypt, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, the Phillipines, and the Sudan also have training centers, staging and support facilities, or internal conflicts involving neo-Salafi extremists. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict does as much to fuel Arab and Islamic anger as the Iraq conflict, and such extremists capitalize on political, economic, and social problems and tensions throughout the Arab and Islamic worlds.

Nevertheless, Iraq has become a critical center for such extremist activity, and currently presents the greatest threat that such extremists could destabilize a major state, and drive it towards a major civil war. They have at least partially displaced the struggle between Iraqis, and they certainly drive it towards violence and away from political competition and accommodation. They are fighting a war to create a civil war in Iraq; one that would make an effective secular or moderate government impossible and trigger a conflict between Sunni and Shiite that could spread to divide Islam and the Arab world. More broadly, they seek to make Islam a captive to a kind of violent, intolerant, and ruthlessly exclusive ideological movement that would deprive it of a future by driving it back towards an imaginary and perverted vision of the past.

Intelligence analysis – corroborated by information from Internet chat rooms and web sites run by Islamists – indicates that such extremists have established terrorist training camps in the mountains of northern Iraq and in the country's western desert along its 450-mile border with Syria. There are also reports of staging facilities and indoctrination centers inside of Syria. The activities of these groups have been responsible for a great deal of the daily carnage that is one of the primary causes of waning domestic support for the war in the United States.

Many have assumed that foreign fighters form the bulk of these terrorists, and some that that they include a large Saudi presence. For example, an Israeli report claims that 61% of the foreign fighters killed and 70% of the Suicide bombers in Iraq were Saudi.¹ These figures have been picked up by journalists, including some at the *Washington Post*.

While there are valuable insights in such studies, both intelligence experts and the patterns in detentions indicate the largest component of the insurgency is composed of Iraqis. While no one knows the number of active and part time insurgents, paid agents, and sympathizers, the pattern of detentions and intelligence analysis indicates that the total number of foreign volunteers is well below 10%, and may well be closer to 4-6%. Furthermore, Saudis seem to make up only between 1-2% percent of the fighters currently operating in the country.

This paper attempts to provide a detailed overview of the foreign elements of the Iraqi insurgency, an estimate of the number of Saudi fighters it contains, and an analysis of their

motivation, recruitment, training, and means of entering Iraq. One of its primary conclusions is the unsettling realization that the vast majority of Saudi militants who have entered Iraq were not terrorist sympathizers before the war; and were radicalized almost exclusively by the Coalition invasion.

Anatomy of the Insurgency

At the risk of oversimplifying an extraordinarily complex situation, the main source of the current violence in Iraq can be traced to a deep-seated Sunni-Shiite rift. Three separate opinion polls taken by Iraqi and foreign pollsters indicate that up to 85% of the respondents in the Sunni Arab area express support for the attacks on US forces in Iraq. At the same time, surveys conducted by the US and Iraqi governments indicate that no more than 30-40% of the Sunnis surveyed expressed much confidence that “armed national resistance” would improve conditions in the country. Some 30-35% say they have “no confidence” in the militants’ ability to effect change. A significant number of those polled expressed skepticism about the insurgent’s methods and denounce violence as a means to achieve political objectives.ⁱⁱ

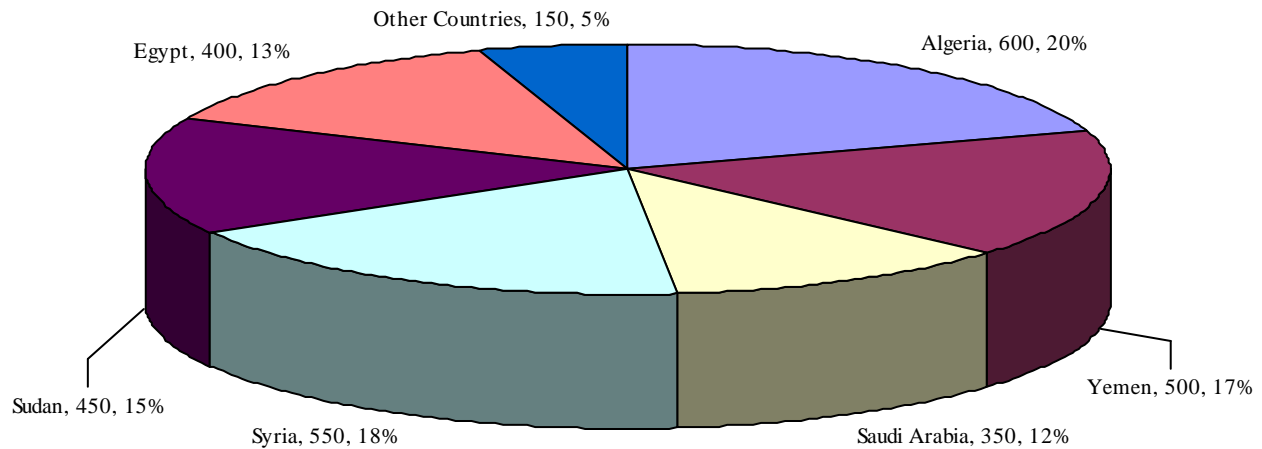
No one knows how many foreign volunteers are present in Iraq, or the current trend. US sources say on back ground that they believe that the Zarqawi movement may have roughly a thousand, and believe the number has increased since the January 30, 2005 election. At the same time, they note that a significant portion have been captured or killed, and feels such cadres are less sophisticated and well trained.

The Saudi National Security Assessment Project has made its own estimate, and concludes there are approximately 3,000 foreign fighters in Iraq (See Chart 1). This figure, and the breakdown by nationality, are rounded “best estimates,” based on reports of Saudi and other intelligence services; specifically, on the interrogations of hundreds of captured militants and a comprehensive analysis of militant activities. This includes interviews and analysis of activities by both Saudi and non-Saudi militants. Also consulted were intelligence reports prepared by other regional governments, which provided not only names of militants, but also valuable information on the networks that they relied upon to enter Iraq and conduct their activities.

The conclusion of this investigation is that the number of Saudis is around 12% of the foreign contingent (approximately 350), or 1.2% of the total insurgency of approximately 30,000. Algerians constitute the largest contingent at 20%, followed closely by Syrians (18%), Yemenis (17%), Sudanese (15%), Egyptians (13%) and those from other states (5%).

Chart 1: Foreign Militants in Iraq

(3,000 Total)



The fact that there are 3,000 foreign fighters in Iraq is cause for alarm, particularly because they play so large a role in the most violent bombings and in the efforts to provoke a major and intense civil war. They are also a threat because their actions give Bin Laden and other neo-Salafi extremist movements publicity and credibility among the angry and alienated in the Islamic world, and because many are likely to survive and be the source of violence and extremism in other countries.

Nevertheless, these numbers pale beside those for the Iraqis themselves. By all reports, the insurgency is largely homegrown. This is not simply the view of US experts, based on estimates emanating from Iraq, at least 90% of the fighters are Iraqi, in contrast to some allegations that the insurgency is being mainly fueled from abroad.

Once again, it must be stressed that open sources cannot characterize the overall patterns of insurgency in Iraq with any accuracy, or assign precise numbers. Saudi intelligence assessments indicate, however, that the main pillar of the insurgency is not, as some have previously thought, former regime loyalists (FRLs) like remnants of the Republican Guard, although the Republican Guard is contributing technical and logistical expertise.

By and large, the foot soldiers are members of extremely conservative families from traditional Sunni tribal groups of Iraq. The Saudi intelligence assessments that have led to this conclusion derive from the strong tribal connections that exist between Iraqi and Saudi families. Thus, a great deal of information about the insurgency has been transmitted back to Saudi Arabia from Iraq via these tribal links. In March 2003, when the Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal warned that Iraq would become a "Pandora's box," his information came from reports he was receiving from Iraqi tribal leaders with long-standing and deep connections to their counterparts in the Kingdom.

These groups consist largely of military officers trained during Saddam's regime, this group is well-funded. Some former Baathists who are joining the Iraqi security forces are hoping for the

failure of the democratic political process and the destabilization that will follow so they can emerge as a solution to the nation's security problem. Other elements include paramilitary organizations, like the Feyadeen Saddam and the Quds Army, in addition to former members of the regular Iraqi army. Hard line Ba'athists loyal to Saddam Hussein, including former high-ranking military or intelligence officers, generally seem to be reacting more to their loss of power and influence, and trying more to block the emergence of a new Iraqi government, than pursuing any clear set of objectives for the future.

If one talks about the sources of broader public support for the insurgency, Sunni nationalism seems to be the strongest contributing factor fueling the unrest. The "nationalists" include Iraqis who, after the fall of Saddam Hussein, were dismissed from their military or civil service jobs. Although they do not favor a return to Saddam Hussein's regime, most are Sunnis wary of a Shiite-led government. Nor have these fears been alleviated by the writing of the Constitution – many felt deeply marginalized by the Shiite and Kurds. These individuals favor a state run by Sunnis, and want U.S. forces out of Iraq as soon as possible. They are also believed to be less likely to target Iraqi civilians or engage in suicide bombings.ⁱⁱⁱ

Thus, not everyone who has joined the insurgency shares common political and ideological goals. Many are products of what can be termed "situational factors," such as family affiliations, coercion, and material incentives.^{iv} In some cases, criminals participate for pay. In other cases, young Iraqis participate either for small sums or simply because they felt they no longer have any meaningful anger. Some Iraqis join or collaborate with the insurgency for much more intimate reasons such as an inability to feed their families, or the loss of a friend or relatives during the war. These civilians mainly take up arms because they are frustrated with the U.S.-backed government's failure to provide basics like security, running water, or electricity.^v

The fact that such Iraqi Sunni movements know what they are against, but have no achievable goals other than disrupting Iraq, does, however, give neo-Salafi extremists and those fighting to create a major civil war added leverage.

There are also indications that as the insurgency has progressed, the growing split between Iraqi Sunnis and Shiites, and Arab and other minorities – coupled with steady losses among the more secular Sunni insurgents and the emergence of Sunni clerics as a major political force – is polarizing younger Sunni Iraqis along religious lines. The fact that neo-Salafi extremist movements like Zarqawi's have foreign leaders and volunteers does not mean such movements do not have significant numbers of Iraqis, and do not rely on Iraqi sympathizers for support and safe areas.

There are reports of clashes between neo-Salafi extremist groups and native Iraqi Sunni insurgent movements but these seem to be the exception, and scarcely the rule. Similarly, even most native Sunni clerics who do sympathize with the insurgency do not support anything approaching neo-Salafi views. However, the rise of "Sunnism" as part of Sunni nationalism does allow neo-Salafi groups to exploit such support.

Saudi Militants in Iraq

It is within this broad context, that the role of Saudi militants in Iraq must be considered. The tendency to focus on Saudi Arabia because of the role of Saudis in “9/11,” and the fact Bin Laden has become the symbol of terrorism and Islamic extremism, disguises a much more complex reality.

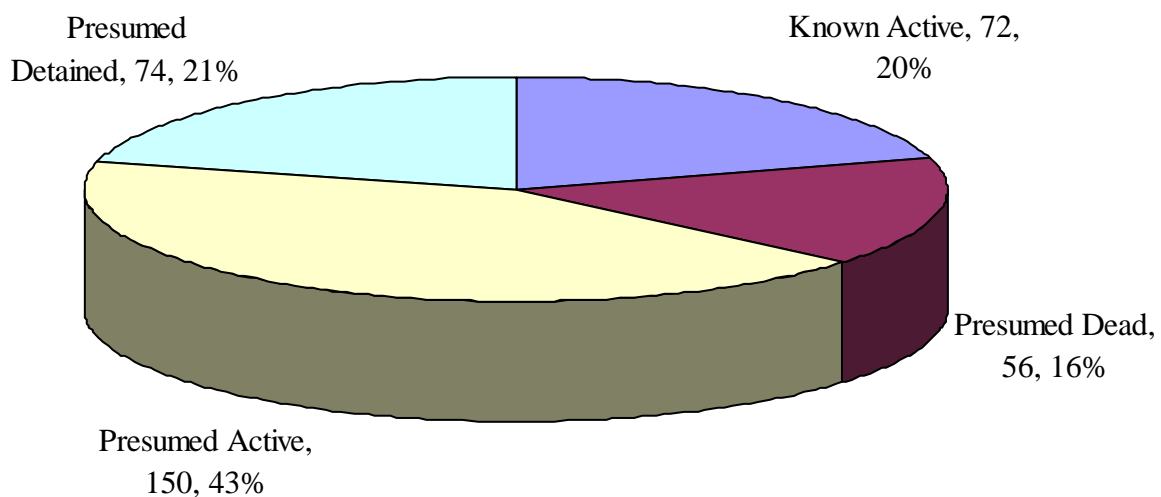
Overview

Again, it must be stressed that no one has precise numbers. Saudi Arabia, however, is deeply concerned with both the risk of intensifying civil war in Iraq and the fear that Saudi militants with experience in Iraq will become a new source of terrorism and extremism inside Saudi Arabia and other regional states. As a result, the Saudi intelligence services have made a major effort to estimate the number of Saudi infiltrators that move across the Saudi border – or far more often transit through third states like Syria.

As of August 2005, approximately 352 Saudis are thought to have successfully entered Iraq (and an additional 63 have been stopped at the border by Saudi security services). Of these, 150 are thought to be active, 72 are known from al-Qaeda compiled lists to be active in Iraq,^{vi} 74 are presumed in detention (a maximum of 20 in US custody and 3 in Kurdish), and 56 are presumed dead (See Chart 2).

Interrogations and other Saudi intelligence gathering operations reveal that these individuals do not come exclusively from a single geographical region in Saudi Arabia, but from various areas in the Kingdom, especially from the South, Hijaz, and Najd. They are usually affiliated with the most prominent conservative tribes and are generally middle class. Most are employed, many are educated, and all are Sunni.^{vii} (For more background, see “Case Studies” in Appendix I.)

Chart 2: Saudi Militants in Iraq as of September 2005



The average age of these fighters is 17-25, but a few are older. Some have families and young children. In contrast, other fighters from across the Middle East and North Africa tend to be in their late 20s or 30s.

As part of a massive crackdown on Saudi militants attempting to enter Iraq, the Saudi government has interrogated dozens of nationals either returning from Iraq or caught at the border. They were then questioned by the intelligence services about, among other things, their motives for joining the insurgency. One important point was the number who insisted that they were not militants before the Iraq war. Backing up this contention, of those who were interrogated, a full 85% were not on any government watch list (which comprised most of the recognized extremists and militants), nor were they known members of al-Qaeda.

The names of those who died fighting in Iraq generally appear on militant websites as martyrs, and Saudi investigators have also approached the families of these individuals for information regarding the background and motivation of the ones who died. According to these interviews as well, the bulk of the Saudi fighters in Iraq were driven to extremism by the war itself.

Recruitment

Most of the Saudi militants in Iraq were motivated by revulsion at the idea of an Arab land being occupied by a non-Arab country. These feelings are intensified by the images of the occupation they see on television and the Internet – many of which come from sources intensely hostile to the US and war in Iraq, and which repeat or manipulate “worst case” images.

The catalyst most often cited is Abu Ghraib, though images from Guantanamo Bay also feed into the pathology. Some recognize the name of a relative or friend posted on a website and feel compelled to join the cause. These factors, combined with the agitation regularly provided by militant clerics in Friday prayers, solidify their position.

In one case, a 24-year-old student from a prominent Saudi tribe -- who had no previous affiliation with militants -- explained that he was motivated after the US invasion, to join the militants by stories he saw in the press, and through the forceful rhetoric of a mid-level cleric sympathetic to al-Qaeda. The cleric introduced him and three others to a Yemeni, who unbeknownst to them was an al-Qaeda member.

After undergoing several weeks of indoctrination, the group made its way to Syria, and then was escorted across the border to Iraq where they met their Iraqi handlers. There they assigned to a battalion, comprised mostly of Saudis (though those planning the attacks were exclusively Iraqi). After being appointed to carry out a suicide attack, the young man had second thoughts and instead, returned home to Saudi Arabia where he was arrested in January 2004. The cleric who had instigated the whole affair was also brought up on terrorism charges and is expected to face a long jail term. The Yemeni al-Qaeda member was killed in December 2004 following a failed attack on the Ministry of Interior.

There are other similar stories regarding young men who were enticed by rogue clerics into taking up arms in Iraq. Many are instructed to engage in suicide attacks and as a result, never return home. Interrogations of nearly 150 Saudis suspected of planning to join the Iraqi insurgency indicate that they were heeding the calls of clerics and activists to “drive the infidels out of Arab land.”

The Saudi government has sought to limit such calls for action, which inevitably feed neo-Salafi extremist as the expense of legitimate interpretations of Islam. King Abdullah has issued a strong new directive that holds those who conceal knowledge of terrorist activities as guilty as the terrorists themselves. However, many religious leaders and figures in Arab nations have issued fatwas stating that waging jihad in Iraq is justified by the Koran due to its “defensive” nature. To illustrate, in October 2004, several clerics in Saudi Arabia said that, “it was the duty of every Muslim to go and fight in Iraq.”^{viii}

On June 20, 2005, the Saudi government released a new list of 36 known al-Qaeda operatives in the Kingdom (all but one of those released on previous lists had been killed by Saudi security forces, so these individuals represented the foot soldiers of al-Qaeda, and they were considered far less dangerous). After a major crackdown in the Kingdom, as many as 21 of these low-level al-Qaeda members fled to Iraq. Interior Minister Prince Nayef commented that when they return, they could be even “tougher” than those who fought in Afghanistan. “We expect the worse from those who went to Iraq,” he said. “They will be worse and we will be ready for them.” According to Prince Turki al-Faisal, the former Saudi Intelligence Chief and the new Ambassador to the US, approximately 150 Saudis are currently operating in Iraq.^{ix}

Unlike the foreign fighters from poor countries such as Yemen and Egypt, Saudis entering Iraq often bring in money to support the cause, arriving with personal funds between \$10,000-\$15,000. Saudis are the most sought after militants; not only because of their cash contributions, but also because of the media attention their deaths as “martyrs” bring to the cause. This is a powerful recruiting tool. Because of the wealth of Saudi Arabia, and its well developed press, there also tends to be much more coverage of Saudi deaths in Iraq than of those from poorer countries.

In contrast, if an Algerian or Egyptian militant dies in Iraq, it is unlikely that anyone in his home country will ever know. For instance, interrogations revealed that when an Algerian conducts a suicide bombing, the insurgency rarely has a means of contacting their next of kin. Saudis, however, always provide a contact number and a well-developed system is in place for recording and disseminating any “martyrdom operations” by Saudis.

Means of Entry to Iraq

The Saudi government has had some success in its efforts to seal the border between the Kingdom and Iraq. However, several other countries provide relatively easy passage to Saudi and other foreign volunteers, and have been accused by Iraqi authorities of not doing enough to prevent foreign fighters from entering.

Syria

Syria is clearly the biggest problem, but preventing militants from crossing its 380-mile border with Iraq is daunting. According to The Minister of Tourism, Syria is fast becoming one of the largest tourist destinations in the Middle East. In 2004, roughly 3.1 million tourists visited the country; the number of Saudis arriving in just the first seven months of 2005 increased to 270,000 from 230,000 in the same period in 2004.^x Separating the legitimate visitors from the

militants is nearly impossible, and Saudi militants have taken advantage of this fact (See Appendix 1: Case Studies).

Most militants entering Iraq from Syria do so at a point just south of the mountainous Kurdish areas of the north, which is sparsely inhabited by nomadic Sunni Arab tribes, or due east from Dair al-Zawr into Iraq's Anbar province. Crossing near the southern portion of the border, which is mainly desert and is heavily occupied by Syrian and U.S. forces, is seldom done.

The crossing from Dair Al-Zawr province is the preferred route, because the majority of the inhabitants on both sides of the border are sympathetic to the insurgency, the scattering of villages along the border provides ample opportunity for covert movement, and constant insurgent attacks in the area are thought to keep the U.S. forces otherwise occupied. According to intelligence estimates, the key transit point here – for both Saudis and other Arabs – is the Bab al-Waleed crossing.

Even if Syria had the political will to completely and forcefully seal its border, it lacks sufficient resources to do so (Saudi Arabia has spent over \$1.2 billion in the past two years alone to Secure its border). As a result, it relies heavily upon screening those who enter the country. A problem with this method, however, is the difficulty of establishing proof of residency in Syria as well as the difficulties with verifying hotel reservations. Moreover, there is no visa requirement for Saudis to enter the country. Syria does, however, maintain a database of suspected militants, and several dozen Saudis have been arrested at the border. However, pressuring the Syrians additionally to tighten security could be both unrealistic and politically sensitive.

An April 2003 report by Italian investigators described Syria as a “hub” for the relocation of Zarqawi's group to Iraq. According to the report, “transcripts of wiretapped conversations among the arrested suspects and others paint a detailed picture of overseers in Syria coordinating the movement of recruits and money between Europe and Iraq.”^{xi}

At the same time, there are those who claim the Syrian authorities are being *too* forceful in their crackdown of Saudis in the country. There have been recent reports that Syria has engaged in the systematic abuse, beating and robbery of Saudi tourists, a charge that Syria denies. According to semi-official reports published in *al-Watan*, released prisoners alleged that Syrian authorities arbitrarily arrested Saudis on the grounds that they were attempting to infiltrate Iraq to carry out terrorist attacks.

The former detainees maintained that they were “targeted for arrest in Syria without any charges.” They went on to say that, “if they had intended to sneak into Iraq, Saudi authorities would have kept them in custody when they were handed over to that country.” According to the Syrian Minister of Tourism, Saadallah Agha Kalaa, “no Saudi tourists have been harassed in Syria or subjected to unusual spate of robberies. Those who are spreading these rumors are seeking to harm Syria, which is a safe tourist destination.” In the murky world of the Syrian security services, it is difficult to discern the truth. Suffice it to say that the problem of successfully halting the traffic of Saudis through Syria into Iraq is overwhelmingly difficult, politically charged, and operationally challenging.

Iran

Iraq also shares a long and relatively unguarded border with Iran, however, as a non-Sunni non-Arab country, few Saudi extremists use it as a point of entry. Still, Saudi authorities have captured a handful of militants from the Kingdom who have gone through Iran and four were apprehended after passing from Iran to the United Arab Emirates.

Iran is also a major source of funding and logistics for militant Shiite groups in Iraq (mainly SCIRI). According to regional intelligence reports, Iran is suspected of arming and training some 40,000 Iraqi fighters with a view towards fomenting an Islamic revolution in Iraq. Most of these Iraqi Shiites are former prisoners of war captured during the Iran-Iraq war.^{xii}

The Saudi Response

Saudi-Iraq Border

As mentioned above, the Saudi Government has made closing its border with Iraq a priority. As of 2005, the Kingdom has almost entirely sealed this border and troops have the power to apprehend and detain anyone attempting to cross. By the end of 2004, the government spent \$850 million – a number that has risen to \$1.2 billion by July 2005. All branches of security are involved in the endeavor, including the National Guard, specialized units from the army, border security guard, forces from the drug enforcement agency, and customs officers.

Since spring 2004, a comprehensive training program has been implemented for officers involved in operations to monitor the borders and outlets of the Kingdom. While custom agents control the point of entry, the Border Guard, National Guard, and the army have expanded their forces and equipment across the Kingdom's vast borders, covering nine regions, 35 departments, and 275 centers. Security units patrol around the clock. Strict security measures have been imposed around all outlets, and massive sandbag obstacles have been laid to prevent the movement of militants across the Saudi-Iraq border.

The use of trained police dogs was implemented to uncover drug-smuggling activities, but they have also been effective in detecting hidden individuals. The dogs are especially useful in locating persons hiding in places along the border. Militants favor the most isolated desert regions of the border, which are also the preferred routes for drug smugglers and traffickers. Saudi Major General Abdul Rahman al-Ibrahim, Commander of the Border Guards in the Eastern Provinces said that authorities have stepped up efforts to maintain security along those portions of the border. The preferred route of infiltration from Iraq is through the vast Northern Frontier Province (See map).

The Saudi Ministry of Interior has 204 teams of trained canines working the borders and half of these have been reassigned to the Iraq border. The use of modern methods for monitoring border movement also includes special planes supplied by the Royal Saudi Air Force and sophisticated radar and night vision equipment furnished by the Ministry of Defense. Furthermore, the Ministry of Interior has deployed the latest thermal control systems technology and cameras to the border. As of December 2004, there were 34 stationary and 38 mobile units installed in the region. 19 additional stationary units and the same number of mobiles are being set up.

At the same time, there has been a systematic program of constructing sand barricades to prevent vehicles from crossing directly over the border. Another barricade has been constructed approximately six miles inland in an effort to discourage movement in the isolated desert regions. There are currently 35,000 troops from the National Guard, Ministry of Interior and various other military services of the Ministry of Defense working to seal the border. Water routes pose little risk, as US and British forces control both large and small Iraqi ports.

This massive effort was undertaken with little help from the Iraqi side. According to Prince Turki al-Faisal, "the problem is that on the Iraqi side there are no security measures to help curb the crossing of Iraqis and other arms and drug smugglers as well as criminals and thieves." All told, Saudi authorities have apprehended approximately 682 Iraqi intruders and smugglers over the last six months and stopped 63 Saudis from crossing north, thanks in part to the use of hi-tech

cameras placed along the border. Border patrols confiscated a large number of homemade explosives heading into the Kingdom. Thus, these measures have exposed an extensive network engaged in the manufacture and smuggling of explosives to Islamic militant groups in Saudi Arabia and neighboring countries.

According to the Saudi General Security Service, recent security operations have uncovered several hiding places for these materials, and this has led to a shortage of high-grade explosives for use by militants. Between 2000-2004, 14.8 million ammunition pieces, 16.3 thousand arms, and 2,991 pounds of explosives were seized. Again, this is an additional benefit of the increased monitoring at the Saudi-Iraq border.

But these successes come at a cost. Recently, the Interior Ministry established a special section to care for the families of security officers who were either killed or wounded during armed confrontation with terrorists along the border and elsewhere. According to Prince Muhammad bin Nayef, the Assistant Interior Minister for Security Affairs, the opening of the section at the ministry's Department of Military Affairs reflected the Saudi leadership's concern toward the families of the officers who were either killed or wounded in anti-terror operations.

Cutting the Flow of Money and Weapons

Terrorism does require money and supplies. Mindful of this, the Saudi government, in conjunction with the US and others, has adopted measures designed to curb access by terrorists to conventional financing resources. Unable to rely upon mainstream financial institutions such as banks and charity organizations, they resort to money smuggling, sometimes in conclusion with criminal syndicates. In many cases, terrorist networks provide drugs in exchange for money, arms, ammunitions, and logistical support such as document forging and transporting and concealing illicit substances.

Sealing the smuggling routes has the added advantage of cutting off funds from the sale of drugs used to subsidize militant and terrorist activity. The substantial revenue obtained from trafficking drugs enables militant groups to continue their activities. To date, the Saudi government has shut down all twenty-seven known smuggling routes between the Kingdom and Iraq, and the activity has been substantially curbed.

There are, however, certain financial realities that limit what can be done. The current projections of the US Energy Information Agency indicates that total Middle Eastern and North Africa oil export revenues will rise from a recent low of around \$100 billion in 1998 in constant 2004 dollars to over \$500 billion in 2005 – reaching or exceeding the former peak of some \$500 billion reached in 1980. According to Merrill Lynch, the capital controlled by wealthy individuals in the Middle East has already risen by 29% during 2003-2004, to a level of approximately \$1 trillion dollars. This some estimate projects a further 9% annual rise from 2004 to 2009. According to some estimates, some \$500 billion of this total is still invested outside the region, and is not subject to monitoring or control by Saudi Arabia or any other regional government.

Extremism and terrorism are not particularly expensive. They also can cloak their identity under a host of religious and charitable covers, or exploit “arm chair militantism” throughout the Arab and Islamic worlds. No amount of Saudi, US, or international activity to limit funds transfers, or

activities like money laundering, is going to halt a substantial flow of money and weapons to terrorist and extremist groups. As long as religious extremism, and Arab and Islamic anger, act as a strong political and ideological force, enough private money will flow to allow such groups to continue to function and act. This is particularly true when, as is the case in Iraq, they can exploit significant popular sympathy and support.

Crackdown on Militant Clergy

Saudi Arabia is, however, also attempting to deal directly with the religious and ideological aspects of the threat. On November 5, 2004, twenty-six prominent Saudi clerics, including Sheikh Salman al-Audah and Sheikh Nasser al-Omar, sign a signed a fatwa saying that Iraqis should rise up and oppose the Americans in their country. Some young Saudis who heard this fatwa interpreted it as a call to jihad.^{xiii} Calls such as these have led not only to terrorist attacks in Iraq and elsewhere, but in the Kingdom as well.

In the past several years, the government of Saudi Arabia has cracked down on militant clerics who encourage terrorist activity. Many have been relieved of their religious duties and ordered to attend re-education programs. The Saudi government has also recently revoked the diplomatic status of many clerics who have traveled around the world on diplomatic passports to garner support for militant groups. Also, it is now illegal for any cleric not associated with the state sponsored Senior Council of Ulema to issue a fatwa. Those who do face penalties and jail time, and since the announcement of this policy, no such fatwas have been issued.

In a new twist to the fight against militants, Majid Shabib al-Otaibi, who blames the extremist religious scholars for the death of his 26-year-old son, Muqrin, is suing 26 Saudi religious scholars who called for jihad against US forces. The Saudi government is supporting the legal actions of these individuals.

Challenges

No country can today say that it has done everything it can to fight terrorism and extremism, or that it has learned and adopted the best methods and techniques for doing so. Iraq is only one part of a nearly global struggle, and it is clear that this struggle will require national and international action on a far more sophisticated scale for at least the next decade.

It is also clear that the primary struggle in Iraq is Iraqi, and its outcome will be determined largely by whether the new Iraqi government can be inclusive and fair enough to win the broad support of Iraq's Sunnis and bring them into Iraq's political process. Outside power can help, but even the most successful efforts will pale to insignificance compared to the impact of Iraq's internal politics. Soldiers and outside powers do not win hearts and minds.

Nevertheless, Saudi infiltration into Iraq is a problem, and Saudi Arabia does need to do more. The Saudi government is making major efforts to seal its border with Iraq, but more pressure needs to be put on Syria for that country to do the same. This is certainly a sensitive topic, but until something is done, it will be very difficult for Saudis to completely stop the flow of their nationals into Iraq. And as is understood by all, these militants, upon returning to the Kingdom, will pose a threat perhaps even greater than those who trained in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Also, although the Saudi Government has been increasingly vigilant in pursuing renegade clergy and other extremists who aid and encourage impressionable young men to resort to violence, it needs to implement even stricter monitoring systems, as well as stronger penalties to discourage such practices. The government should implement and continue to enforce its zero-tolerance policy regarding these activities and do more to transform its educational system to ensure it teaches tolerance, the true nature of Islam, and the need to find political alternative to violence. If nothing else, the tragedy of false “martyrdom” is unacceptable at every human level – to the victims, to their families, to those who lose their sons, and to the young men who pointlessly waste their lives.

Conclusions

This analysis has three main conclusions:

- First, analysts and government officials in the U.S. and Iraq have overstated the size of the foreign element in the Iraqi insurgency, especially that of the Saudi contingent. When the Iraqi Defense Minister Sadoun al-Duleimi claims that “all” of its neighbors represent a threat to Iraqi security, he is feeding the myth that foreign militants are a backbone of the insurgency. In fact, over 90% of the insurgency is homegrown.
- Second, Saudi volunteers are only a small part of the insurgents that are foreign.
- Third, if not for the efforts exerted by the Saudi government over the past 18 months – both by sealing its border and by clamping down on extremist clerics at home – there would likely be hundreds more foreign insurgents in Iraq today. This includes not only Saudis, but also those from other states whose transport would have been funded by Saudi militants.

More broadly, the outcome in Iraq is going to be determined by how well Iraq’s political process can find an inclusive solution to bringing Arab Sunnis, Arab Shiites, Kurds, and Iraqi minorities into a state that all are willing to support. Military action, counterinsurgency, and counterterrorism cannot unite or build a country. They cannot put an end to Iraqi insurgency or creating the climate of popular support that neo-Salafi movements and foreign volunteers can operate it.

The real threat, moreover, is not so much the growth of foreign volunteers, but that they can be exploited to help catalyze a much more intense civil war – largely between religious Arab Sunnis and Arab Shiites in which Iraqi nationalism and secular progress become less and less important. If this happens, the “spillover” into Iraq’s neighbors and the polarization within Islam and the Arab world would have implications that go far beyond today’s problems with infiltration into Iraq.

Appendix I: Case Studies

The following are derived from interrogations with suspected Saudi militants conducted by intelligence agencies and provided to the Saudi National Security Assessment Project.

Case Study #1

The first case involves a 24-year-old Saudi male (name withheld due to security consideration for him and his family) from a prominent Saudi tribe. He was a student and had no association whatsoever with al-Qaeda or other militants prior to the US invasion of Iraq. After that, the Saudi press began publishing a great deal of rhetoric regarding the legitimacy of the US action. The young attended Friday prayers in his neighborhood mosque where the local preacher condemned the U.S. and cited examples of innocent Iraqis dying. This occurred in April 2003. The oratory at the mosque became more forceful and more critical as the images of the war began to flow in the press.

He and three friends started attending private gatherings with a mid-level cleric from the mosque, and the topic of jihad was soon introduced. Religious justification for protecting Arab lands from occupiers was discussed. A short time later, the suggestion was made that the young man and his friends should offer to assist in Iraq by contributing either money or going there themselves. Suicide attacks were never mentioned.

As it happened, the cleric, who has since been arrested, had a close relationship with a Yemeni who was an al-Qaeda operative wanted by the Saudi authorities. He introduced the young men to this operative, but his affiliation with al-Qaeda was never disclosed.

The young men began to visit the Yemeni at a safe house in Riyadh where he began to indoctrinate them about jihad. This instruction continued for five weeks. At this point a member of the Religious Committee of al-Qaeda provided the young men with theological justification for suicide attacks. At the end of the 5-week period, they were told they were ready to leave for Iraq.

Using their own resources, they bought one-way tickets to Damascus in July 2003. Once there, they were told where to stay and given a telephone number of a Syrian who would

Meet them. They contacted this man upon arrival, and he took them to the border with Iraq (specifically, to al-Waleed point, a place where Saudis frequently enter the country). Once at the border, they were received by three Iraqi handlers who asked them to turn over all of their money. They were then brought to Tikrit. It took three weeks from the time they arrived to Damascus to arrive in Tikrit.

In Tikrit, they were assigned to a battalion that was comprised mostly of other Saudis (six were from the Kingdom, a few from other Gulf countries, and many from Yemen). The operational people who were planning the attacks were only Iraqis—not foreigners. None of the young men were provided with any further training. Soon after arriving in Tikrit, an Iraqi arrived and assigned them each to a job. All were suicide attacks. Three of the four accepted and were taken away. The fourth realized he did not want to participate because he had wanted to fight, but realized that he was expected only to drive a truck full of explosives into a designated target. He never saw his friends again.

Another assignment was offered and he accepted, but only as a means of escape. He was provided with a truck, which he drove some distance from the safe house and then abandoned. He did not tell anyone of his intentions to leave Iraq because he knew that they would kill him. The truck was subsequently found and blown up by the US military.

He claimed he kept some hard currency with him and he made his way from Tikrit (this portion of his testimony is unconfirmed). There he found a driver who took him to the Syrian border. At the border, he paid \$1,500 and was able cross back illegally (his passport had been confiscated upon entry). He then presented himself at the Saudi embassy, claiming to have lost his passport. The Saudis provided him a "laisse passé" believing him to be a tourist.

He returned to Saudi Arabia in November 2003 and was arrested in January 2004. It is standard procedure in the Kingdom that when one loses a passport, for whatever reason, a criminal investigation is initiated. Thus, when he returned, the Ministry of Interior conducted a routine investigation and uncovered the fact that he was involved in illicit activities. He was taken into custody and is facing trial (and several years in prison). The cleric who originally enlisted him has been brought up on terrorism charges and can be expected to face a lengthy prison sentence. The Yemeni member was killed in December 2004 following a failed attack on the Ministry of Interior.

Case Study #2

The second case involves a 22-year-old man from Buraida in Qassim, originally from a large tribe in the South. The timeframe for his story is March 2004 - July 2004.

This situation is very similar to first and also involves a rogue preacher in a small mosque. The cleric in this case hosted a guest lecturer and members of his congregation gathered at his private residence to hear him speak about the situation in Iraq. The guest lecturer was a self-proclaimed sheikh who was offering theological justifications for Saudis to join the insurgency in Iraq. The sheikh had made the case that members of certain tribes in Saudi Arabia had already gone and died, and this was seen to strengthen his argument.

After the lecture, he asked for volunteers. His assistant took the numbers of roughly eight people from the audience. They later called him and discussed the situation one-on-one. Within eight weeks, they had all been convinced to go to Iraq. These eight men had studied lists of tribal names (later found to have been unreliable) and took inspiration from joining their kin.

The sheikh advised them not to go directly to Iraq, but first to Syria. He gave them the telephone number of a sheikh in Damascus. Interrogators have determined that since there was no al-Qaeda connection in this case, it was less organized.

The group of three arrived at the airport, and were collected. After a few days of indoctrination, they were taken to the border. They waited at a small village next to the Iraqi border for seven days, but no Iraqi handler materialized. They were then taken to another point, where they met their Iraqi contacts. They were told to surrender their money and passports. One refused to go at the border, and flew back to Riyadh. His two friends who went to Iraq told the handlers that if anything happened to them to inform their absent friend. Both carried out suicide bombings in Baghdad. The two left behind a last will and testament. The friend was directed by the sheikh in Syria to visit a website where he could read about their deaths.

The cleric who had initially inspired the three to go to Iraq had since been arrested and provided names of those he sent to the insurgency. One of the names was the individual this case study is concerned with, and he was subsequently arrested and gave the above account.

Appendix II: Map of Iraq and Neighbors



Endnotes

ⁱ Reuven Paz, "Arab Volunteers Killed in Iraq: An Analysis," The Project for Research of Islamist Movements (PRISM), Global Research in International Affairs, Occasional Papers, No. 1/3, March 2005.

ⁱⁱ "The Sunni Arab Insurgency: A Spent Force or Rising Tide," Michael Eisenstadt, *The Washington Institute*, August 26, 2005.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Iraq: Insurgency Goals," (Council on Foreign Relations) May 20, 2005.

^{iv} "Study Cites Seeds of Terror in Iraq," Bryan Bender, (Boston Globe, July 17, 2005).

^v "Iraq: Insurgency Goals," (Council on Foreign Relations) May 20, 2005.

^{vi} The Paz study places the number of Saudis in Iraq much higher, at 94. However, this study based much of its evidence on an analysis of an al-Qaeda compiled "martyr website." Further investigation revealed that this list was unreliable and the numbers were most likely inflated for propaganda and recruiting purposes (one Saudi captured in November 2004 involved in compiling these lists admitted as much). For instance, further investigations revealed that 22% of the Saudis listed as martyrs on this site were actually alive and well in the Kingdom. Furthermore, an additional investigation has disclosed that many others who claimed that they would be going to Iraq were merely boasting on Internet sites – they too were found to be living in the Kingdom. Finally, since the "list" was compiled by Saudis, it is highly likely that they would over-represent their countrymen, as they had the most contact with and knowledge of fellow Saudis.

^{vii} Source: Saudi National Security Assessment Project.

^{viii} "Study cites seeds of terror in Iraq: War radicalized most, probes find," Bryan Bender, *The Boston Globe*, July 17, 2005.

^{ix} "Saudi Arabia says Ready to Beat Militants from Iraq," Dominic Evans, (Reuters, July 10, 2005).

^x The Ministry has also issued numbers totaling some 6.2 million for the same year, "Syria Sets Sights on Tourism to Revitalize Economy," Nawal Idelbi, *Daily Star*, June 30, 2005; In 2005, the Ministry announced that tourism had reached 1.41 million in the first half of 2005, "Tourism in Syria Sees Major Increase," www.syrialive.net, July 16, 2005.

^{xi} "Probe Links Syria, Terror Network," *The Los Angeles Times*, 16 April 2004. Sebastian Rotella, "A Road to Ansar Began in Italy: Wiretaps are Said to Show how al Qaeda Sought to Create in Northern Iraq a Substitute for Training Camps in Afghanistan," *The Los Angeles Times*, 28 April 2003.

^{xii} The role of Iran in post-Saddam Iraq goes beyond the pale of this study, but it is important to note that intelligence assessments clearly show Iran is by far the most dangerous destabilizing factor in Iraq today. The Iranian-backed Shiite forces are by far the most organized and positioned to influence future events.

^{xiii} However, when al-Audah's own son was inspired by the fatwa to seek martyrdom in Iraq, al-Audah contacted the Interior Ministry and ensured that he was apprehended at the border. This shows not only the hypocrisy of many of the militant clerics (who urge others, but not their own sons, to die), but also the swiftness with which the Saudi authorities were able to act on this tip. And if al-Audah were to sign such an unauthorized fatwa today, he would certainly find himself back in prison.